Introduction

Julie Dowling is one of Australia's most celebrated Indigenous artists. Dowling's oeuvre mostly consists of portraits that reflect a diverse range of influences, such as Renaissance portraiture, Romanticism, Catholic iconography, Papunya Tula dot painting and contemporary art. I propose that Dowling employs traditional portraiture techniques to individualise Aboriginal history, breaking it down from being perceived in terms of a homogenous plight.[1] Her portraits put viewers face to face with individual Aboriginal people. Dowling wants viewers to feel as if they are meeting her ancestors in the hope that 'bridges are crossed in people's minds about my grandmother's people' (cited in Watson, 2012). As Julie's twin sister Carol writes (2005a), 'Julie implores her audience to see through Aboriginal eyes, as oppressed peoples, to have compassion and respond humanely, and to celebrate our survival'. In this paper I explore how Dowling creates an impression of life that makes her portraits accessible and affective to a broad audience.

This paper is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on a particular imagined portrait.[2] The first section highlights the interconnectedness and importance of family to Dowling and her connections to Country. In the second section, I consider Dowling's 'Nyorn' series, isolating one imagined portrait of the series to demonstrate how Dowling sparks empathy in viewers. The third section examines how Dowling employs romantic conventions to ennoble her great-great grandmother, while the fourth section looks at how Dowling uses a similar approach to apotheosise the Aboriginal freedom fighter Walyer.

With Her Family

Family and community are vital to Dowling's portraiture. Dowling describes Aboriginal cultures as 'we cultures' as opposed to western 'I cultures' (Bannister, 2005). She paints with people around her yarning so her paintings reflect the community. Dowling explains 'I don't do paintings without people around, I don't feel like the work's accomplished anything unless it's been through the mill of the family' (Bannister, 2005). Her work, in a sense, belongs to her community (Lloyd, McDonald & Hastie, 2007, p.66).

Dowling's portraits tell family stories but they do not trace them linearly. She does not think in terms of past/present/future (Bannister, 2005). Dowling paints individuals at different stages

[1] In his book *The Making of the Aborigines* (1989) Bain Attwood posited that 'Before the coming of the Europeans, one cannot regard 'Aborigines' as a homogenous group. Their world was premised upon small groups and narrow division rather than upon
[2] For a definition of imagined portraiture see Jackett, 2011.

of their lives at different times. As Jeanette Hoorn observed (2004, p.207), 'there is no narrative structure that follows the rules of storytelling ... a quality that places them outside the strategies of closure'. Hoorn posits this is Dowling's way of dealing with the unresolved trauma of dispossession and assimilation her family has been through.

In *Self-portrait: In Our Country* (2002),[3] Dowling portrays herself standing outdoors in a dry and russet landscape with a clear blue sky. Inside her body is another version of the same landscape, this one populated with her matrilineal ancestors, including her great-great-great grandmother and great-great grandmother (Dowling in Bannister, 2005). Dowling explains, 'I am situated [in this painting] as a member of [my ancestors] with time not separating our mutual connection to this country' (quoted in National Gallery of Australia, 2010). Dowling feels very close with her ancestors; part of this intimacy is achieved through oral history and her responsibility as a woman to honour, as accurately as possible, the voice of her ancestors (Dowling, 2006b). Dowling proclaims 'I talk about my grandmother and my mother's story as if its [*sic*] mine as well' (Jebb, 2008).

Dowling grew up admiring Renaissance artwork (Ryan, 1998, p. 47). As a portrait within a portrait, Dowling seems to have drawn inspiration for *Self-portrait: In Our Country* from Italian Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli's *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo de' Medici* (c.1465) in which an unknown male sitter holds the likeness of Cosimo de' Medici within his hands close to his heart. The living man seems to honour and protect the memory of the recently deceased Medici. With one of her hands placed over her ancestor's hands and the other on the head of her great-great grandmother, Dowling similarly portrays herself in a protective, loving role as guardian of the memory of her ancestors.

At a metre twenty tall and a metre wide, the figures in this large painting have a compelling presence. Although the skin colour of Dowling and her ancestors differs greatly, the face of her great-great-great grandmother within her bears a close resemblance to Dowling with similar eyes and lips and the same hairstyle. The resemblance Dowling has imagined her ancestors having seems to reinforce her sense of identity. I believe this painting encapsulates Dowling's aim to 'strengthen [her] identity, culture and connections to country' (Dowling, 2008).

[3] This portrait is in the National Gallery of Australia's collection and can be viewed online on their website, http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=37840

Facing her Ancestors

I now want to turn to some of Dowling's individual imagined portraits of her ancestors. I find these works incredibly emotive, especially the 'Nyorn' series (2005) which present Dowling's elders as newborn *Nunifas* (babies) (Dowling, 2005b).

The imagined portraits in the 'Nyorn' series are of isolated faces.[4] The faces of the babies are depicted in the centre of each painting surrounded by a patterned border, which forms a kaleidoscopic aureole. In a vivid fusion reminiscent of Robert Campbell Junior's and Lin Onus's combination of portraiture and Aboriginal motifs,[5] Dowling draws on both the Catholic iconography she learnt growing up and Aboriginal art to portray her grandmother, great aunts and uncles as icons emanating spirits of the Dreamtime (Edmundson, 2008). The patterns surrounding the babies are evocative of Central Australian desert dot painting, although Dowling's dots are brightly coloured and accentuated by plastic beads. The dazzling pink, purple, green, gold and silver colours and pearlescent pigments have a luxurious sheen. Akin to the gold leaf in icons of saints, the highly ornamented finish inspires reverence. Dowling says she is also inspired by Nigerian artist Chris Ofilli's use of elephant dung and glitter (Dowling in Bannister, 2005). Ofilli's work is both stimulating and banal in its combination of decoration and found collaged materials.[6] I see Dowling's work as having a similar kind of complex appeal.

According to Dowling, '"Nyorn" is a Noongar expression referring to something that is at one extreme endearing and at the other, something to be pitied' (Dowling, 2005b). As visually alluring and celebratory as the colourful 'Nyorn' portraits appear, they are also melancholic. Each portrait in the 'Nyorn' series is accompanied by a written biography of the subject. For example, for *Frank*, Dowling writes: 'Uncle Frank worked with sheep all his life and eventually died from injuries when some rams doubled back and knocked him to the ground. He was a gentle and much loved man' (Dowling, 2005b). This personalises the portraits and sets up an emotional connection between viewer and subject, a pathos that is deepened by the expressions of the babies' faces.

Using Ernst Gombrich's distinction between permanent and mobile facial features in his essay 'The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and Art'

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[4] Dowling has produced a large body of imagined portraits of isolated faces. For instance, the series: 'Icon to a Stolen Child' (1997-), 'Federation' (2001), and 'Sable Valet' (2006).

[5] For example, see Robert Campbell Junior's *Charlie Perkins* (1986), *Bart Cummings* (1989) and *Untitled* (1991) and Lin Onus's *Portrait of Jack Wunwun* (1988).

[6] See Ofilli's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996)

(1972), I argue the emotive nature of the 'Nyorn' portraits is largely achieved through the fact that babies' faces are purely mobile.[7] The skeletal facial structure of babies is not yet fully formed and there are no ingrained wrinkles. The faces of the infants are, in a sense, *tabulae rasae* because no experience has yet etched its mark onto the surface of their faces. Thus, there are no 'permanent' facial features. This means there is no margin for the viewer to incorrectly separate the permanent and mobile facial features. In other words, viewers can more easily 'project life and expression onto the arrested image and supplement from [their] own experience what is not actually present' (Gombrich, 1972, p.17). Being able to see the babies as living beings, the viewer can form a strong empathetic bond with the faces of the innocent babies.

In a manner that became celebrated in history painting with Charles Le Brun's influential theory on the passions, *Conference sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1669),[8] Dowling uses the eyebrows and mouths of the babies as the key indicators of emotions. I believe the furrowed eyebrows of most of the babies and downturned lips appear sad. It is almost as if the babies know they will soon be removed from their homeland and 'separated up and down the coast based on the colour of their skin' (Bannister, 2005). For instance, in *Frank* the angle of the eyebrows and semi-open eyes form a pensive depressed expression evocative of someone much older. I feel this particular imagined portrait in the 'Nyorn' series poignantly expresses the generations of sorrow Dowling's family experienced.

Ennobling Her Great-Great Grandmother

Dowling and her family are still trying to come to terms with their dispossession: 'we're descended from one woman who was taken away. She was picked out of the ocean of her community and stuck into a completely different world' (Dowling in Bannister, 2005). That woman was Dowling's great-great grandmother, Melbin. Melbin was the first person in Dowling's family to have contact with white people. She married a white man, Edward Oliver. He called her Melbin after his favourite city, Melbourne. He took her to England to be exhibited as a Savage Queen. With the money he received from doing so, he purchased a house back in Australia. They had a daughter, Mary. Edward then took both Melbin and Mary to England to be photographed for one of Queen Victoria's world exhibitions (Julie

[7] Permanent facial features, for Gombrich, are the bone structure and set-in facial expression expressions, which over time 'mould a face' (1972, p.36-37); mobile facial features are emotional expressions, which ripple across the surface of the face (1972, p.5). Gombrich asserts that part of the difficulty in viewing portraits comes from separating the permanent and the mobile facial features. We can easily do so in real life but it is much more difficult in the arrested moment of a portrait (Gombrich, 1972, p.32).

[8] (see Montagu, 1994)

Dowling in Ross, 2007). Melbin eventually left Edward to rejoin her community and return to her traditional ways. Her daughter Mary became a servant to Edward, his new white wife and new white children. Melbin died a free woman between 1901 and 1910 but 'she had lost her land, her family and her daughter (my great grandmother, Mary) to white men' (Dowling, 2001).

In her large imagined portrait, *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* (2004),[9] Dowling returns Melbin to her land before the devastating impact of white contact. Breaking down the title, the word *Warridah* refers to her wedge-tailed eagle totem; *Melburra* is Melbin in Badimaya language; the word *Ngupi* means water. Dowling states that totems were awarded in her family to people who could find water using star patterns (Bannister, 2005). *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* thus conveys Melbin's ability to find water using her totem and the stars of the night sky.

This full-length portrait depicts Melbin alone at night in a desert. Holding a spear and wearing a kangaroo skin cloak,[10] she casts a distinct shadow onto the dry, ochre-coloured landscape. The shadow resembles a caped explorer, a gallant figure like Caspar David Friedrich's wanderer and could represent a kind of everyman symbolic of heroism.

In *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, Melbin is mostly naked. Her body is frontally exposed to the viewer, yet I believe her spirited gaze bars any sense of voyeurism. Her powerful gaze and angled face are reminiscent of Diego Velazquez's *Portrait of a Man* (c.1630) and Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Monkey* (1938). Her eyes directly confront the viewer; she is not an object to be looked at but a strong woman in charge of her fate.

To depict Melbin, Dowling has adopted the heroic gestural style of Velasquez, Ingres and Goya (Dowling, 2004). Standing in the centre of the painting, Melbin dominates the pictorial space. Melbin's grounded, frontal stance is similar to Francisco de Goya's *Portrait of Ferdinand VII* (c.1814). The full-length standing pose connotes power. This pose, which was often used in portraits of elite rulers in western history, derived from earlier representations of saints (West, 2004, p. 73). I believe the familiar historical associations with this pose ennoble Melbin. Dowling presents her great-great grandmother as a resolute independent woman.

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[9] This image can be viewed online: http://www.artplace.com.au/exhibsprevious/Warridah-Dowling.html

[10] This kangaroo skin cloak is known in Noongar as a *Boogka*. Dowling explains a *Boogka* as 'one of the only significant personal possessions by a Noongar person. It had your life's journey and Dreaming's etched onto its tanned skin. It was wrapped around you when you were buried into the sacred earth' (Dowling, 2006b).

Celebrating Aboriginal Freedom Fighters

The portraits I have discussed so far have been of Dowling's family. Dowling has, however, also created several striking imagined portraits of Aboriginal freedom fighters. In a similar manner to *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, Dowling adopts traits of romanticism and heroism in portraits such as *Walyer* (2006).[11] She does so to highlight the historical dearth of representations of significant Aboriginal individuals. Dowling asserts 'By using the colonial romantic imagery of Aboriginal people as a tool, I can inform non-Aboriginal people of the denial of Aboriginal culture in current representations of Australian history' (Dowling, 2006c). She hopes her portraits of Aboriginal freedom fighters will trigger discussions about Aboriginal resistance that will filter 'into the Australian psyche' and challenge 'the triumphant colonial enterprise' (Dowling, 2006a, p. 8).

Dowling's imagined portraits of freedom fighters extend what Lin Onus began with his celebrated 'Musquito' series (1979-82). Onus realised Aboriginal people had few heroes or models and that stories of freedom fighters were absent from Australian history books (Leslie, 2010, p. 2). While Onus primarily connected with and portrayed Musquito,[12] Dowling created imagined portraits of many freedom fighters such as Sambo (Saturday), Pemulwuy, Windradyne and Tunnerminnerwait for her exhibition *Widi Boornoo (Wild Message)* (2006).

The work I have chosen to analyse, *Walyer*, depicts the Tasmanian Aboriginal female fighter of the same name.[13] Walyer learnt English and how to use firearms from sealers. She then led violent attacks against settlers and other Aboriginal groups. To Dowling, Walyer represents 'the hundreds of women who fought for their land against the invading colonial forces' (Dowling, 2006c).

Like Melbin in *Warridah Melburra Ngupi*, Dowling portrays Walyer alone in the landscape. The soft moonlight which illuminates her body is evocative of Joseph Wright's Romantic landscape scenes.[14] Dowling presents Walyer dressed in traditional Aboriginal clothing

[11] This portrait is in the National Gallery of Australia's collection and can be viewed online: http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=144778

[12] Onus also portrayed elders Jack Wunwun (Big Wamut), John Bulun, Gary Foley and some survivors of the Stolen Generations (Neale, 2000).

[13] Walyer was also known as Tarenorerer and Te Nor.

[14] For example, *The Lady in Milton's 'Comus'* (1785) and *Dovedale by Moonlight* (1785).

wearing a *boogka*, a shell necklace and clay in her hair (Dowling, 2006c). In this full-length frontal portrait, Walyer looks directly towards the viewer. However, her gaze is much softer than Melbin's; I feel it is affable and inviting. One hand clasps a rifle; the other arm is outstretched with an open palm facing the viewer. This pose with one arm outstretched is characteristic of many of Goya's portraits.[15] In *Walyer* the outstretched arm is directed towards a group of colonial houses (Dowling, 2006c). Dowling positions the viewer as one of Walyer's supporters. Standing tall in the moonlight atop a rocky cliff, Walyer gestures 'to the viewer as if they were one of the fighters she has assembled to battle the colonial encroachments upon their land and hers' (Dowling, 2006c).

This two metre tall painting gives Walyer a bold presence. Like Melbin, she has a heroic stature and appears confident and determined. Displayed at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, Dowling has ensured Walyer a place alongside other Australians deemed historically significant.

Conclusion

Julie Dowling's imagined portraits present Aboriginal people she admires, namely her ancestors and Aboriginal freedom fighters. They are both elegiac and celebratory. This paper has explored some of the western portrait conventions she has drawn on to create powerful and affective portraits. In *Self-portrait: In Our Country* Dowling created a portrait within a portrait to convey her close connection to her ancestors. In the 'Nyorn' series Dowling presented her grandmother and her siblings as isolated faces, beautiful and bejewelled but also sad. In particular, I singled out *Frank* as exemplifying the emotions this series stirs in viewers. *Warridah Melburra Ngupi* demonstrated Dowling's adoption of heroic gestural styling to empower her great-great grandmother, Melbin. In *Walyer* Dowling used a similar heroic pose and large scale to position viewers as supporters of the Aboriginal freedom fighter, Walyer. The imagined portraits I have discussed in this paper reveal Dowling's ability to put viewers face to face with 'strong people, but sad people' (Dowling in Maza, 2006) and individualise Indigenous history.

[15] For example, *Duquesa de alba* (1795), *Lucientes Pepito Costa y Bonells* (1813), and *Infante Don Sebastián Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza* (1822).

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