Tall ships / Tall tales
Armada: a video work by John Gillies

by Linda Carroli

They came by sea, over the shimmering horizon, in monstrous creaking ships. Water splashed against heavy timber hulls. Sails billowed as the distance between ship and shore diminished. The land, of course, was the prize. An invading force cannot take and occupy the sea as it can take and occupy the land. They glided across the calm waters of the bay, the first British fleet, lead by the flagship, Sirius, that `first armada'.

So it was, in early 1788 that the landing party claimed their prize -'discovered' and claimed for the British crown some 18 years previously - for the purpose of colonising Australia and its people and establishing a penal settlement. As the Union Jack unfurled, the British took possession of a land that they had decided was *terra nullius*. Fatal atrocities are heaped high in this scenario of dispossession and punishment. Robert Hughes writes, "never had a colony been founded so far from its parent state, or in such ignorance of the land it occupied...an unexplored continent would become a jail. The space around it, the very air and sea, the whole transparent labyrinth of the South Pacific, would become a wall 14,000 miles thick. " [1]

Throughout John Gillies' video montage, *Armada*, those moments of atrocity and cruelty are presented as sites to be revisited, sites whose compelling persistence requires, at the very least, consideration. The dispossession and punishment embedded within this country's colonial past are excavated or evoked through a series of historical and cinematic symbols and representations. In titling the work, *Armada*, Gillies has set a tone: there is a battle to be fought, a history to be remembered and a power to be resisted. The artist admits that this was his intention. Interviewed in Eyeline by Nicholas Zurbrugg after producing the work in 1994, Gillies explains that he "was trying to make these images of the First Fleet seem strange and menacing….if one calls the First Fleet the 'First Armada' it has totally different connotations….I was trying to take the image and make it something that one sees for the first time - something really menacing as the image of the boat must have been for the people who first saw it coming here."[2] This is no easy feat given that the images and commemorations of 'tall ships' are celebrated in the national imaginary as a manifestation of nationhood and progress. Nevertheless, as governments continue to betray the Indigenous right to Native Title, we are

[1] Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987, p 1
[2] John Gillies interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg, '0rchestrating Armada', *Eyeline* 25, Spring 1994, p I3

reminded that Gillies has a point: the colonial past is not distant but recurs, repeatedly, in cultural and political arenas.

The doctrinaire authority of *terra nullius* underwrites each political response and posture. According to Henry Reynolds *terra nullius* is accepted as meaning a land belonging to nobody. However, “confusion has abounded because *terra nullius* has two different meanings, usually conflated. It means both a country without a sovereign recognised by European authorities and a territory where nobody owns any land at all, where no tenure of any sort existed"[3] In refusing to recognise that the land was occupied by not only sovereign people (as dispersed tribal authorities) but also that these people were in possession of the land (in the sense of custodianship and occupation), the land was declared empty and therefore 'open to occupation'. ln *Armada*, this idea of emptiness is addressed in terms of absence; an absence that is illusory. There are clear signs of occupation, of the presence or passage of 'others'. Throughout the work bodies are suggested through the use of sound and imprint: speech, footsteps, scratching, artefacts. Subsequently, there is a sense that those who are absent are hidden or hiding; they are elsewhere. Marginalised, they do not exist within the colonial space, nor are they readily exposed to the colonial gaze, although they are positioned by it and colonised by it. Nevertheless, these other bodies inscribe and map the landscape.

Throughout *Armada*, Gillies not only addresses notions of history, time and memory but also engages a visual lexicon by toying with traditional cinematic methods of treatment. There is something familiar about the images of machinery and turning wheels, the Union jack and a clock face layered over each other: somehow we know that time is passing, that machinery changes our relationship to time and space. Through such imagery, coupled with cuts to turning pages of the bible, indiscernible and alien terrains or semi-lit tall ships, Gillies displaces the linearity and telelogical impulse of colonial and industrial history. The past and the present are squeezed together; sounds of old and new trains are mixed, short-wave radio signals generate another space and another landscape. He fuses these sounds and images together as part of an ‘infernal machine', a hegemony that is rapidly spinning into crisis and obsolescence.

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[3] Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, Penguin, Sydney, 1987, p I2