

Bidi Karta Werda (Path Across)

*By Ainslie Gatt*¹

Bidi Karta Werda (Path Across) is one of Christopher Pease's most recent works based on an aquatint of a sketch, *Panoramic View of King George's Sound, Part of the Colony of Swan River, 1834*, by the 21-year-old surveyor, cartographer and topographical draughtsman Robert Dale (1812-1853). Pease's life-size painting portrays a section of Dale's panorama focused on the activity of the Minang nation members in the foreground who are returning inland from a fishing trip, followed by a *toort* (dingo).² Their catch is being carried by the most central figure, hanging on each side of the horizontal *maungull* (spear), although removed in Pease's interpretation. The figure most forward in the artwork, painted in ceremonial ochre and wearing a feathered headdress, holds a spear in one hand and a firebrand in the other. This representation is one of the earliest indicators of the use of fire and the practice of continual burning of the land by Nyoongar people. The artwork has the viewer looking in a southerly direction, out over the inner harbour's small settlement of Albany and Princess Royal Harbour in the central plain. Pease's contemporary interpretation of Dale's artwork brings the past into the present conscious, highlighting Minang occupancy at King George Sound and the encroaching British settlement.

Pease challenges contemporary Western thinking to re-examine the foundations of their sense of identity. *Bidi Karta Werda (Path Across)* is a painting of layers. From our Western perspective, we see a landscape with contemporary motifs that are positioned on top of a landscape. In this painting, Pease explained that he wanted to push the image back to something different and in doing so has painted a landscape over a landscape.³ Unpacking the layers of this image, the ocean has become the land fertile with ochre. The yellow and lime-green colours reference back to his 1999 painting *Nyoongar Dreaming* and the influence of colours used by the Carrolup School children. The lines are Nyoongar Songlines and trading routes; the blotches of Balga Tree resin are scars on the earth; and the lighter dots are ochre mines, ochre that Pease has extracted from a southwest ochre pit well known to his family.

There is a backstory to Dale's artwork and one that recurs in Pease's *oeuvre*. Briefly told, the story is about a *Whadjuk* warrior and resistance fighter named Yagan (c.1795-1833). The story of colonisation in *Whadjuk boodja* (the Swan River Colony) is a violent one, and the death of Yagan is no exception. Yagan played an instrumental role in *Whadjuk* Nyoongar resistance to British colonisation. He was accused of a series of thefts and

1 Ainslie Gatt, "Nyoongar Identity and the Art of Christopher Pease" (M.Cur., University of Western Australia, 2019), 104-107.

2 "Robert Dale's Excursion from King George Sound to Koi-kyeun-u-ruff Ranges, January 1832" in *Western Australian Exploration, Volume One, December 1826 - December 1835*, ed. Joanne Shoobert (Perth, WA: Hesperian Press in conjunction with Department of Land Information, 2005), 298-301.

3 Christopher Pease, in discussion with the author, 25 April 2018.

murders of British settlers in the colony, and consequently, the police offered a bounty of 30 pounds to anyone who could apprehend him, alive or dead. Eventually, after a series of events, he was shot and then decapitated.

The death of Yagan has since been embedded in Nyoongar folklore; a heroic figure remembered as one of defiance towards the prejudice and barbarous treatment inflicted by the Swan River settlers on Nyoongar people.⁴ In 1834, when Robert Dale returned to London, he took Yagan's head with him. To promote the sales of his panoramic artwork of King George Sound, Dale exhibited Yagan's skull alongside the picture, staging his exhibits as a story of antipodean anthropological curiosity.⁵ After being held in museum storage for over a century Yagan's head was buried in an unmarked grave. In a long campaign by the Nyoongar people, Yagan's head was exhumed and returned to Western Australia in 1997 and buried alongside his body.⁶

Pease's describes his painting *Bidi Karta Werda (Path Across)*

The title *Path Across* refers to the repatriation of Yagan's head in 1997 and the journey home from Liverpool back to Perth. For more than a decade, *Wudjuk* Elders had been lobbying for the repatriation of Yagan's remains until finally a delegation including Ken Colbung, Robert Bropho, Richard Wilkes and Mingle Wanjurri-Nungala had success.⁷

In 2010 Yagan's head was buried in a purpose-built memorial park in Perth, close to where his body was initially laid to rest. Pease comments, "I was lucky enough to be present during the reburial ceremony on the 10th July 2010."⁸ Yagan's final burial was a private and intimate ceremony attended by a select few with his actual resting place kept secret from the general public. As a precursor to this, in 1984, the Nyoongar community commissioned Perth sculptor Robert Hitchcock to create a sculpture of Yagan after a vigorous public fundraising campaign. The sculpture of Yagan was erected at Heirisson Island on the Swan River in East Perth to commemorate the warrior and his return to *Whadjuk boodja*.⁹

European contact with Minang nation peoples between the years 1627 to 1832 was largely stimulated through the pursuit of scientific investigation. Correspondingly, records of contact during this time reveal predominately friendly encounters. Journal entries of explorers and the visual documentation in artworks disclose that the Minang were responsive to exchanging cultures and welcoming into their world new ideas while adapting to the hybridity that challenged identities. However, the collision of cultures at King George Sound was by no means as disruptive as it was at the Swan River Colony from 1829 or other parts of Australia, where commercial expansion was a rapid

4 Anna Haebich, *Dancing in Shadows : Histories of Nyungar Performance* (Perth, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2018), 57.

5 Cressida Fforde, "Yagan", in *The Dead and their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice*, ed. Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert and Paul Turnbull, (London: Routledge, 2003), 233.

6 "Warrior Reburied 170 Years After Death". *Australian Geographic*. (12 July 2010) Accessed January 22 2020, www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2010/07/warrior-reburied-170-years-after-death/

7 Christopher Pease, "Bidi Karta", e-mail to author, 24 October, 2018.

8 Christopher Pease, in discussion with the author, 25 April 2018.

9 Stephen Gilchrist, 'Surfacing Histories: Memorials and Public Art in Perth', *Artlink* 38, no. 2, (2018), 42.

development. British colonisation in the South West was so concentrated and accelerated that within 50 years much of the traditional Nyoongar way of living had perished.

For the European explorers the Western Australian landscape was an alien terrain. Not faltered by its harsh and unforgiving nature, artists such as the French exploration artist Louis Auguste de Sainson, and Dale, painted the southern landscape to resemble a more familiar and welcoming countryside (that is, more European), as a desirable place to settle. As these nineteenth century artworks by de Sainson and Dale are not widely recognised, the act of appropriation by Pease is an innovative way of reintroducing the images to contemporary audiences while highlighting an Aboriginal perspective.

Flickering between past and present narratives, *Bidi Karta Werda (Path Across)* is firmly entrenched in the history and lived experience of the Nyoongar Aboriginal, offering a rich depository of cultural and historical information. Pease's appropriation of the southern landscape of Western Australia subverts the European account by representing the *boodja* (country) from an Aboriginal perspective while presenting a gateway to an aspect of Australia's past that has been obscured from public consciousness. From early cooperation between cultures to the bloodshed and historical trauma that followed for the Nyoongar people, Pease has found a unique way to interpret history, while making it relevant to audiences in contemporary society.