

Jeremy Blincoe

New Zealand / Australia

‘The Honest Mythmaker’

Introduction and interview by Alasdair Foster

INTRODUCTION



Traditionally, stories were a way to make sense of the world. They gave apparent structure to the bewildering torrent of phenomena of which the evolving human mind was rapidly becoming conscious. The power of stories does not rest in the accuracy of their description of the real world. Rather, they construct emotional narratives, creating complete poetic packages from the apparent chaos of lived experience.

Myths are stories that become deeply embedded in the imagination of the community. In modern English, the word ‘myth’ derives from the ancient Greek word ‘mythos’, which simply meant ‘story’. Within modern times, psychoanalysts such as Carl Jung (1875–1961) have argued that myths are an important way to understand the workings of those parts of the mind that are not available to direct rational inspection: the unconscious. The characters and situations depicted in myth are shaped by our unconscious drives, which also shape many of our attitudes and actions while remaining beyond our awareness. By studying myths as collective narratives and as individual dreams or fantasies, psychoanalysts believe we can gain insight into the powerful psychological forces that mould the way we feel and behave, even though we remain unaware of them.

The photographic artist Jeremy Blincoe is a visual storyteller. His purpose is not to reflect the world we see around us, but to explore the interior world of the mind. The mind of the individual, but also the mind of the community, the shared imagination of the group. Like peeling the layers of skin from an onion, it is a slow process of gradual steps as he digs deeper into these imaginative psychological spaces. While his images often spring from the personal, they seek, through the process of becoming artworks, to be reformed in a mythic visual language that may be shared by others.

If these are myths, in that they use narrative to describe possible ways of thinking about the world, they are not fables or parables; they do not have a simple moral lesson they seek to impart. Each visual story remains open, inviting viewers to journey into the mythic space and find, perhaps, their own personal answers or empathic resonance.

Jeremy Blincoe was born in New Zealand in 1981, moving to Melbourne, Australia, in 2008, where he now lives and works.

INTERVIEW

How did you begin to make photographs?

Around 2003, I was living in Wanaka, in the South Island of New Zealand. I had been skiing for a number of years, 'chasing winters'. Driving up the access road of Treble Cone ski area, I spotted a camera. It had been abandoned in the dust. It was a panoramic point-and-shoot. I began photographing friends and landscapes, and my love for photography grew from there.

What drew you to the construction of staged images rather than images which reflect the real world?

I love stories. As a child, I enjoyed reading fairy tales, then I moved on to science fiction and now I have been engrossed in some of the oldest stories of all, religious mythology. It is this love of stories that drives me to construct narrative images rather than simply document the world as it appears.

After graduating from university, I began my photographic career in advertising. Working with creative directors on concept generation and meticulously planning each image taught me skills and gave me ideas that, today, I still draw on in my work.

What were the ideas behind your first series, 'Wander and Wonder'?

The modern world is in a perpetual state of busyness and technology is extending into every aspect of our lives. There is little room left for us to pause and ponder the unknown; to see the mystery in the familiar. Even in our leisure time, we seek passive entertainment and chase the ephemeral gratification of social media rather than engage in activities that would enrich our minds and our imaginations.

At times, I have felt myself becoming indifferent to the wonder of the world. It leaves me in a terrible state of boredom. For me the solution is found in nature and in art. They can enable you to enter other perceptual worlds and return with an enriched perspective.

Some of the images seem to suggest violence, but it is unclear if the children are protecting or hunting the animals. What do you think is happening in these images?

The image of Samedhi is based upon a childhood memory. My family home backed onto a nature reserve. At the time, it was filled with a dense forest of bamboo. It was a beautiful place, which attracted many birds. I bought an air rifle from a neighbour up the street – I used to stash it under the mattress of my sister's old pram in the attic. Immediately after school ended (and before my Dad got home from work) I used to put bread on the nature reserve fence to attract the birds... and then shoot them. Now, I feel remorse for this macabre sport but, at the time, I didn't stop to question whether it was right or wrong. The boy in the image has learned the error of his ways (my ways). He has freed the bird from captivity and is now its protector.

Other images from the series have a more fairy-tale quality.

I made the image of Mae in the forest to express my desire to connect with nature. It is a kind of 'call to the wild', an invitation to embrace the uncertainties of the unknown.

Your second series, 'Fleeting Embrace', also focuses on childhood mythology. How were these ideas evolving for you?

I was questioning what kind of legacy we might be leaving to the children of the world. Will some of the magnificent creatures that roam the earth become so rare that they end up as curiosities in a museum? The image of Sassy is about the way the habitat for polar bears is rapidly shrinking due to global warming. The image is set on a barren salt lake. The solid salt glistens like polar ice, but it is a far from hospitable place for a great white bear.

Dre – who is standing knee-deep in the white lake, surrounded by tall gum trees – is mourning the loss of an animal whose skull he cradles in his arm. I wanted to express the young boy's confusion about why something to which he was once emotionally close is now gone.

In 2012, you created 'Ephemeral Memory', which extended the images of childhood into other conceptual areas around indigenous Australians. What was the impulse behind that transition?

The inspiration for this series came when I began boxing at the Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Centre. Here, I formed close friendships with the other participants. I was astonished to learn that many people had little or no contact with indigenous Australians, yet they would confidently project negative stereotypes onto people they knew nothing about. In creating the series 'Ephemeral Memory', I wanted to highlight the struggle of Indigenous people to hold on to their ancient culture while also forging a new indigenous identity in modern-day Australia.

Jack Charles is an Aboriginal elder and actor. In my image of him amid a sea of white, I wanted to express the 'oneness' of indigenous people with their land. I wanted to highlight the importance of maintaining and celebrating their cultures, which date back more than 60,000 years.

There is a very different aesthetic in the image entitled 'Two Dollars' which also features Jack Charles...

Jack, is a member of the Stolen Generation. [The Stolen Generations were the children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were compulsorily removed from their families by the Australian Federal and State government agencies and church missions. The aim of the removals was to 'assimilate' paler-skinned children into white colonial society, in the belief that the traditional indigenous population would soon become extinct – something the authorities believed to be an inevitable and a 'natural' process. The practice began at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted into the early 1970s.] In this image, Jack is rendered gold, mimicking the reverse side of the Australian two-dollar coin [which features an Aboriginal elder embossed on the gold-coloured metal]. The picture comments on the ongoing fight which members of the Stolen Generation face when claiming government compensation for being forcibly removed from their families.

How did you develop your ideas for the next series?

'Chimera of Control' is an investigation into human existence: what drives our actions and what are the consequences of our actions for the environment and for us? As our population continues to expand so does our demand for material goods, many of which are coveted symbols of status and success. Natural resources are exploited to meet these demands and the detrimental consequences for the environment are spiralling out of our control.

The title suggest that control is an illusion.

I am interested in the illusion of 'free will'. The image *'Ego and Nature'* is based upon Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) concepts of the ego and id [in Freudian psychology, the 'ego' is the part of the mind that mediates between the conscious and the unconscious and is responsible for one's sense of personal identity and control. The 'id' is the unconscious part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and pleasure drives are manifest.] In the image, I am relating the ego and the id to the rider and horse. It is the horse that is in charge, the rider is involved in a kind of pretence of control when the horse is manifestly more powerful. We are creatures full of contradictions with wavering self-control, often surprised by our own decisions.

There are two images of children that have formal similarities, but contrasting colour schemes and emotional undertow. What ideas are behind these two images?

Material culture and the pursuit of a perceived perfection are instrumental in shaping our identities. *'Radiant Child'* features Mila, the daughter of a friend of mine called Reko Rennie, an Aboriginal artist from Melbourne. In the image, I wanted to highlight the impact of colonisation on indigenous cultures. The greed prevalent in western cultures which drives the mining of natural resources is symbolised in the gold dust which showers down on Mila, smothering her true identity.

In contrast, the image entitled *'Bound'* depicts a young girl trapped within the confines of a pearl-encrusted straightjacket. Immersed in her own narcissism, she is blinded to the wonders of the natural world.

Again, in 'The Myth of Progress', you suggest a sense that we are not in control of our destiny. Why do you think that is?

Human knowledge and technology continue to grow exponentially, but our morality and ethics don't keep up. History is cyclical: we often learn things, only later to unlearn them. Yes, I am suggesting that we are not fully in control of our destiny. I do not share the belief that many people seem to have that, with technology, we have the capacity to create a utopian future.

We come to justify violent acts in the name of 'progress', while in many cases failing to perceive those acts as violent at all. The prevalence of an 'Us versus Them' rhetoric is used to justify demonising and dehumanising those we consider to be 'the enemy'. Evil has had many faces throughout the course of history and, as I suggest in my image of the blindfold girl swinging a cudgel at an enemy she cannot see but misinterprets as a threat, it is often presented as being an urgent 'necessity'.

That image is presented like a fable, but in 'Still I Hear the Word Progress' the strange figure arising from the lake is rather more abstract. How was it created?

It is a two-metre-high sculpture, made from plastic bags, plaster and sticks constructed around a steel 'spine'. I created this sculpture to represent the 'spectre of progress', the 'plastic footprint' haunting an expanse of water filled with dead trees.

These later images seem emotionally darker than most of those that precede them. Is that a fair observation?

Yes, I would definitely agree with that. Perhaps over time I have attempted to explore and analyse the darker parts of my psyche, what the psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the 'shadow self' [the unconscious, unrecognised, dark side of one's personality]. Though this personal exploration is a continuing 'work in progress', I have discovered more about myself and come to understand that there is a capacity for evil that lurks within all of us, whether or not we act on it.

How much post-production do you do on your images?

I prefer to achieve as much as possible in the camera, but certain concepts and locations do require the combining of multiple shots. Saying that, part of me rather enjoys spending time in post-production, working on the smallest details in order to ensure that all the different puzzle pieces blend together perfectly.

What kind of response to your work do you receive from the public and critics?

A few years ago, I met with a writer and critic who intensely disliked my earlier work. He considered it to be soft, like a sentimental fairy tale. It was, at the time, terribly disheartening. But it is important to listen to criticism. I think, subconsciously, I have carried those words with me as my work has evolved. At my most recent exhibition – *'The Myth of Progress'* – I was told by a curator that my work carries real weight. For me, this was an especially wonderful compliment because it meant that, as my philosophical outlook has become more refined, so has my work.

What is the most surprising response you have had to one of your images?

On a number of occasions people at exhibitions have explained their interpretation of a work in ways I had never considered before. I am always thrilled when that happens. I try to create imagery that is multilayered, so feedback like this provides a gentle affirmation that I am on the right track.

What are you working on now?

I am developing a portrait series entitled *'Always Will Be'*. It features young indigenous Australians photographed in landscapes lit by the full moon. The portrait series is driven by my long-term admiration for the beautiful portraits of New Zealand Maori dignitaries by the painters C.F. Goldie (1870–1947) and Gottfried Lindauer (1839–1926) held by various museums in Auckland. Their influence has resulted in a marked shift in my aesthetic approach.

This is planned to be an ongoing project and, early next year, I would like to spend some time photographing in New Zealand. I am working on the portrait series in tandem with a new series exploring the architecture of belief, a sequel to *'The Myth of Progress'*.

What do you mean when you say, 'architecture of belief'?

I am interested in examining the myths that have shaped our behaviour and beliefs. If, as the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) asserted, “God is Dead”, has modern science created its own mythologies... and are they any more sophisticated or any less dangerous than the ones we have discarded?

What have you discovered about yourself through making this work?

Self-discovery and personal growth can be very slow processes, combining a myriad of factors. Working with Nathan McGuire and other young indigenous Australians, I am reminded of the profound connection with the land and the strong community bonds that indigenous people possess. It has caused me to question my own values... and I have come to the conclusion that I still have much to learn.