

rea
gins_leap / dubb_speak

Tour d/Lux 2006



**r e a-framing landscape,
memory and identity: an introduction
to r e a's gins_ leap / dubb_ speak**

by Catherine Nichols

New media artist r e a has stated a preference for making technology based visual art because, significantly, she actually conceives her projects in digital form and also because of the challenges presented by working with new media.

The origin of r e a's contemporary visual art practice can be traced back to her childhood in the small, predominantly Indigenous northern NSW town of Coonabarabran, where she was born into the Gamilaraay nation:

My Mother had taught me that my siblings shared our history by showing us her collection of black and white portrait photographs that she kept in a tin in the corner of her bedroom.

I learned these images in my own way, and I went to art school, I then contacted my mother. If I could have the photos to work with, I began to create coloured photos from my black and white originals so that they would be like new and to show

the colours people can see. I then I realised how much I could do and that the colours were beautiful because the main focus of creating and exploring new ideas.

From that auspicious starting point r e a went on to create a celebrated body of photographic works which included *EYE/WHABLAKPIECE* solo Adelaide Festival (1996), *POP* (2000) and *Don't Shoot Till You See The Whites Of Their Eyes.* (2000), which are both part of her MA graduating work from the Australian National University, Canberra.

Since returning from the USA, r e a has created an innovative DVD installation, *gins_ leap / dubb_ speak*, which evokes

a well known technique of the Gamilaraay Nation where photographs of a woman's children are placed in a wooden box and then covered with a layer of red ochre and white ochre.

While r e a is perhaps most renowned for her innovative approach in incorporating digital media into her artwork she has also created a number of other significant works using diverse media.

Best known among these are *LOUR WHO'S Calling The Kettle Black* (1992), comprising ten small prints that were created to call attention to the situation of Indigenous girls who were forcibly removed from their families and made to work as domestic servants for the colonizers, as well as the installation *Don't Shoot Till You See The Whites Of Their Eyes.* (2000), an in-your-face r e a-take of Australian history that comprises photographs, glass sculptures and a soundscape, recently acquired by The Art Gallery of South Australia. The latter work will be exhibited at a major exhibition marking 2006 as the Australia-Japan Year of Exchange that opens at the Bridgestone Museum of Art in Tokyo later in the year.

The centrepiece of d/Lux/MediaArts' current touring exhibition is r e a's ambitious digital installation work entitled *gins_ leap / dubb_ speak*. Indigenous oral history has it that many years ago Gins Leap was the site of a tragic death leap by a young Indigenous woman.

The development of the work *gins_ leap / dubb_ speak* began with an earlier visit by the artist to Coonabarabran as part of the first Tour d/Lux curatorial residency programs in 2001. A series of conversations recorded during this visit have been developed into a multi-channel interactive video work over a period of 4 years.



Marina



r e a



The title of her work is in itself provocative because of the present-day connotations of the word 'gin', a demeaning term for Aboriginal women. The genealogy of this word has been traced back to an originally quite neutral word for 'woman' or 'girl' from the Tasmanian Indigenous language, but which took, when linguistically appropriated by the colonizers, a decidedly racist, sexist turn. The idea of 'gin' or 'gins' operates at two levels in *gins_leap / dubb_speak*. At one level, it makes reference to the stories about the young woman's allegedly tragic fall from a rocky outcrop near this location, at some indefinable time in the past. The stories associated with this event persist to this day and have become incorporated into local Indigenous oral history and into collective memory.

On another level, the work refers to the four contemporary 'gins' who took part in the making of this work, under 're's' guidance and direction: 're' herself, Maria, Sharmaine and Susan. These four women grew up in Coonabarabran and the image cycles in *gins_leap / dubb_speak* relate to the fugitive memories of their shared past, and to their present lives. Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and 're' are all of whom started school on the same day, remain friends today. Unlike 're', the other three women have stayed in Coonabarabran. The women's collective memories form the basis of this work.

The work is a multi-channel interactive digital video and sound installation that has been designed to surround and envelop its audience. Activated by entry into a gentle space of silent, meditative water. Venturing further into this seemingly tranquil space, one's movement sets in motion the image cycles that relate to the past and present lives of Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and 're'. The viewer is then immersed in darkness and greeted by a soundscape comprising a low susurrantion of unearthly, eerie wind-like resonance that symbolises the mourning of their past.

The poetic visual imagery of the landscape and the beguiling soundscape (it is a lot more than simply a soundtrack) are equally important. These images and sounds in *gins_leap / dubb_speak* inhabit the space so that the viewer is never quite certain when or where the next cycle might appear – perhaps from behind, in front of or immediately beside us. The repetitive cycle of the visual imagery, accompanied by the lyrical haunting soundscape of half-remembered fragments of conversation, birdcall and flowing water, gives this magisterial work a deeply meditative quality. The landscape itself, we realize, represents culture as much as nature.

Through this installation we collectively experience the powerful psychic claim that Gins Leap, as a place imbued with powerful, partly understood memories, exerts on the human beings whose Ancestors had lived there since time immemorial. We, as viewers, are privileged to enter the women's space and their homeland and to share the experience of these women who, oh-so-gently and -lightly, feel, touch, imagine, yearn for, remember, and move across their country. Significantly, this is also a work about contemporary Indigenous identities. It involves the reclamation of positive, self-defined identities, expressed via the women's continuing relationship with their ancestral homeland. As such, *gins_leap / dubb_speak* acts as a much-needed antidote to those earlier Other-defined constructions of Indigenous identity, whereby neutral words like 'gin', uttered through the mouths of the colonizers, turned racist and ugly. The word 'gin', in this context, is repressed, and returned to its earlier, innocent usage.

To be immersed in the deceptively gentle wash of memory of the sounds and images comprising *gins_leap / dubb_speak* is an extraordinary experience that enables people to feel as well as see and hear. One can envisage it becoming a 'must-see' event on d/Lux/MediaArts Australian touring circuit for some years to come.

Dr Catherine Noyes is a writer, researcher and curator who works at Australian Studies at Monash University in Australia.

¹ The word 'gin' had the same original meaning of 'a girl' but over time, with the passing of time, it has become more derogatory and is now used to refer to the skin on the part of the body.

² I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the research for this article: Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and 're'.

³ Please note that the word 'Indigenous' and other terms used in this article are not meant to be a blanket term for all Indigenous people, but rather a general term used to refer to the diverse Indigenous peoples of Australia. The word 'Indigenous' is used here to refer to the people of the land, and not to the people of the sea, as in the case of the Torres Strait Islanders.

⁴ I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the research for this article: Maria, Sharmaine, Susan and 're'.



about the work

gins_leap / dubb_speak is a four screen, nine cycle interactive digital video & sound installation which traces and tracks the memories, connections and on-going relationships to country/place/identity of four Gamilaraay women. The cycles entitled: 'sharmaine', 'maria', 'susan', 'r e a' and 'hands'... all place the women at the centre of the frame. There are five large language wall texts, which use repetitive Gamilaraay words to describe the relationship that Indigenous women have to their land and culture.

'The visual and sound cycles gently segue into one another with the images referencing childhood memories, laughter and games (marbles, tin trucks), the centrality of 'country', natural phenomena such as trees and plants, earth, water, fire, Indigenous space, and intermittent reflections on various subjects, including Indigenous language loss and retrieval.'

The development of *gins_leap / dubb_speak* began with an early visit by the artist to Coonabarabran as part of the first Tour d/Lux programs in 2001. A series of conversations recorded during this visit have been developed into a multi-channel interactive work over a period of 4 years.

title *gins_leap / dubb_speak*

medium multi-channel DVD moving image & sound installation

date 2006

creative team

r e a Creative Director, Artist
Stephen Jones Technical Designer, Programmer

Gail Kelly Dramaturge

Lea Collins Sound Design

Peter Oldham Co-editor