In a presentation at the *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, artist Fiona Foley (b. 1964) stated that, prior to the exhibition, she did not know how to spell feminism and that her position as a woman came second to her position as an Australian Aboriginal person.¹ Her contributions to the exhibition included images of women, but were on the topic of racism against all Aboriginal peoples, not issues particular to Aboriginal women, such as the dramatically high rates of abuse and violence that they suffer.² In her statement, Foley used the phrase “spell feminism” as a means of dismissing feminism as inapplicable to her work and life. Her statement in Brooklyn was an attempt to strategically distance herself from white Australian feminism, which she views as having a problematic and paternalistic history with respect to Aboriginal women.³ In this paper, I highlight a number of Foley’s artworks to argue that womanhood is central to her sense of being

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3. Fiona Foley, “Biting the Clouds: The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897” (PhD confirmation paper, Griffith University, 2017), 12.
Aboriginal, which is based on her deep ties to other Aboriginal women. In considering Foley’s work, I draw on the concept of intersectionality as coined by law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in order to understand why the artist would want to distance herself from feminism while making art about women. Distance from feminism allows Foley to centralize Aboriginal women’s experiences in her work and conceptualize them as distinct from those of white women.

Although not widely known in the United States, Fiona Foley is a prominent artist who has exhibited nationally at Australia’s major museums and globally in Austria, China, Ireland, Japan, and the United States. She is a member of the Wondunna clan of the Badtjala people from K’Gari, also known as Fraser Island, in the Queensland state of Australia. Foley is a scholar, lecturer, and practicing artist. She studied sculpture and printmaking at the Sydney College of the Arts, a major art school in Australia, from 1984–86. In 2017, she received her PhD from Griffith University in Brisbane based on her research about the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, an important law that greatly restricted the mobility of Aboriginal peoples in Queensland and beyond. As is common practice, I will use the term Aboriginal to refer to the linguistically and culturally diverse Indigenous peoples of Australia. Aboriginal is a Latin-rooted English word meaning “from the origin.” It has been in use for most of Australia’s history to label its Indigenous peoples, carrying many negative connotations as well as more recent positive valences, such as Aboriginal rights

or Aboriginal pride. The term “Aboriginal” is akin to “Indian” in the American context. As Comanche scholar Paul Chaat Smith has argued, diverse, distinctive Native peoples became Indians through the process of US colonization. Similarly, distinct Australian Indigenous peoples became Aboriginal. As in the case with “Indian” in the American context, Aboriginal is the chosen general term many Indigenous Australians use to refer to themselves, including Foley.

Foley is a member of the first generation of city-based Aboriginal artists to achieve national and international fame. She was a member of the Boomalli 10, named in part for their creation of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, the first gallery founded by and for the exhibition of art by city-based Aboriginal artists. Many of the group’s founders are prominent today as artists, curators, and other arts professionals. After the expansion of the Aboriginal rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s was a time of activism in the cultural sphere. Aboriginal art, and Indigenous art more broadly, has grown in its recognition over time. In 1987, when Boomalli was established, there were no spaces to display contemporary city-based Aboriginal artists’ work—art such as Foley’s, which references her Badtjala background.

9. Ibid.
11. Ian McLean, “Names,” 1–3. McLean includes a quote from Lowitija O’Donoghue as a foreground for his epigraph in which she requests to be called Aboriginal. The term has been in use referring to Indigenous people in Australia for most of living memory, and has become so common that it is often included in texts or titles without explanation.
but is by no means traditional Badtjala art. Similar to Aboriginal art more broadly, Badtjala art, such as body painting, ground designs, and (more recently) multimedia paintings, contains figural representations of ancestral spirits, including animals that often tell didactic stories about how to live within a community. Foley was intensively involved during the first several years of the Boomalli collective but subsequently grew less involved as she pursued her own career. Though her time at the gallery was somewhat brief given that its history now extends over thirty years, the initial lack of a place for display and absence of a framework for understanding her work—issues that prompted the founding of Boomalli—also fueled Foley’s practice. As an artist and curator, she works to make space for her varied practices and to challenge the status quo of acceptable art, history, and ideas.

In the early 1990s, Foley encountered a photograph from 1899 entitled “Fraser Island Woman” while doing research at the John Oxley Library in the State Library of Queensland. According to Foley, she instantly recognized this woman as one of her own people by the shape of the woman’s breasts. This bodily recognition prompted Foley to create the Badtjala Woman (1994) and then Native Blood (1994) series, in which she becomes this Fraser Island woman, a member of the Badtjala, by embodying and recreating that moment. The original photograph is in black and white, while the others in this series are sepia-toned; Native Blood (1994) also has some colored accents. In the Badtjala Woman series, photographed by Greg Weight, Foley posed her topless body, looking out into the distance, in three heavily shadowed, bust-length photographs.

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Taken when Foley was thirty, the photographs display a confident young woman with long flowing hair. They are staged along with Aboriginal material culture, including shell necklaces and, in one photograph, a dilly bag—an Aboriginal woven bag for gathering food that Foley reinterpreted in *Black Velvet* (1996). The series is striking for its composition, which draws the eye to the artist’s features and Badtjala accoutrements, as well as its message of Foley proudly claiming her Badtjala heritage. The series bears noticeable resemblance to the ethnographic photograph featuring a young woman adorned with necklaces but no blouse. Speaking broadly of Foley’s practice, anthropologist Diane Losche argues: “Foley reinvents the nude, moving it from the realm of patriarchal domination and colonization to the zone of the maternal breast, recovering in herself, in her own body, her lost ancestors.”20 Nudity is used here to connect Foley and her work with the nude in Western art and the ideal female form. These photographs straddle the line between nude, as the perfect ideal body, and naked, as the marked, imperfect body.21 The nineteenth-century photograph represents an ethnic type marked by beaded necklaces, dark skin, and bare breasts; Foley’s series echoes this typology but through the artist, who is topless and accessorized so as to be recognizably Badtjala.

This work ties into the global practice of artists replicating the display of Indigenous or othered bodies with their own, which dates to the 1980s in the work of artists such as James Luna and Coco Fusco.22 The series is deeply personal, as Foley was inspired by specific archival photographs of her own people. Foley’s mother is Badtjala cultural leader Shirley Foley, who wrote the first modern Badtjala/English dictionary as well as organizing language and culture learning opportunities for her Badtjala community. Speaking about the influence of her maternal grandmother and how strong Aboriginal women were her earliest role

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models, Foley has said, “My culture comes from my mother.” She initially thought to use her mother for the series, but decided to use herself instead, understanding that, “I can use my body to speak to that history,” by which she means the period in the late nineteenth-century when many studio images of Aboriginal people circulated for the enjoyment of a mostly white audience, financially benefitting white photographers.

Continuing with the theme of restaging an ethnographic photograph, Foley also created Native Blood in 1994, a series of three photographs of the artist, partially clothed and set against a wave backdrop. Art historian Helen McDonald explores this work through a feminist perspective in Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art. Foley told McDonald that the series was not created with feminist intent, but McDonald felt strongly that this was the correct lens to understand the piece. Focusing on Foley’s photograph from the series in which she lounges on the floor, McDonald interpreted the series as Foley presenting the ideal woman as Aboriginal, thus contributing to the broader effort among woman artists to reconstitute the ideal female form. McDonald acknowledges the photograph’s relationship to ethnographic photography but ultimately characterizes the piece as an appropriation of the female nude, significant for its relation to idealism. Though the image draws comparison to other art historical nudes, McDonald’s discussion of idealism detracts from the manner in which Foley makes visible the staged nature of the ethnographic photographs. As these were her source material, idealization was not the original intent, nor is it Foley’s.

24. Ibid.
25. As with the Badtjala Woman series, I have chosen not to illustrate Native Blood in this publication out of respect for the artist, who prefers not to have these images shown. However, they have been printed in books and are held in public collections. To view these images, see Shepparton Art Museum, “Fiona Foley,” http://sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/paradise-again-gallery-item/!/312/item/28; and Museum of Contemporary Art, “Fiona Foley: Badtjala Woman (crossed string), 1994,” https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/1995.101B.
26. McDonald, Erotic Ambiguities, 45.
27. McDonald, Erotic Ambiguities, 41.
28. Ibid.
Fiona Foley, Image of artist with *Black Velvet*, 2014. Timber, aluminum, enamel, and acrylic paints, 120 × 850 × 80 cm. (installation length variable).

All images shown in this art essay courtesy of Fiona Foley and Andrew Baker Art Dealer.
Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet*, 2015. Inkjet print, 60 × 80 cm.


OPPOSITE (TOP TO BOTTOM)


THIS PAGE (LEFT TO RIGHT)
Oil on linen, 31 × 37 cm.

Brass and enamel paint, edition 3, 17 × 22 cm.

**LEFT TO RIGHT**

#2, 60 × 80 cm.; #13, 80 × 60 cm.; #16, 60 × 80 cm.
Fiona Foley, *School’s In*, 2015. 
Inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, edition 15, 80 × 60 cm.
Fujiflex digital print,
edition 15, 45 × 33 cm.
Installation image of *Vexed* exhibition, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, 2014. Featuring *Badtjala Woman*, 1994, gelatin silver print, 45.5 × 35.5 cm (each); *Modern Nomad*, 1994, Type C photograph, 50 × 40.5 cm.; and *Native Blood*, 1994, Type C photograph, 47 × 55.5 cm (each).
There are examples of non-European women posed in ways that evoke classical Western imagery, but this was by no means the norm. Ethnographic photographs were largely meant to be taxonomic so rather than an ideal beauty, an Indigenous or otherwise non-white woman would be understood as representative of her race. Instead, Foley uses her body to recreate images of a Badtjala woman. She honors the original sitter by refusing the anonymity imposed by reducing her to “Fraser Island Woman,” when she in fact had a name. Foley thus criticizes ethnographic photography while also demonstrating its continued utility in providing people with images of their families or ancestors, to whom they are not just anonymous types. The series title, Native Blood, refers to the artist herself, as a possessor of Badtjala heritage. By using the term “native blood,” Foley relates herself to global indigeneity. In Australia, the right to claim Aboriginality is generally understood to be personal, yet proof of Aboriginality, often in the form of a letter, can be required for particular opportunities. According to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, there are three criteria to obtain such proof: “being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifying as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, being accepted as such by the community in which you live or formerly lived.” These criteria are largely informal and based on self and community identification, unlike in other countries. As many scholars have pointed out, blood is used to categorize and label many animals, such as dogs, but

31. Since the early 1990s, independent researcher Michael Aird, himself of Aboriginal descent, has been a pioneer of research into photographs of Aboriginal peoples. His work has shifted the conversation around ethnographic photographs to focus on their function as records of individuals and of people’s families. See Michael Aird, Portraits of Our Elders (Brisbane: Queensland Museum, 1993).
33. Ibid.
only Native peoples among humans. In the United States, membership in Native tribes and/or nations is often at least partially determined by blood quantum, the amount of Native blood one possesses as determined by historic rolls of tribal members.

From Badtjala Woman to Native Blood, Foley repeats the same gesture of restaging: moving from the particular, her people, to the general, an Indigenous or “Native” woman. Like Badtjala Woman, the likely source of Native Blood is also an ethnographic photograph from the John Oxley Library, as identified by McDonald. This sitter appears to be the same woman from the “Fraser Island Woman” photograph, both of which were taken in 1899. In Native Blood, Foley’s platform shoes purposefully mirror the black, yellow, and red colors of the Aboriginal flag, a contrast to the 1899 photograph in which the Badtjala woman is barefoot. The Aboriginal flag is a pan-Aboriginal symbol of strength, unity, and the continued resilience of Aboriginal peoples. Native Blood is thus meant to be a tongue-in-cheek simplification of the artist as a Native stereotype, the lounging topless Native, wearing her political beliefs on her feet via the Aboriginal flag. The original photograph is also a kind of role-playing. Several missions were established near K’Gari at the time, and women’s typical attire would have been much more Westernized and covered up. It was also quite common to stage Aboriginal people who were living in or near cities as Native types for commercial gain. This nineteenth-century Badtjala woman is calm and dignified, not entirely naked nor accessible to the viewer. Foley writes of her: “Yet I

34. This conversation about blood and identity is a major topic in Native Studies. For more information, see Kim TallBear, Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
35. TallBear, Native American DNA, 45–48.
live in hope that my heroine could be your heroine, as she defies all odds with an unspoken eloquence of spunk.” 41 Foley thus positions herself as a contemporary heroine, a way to reclaim some agency, to be named and known. 42

Foley’s *Native Blood* and *Badtjala Woman*, both from 1994, present the artist as an archetype of Aboriginal womanhood and are the two most well-known series on the subject of Aboriginal women. 43 Despite the importance of *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood* to Foley’s career, the body of work that speaks most directly to her understanding of Aboriginal womanhood as an abstracted concept began with *Black Velvet* in 1996. While complementary in their overlapping subject matter, *Badtjala Woman* and *Native Blood* are more immediately impactful, whereas Foley’s *Black Velvet* works require further examination to understand. *Black Velvet* addresses Aboriginal womanhood in an abstracted visual language based on the nineteenth-century euphemism “black velvet,” which refers to sex between white men and Aboriginal women—a phrase I discuss in detail below. 44 Since the creation of her 1996 piece, Foley has made several additional pieces using the black and red abstract shape, the phrase “black velvet,” and/or the term as the title. *Black Velvet* (1996), with its shopping bag material, assemblage technique, and simple abstracted appliques, appears drastically different from *Native Blood* and *Badtjala Woman*. However, taken together, these photographic works from 1994 and the *Black Velvet* pieces from 1996 display Foley’s sense of Aboriginal womanhood as informed by the history and policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a particularly tumultuous period in the artist’s home state of Queensland, especially for the region’s Aboriginal peoples, who were often displaced from their homelands as a result of newly established settlements as well as land and resource grabs. 45 For Foley, being

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an Aboriginal woman today necessitates an understanding of an earlier historical moment in which biases against Aboriginal women were set, stereotyping them both as natural victims of their Aboriginal husbands and as sexually deviant.

The term “black velvet” is not widely used in Australia today, perhaps because it dates to the late nineteenth-century Australian frontier.46 Historian Anne McGrath is one of few scholars who has given the term focused attention. In an article on relationships between white men and Aboriginal women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, McGrath writes, “‘Black Velvet’ was the term used to describe Aboriginal women with whom white men had sexual intercourse.”47 McGrath further explains that the term could mean either the women themselves or the act of having sex with them. Black Velvet was also the name of a popular alcoholic drink at the time, and velvet indicated the smoothness of women’s skin. McGrath challenges the notion that these relations were akin to prostitution, which seemed to be the dominant view at the time.48 She explains that with so few white women on the frontier, Aboriginal women were seen not only as sexual objects but also as potential partners.49 However, laws discouraged long-term legal partnerships and did nothing to protect Aboriginal women from abuse, including rape. These same laws punished Aboriginal women — not men — for prostitution.50 Although the law and historical record demonstrate the prevalence of abuse and lack of protection for women, there were also many types of mutually beneficial relationships, evidence of Aboriginal women’s agency amidst deep inequality.51 Other historians have focused on this period because of its importance in the growth of progressive and feminist movements in Australia, many of which had a particular concern for Aboriginal women. Historian Marilyn Lake writes that, to white Australian feminists and many other reformers in the early twentieth century, “‘Native women’ were the key to the position of Aboriginal people because of their use and abuse as ‘sex slaves’ — by both

46. McGrath, “‘Black Velvet,’” 233.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 247–52.
51. Ibid., 236.
Aboriginal and white men.” Lake goes on to argue that the dominant society’s attitudes toward Aboriginal women were based on a belief in the brutality of Aboriginal men, and hence the abuses of white men were seen as less egregious. Social scientist Amy Humphreys’s analysis of how Aboriginal women were positioned echoes this analysis in her thesis on representations of Aboriginal women from the nineteenth through the twenty-first century. Humphreys argues that across sources and time, Aboriginal women have been portrayed as hypersexualized victims, excusing men who have or would do them harm. More bluntly, Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that, “Sexual intercourse between Indigenous women and white men is a social practice which reinscribes white racial superiority into identities of white masculinity, because for over 200 years the Indigenous woman’s body has been positioned within white society as being accessible, available, deviant and expendable.” Through this statement, Moreton-Robinson connects the historical with the present, much as Foley does. Both are concerned with how these past ideas about Aboriginal women affect the present.

The term “black velvet” thus points to a variety of attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal women, as opposed to coming from them. According to Foley, black velvet was “a euphemism used by white men to go out and get Aboriginal women. Instead of saying we’re going to get Aboriginal women, [they would say] we’re [going to] get black velvet. So that’s all about men taking Aboriginal women for themselves and doing whatever they want to do to them.” As Foley explains, the phrase black velvet was used by men about women. Her use of the term thus shifts society’s perspective away from Aboriginal women as objects to instead foreground their roles as subjects and authors. Through her repetition of this theme, Foley encourages viewers of her works to explore the term

53. Lake, “Colonised and Colonising,” 381–83
56. Fiona Foley, conversation with the author.
and how their perceptions of Aboriginal women might be based on the attitudes of white men.

Considering the artist’s attitude toward her subject matter and feminism generally, it is worth mentioning the growing body of scholarship around the concept of Indigenous feminism. In her own work, Foley has cited Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s recent book *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (2015). Moreton-Robinson’s work has influenced many scholars by emphasizing how the nature of feminism in settler colonial countries is a global and pressing concern. The edited volume, *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism* (2007), likewise provides several examples of scholars taking up the idea of what Indigenous feminism could look like, mostly within the North American context. Generally, these approaches to feminism are based in Indigenous conceptions about the roles and values of women, the feminine as a source of societal power and knowledge related to, but departing from, Western feminist scholarship. These approaches also imagine work by women to change society based on community initiatives that operate from the bottom up, rather than top down. Feminist politics and practices that center Indigenous women’s issues are growing, but these are by no means the global norm. Thus, when Foley criticizes feminism, or questions its utility for her and her work, she is not referring to Indigenous iterations of feminism, such as articulated by Moreton-Robinson. Like Marcia Langton, Foley is commenting specifically on pervasive cultural attitudes about the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women.

Utilizing the form of a mass-produced cotton bag, the aesthetics of *Black Velvet* reinforce the commonly held nineteenth-century view that Aboriginal women were easily taken and virtually valueless. The piece is composed of nine cotton dilly bags that hang on the wall, each sewn with a simple pattern of pointed oval shapes, red with a black outline. The effect is to make these bags appear quotidian, with a mass-produced aesthetic though in fact, they were each stitched by Foley. The label “dilly bags” suggests an explicitly Aboriginal reading of the piece, since the dilly bag was used widely by women across Indigenous Australia, who would hold and transport collected food by tying it around their heads.

58. Langton, “For Her We Must.”
with the bag at the wearer’s back like a ponytail. The shape does not automatically register as a dilly bag given the rectangular shape of the canvas, as opposed to the flat-topped, oval shape and woven material of traditional dilly bags. Instead, these bags are rectangular with only the pointed oval being somewhat reminiscent of the original. The red and black shape is meant to symbolize Aboriginal women as genitalia, with the black representing the outer labia’s dark skin and the red standing in for the vulva. These abstracted, but recognizable, female sexual symbols reduce Aboriginal women to their sexualities by representing them on easily obtained, everyday objects. As mentioned above, black velvet was also the name of a popular drink, so Foley’s decision to place this symbol on an object made for consumer use further elaborates the term’s history. The sensorial nature of this term extends beyond the look and feel of skin or genitalia into a consumable, a beverage, which was once as popular and widely available as these canvas bags.

The consumable nature of “black velvet” manifests in a more physical, tactile way in Foley’s piece Black Velvet II (2002). In 2002, Black Velvet was installed in an exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane entitled Your Place or Mine? with a companion ground sculpture, Black Velvet II. The IMA’s chosen title was purposefully provocative, hinting at a sexual encounter that continues the evening after a date or even a chance meeting. The ground sculpture was recreated in 2009 for Fiona Foley: Forbidden, Foley’s major midcareer solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Black Velvet II repeats the simple pointed oval shape of the original work in a three-dimensional ground sculpture. In this piece, the band of black is much wider next to the red that, despite the scale, more closely mirrors female genitalia. Composed of charcoal and chilies, the pointed oval becomes organic, textured, and tactile. Charcoal is meant to represent dark complexion, the reduction of Aboriginality to blackness with a substance that makes

63. Ibid., 233.
64. Michelle Helmrich, Christine Morrow, and Rachel Kent, eds., Fiona Foley: Forbidden (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009), 143.
65. Helmrich et al., Fiona Foley: Forbidden, 85.
marks, a potential tool for drawing. The mark-making capacity also is a nod to ethnography—the writing of culture, a method once used to study Aboriginal peoples. Dried, red chilies take the place of the vulva in *Black Velvet II*, forming a mass of small, red, ironically phallic shapes—harmless looking but spicy beneath the skin. Both chilies and charcoal also relate materially to heat through cooking and eating, bodily experiences that are as common as sex. Charcoal has the capacity to hold heat. Upon entering the gallery, the smell of dried chilies overwhelms visitors’ nostrils, making the normally scentless gallery air pungent. The organic and sensory qualities of *Black Velvet II* present a stark contrast to the reproducible quality of the original *Black Velvet* wall installation. I imagine that these chilies and charcoal bits could be the contents of the *Black Velvet* bags, ingredients for an inedible meal. The piece is inherently unstable and time-based, like any organic sculpture. Unlike a clean shopping bag, the charcoal creates marks and residue; the chilies rot and decompose with time. *Black Velvet II* is thus a more embodied take on the concept of “black velvet,” occupying physical space and leaving evidence on anyone who might try to take these objects.

In 2014, Foley once again took up this phrase, rendering it in large metal lettering for her three-dimensional text sculpture, *Black Velvet*. The industrially fabricated steel piece evokes a work Foley made of wood and bullets in 2008, titled *Dispersed*. The term “dispersed” was used as a euphemism for the displacement or violent removal of Aboriginal peoples by the government and white settlers in order to obtain their land. Like *Black Velvet*, *Dispersed* points to violent colonial encounters, though not explicitly sexual in nature. The text of *Black Velvet* (2014) is presented in two rows, with the letter “B” in black, the letter “V” in red, and the other letters in silver. At around four feet tall, this easily readable, all-capitalized serif-font sculpture is large enough to walk and move around. If displayed on a museum floor, this piece would present a

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66. As I have not seen the piece installed, the smell of the chilies did not initially occur to me. This information was provided by Fiona Foley. Email to the author, February 2, 2019.
puzzle to visitors — a little-used but importantly scaled phrase, impossible to ignore because of the space it takes up.

In 2015, Fiona Foley created another black velvet piece as part of a public art project in South Stradbroke Island in Queensland, Australia. This *Black Velvet* recalls visual elements of her 2014 piece; however, it is unmistakably a less permanent creation. Seemingly at random, Foley and her team of volunteers and collaborators purchased clothing—pants, shirts, and even some jackets—from Salvation Army stores and used them to fabricate the 11 letters of the phrase “BLACK VELVET” in two lines. Other works in this series such as *White Trash* (2015) were more controversial and have been reshown through photographs taken at the time. As the population of Australia is largely white and so were the community collaborators, the sculpture *White Trash* (2015) was quickly decried as offensive. *Black Velvet* (2015) seems to have had a much shorter life as an artwork, shown only through photographs of the piece in 2017 as part of an exhibition in the town center of Lismore, New South Wales.

*Black Velvet* (2015) is the largest of the pieces. Although dimensions were not recorded for the ground sculpture, the amount of clothing suggests they were roughly human-sized. Encountering this sculpture on the beach might be a puzzling experience for viewers. We might think about how coming upon this work would compare with encounters between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men—heavily embedded with meaning and power differences, but also uncanny and confounding. The choice of clothing as material for this piece lends a bodily sense to the work and evokes how Aboriginal women, viewed as “black velvet,” were also “used.” Evidence of sexual violence can often be found on both the victim and perpetrator’s clothing through rips, tears, or residue on fabrics. Because the clothing cannot be readily identified as “male” or “female” in existing photographs, they also carry the potential to outfit

69. Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet*, 2015, inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper, 80 x 60 cm., Lismore, NSW, Lismore Regional Gallery; Djon Mundine, conversation with the author, February 23, 2019, Charlottesville, VA; Fiona Foley, email correspondence with the author, August 7, 2019.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

either victims or perpetrators. This piece has the potential to act as a remnant of past violence, both historical and more recent, and to reference the subsequent culture of silence about sexual assault against Aboriginal women.

The most recent *Black Velvet* (2017) is on a much smaller scale — it is a breastplate with dark brown, bold, capitalized text set against shiny rose gold. This work was part of Foley’s PhD-qualifying installation, *Horror Has a Face*, which included several breastplates and a series of photographs imagining the lives of two white Australian men who were central in making Aboriginal policy in Queensland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The piece references nameplate necklaces, a fashionable accessory, and colonial breastplates. From 1816 to 1930, breastplates were given to small numbers of Aboriginal people by the British colonial government in Australia for helping the colonial government or in recognition of the powerful positions they held in their communities. Breastplates were important cultural objects for individuals, and in this context, demonstrated a colonial attempt to impose a Western social system, that of kings and queens, onto Aboriginal peoples. Unlike the breastplate by Foley, these breastplates were meant as personalized objects, prized and kept in families, but they are also complicated, painful reminders of colonization. By using the phrase “black velvet,” Foley feminizes an object that was originally given to both women and men. In using a term for Aboriginal peoples coined by their colonizers, Foley alludes to the original, colonial use of breastplates: they

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73. Djon Mundine, who consulted on the project, said that the used clothing for *Black Velvet* (2015) was chosen at random, including both female and male items. Conversation with the author, February 23, 2019.

74. Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet*, 2015. Mundine made this argument to me when we were discussing the differences between Fiona Foley’s gallery works and public installations. Conversation with the author, February 23, 2019.


79. Ibid.
were often given with the expectation of taking land or, perhaps, also the wearer if she happened to be an Aboriginal woman.

Through much of her practice, Foley visualizes Aboriginal womanhood from an insider’s perspective. In the Native Blood and Badtjala Woman series, Foley becomes or restages late nineteenth-century ethnographic photographs. In her Black Velvet works, she uses a simple phrase to communicate the complexity of how Aboriginal woman are viewed by a non-Aboriginal people. Foley requires the viewer to have some background information to fully comprehend her work. Global Feminisms included the photograph HHH #4 (2004), meaning Hedonistic Honkey Haters, in which the artist created a series of robes and hoods in bright colors, modeled after Ku Klux Klan robes.80 The photograph, HHH #1 provides a wider view of the project, showing all robes made specifically for the artist and her friends out of African fabric purchased in Harlem.81 She presents images and terms that allow for an aesthetic and intellectual interpretation, perhaps to inspire some of her own curiosity about history in her audience. For Foley, meaning is layered and based on the relative knowledge of the viewer.

Foley’s art is driven by her desire to highlight overlooked histories in abstract or figural forms.82 The Black Velvet pieces thus speak to her conceptualization of how contemporary attitudes are informed by the past. Foley’s practice has moved beyond embodying an ethnographic type, but she periodically returns to an abstracted conception of Aboriginal women. She repeats “black velvet” to examine how the ideas behind it remain, though the term itself has fallen out of favor. By reducing Aboriginal women to this phrase, Foley forces viewers to confront their level of comfort with reductive stereotypes, with the objectification and commodification of women. She asks that we question how the trajectory of frontier encounters has led to the current moment. This gesture can be understood as broadly feminist, though both for Foley and in my

discussion, the emphasis on womanhood centers Aboriginal women in a way that much contemporary debate around feminism in Australia has not. Seduced by the simple tactility of her *Black Velvet* pieces, we might consider our own complicity in the traffic of corrosive stereotypes that on the surface seem benign or even soft.