

SARAH SCOUT PRESENTS

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON AO BETA CITY

15 April – 22 May 2021

How can a memory coalesce between two cities? Christian Thompson's BETA City looks back on Amsterdam and Melbourne as formative cities of his artistic practice. Currently based in Narm, a place undergoing a post-COVID recovery, Thompson reflects on living through one of the harshest lockdowns globally, and just how many systematic, financial, social and economic injustices were made apparent by the ramifications of a global pandemic. We slowly reel out of everything thrown at us in 2020 and continue to live with an array of emotional, physical, and economic trauma. Now is an opportunity to reconsider our city and reinvent it: imagine it's systems differently for it to become a much more sustainable and liveable place. BETA suggests we have been given a second chance, a "back up", plan-Beta—so, do we ignore or rethink these systems? The future is for us to shape and Thompson is there waiting for us.

Barindyila Barindyila (Sister, Sister) (2021) references the active role men can play as allies to women (sisters) to address gender inequities. "Identity is something you have to practice", Christian tells me. As he continues to connect with his own history, Christian re-configures his own image in the present rather than being archived in that history. We find his future thinking realised in this exhibition.

Thompson's golden face is nestled amongst the coloured blossoms. As his eyes are closed, our gaze does not meet his. There is no confrontational exchange. Rather, we are caught on the fingertips of his gold-painted splayed hands, digitally multiplied, puncturing the flower wall, transforming Thompson himself into a deity: a symbolic visual offering. The mythological properties within the frame shift and transport us into a more contemplative space. The sheer scale of the image, too, signals physical closeness—a sensation we've had to grapple with and reconsider throughout the pandemic—and now, as our bodies can be with the work, we can accept the invitation of a wholly immersive experience.

Seen at a distance, *Barindyila Barindyila (Sister, Sister)* resembles a blazing fire. The image's rich palette of earthy tones along with Christian's golden accents from his face and hands create a feeling of movement. His movement recall other movements: the many social and political movements, actions and protests, which Christian dedicates this work to, borne out of the litany of social, economic and political injustices, as well as gender inequity around the globe. Black Lives Matter, March4Justice, the MeToo movement, along with too many others, become vital sites of justice when community action is finally taken. Could this image galvanize the same energy as these movements? Is it also a site for exchange? Thompson invites a conversation to open up the possibility that art can facilitate change in a moment of a potential social reset.

Thompson's newest video work, *Amsterdam RMX* (2020), reimagines and re-introduces us to the artist's earlier song *Bayi Gardiya* (Singing Desert), which was first composed and performed as the sound component of a 2019 virtual reality commission—also titled *Bayi Gardiya* (Singing Desert)—at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne.

Sung in his father's traditional language Bidjara, in 2019 the song was originally synchronised to a virtual landscape: a swimming hole at the Sixth Mile creek where Thompson's parents, brothers, and cousins spent time during their childhood. Over the past decade, the creek has been devastated by worsening drought and the effects of climate change. But *Bayi Gardiya* sees the landscape of Bidjara country—spanning a broad central western Queensland region that includes his hometown of Barcaldine—digitally rejuvenated in a time lapse the audience can walk through as the landscape is slowly composed around them. Thompson imagines and fosters the future as a restorative force—albeit virtually—where we witness the creek restored. Remarkably, Thompson's premonition was realised during the production of the work when the Sixth Mile creek began to flow again.

Unlike *Bayi Gardiya* (Singing Desert) (2019), *Amsterdam RMX* (2020)—references an impressionable city Thompson used to reside in—it does not visually immerse us in the place he grew up. Instead, our gaze is simply directed to look and listen to Thompson himself, alone in contextless snow: regenerating, re-energising, and remixing the song of a language that has been called “extinct” despite continuing to be spoken and sung throughout its long 120,000-year history.

In *Amsterdam RMX* (2020), a different demand is placed on the viewer. Instead of presenting a living language by way of feeling or seeing the landscape it is spoken in, Thompson seeks to offer us an experience of what Bidjara language itself feels and sounds like. We are not expected to learn this infectious melody; nor is it necessary for us to know the meaning behind such a lyrical language. In one sense, *Amsterdam RMX* (2020) conforms to the practicalities of preservation, archiving and re-representing language drawn from one of many over-looked, smaller Indigenous communities in Australia.

Shot in Thompson's Melbourne studio, the constructed set in *Amsterdam RMX* (2020) lacks context aside from its European namesake. Thompson says it is set in a memory. In 2006, while living in Amsterdam, he ran into someone on a walk amidst a snowstorm. He stands in front of a black backdrop cloaked in a warm-looking hooded coat, singing to us with specs of snow rapidly falling in front of him. In this scene, I like to think that Thompson, rooted in a memory, imagines himself in a constructed future that transcends the ephemerality of the natural world. It will be a world where if humanity continues to be complacent, destruction and obliteration erase it completely from any visible recognition or memory.

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