

Bus Projects;
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Ebony Hickey
'Strong I Am'

Bus Projects operates on the unceded sovereign land of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Powerful I Am

By Kate Just

Ebony Hickey has become known for her diaristic drawings, sculptures and video works that translate deeply personal narratives of Blackness, adoption, sexuality, and queerness. *Powerful I am* is a significant solo project that continues these themes while also exploring the artist's ancestral connections to Haiti, the sea and the Transatlantic Slave trade.

Adopted from Haiti as a newborn, Hickey explores the importance of this journey to her sense of self. At the centre of this exhibition is the moving video portrait *Divine Makeup*. The video features the artist drawing a face that mirrors her own on a giant sheet of Perspex. As she doodles a rich and colourful world around her face in the 'mirror', the artist's voice echoes a mantra of her experiences of loss, pain, struggle, and self-love. Phrases including 'shake loose my trauma,' 'let me fly into myself,' 'for I am an abandoned, adopted child soul,' 'guide my enslaved DNA,' and 'powerful I am,' assert Hickey's reconciliation with her past and her resilience to chart her own future. The artist also reclaims her lost ancestors: 'my art is the connection to my DNA.'

Four large scale drawings in oil pastel, posca, soft pastel presented on opposing walls extend the ideas in the video. Deploying a diaristic style featuring simplified forms and images, the drawings map Hickey's ancestral link to Haiti and the sea through portraits of four key objects/figures: a hammerhead shark, a self-portrait, an Ansett plane, and a tall slaving ship. On first glance, the brightly coloured cartoon-like forms in these drawings recant an almost friendly narrative of adventure and exploration. But on closer look, each picture articulates difficult and traumatic histories. The Ansett plane taking off from Haiti illustrates the artist's journey to Australia as an inter-country adoptee as a baby. On the country of Haiti, we see a wild-haired stick figure, her

feet firmly planted on the earth, and her arms outstretched, marking the plane's trajectory. This is a combined image of the artist's birth mother and Mother Earth. They are one guardian figure for Haiti and for Ebony. Through this work, Hickey simultaneously signifies the magnitude of her journey and re-grounds her kinship to Haiti.

Hickey's drawing of a tall slaving ship explores the artist's connection to the Transatlantic slave trade, of which Haiti was a part. This drawing of an upright ship on calm waters is undercut by text repeatedly scrawled on all sides – Ancestors, Ancestors, Ancestors, Wealth, Wealth, Wealth, Taken, Taken, Taken. The drawing honours Hickey's ancestral relationship to slave histories and underscores how Western wealth was built upon the slavery of Africans. For Hickey this history resonates with her experience of adoption in which removal, loss of family and money also figure. In *Divine Makeup*, the artist declares: 'Black commodification is a billion-dollar industry, and I am a product of that - money changing hands for adoption.'

Hickey's drawing of the hammerhead shark further explicates the violence of slave history. The artist's research into Transatlantic slavery led her to recognise the role of sharks in the slave trade. Ship captains, officers, sailors, and passengers confirmed that sharks followed slave ships across the Atlantic and 'feasted on human remains thrown overboard during the Middle Passage.... The shark functioned as an integral part of a system of terror utilized by the slave ship captain.' These images of sharks later contributed to successful public protests the slave trade enacted by poets, writers, and abolitionists.¹ Hickey scrawls out one such poem by James Thompson in 1783 on a Perspex sheet in the gallery; the verse makes vivid the horrors of slavery via 'the direful shark.'

Hickey's drawing of the shark features multiple tiny stick figures, and fragments of figures, floating in the water or in the body of the shark. These figures represent the artist's

many ancestors that may have been lost along the way – ‘black pearls of the ocean.’² By reimagining their plight, Hickey makes plain the violence imposed by Western imperialism on all corners of the globe and revives her own care and concern for their bodies and souls.

The last large-scale drawing is portrait of the artist’s face and torso, floating on a field of deep blue sea. Her hair extends out all in all directions. Despite her struggles and losses, she bears a smile. Here, the water is a place of solace, healing, and rejuvenation. We know now that this person has travelled great distances. She has faced great challenges but has remained afloat. There is a lightness in this water and a lightness in her. She bears this message: Powerful I am.

1. Rediker, Marcus (2008) ‘History from below the water line: Sharks and the Atlantic slave trade’, *Atlantic Studies*, 5:2, 285 – 297.

2. This is from an email note from the artist to the writer about the work 12 October 2021.

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Bus Projects acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate: the Wurundjeri people and Elders past and present of the Kulin nations.

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