



1/ *Portrait of Emmanuel: Kerobokan Gaol, Bali, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 122cm*

2/ *Rose Coloured Glasses, 2013, charcoal and acrylic on paper, 76 x 56cm;*
all images this article of work by Geoff Todd; images courtesy the artist



War Paint: Protest & Social Activism in the works of Geoff Todd

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You see within my heart I know there was no contrivance, chasing controversy or seeking attention, but I am not sure how one can avoid this misinterpretation being made in the public arena.¹

In a career spanning over forty years Geoff Todd's practice has consistently expressed his commitment to social justice and activism, while also reflecting his responses to wider political issues ranging from the so-called 'Bali Nine' arrests in 2005, to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. These works have also, quite often, conflicted with Todd's innate modesty, and his (unwarranted) concern that they might be perceived as grandstanding or in some way manipulative. As the author has previously asserted:

Todd has always pursued his own distinctive path. If there is a bandwagon being boarded, he will set out on foot. Yet over the course of his diverse career he has been both alarmed and somewhat bewildered to have his work variously perceived as controversial, sensationalist, borderline-pornographic, subversive, politically incorrect, contentious, pro-Muslim, pro-Christian, anti-religious, and just plain inappropriate, to name but a few. Such is the apparent confusion generated by a refusal to conform, but Todd has never been in any doubt as to his consistent and defining principles.²

The recent exhibition *Proxy*, curated by Genevieve Barry, brought together for the first time nearly thirty such potentially divisive works, drawn from suites Todd completed over the course of a decade.³ It included the *Floral Tributes* (2007) series, which the artist had chosen not to exhibit

previously, owing to his anxiety that it might be viewed as sensationalist, or mawkish.⁴ Todd used the floral emblems of seven countries, painted onto reclaimed wood like a grave marker, and fired bullets through them, to commemorate the numerous war dead across various fields of engagement. Publicity surrounding the arrival of the *Long Tan cross* (1969), loaned to the Australian War Memorial by the Dong Nai Museum in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, during the preparations for *Proxy*, gave Todd encouragement that the *Floral* works might meet with a receptive audience, and would be viewed as a respectful meditation on the terrible legacy of war.⁵

Although Todd's work is better known for the pervasive themes of landscape and the female figure, he has consistently engaged with other cultures and traditions. Whether it be Indigenous clan groups of the Northern Territory or further afield to Indonesia where he lived for periods and worked to great acclaim throughout the 1990s,⁶ Todd is principally concerned with exploring and reflecting upon the human condition, in seeking explanations for behaviour and examining motivations. In these unsparing works, he confronts the more unsavoury and outrageous manifestations of human nature: violence, injustice, cruelty, avarice, deceit, racism, emotional and psychological abuse. Even petty arrogance and superiority in how we treat each other in day-to-day interactions does not escape Todd's insightful viewpoint. The extensive exhibition *Weeping Waitresses* (2002), for example, ruminates on the habit certain patrons have of belittling others, based on some mistaken idea of status and entitlement.



Ceremony Kid Playing Pirate, 2013, charcoal and acrylic on paper, 76 x 56cm



Mother and Child Sanguine, 1 + 2 (detail), 2002, the artist's blood and acrylic on paper

Todd dates his initial artistic impulse in response to social and political events to an etching he did entitled *Bantam Trailer/Jeep* (1978). It concerned the US Army's misuse of the intellectual property of freelance engineer Karl Probst (1883-1963) and the Bantam Car Company who designed and built the prototype Bantam BRC (Bantam Reconnaissance Car), used as the basis for the Jeep vehicles in World War II. This somewhat obscure episode piqued Todd's interest because the originators of the concept were excluded from the contracting process, and from their rightful credit.⁷

Beginning in 1984, Todd spent eighteen months as the Craft Advisor for Maningrida Arts & Crafts (MAC) in Arnhem Land, a somewhat nebulous term for a problematic role, as he was to discover. Moving from Melbourne with his partner (and later wife), artist Janette Lucas, and teenage son Joshua, it is no exaggeration to say that Todd's life and practice was completely transformed by his engagement with the Northern Territory. It has resonated powerfully throughout his subsequent work, and he has remained utterly absorbed by his experiences with the landscape and its peoples. During his tenure Todd worked with Charles Godjuwa, a Burarra man who was Chairman of the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (BAC) at the time, Djinang artist Peter Bandjurldjurl (1942-1995), and senior Dangbon/Kune elder and artist Wally Mandarrk (c.1915-1987). Although he was eventually adopted as a *bangardi* (brother) and 'given skin' by Ganalbingu artist John Bulunbulun (1946-2010), Todd's aim was to be as objective as possible in terms of his interactions across all groups in the region. It was not always easy to appear impartial, and after his tie to Bulunbulun, the Kuninjku group particularly felt he was no longer independent.⁸

Todd came to be deeply concerned about the cultural dignity and integrity of the work the artists were producing, and that it not be unduly influenced by the fledgling market for Aboriginal art, in terms of perpetuating certain themes and motifs simply to please the *balanda* (whitefella) buyers. He was more intent on imparting ideas about craftsmanship,

the proper preparation of materials with a view to the permanence of the work, and discipline of practice, rather than passing any judgement about the imagery. 'We would sit and talk endlessly about most things other than what sells easiest ... the evolution of style and meaning was the artist's business', Todd declared.⁹ An accomplished sculptor and restorer in his own right, Todd is one of the figures from that earlier period credited with encouraging Indigenous artists working with traditional *mimib* carvings to scale their works up to be better accepted within a fine art paradigm for exhibition purposes.

If Todd viewed the role of Craft Advisor as one of advocacy on behalf of his 'clients' and the ethical management and sale of their works, he soon grew frustrated with the haphazard and condescending bureaucracy supposed to administer it. He was profoundly disillusioned with the lack of transparency and clarity in financial dealings between the advisors and the artists whose work was being purchased. Todd's concerns about the potential for corruption and undervaluing of an artist's work, depending on whom was handling it, went unheeded; eventually he found it untenable to remain in the role and resigned. During his time in Maningrida, Todd encountered not only the friction caused by incompatible cultural expectations, but also grave differences in perception between Indigenous artists and white buyers about the purpose and function of artistic expression. These experiences led Todd to develop an abiding interest in ideas surrounding the exercise of power: 'This resentment of the powerful using authority with impunity to humiliate, crush, exploit or even kill the weak is a recurring theme in [Todd's] work ... it appears again in his sympathy and respect for Aboriginal people caught in the hands of patronising and exploitative *whitefella* administrators ...'¹⁰

Todd stayed in Maningrida until 1987, whereupon the family moved to Bachelor, this transition represented by the *Diagonal Cross* (1989) series, which focused predominantly on Aboriginal mothers and their children from these two areas. His numerous works depicting

aspects of contemporary Indigenous community life are imbued with great sensitivity and perception. The ability to convey the liveliness and spontaneity of day-to-day existence in these remote settlements, themes not usually pursued by other artists, is one which only comes with great engagement and respect for Indigenous culture and traditions.

Todd was to be based predominantly in Darwin for a further fifteen years, until the family moved back to Victoria in late 1999; he continues to travel regularly between the two locales. A more harrowing set of circumstances drew Todd back to Bali in January, 2008. Todd had a lengthy association with the Darwin-based QC who was at that time representing convicted drug trafficker Scott Rush. Given Todd's interest in human rights issues, it was suggested that Todd might want to visit Rush, which he did on four occasions over the course of a week at the notorious Kerobokan Prison. Rush was arrested as part of the 'Bali Nine' drug smuggling group at Ngurah Rai International Airport (Denpasar), 17 April, 2005, and was still facing the death penalty at the time Todd met him.¹¹ Todd was permitted to document Rush's circumstances, and those of his then cell mate, Nigerian Emmanuel Ihejirika, the first person to receive the death sentence for drug trafficking in Bali.¹² Todd and Rush discovered a mutual interest in art, especially drawing, with Rush particularly keen on cartooning. They exchanged books and discussed ideas about how Rush might develop his themes and characters, which Todd hoped would provide some focus and means of expression during the long legal process and the squalor of Rush's circumstances. 'My sadness in coming to terms with the ambience of the death tower environment was overwhelming, but the spirit of [the] two boys was inspirational', Todd reflected.¹³

Todd's aim in embarking on the studies and accompanying notes was to reaffirm his aversion to the death penalty as a form of punishment, particularly in the case of 'mules' like Rush and Ihejirika, since the principals behind the drug syndicates usually evade any retribution. Works like *Mulestrung* and *Still Life* (both 2008) express what Todd feels to be the ultimate futility of the sentencing process within the Indonesian justice system. The profile work of the seated prisoner, *Portrait of Emmanuel: Kerobokan Gaol, Bali* (2008), has the opening lyrics of Bob Dylan's *Desolation Row* (1965) scrawled across the bars: 'They're selling postcards of the hanging/They're painting the passports brown/The beauty parlour is filled with sailors/The circus is in town.'¹⁴ The text is expressive of Todd's disgust at the sensationalist and counterproductive coverage of Rush's case, and others like it, by the Australian media.

The best known of Todd's 'protest' works are the so-called *Blood Paintings* (2001-02) which began as a response to issues the artist was dealing with concerning provenance, and accepted methods to establish or verify who really created an artwork.¹⁵ Todd had become aware of forged works being sold as his originals, and mused that if he used his own blood within the work, his DNA would provide a forensic marker of artistic identity to authenticate his legitimate output in the future. Several months later, the tripartite September 11 attacks resulted in nearly 3000 people perishing. DNA samples played a vital role in identifying many of those for whom little recognisable evidence was found, mainly from bone fragments and tissue residue. Todd was immediately struck by the horror of the blood as a metaphor for humanity's inexhaustible capacity for inhumanity; by DNA's vital role as a means of identification rather than verification; and by the sheer magnitude of an event whose perpetrators boasted of their 'authorship', but which served to vaporise the identity of many of its victims.

Todd produced forty works using his extracted blood as a medium which proved an interesting technical exercise, as he had to learn to work with something that would coagulate and turn lumpy if not applied quickly, lending the works a certain urgency. Initially he fixed the blood with an acrylic spray, but later mixed it with a clear acrylic medium, which had qualities similar to watercolour. The only work with male figures, *09/11/TWO: Self-portrait in Blood (Triptych)* (2001), shows the artist standing between the opposing forces of masculine and feminine with the partially obscured text 'war is hell' spelt backwards behind him.¹⁶ For the others, Todd employed one of the most



1/ I Was Killed in Vietnam- Red Lotus (*Nelumbo Nucifera*), 2008, oil paint on carved wooden boards, bullet holes, 95 x 50cm (irregular); from the *Floral Tributes* series

2/ I Was Killed in Turkey- Tulip (*Tulipa*), 2008

3/ Kenny, VC, Private Thomas James Bede (aka. Chunder Loo), 1995, acrylic, pastel and charcoal on paper, 76 x 56cm, from the *VC Winners* series



1/ Middleton, VC, Flight Sergeant Rawdon Hume, 1995, acrylic, pastel and charcoal on paper, 76 x 56cm, from the VC Winners series



2/ Simpson, VC, Rayene Stewart, 1995, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 76 x 56cm, from the VC Winners series

3/ Death Row: Kerabokan Bali (Scott and Emmanuel), 2008, acrylic on canvas and carved wood, bullet holes, 10 x 200cm



recognised and universally understood genres in art, that of the 'Mother and Child', with its connotations of the sacred, to emphasise his revulsion not only about the '9/11' atrocity, but also the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. He painted nude women holding infants and young children – otherwise tender maternal scenes – rendered in blood, literally, amid scenes reflecting how the order of family life, relationships and dependencies are distorted by war, uncertainty and turmoil.

Also from the theatre of contemporary war-zones comes the subject-matter for Todd's twelve *Collateral Damage* (2004-05) works, which focused on stricken displaced persons and civilian victims of conflict (1936-92). The paintings are based on existing photojournalism images, two of them taken by photographers killed during the campaigns they were documenting. Bernard J. Kolenberg (1927-1965) had been temporarily assigned to the Associated Press (AP), and was on his second field engagement in Vietnam, when the A1-E Skyraider in which he was riding collided with another.¹⁷ Tea Kim Heang (d. 1975) was a freelance/AP photographer killed in Cambodia after being captured along with other reporters by the Viet Minh and held for twenty-three days.¹⁸ Todd pays tribute to the war photographers and reporters who risk their lives in an effort to document what is actually going on in conflict zones; when acting as a witness to atrocities is often the only evidence of suffering.¹⁹

Todd's series of Victoria Cross (VC) winners may seem incongruous within his *oeuvre*. However, the works stem from the same irritation at the insensitivity of 'officialdom' and continue his affirmation of the eyewitness account. The re-issue of Lionel Wigmore's book *They Dared Mightily* (1963), about Australian recipients of the VC and George

Cross, omitted the official citations for which the medals were awarded, including the first-hand accounts which constitute the essence of the recorded action. Todd, who has the first edition, felt this showed a lack of respect for the primary sources instrumental to the awarding of the medals, and, in a sense, the soldiers themselves. Todd based his charcoal drawings on the accompanying photographs spread throughout both editions of the book, to draw attention to the textual discrepancy in 'simplifying' history.

Throughout his career, Todd has grappled with how to respond to both contemporary and historical events, and engage with social conditions, without the resulting work seeming exploitative, strident or preachy. 'The obligation of the artist to reflect or respond to the times works best when not contrived. An artist needs to be moved sufficiently to do something', he contends. 'This is pretty logical and obvious, but it is this internal outrage that is the driving force and the only advantage an artist may have over someone who is not an artist ... is an outlet for protest through his/her work'.²⁰ It also means addressing the potential conflict between content and execution, so that the artist is not allowing the work to become merely a vehicle for the message at the expense of the aesthetic, or drifting into the realm of applied art. 'My recognition of the content has become extraordinarily important for me in a negative way ... I have to keep control, because I want my paintings to work as paintings first. If there's a message and it needs to be heard, that's fine, but it should not cost the painting anything'.²¹

1. Geoff Todd, interview with the author, 21 November, 2009.
2. Inga Walton, 'The Physical Landscape', catalogue essay, Framed – The Darwin Gallery, Darwin, 12 September to 6 October, 2008; unpaginated.
3. *Proxy* was at Healesville Contemporary Artspace, Victoria, 24 August to 21 October, 2012. Barry staged the exhibition as part of her Masters of Arts Administration, College of Fine Art, University of New South Wales, Sydney.
4. 'I love my *Floral Tributes* dearly, and want to do more, but I would be very hurt if they were ever dismissed as an attention seeking concept, so I hide them and let the wars rage on around the globe. What a weak bastard I am!'; Geoff Todd, interview with the author, 21 November, 2009.
5. The cross, erected by soldiers of 6RAR/NZ (ANZAC) in 1969 in the Long Tan rubber plantation, Phuoc Tuy province (now Ba Ria-Vung Tau province), South Vietnam, marked the site where 108 members of D Company 6RAR had died in 1966 in a fierce battle against National Liberation Front (NLF) forces. The exhibition of the cross commenced 17 August 2012 and continued to 11 June 2013: www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/long-tan-cross
6. Todd's first solo exhibition in Indonesia was with Nyoman Rudana at his eponymous Gallery in Ubud (1991). Todd would hold a further twelve shows (1992-2005) in Bali, Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta, and was included in nine group exhibitions (1991-2002). Todd's interpretation of the life of the Javanese Prince and national hero Diponegoro (1785-1855), who played an important role in the Java War (1825-1830) against the Dutch, was a sensation in 1999. A risky undertaking for a non-Indonesian artist, Todd's work received widespread coverage in Indonesia where it was exhibited at the Museum Benteng Vredeberg, ironically a Dutch fortification. GBPH. Prince Harumanto Prabukusumo, the brother of the Sri Sultan of Yogyakarta, Hamengkubuwono X, gave the opening address, signifying the approval of the dynasty of which Diponegoro was a member. Prince Harumanto stated: 'The paintings were a surprise for me because Geoff Todd is a foreigner and he captured the spirit of the son of my great-great grandfather.' See Dennis Schulz, 'Portrait of a leader', in *The Bulletin*, Vol. 117/No. 6170, 20 April, 1999, p.108-110. Todd's *Sacred Heart of Ganjuran* series (2001) and his interpretation of *Valmiki's Ramayana* (2004) cemented his position as Australia's most important living artists in the Indonesian context to be widely acknowledged and collected there.
7. 'Back then in 1978 one was allowed to be more honest about how shitty the Yanks were, and apparently the guys involved from Bantam and the company were just broken by the US Government [War Department], and I felt for them. Such a brilliant design stolen from them basically.' Geoff Todd, e-mail to author, 8 April, 2013.
8. Jon Altman, 'Brokering Kuninjku Art: Artists, Institutions and the Market', in Heti Perkins (ed.), *Crossing Country – The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land*, Art Gallery of New South Wales Publications, Sydney, 2004, p. 179.
9. Geoff Todd quoted in Altman, 2004.
10. Tim Lindsey (Malcolm Smith Professor of Asian Law; Director, Asian Law Centre; Director, Centre for Islamic Law & Society; Faculty of Law The University of Melbourne), 'Geoff Todd: Protest By Proxy', opening address, Healesville Contemporary Artspace, 24 August, 2012; unpaginated.
11. Rush was initially sentenced to life imprisonment by the Denpasar District Court at his trial 13 February, 2006. Following an appeal about the severity of his original sentence to the Bali High Court, 6 September, 2006, paradoxically it was upgraded to the death

- penalty. A judicial review by the Indonesian Supreme Court, 10 May, 2011, resulted in the sentence of life imprisonment being reinstated.
12. Kathryn Bonella, *Hotel K: The Shocking Inside Story of Bali's Most Notorious Jail*, Quercus, London (2009) 2011, pp. 274-75. Also, Kathryn Bonella, 'Life is cheap in Bali jail hellhole', *Herald Sun* ['Focus' section], 25 October, 2009, pp. 88-89.
13. Geoff Todd, artist statement, 11 March, 2008.
14. The last track on Dylan's sixth studio album *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).
15. Todd was seeking to auction two paintings at around this time, one by Warlpiri/Anmatyerre artist and senior Lawman Dinny Nolan Tjampitjinpa (b.c.1922/26), for which Todd was told by the auction house that he must seek an authentication certificate from a white Aboriginal art expert to establish the work's legitimacy. The other was by Sir Sidney Nolan (1917-1992), which was signed, but Todd was informed that because the signature was so easily forged, that work was problematic as well. The irony, in the words of Tim Lindsey, 'was exquisite – and profoundly racist. The whitefella signature wasn't enough to authenticate a whitefella painting, but it was good enough, in fact, essential, to authenticate a blackfella's.' Lindsey, 2012.
16. The quote is from General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-1891) who led the Union army in the western theatre of the American Civil War (1861-1865); the full quote being: 'You don't know the horrible aspects of war. I've been through two wars and I know. I've seen cities and homes in ashes. I've seen thousands of men lying on the ground, their dead faces looking up at the skies. I tell you, war is Hell!'
17. See 'Cameraman is killed in combat', *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, No. 365, 3 October, 1965, p. 1 & 2A. Kolenberg's widow Mary accepted the posthumous award of the New York State Conspicuous Service Cross from Governor Nelson Rockefeller, 11 January, 1966, and AP would name an award for emerging press photographers after him.
18. See related accounts by Kate Webb (1943-2007) in *On the Other Side: 25 Days With the Viet Cong*, Times Books, New York, 1972, and *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam*, Random House, New York, 2002, pp. 72-79, 80.
19. See also, <http://thejournalistsmemorial.rsrf.org>
20. Published by the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, the First Edition (written with Bruce Harding) was 317 pages. The Second Edition, 'revised and condensed' by Jeff Williams and Anthony Staunton (1986), was 191 pages. It has since been re-worked under Staunton's sole credit as *Victoria Cross: Australia's Finest and the Battles They Fought* (2010) at 360 pages.
21. Geoff Todd, interview with the author, 21 November, 2009.

Geoff Todd recently showed his solo exhibition *Muster* at Framed – The Darwin Gallery, Darwin, 12 to 27 July 2013; framed.com.au

Proxy will be re-staged in coming months at Kudos Gallery, Paddington, Sydney; cofa.unsw.edu.au/galleries/campus-galleries/kudos-gallery; proxytodd.com; geofftodd.com

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