

Peter Drew

Flags 2

25 May – 12 June 2021

Peter Drew's flags are not for flying overhead, a remote and abstracted symbolic ideal, always out of reach.

These flags are remade in the artist's hands and given a palpable materiality. Aggressively stripped of their official governmentality with various power tools, they are enmeshed with another layer of official government record. Photographic portraits from the National Archive, once tiny and hidden, are given a bold presence and a reverent monumentality. This second skin of citizenry has also been degraded and distressed by the artist as he acts out the entanglement and the conflict which lies at the centre of national identity formation. Layers of paint appear to bind and salve the wounds, while simultaneously reproducing the motifs of the flag – the star of federation, the southern cross, the union jack – attesting to nationalism's legacy and its persisting presence.

The photographs depict people who applied for government exemptions to the White Australia Policy, enabling them to travel abroad and return to Australia without fear of exclusion. They evidence the foundational agenda of this colonial nation state to build and preserve a white, English-speaking Christian country through a racialised population regime.

These photographs also feature within Drew's ongoing AUSSIE poster project which has garnered widespread public attention and support. Drew utilises the poster platform to stage a public conversation about the nature and formation of Australian identity, giving a new folkloric currency to these figures from a white-washed colonial past. Drew has pasted up thousands of these posters across Australia's capital cities.

The Flag paintings intensify Drew's scrutiny of national identity. These works position nationalist discourse in a fundamental conflict with the complex realities of its citizenry – the diverse stories of migration, relationship and inter-connection. Nationalism's reductivism continually seeks to promote a singular notion of what it is to be Australian, to homogenise a population and make manifest monocultural practices. Through this exhibition, Drew holds that ubiquitous social and governmental impulse to account, and urges us to do the same.

In giving recognition to the faces, names and stories of these exempted citizens from racial minorities, Drew not only rewrites our recent colonial past but also draws attention to the nation state's ongoing mechanisms for population control, and in turn leading us to wonder about those whose faces might form part of the contested terrain of today's Australia.

Text by Beth Jackson, 2021

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Adelaide (1983), Drew studied Psychology and Philosophy, then Art History at the University of Adelaide before doing his Masters at the Glasgow School of Art. His work is held in major public institutions including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of South Australia, State Library of New South Wales and the Victorian Immigration Museum.