

# BLACK COWBOYS

## BY GEOFF TODD

### INTERVIEW WITH GEOFF TODD ON LIFE AND LATEST WORKS

**The latest stunning Todd collection and body of work is about Aboriginal stockmen. How did you arrive at this topic?**

When American Bill Shatner and I met in Sydney and he discovered I was from the Northern Territory, he was interested to know how our large station owners worked with Indigenous groups who may live on their properties. His interest was because he had quite a large tribe of Native Americans on his Texas ranch and while accommodating them to an extent, he was keen to involve them and work with them if they wanted.

I didn't have all the answers, so my interest was stimulated to find out the history of the industry that employed the talented Aboriginal stockmen I had heard about. I was amazed that the word about the Aboriginal stockmen's work had travelled to Texas years ago.

Bill wasn't the only catalyst to my pursuing the subject - during my time in Arnhem Land, frequenting the Centre and as an adult educator and friend of a pastoralist I quite often found myself in Tennant Creek and Katherine, and heard tales of the Aboriginal stockmen.

**You have a strong disposition for painting Aboriginal subject matter spanning your career. Where does this interest come from and why?**

I have always been fascinated by people other than those from my "tribe". An article in a Melbourne paper in 1969 after my first exhibition was headlined Dreaming of a Greek Island, so I was already focusing on a culture other than my own. It may have taken 30 years, but I did end up working on a Greek Island.

My awareness of Aboriginal people at a very young age (but no real contact, in the sense of meeting them face to face) stimulated a sense of inquiry in me. At that young age I think I was already aware that skin colour was an obvious but unimportant difference.

In 1984, my wife-to-be Janette and I were both teaching at what was regarded as one of the most difficult schools in Victoria when

I found an advertisement for a craft adviser in Maningrida. We ran screaming to paradise.

The two main reasons for the decision to head north were -

A chance for me to find out about Aboriginal people from them, rather than from tired anthropologists or political activists in southern bunkers. And it was an art-related job that was not secondary school teaching.

Taking a pair of dividers with the radius from our damned place of work in southern Victoria to Maningrida revealed we couldn't travel much further away from our school and still remain in Australia.

I found great inspiration in Arnhem Land, its people and their art, ceremony and thinking processes. As the years passed, I continued working and living with Aboriginal people in Batchelor and Darwin.

This inspiration for me from other cultures is well illustrated in my work after spending more than a year (in two-month visits) working in different parts of Indonesia, where I found the people more interesting subjects than the landscape. An artist from Hawaii once asked me "how come you're ignoring this beautiful landscape?" His work was images of lush tropical growth, mountains and greenery. No people. But landscape that you could find in other tropical countries, even in Hawaii, perhaps, nothing intrinsically Indonesian seemed to exist in his work. I felt he was missing the point of being with a foreign people and their culture and, of course, he thought I was missing the point.

Fortunately for me, the Aboriginal people are here in Australia, so their presence keeps me inspired. My drives between our studios in the Top End and Victoria numerous times every year since 1984 keep me well in touch. An Aboriginal man I worked and drove a lot with in Arnhem Land explained the visual rhythm and music of the landscape. This different appreciation of the landscape, solo driving in total silence from Port Augusta to Darwin, was bliss rather than boring.





**What interesting findings have you discovered about Aboriginal stockmen from your research into the unsung heroes of the pastoral industry?**

Some of the interesting findings have been totally unexpected. The most interesting is the NT town of Elliott and its quite short history in which the Aboriginal people played pivotal roles.

When Elliott was established as a landing stage for the military during the Second World War, Aboriginal men pitched in to work in the abattoir, others enlisted in the services and worked in other jobs. This left a shortage of stockmen and Aboriginal women took the role. Some of these women continued as stockwomen well after the war. I am not confusing these women with the “boys” – women in disguise taken on musters for company by the men. Reports suggest the women were gentle stock handlers, mustering over huge areas, handing stock over to tribal landowners down The Track in a chain-gang way until

the herds finally arrived in Elliott healthy to keep the troops fed.

I found it rather disturbing but interesting that spaying of cows would take place in the bush by skilled Aboriginal stockmen to keep the weaker cows from breeding. I always understood about the steers, but this was an interesting turn from castrating the males to a more invasive and sophisticated procedure for the cows. Apparently, it was a procedure that took only a few minutes if done well.

**Some say artists are social commentators – what are the key emotional points that you want people to feel from the collection?**

I like to believe that while artists may be social commentators there must be much more to the art than just protest or comment. So, firstly, I hope people are drawn to my work because of the aesthetics and respond to the paintings as artworks. I am an artist first and if I am inspired by circumstances to make paintings that may carry a message, I won't deny that, but I will

not give into the message and spoil a painting just to make a point. I would like people to discover through the imagery what things have happened that they may have been unaware of. These “things” may be very minor and subtle or extremely major and obvious, but hopefully enlightening for the viewer. In this collection I would like people to take away an awareness of the positive involvement of the Aboriginal stockmen and women in the history of Australia's cattle industry while enjoying the art experience.

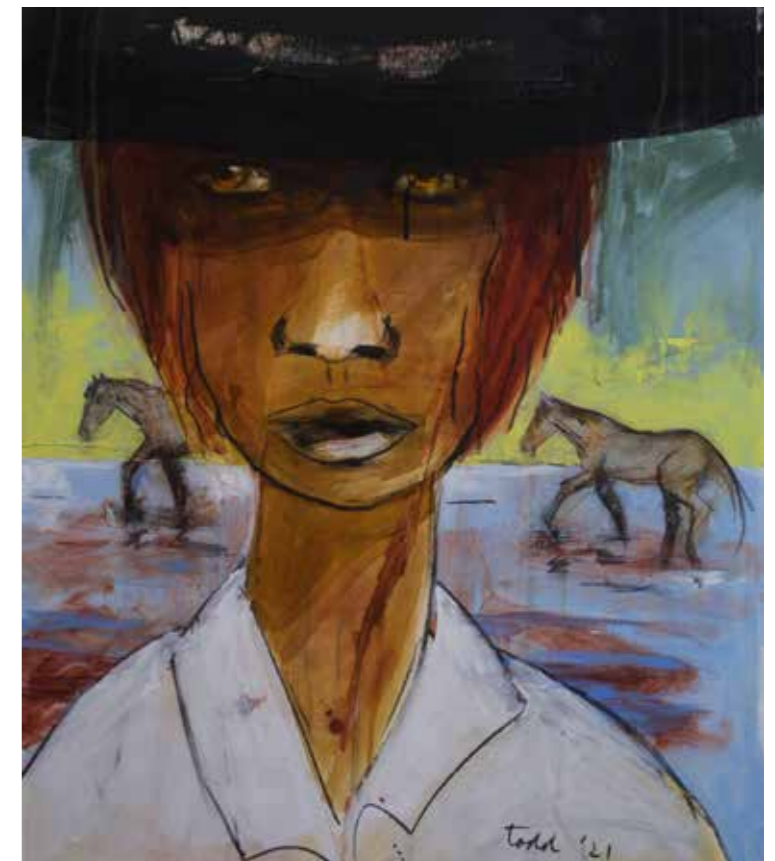
These Aboriginal people were not only stockmen but sensitive animal handlers, reading the seasons, understanding the animals' needs and in many cases saving the whitefella managers from making huge and sometimes foolish errors. This was often done under extreme adversity for the workers – the contribution of the Aboriginal people was understood and appreciated, but it was often never acknowledged by the whitefellas and more often not remunerated.

Todd '21

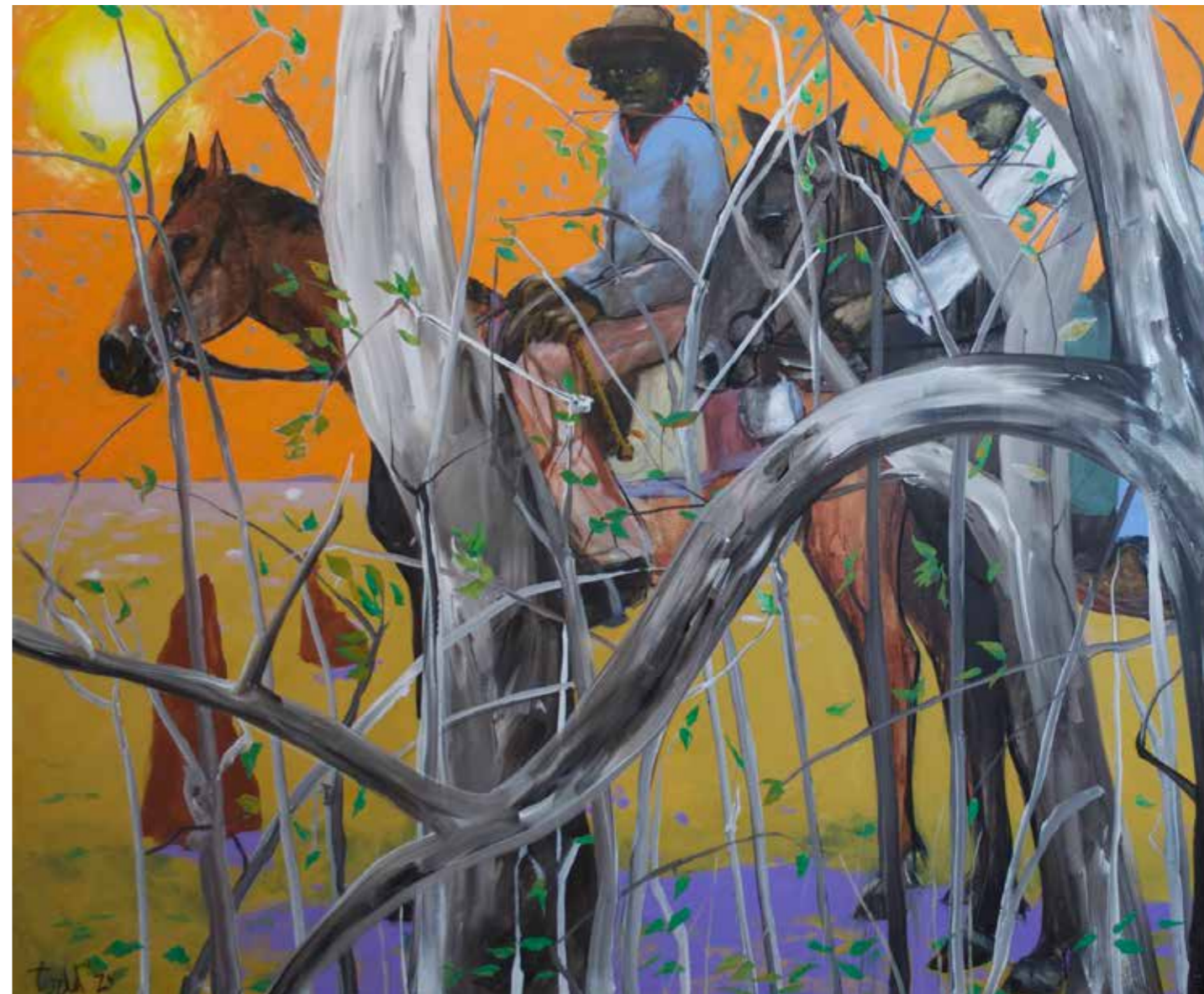
TITLE IMAGE PREVIOUS PAGE:  
"WATERHOLE" 2021 ACRYLIC AND CHARCOAL  
ON CANVAS 84CM X 107CM \$8,000.00

ABOVE: "POSING FOR THE CAMERA" 2021 ACRYLIC AND  
CHARCOAL ON CANVAS 76CM X 213CM \$18,500.00

RIGHT: "ALL THE TIRED HORSES" 2021 ACRYLIC AND  
CHARCOAL ON PAPER 75CM X 55CM \$3,500.00







TOP LEFT: "RIDER IN THE STORM" 2021 ACRYLIC AND CHARCOAL ON CANVAS 138CM X 102CM \$14,500.00

ABOVE: "NOT HAPPY" 2021 ACRYLIC AND CHARCOAL ON HEAVY RAG PAPER 103CM X 51CM \$5,500.00

LEFT: "HOW FAR TOMORROW?" 2021 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 61CM X 61CM \$5,500.00

OPPOSITE: "LOOKING FOR STRAGGLERS" 2021 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 137CM X 168CM \$22,000.00

## BLACK COWBOYS

To purchase prior to the next exhibition these and more works from this collection, contact:

**Paul Johnstone Gallery**  
 2/2 Harriet Pl, Darwin City NT 0800  
[www.pauljohnstonegallery.com.au](http://www.pauljohnstonegallery.com.au)  
 Phone: (08) 8941 2220

### Do you have any recommended reading for people who would like to find out more about the role of Aboriginal people in the cattle industry?

I really recommend Raparapa: Stories from the Fitzroy River Drovers, a collection of stories edited by Paul Marshall, but told by the stockmen themselves.

Fascinating stuff - from the horrendous treatment some suffered at the hands of the whites to the successful stories of individuals rising to managerial positions and stations being taken over by the Aboriginal people.

Interesting asides about the local advice given to road makers who believed raising roads means easy access in wet seasons, while the Aboriginal people understood the inadvertent creation of long levee banks can actually cause flooding. The advice was ignored and hundreds of square kilometres of topsoil was

washed away through a few violent flow drainage points and cattle drowned.

I also recommend Peter and Sheila Forrest's book about Elliott, In The Middle Of Everywhere. Not so much about the Aboriginal stockmen here but all about the time and circumstance, and it offers a sense of understanding and some awe when confronted by the problems of those days in the Territory.

### Which is your favourite piece and why?

I have thought about this a lot and I think Posing for the Camera is my favourite. Even though there is not a cow in sight, I like to think I have captured something of the working time.

The older guys wondering why we are wasting time for this person with a camera, one guy a bit anxious about what is going on, how is the photo going to be used, the self conscious adolescents who understand the

camera better than the adults and one kid not caring what so ever, while the horse seems the most keen to be photographed as it is a big part of the whole scene anyway. The painting did not start with this conscious rationale by the way.

I quite like Waterhole too. I like to think it captures the spiritual side of the interaction between the local man and his landscape while the dutiful horse looks on.

### We hear you have another planned exhibition in 2022 at Paul Johnstone Gallery - any hints on what next for Geoff Todd?

No real hints except that I think I might explore a little further the Aboriginal stockmen and especially women, horses, cows and landscapes. But then I may not...