

# NUCLEAR IMAGING

Sixty years after the black mist rained on Maralinga burning people and country, Australia's nuclear history is being made visible through art.

Writer: Sarah Harris - Photographers: David Field and Jessie Boylan

Jessie Boylan may just be proof of the adage that activists and artists are born rather than made, entering the world under not so much a star sign as a mushroom cloud of Cold War hostilities.

The global nuclear arsenal reached its peak of 65,056 weapons in her birth year when she was delivered of a pregnancy literally book-ended by the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior and the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown.

Now aged 30, the multi award-winning photomedia artist finds herself at the forefront of documenting the Australian anti-nuclear movement with its inextricable threads to war, mining, social and environmental justice as the Doomsday clock, once again, shows three minutes to midnight.

The Castlemaine-based mum-of-two is one of more than 36 (indigenous and non-indigenous) artists and two locals (the other, Montalto Sculpture Prize-winning master founder Craig MacDonald) whose works will feature in a major two-year national touring exhibition to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the atomic test series at Maralinga in South Australia, starting in September.

Black Mist Burnt Country spans seven nuclear decades from the apocalyptic bombing of Hiroshima, the post-war testing in the central desert, through the protests against Pacific testing in the '80s to the present day.

It's a huge potential crowd-puller including works by the leading Australian painters of the 20th century: Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker, who saw the devastation of Hiroshima first hand in 1947 when he travelled with the Australian Army as art correspondent.

Jessie's contribution will be a collaboration with Linda Dement – a distillation of their three years as part of the Arts Council of Australia-funded Nuclear Futures community arts project extending across six countries which produced, among many other works, a major immersive installation titled Ngurini (Searching).

Made for a three-metre high, nine-metre diameter circular screen employing six projectors that viewers walk into – and

eventually must leave – Ngurini explores the forced relocation and intergenerational response of Pitjantjatjara Anangu in the aftermath of Britain's atomic testing at Maralinga.

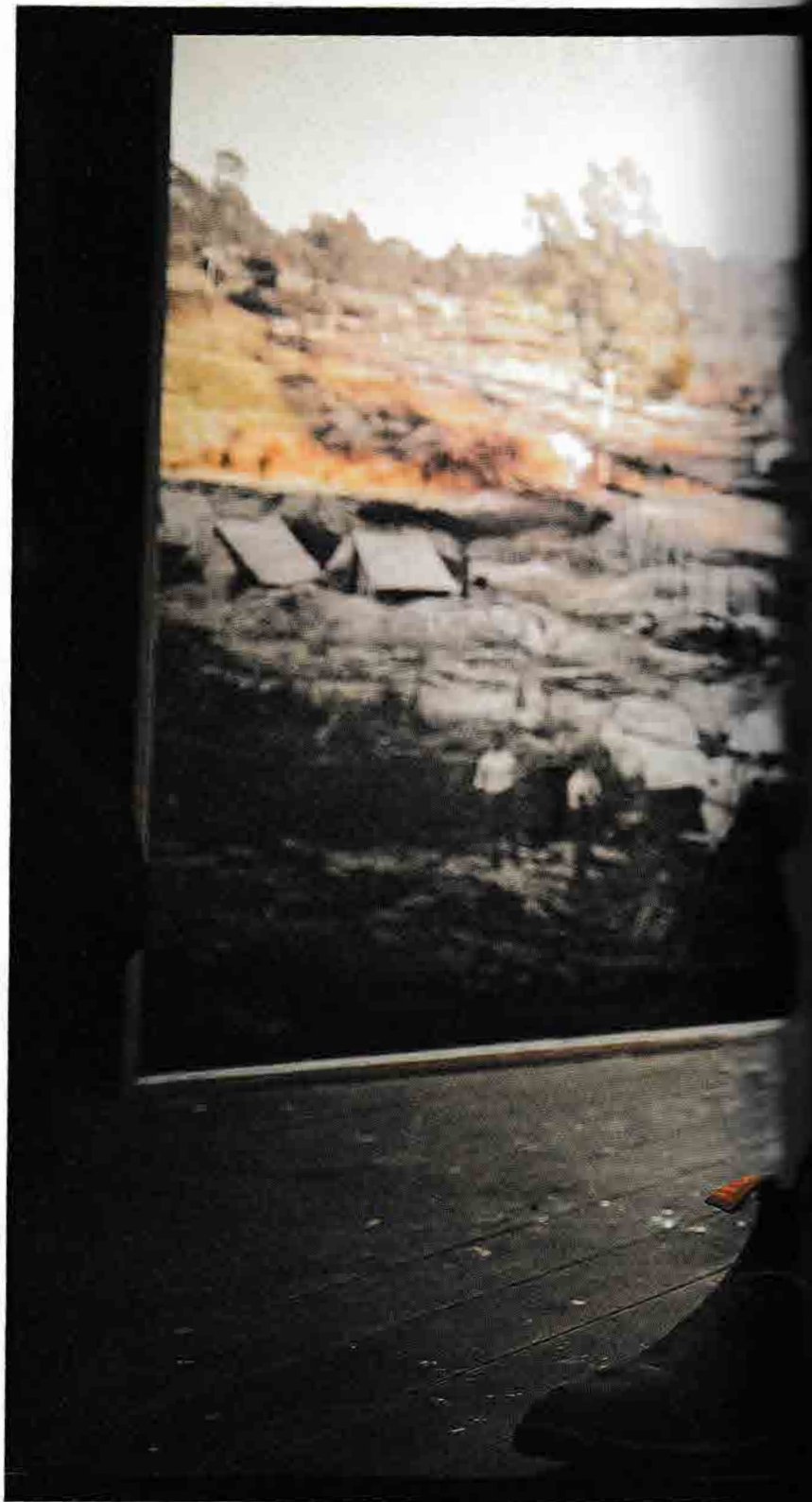
The new work will also focus on Pitjantjatjara Anangu people, the contemporary community and current landscape of Yalata through multiple projections and the possible effects of a nuclear winter; our own ground zero if you will.

Jessie's progression from traditional 2D images to large scale 3D immersive

works reflects not only the evolution of photomedia, but her own development as an activist and artist, first sparked when her year 8 science teacher offered an elective class in darkroom photography.

Until then she had done little more than perform for and play with her sound engineer father's camera. She still has and uses the Canon 81 SLR her dad gave her in her teens.

Click... wind, click... wind. Jessie vividly recalls the first time she journeyed into the desert after signing on for the Friends of the Earth annual induction into Australia's



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AF GBCI (10.2 X 12.7)



the landscape.

"When I started uni, I was very passionate about social justice, environment and human rights and I wanted to use my photography for that purpose. I walked past the Sustainable Living Festival and the Radioactive Exposure Tour," she recalls.

"The journey into the interior evoked a strong response. "Once we had left the tip of the Gulf and the white sand changed to orange and then red, I remember this feeling of amazement at every grain of sand and every spinifex plant in front of me," she

says. "Setting foot on the land came with a whole education about what had happened there before I reached it. Being in the 'Outback' was coupled with the introduction to so many things: Australia's dark history in relation to Aboriginal people and colonialism, the anti-nuclear movement, a sense of community, sense of place, activism, campaigning, connections, capitalism, greed, struggles and resilience."

The land and its people would call to her over and over again as she attempted to document a movement often remotely perceived through layers of dust, dreadlocks

and deliberate disinformation as comprising of "ratbags and troublemakers", so people might understand the cause.

It was during one of her earliest trips that Jessie met a Yankunytjatjara man called Yami Lester. Yami was 10 years old and living at Wallatina Station when 'Totem One' was detonated at Emu Field in 1953 – and although less well-known than Maralinga it was actually the first of a series of atmospheric atomic bombs tested both in South Australia and off the coast of Western Australia.

Yami was blinded by the black mist of the

fallout that rained on his people while many others, including those involved in the testing, became sick with diarrhoea, skin rashes and other illnesses.

It was the start of a series called *Inhabited* (2006) – which was a response to the then Environment Minister Brendan Nelson's announcement of the Federal Government's decision (since overturned) to establish a nuclear waste dump in the Northern Territory.

Defending the plan, Dr Nelson memorably told the ABC: "If the people of Sydney can comfortably live with a nuclear reactor that conducts research and produces isotopes for industry and for medical use, why on earth can't people in the middle of nowhere have low-level and intermediate-level waste?"

It showed how time and time and time again toxic stuff lands at the feet of remote Aboriginal communities because "they are out of sight, out of mind".

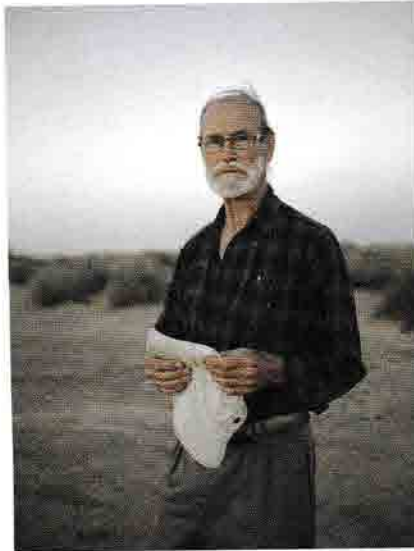
The anti-nuclear movement is not a cause célèbre in Australia, where whales, puppies and even sheep make better poster boys for activism. The history of nuclear testing here is largely ignored or forgotten in what Jessie calls "atomic amnesia".

"We did a project in South Australia working with lots of high school students and only a couple had ever even heard of Australian nuclear testing and it happened on their doorstep," Jessie muses. "That's indicative it is not being taught in schools. I certainly wasn't taught about it in school."

As a member of the small, but growing International Atomic Photographers Guild her mission is, as American founder Robert del Tredici encapsulates it, "to put a face on this culturally invisible, damnably everlasting bomb of ours: to make the invisible visible".

Last year her portrait of one such "face" – Avon Hudson the nuclear veteran, whistleblower and all-round thorn in the side of successive British and Australian governments – won the University of Adelaide Law School Images of Justice photographic competition.

But Jessie is not solely focused on the nuclear industry. On completion of her undergraduate degree she took herself to Palestine after being invited to work with an Israeli artist to document Arab Bedouins who had been displaced.



"While I was there Operation Cast Lead (also known as the Gaza War) happened and 1300 Palestinians were killed in the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip. We were working in the Negev (Desert) and could see the smoke rising from Gaza City. I got very involved politically in that issue and visited the Gaza as a kind of witness with a camera with the international group Code Pink."

Jessie also regularly turns the camera on her own landscape, most recently producing a series called *Fourteen Ounces* layering past on present to show the social, economic and environmental legacies of the gold rush.

Even here there is a message. "I think most art is political. Sometimes I just take landscape photographs and I love it because the landscape is beautiful, but then you see the layers of history on the landscape, you see the human impact on the landscape and you see the colonialism in that landscape. You can go so far so quickly."

Zoom out... Since completing her Master of Fine Art (Photomedia) the lens through which Jessie views the world has undergone a subtle, but powerful tilt shift. "I think my work has evolved in that I am not so didactic any more. I am allowing people to interpret the work and come to it with their own history and experience and not isolate them or push them away if they don't agree. To not have to see it the way I see it... just to see."

**Black Mist Burnt Country**  
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