

*A couple of years ago I realised that we're born into a society that we don't have agency of self in. That as we are born, we are already instructed on who we have to be and how we have to be. And from the First Nations lens, for me, from my First Nations lens, that is incredibly wrong... particularly when you're born onto a country that genealogically you should have agency alongside of... You're born into a country where the agency has been stripped of you. Before you are even born. Like 150, 250 years ago.*

## **Self Actualisation**

They say the easiest story to write is the one about yourself. You know this character better than any other. But I am not sure about this.

Writing about yourself requires honesty and creativity; a willingness to face... yourself. To see you, but also who you want to become. And then to make it *real*.

I first began experimenting with self-actualisation in my work in 2014. I wanted to bend the established rules of First Nations creative practice.

In *self-portrait in bloo* (2014; part of the Muswellbrook Regional Art Centre's collection) and *self-portrait as dayetee* (2015), I placed myself in the narrative, reasoning that the stories we tell now will be the dreaming stories of future generations.

I went on to develop a large immersive exhibition of paintings, sculptures and story in 'Lost Tales' (2016). Sweeping canvases fell from the ceiling out to along the floor and you could literally walk into and through the work.

These experiments taught me that I could as an artist not just make commentary, I could affect the flow of ideas in society.

## Tearing it Down

In mid-2019 I started my graphic novel.

In a break from drafting the narrative I worked on some artistic studies using Procreate. I created *Tear it Down (Cook Falling)*. The work depicts a group of activists wearing kangaroo masks pulling down the captain cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney. The masks worn by the activists are the key to understanding my intention with the work. For me – at least at that time – *Tear it Down* was a symbolic comment on the difficulty in responding to racism as an individual in a small redneck town. It might have featured a statue, but it wasn't really about statues.

I posted *Tear it Down*, along with another image, *Resist*, on my Instagram account, with the simple caption: '*Another study for the comic I'm really excited to make. I've spent hours playing around with a new style and I'm loving it.*'

The attention that *Tear it Down* received took me completely by surprise. In the week that followed I was approached multiple times by people wanting to acquire the artwork, and by commercial galleries interested in doing a series of 'statue destruction pieces'.

I declined these offers.

Soon after, I was invited to talk about the creation of the work for the State Library of NSW. The talk was scheduled for June 2020.

In May 2020 the Black Lives Matter movement swelled in the US. I got a phone call from the police who'd seen *Tear it Down* attached to an event on Facebook, and thought I was inciting violence and unlawful protest. The Facebook event was advertising my Library talk. It was a long conversation.

In the end, the interest in *Tear it Down* – both positive and negative – was a bit too much. The pressure. I felt myself losing hold of the narrative I had wanted to create with my graphic novel. I felt the me in it slipping away. I stopped working on the novel. Two years passed

## Archetypes

I'm not sure what compelled me to open the file that day. It had been a weird time, I'd been working on other projects that felt narratively similar (*Fear of a Blak Planet*) and the medium of graphic novels, the telling of superhero stories. Self-actualisation. Myth building.

Whatever it was, I had decided that today was the day.

I looked at the characters I had created two years earlier. They were recognisable, yet somehow all wrong.

In the pencil work of *The Adversary*, I saw the villain from the original story: the trappings of western society, individualism and organised religion. I disliked him just as much now as before. But I closed the file.

I started to draw.

A young boy inhabited by the spirit of a Gamilaroi legend. *The Chosen*.

*The Spirit* who inhabits the boy. Stone and fire and Gamilaroi magics.

Power and destruction.

The story I wanted to tell had changed. The dark underpinnings of racism in rural society were no longer the point.

I wanted to talk about aspiration for agency. I wanted to talk about revenge.

## Sacred Destruction

Any good revenge story has a good measure of irony. A moment where it is no longer possible to tell good from bad, a mirror image moment, a moment of shocking, poetic brilliance that unsettles and challenges and leaves you feeling fulfilled and empty all at once.

On the left is a sacred Gamilaroi site. On the right is St Mary's Cathedral, seen from William St in Sydney.

In the Gamilaroi scene, we see an explosion rupturing the ground. A mining site now. The threat of colonial violence, ever present.

In the Cathedral scene, we see an implosion from above and within. The *Spirit* and the boy melding and lashing out; demolishing. Destroying like for like.

Is it an inspiring vision?

Do you see a hero or an anti-hero?

Neither?

Both.

## Entropy and Awakening

In late 2021, I received an email out of the blue. A request for a chat about *Tear it Down*. Why not?

And so it began. A conversation, a commission, a research project, an Exhibition. A rolling stone that gathered momentum.

Entropy Awakening: the commission that wasn't a commission – no artistic boundaries or a request for certain imagery. Just an invitation to respond to a legal argument that wasn't really a legal argument. That was actually an invitation to have a public conversation about how we move through public spaces, and whose expression counts, and whose doesn't.

Eventually, the idea was to try and deidentify and neutralise the statue; to neutralise the law; the whole broken colonial system.

With these monuments and statues, tearing them down is potentially one of the outcomes we might want. A fitting end to a symbol of racism. But expending the energy also gives them psychological presence and power over us.

And even if they go the scales of justice are still weighed down by blood.

That's the lesson I've learned since *Tear it Down*: the entropy can't be cast off so easily.

*Even more than that, maybe it's in the imagining that we hold the most power. The possibilities and the willingness to self-actualise.*

Travis De Vries and Dr Marie Hadley