



Interview with Clinton Naina (Meriam Mir)

By Andrew Stephens

Recipient of the Creative Victoria Award For Excellence In Any Media

The 8th Koorie Art Show (5 December 2020 – 21 February 2021)

Having been taken along to political gatherings, protests and activist meetings since he was a baby, Clinton Naina, a Meriam Mir man, has always carried with him a strong sense of justice and a willingness to take action to set things right. As winner of the Creative Victoria Award for Excellence in Any Media in *The 8th Koorie Art Show 2020*, he has produced a stunning new work that, not surprisingly, responds to many contemporary issues involving politics and the consequences of human activity.

The work *Landfill* (2020) is also a reflection on the past year of enduring COVID-19, and, for Naina, the long stretches of lockdown in Melbourne. As he says, the work is inspired by “the strange situation we have been living in”. The walks he has been doing within a five-kilometre radius of his home revealed that the most recognisable object linked to the pandemic – the disposable surgical face mask – has been much in evidence: disposed of carelessly without thought of where it might end up.

“I was seeing these discarded surgical masks everywhere,” Naina says. “I was noticing how they reappeared in the landscape, hanging in trees, wrapped around birds’ legs, floating in the gutter. They were everywhere, in a sinister sort of way.”

With a love of the natural landscape and a deep concern for the urgency of the climate emergency, Naina says he quickly saw how a device intended to protect us had in fact become a form of pollution, adding to the environmental catastrophes endangering our collective health. “It felt like we were making things worse instead of healing. It made me look at the way we are living and the things we need to change.”

Inspired by these daily, everyday encounters with the detritus in the landscape, Naina wanted to make a work about it, and while he knew of the Koorie Art Award, he had never gotten around to entering. This time, with a little more time on his hands, he did so. “Next thing I knew I’d won the prize.”

Naina has been lauded for his idiosyncratic working methods, which involve inventive use of household bleach and dual-cotton surfaces, alongside his own style of performance work. When he had a solo show called *White King, Blak Queen* at the Hogarth Galleries in Paddington in the



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early 1990s, this working method drew much attention and he has run with it successfully ever since.

“Everybody was asking, ‘How did you do this?’” he recalls. “I invented this technique myself. It is similar to a photographic process – but also, it’s not similar – and it is difficult to explain. The process is not as instant as taking a photo, but it is like photography without a camera, with the bleach taking the top layer of the fabric surface out. I have had people say they have never seen anything like it before.”

It is little surprise he is so original, and that he uses his bleaching technique to produce work like *Landfill* that deals with the world’s difficulties. “The way I was brought up I had no choice, surrounded by politics 24/7,” he says. “It was always in my life.” Naina’s mother was the activist Eleanor Harding, and one of his first of many trips began as a baby when taken to the Aboriginal Embassy protest in Canberra.

“She was a very smart woman. I learnt loads about life in general from her. Why things are the way they are, and what we need to do to change things. What it means to fight injustice and stand up to what needs to change, turning negative into positive. One thing she told me was not to lie down and surrender, but stand up and fight. That warrior culture was to remember where you come from.”

That sort of spiritedness helped him through the lockdown periods of this year’s pandemic. Even though he is used to being isolated in his work as an artist and working at home alone, suddenly he had his partner at home and the defined zones of the house became blurred and overlapping, he says. “It was a big mind and place shift to get my head around.” But, he says, he also got through the lockdown by staying in touch with family and friends and doing what he could to support his elderly father.

Naina’s artwork, though, kept him going. “It was my medicine. It was something that could take my mind off the things going on around me. It was extra time to experiment and to focus on things I hadn’t had time to consider before. That gave me another positive side – to make positive energy and decisions in times when there is negativity all around you. I had to rise above it and keep moving as much as possible. So, I just concentrated on my work.”

Now, with the prize boosting him along further, he is planning on a solo show with Gallery Smith during 2021, where, no doubt, his household bleach will be in full evidence.



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Clinton Naina (Meriam Mir), *Landfill 2020*, bleach on cotton. Creative Victoria Award For Excellence In Any Media 2020.



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