

**DAVE HULLFISH BAILEY
CITYCAT PROJECT
2012**

SATURDAY 8 DECEMBER

1--5PM

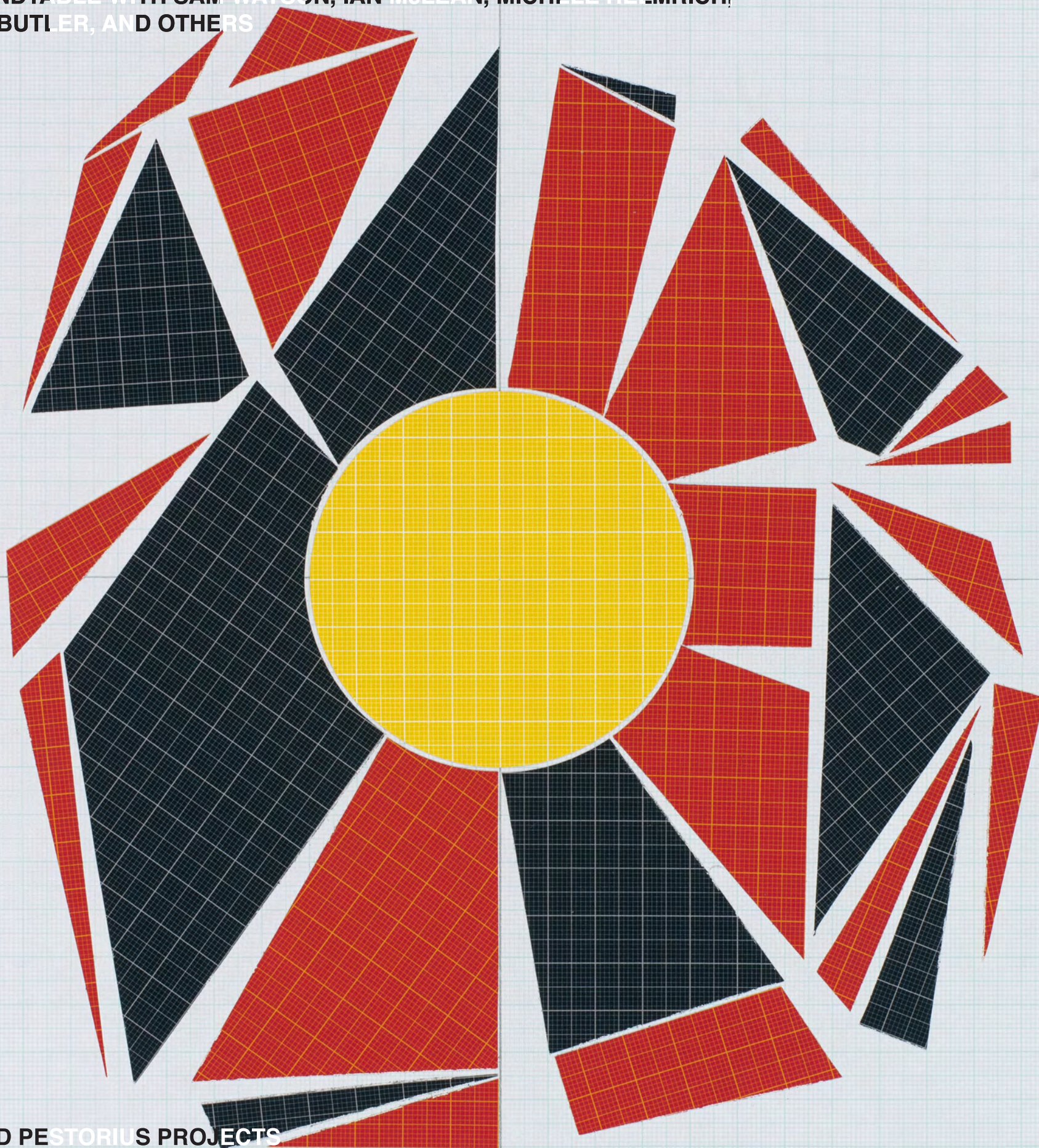
**CITYCAT FERRIES, BRISBANE RIVER*
PERFORMANCE WITH SAM WATSON**

**PESTORIUS SWEENEY HOUSE
EXHIBITION**

6--9PM

PESTORIUS SWEENEY HOUSE

**ROUNDTABLE WITH SAM WATSON, IAN McLEAN, MICHELE HELMRICH,
REX BUTLER, AND OTHERS**



**DAVID PESTORIUS PROJECTS
PESTORIUS SWEENEY HOUSE
39 EBLIN DRIVE, HAMILTON
BRISBANE 4007 AUSTRALIA**

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* In April 2003 Dave Hullfish Bailey began researching a site-based project for Brisbane. In the course of this multi-faceted artwork, Bailey invited the Indigenous activist and playwright Sam Watson to stage a performance around the momentary diversion of Brisbane's CityCat ferries as they travel between the West End and University of Queensland terminals. This performance, which involves senior members of the local Aboriginal community, was first staged on 2 December 2006. Immediately afterwards, Watson declared the performance to be a contemporary manifestation of the Kurilpa Dreaming and would be periodically re-enacted into the future. This will be the third occasion that the performance has been staged. The concurrent exhibition will continue until 29 December, however, the gallery will only be open on Saturdays or by appointment during this period. The activities of the CityCat Project are undertaken with the utmost respect, sensitivity and concern for Aboriginal history and culture. For further information go to www.davidpestorius.com/citycat.html



THE WIND IN HIS SAILS

Most days at work I look across at the Forgan Smith Tower, which is on the Quadrangle of the University of Queensland. At the top of the tower, which operates as the ceremonial facade of the University, there are always a number of flags. There is, of course, the flag of the University of Queensland. There is the Australian flag, there is the flag of the State of Queensland, and there are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags. What is more significant, however, than this selection of flags – which is admittedly progressive, in the way that modern, forward-looking Australian institutions like to present themselves – is the manner in which these flags are hung or arranged. On the highest flagpole at the front is the Australian flag. Next to it on a lower level are the flags of the State of Queensland and the University of Queensland. Then behind them on the same lower level are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags.



Of course, ordinary objects are ideological, and here we have a perfect instance of this. For what is it that this arrangement of flags is saying? The suggestion is that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are particular constituencies like the University and State of Queensland, and that all take their place within the overall Federation of Australia, as indicated by its flag being higher on the flagpole. It is Australia that provides the greater unity that all of the others necessarily fit within. But this is not, needless to say, the only way these flags could have been arranged. Imagine, for example, the Aboriginal, Torres Strait and Australian flags all being flown at the same level. This would be to imply a certain Aboriginal and Torres Strait sovereignty, the fact that they are not just another “state” within Australia but of equal status to it. Or it would be to challenge the very notion of Australia, the possibility that the Australian flag did not provide any unity but was contested, that not all of those who live here consider themselves first of all Australians.

Harold Thomas’ Aboriginal flag, which is undoubtedly one of the great works of art produced in this country, was designed by him in 1971 and first shown in July that year when Thomas and 45 others raised it above Adelaide’s Victoria Square to commemorate National Aboriginal Day. A Luritja man, Thomas was a 24-year old recent graduate of the South Australian School of Art, and was deeply involved in the campaign for Aboriginal Land Rights. He made the flag, he later explained, to “bring unity amongst the Aboriginal people”.¹ It is hard to believe now, such is the esteem in which the flag is held – Australians rallied around it almost unanimously when Cathy Freeman carried it on her back during a victory lap after winning gold at the Sydney Olympics – but when it was originally unveiled it was controversial. Its first real public exposure was when it was flown above the Aboriginal “Tent Embassy” protest outside the old Parliament House in Canberra in 1972. In the beginning at least, the flag, with its red earth, black skin and yellow sun, was strongly identified with the politically divisive struggle for Aboriginal Land Rights and the legal acknowledgement of Aborigines as the first inhabitants of this country. (It was, of course, only some 4 years before Thomas’ flag that Indigenous Australians were granted full citizenship in a referendum.)

Over the years, however, the flag has gained in popularity, so much so that today there are not infrequent calls for it to become the official flag of Australia. Indeed, matching the growing public acceptance of the flag is Thomas’ own long legal battle to be recognised as its owner, which came only with a decision by the Federal Court in 1997.² In some ways, however, this was merely a prelude to Thomas’ ongoing struggle to protect the flag against its unauthorised usage and reproduction. There have been any number of actions in which Thomas has claimed that his copyright

has been infringed, with his design appearing ubiquitously on T-shirts, beer coasters and belt buckles and pirated versions of his flag being made in factories from China to Canada.³ Moreover, on occasions Thomas has spoken out against what he sees as the misunderstanding or misrepresentation of his flag, such as when he chided a group of protesters in Tasmania for wanting it taken down in Parliament,⁴ or argued against it being put forward as the new Australian flag, suggesting that it had already received enough attention.⁵

But this is perhaps the case for all truly significant works of art: that the work is soon taken up and interpreted in ways that go against the intentions of its maker. Indeed, it can happen that the maker no longer sees the work as they originally did, so that we can even hold their work up against them. For what is the final destiny of a work that almost universally enters public consciousness like Thomas’? Certainly, no one could have known or predicted at the time it was made. There often seems to be nothing in common between what the maker of a work of art intended and the way it is understood by others. And it is undoubtedly true that, beyond their legal claim to the work, after a while the maker can themselves only offer another commentary, another point of view on to the work, just as subject to change and correction, the desire to make it responsive to new demands and directions, as any other. This is, after all, what a flag is: that with which many different people, who would otherwise have nothing in common, all identify, without exactly knowing with what it is they are identifying. We only have to think here of that famous case when, after the overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania, the people simply cut the Communist star out of the old flag and transferred their allegiance onto what was missing.⁶



It is just this that Dave Hullfish Bailey makes clear in his series of variations on Thomas’ flag, *Proposals for some possibly useful reconfigurations* (2011). Bailey was inspired in his redesigns, he says, by the 18-foot skiff, the ‘Aberdare’, which used technological innovations (and profits from the Aberdare Colliery near Ipswich) to dominate racing on the Brisbane River in the 1930s. What Bailey proposes is a possible set of sails for its descendants on today’s televised racing circuit, each of which would be composed of a cut-up and re-ordered version of Thomas’ flag. We have a small spinnaker for running, which is when a boat sails downwind with the wind behind it. We have a larger asymmetrical spinnaker for reaching, which is when the boat sails across or perpendicularly to the wind. And we have a jib or headsail for beating, which is when the boat engages in successive tacks back and forth in an attempt to sail into the wind. Bailey first came across the story of the ‘Aberdare’ through research stemming from his 2006 *CityCat Project*, a collaboration with Indigenous activist and playwright Sam Watson. In his *Project*, Bailey worked with Watson to have the Brisbane ferries at one point of their route momentarily veer off course, slow down and face Aboriginal actors standing in the Boundary Street Park, a historical landmark for the local Turrbal and Jagera people. Importantly, Watson hung a large version of Thomas’ flag at the site, which is significant not only for its Kurilpa Dreaming but because it lies on the historical curfew line that prohibited Aboriginal people from entering the city after dark. (Here those three sailing

terms, “running”, “reaching” and “beating”, can also be understood to describe the interaction between the Indigenous population of Brisbane and the new European colonisers.)

Of course, looking at Bailey’s 22 paper collages, we cannot but be struck by the obvious iconoclasm of his *Proposal*, almost in the literal religious sense. The burning or defacement of the flag, if not always strictly illegal, is usually heavily proscribed in most cultures, with the destruction of an enemy’s flag being the ultimate act of political contempt and opposition. So what is it that gives Bailey, who is a white artist from Los Angeles, the right to destroy this flag by Thomas, an Aboriginal man, who has moreover had such difficulty first of all asserting his copyright over the design and then enforcing his legal rights over it? What allows Bailey to think that he has anything to contribute to the cause it is seen to stand for by displaying it in these various sail-shaped formats in an art gallery? Undoubtedly the negotiation of the permissions to make and display Bailey’s altered versions is one of the actual subjects of the work, one of the things that, after a while, we become conscious of while looking at it. (This is just as in the *CityCat* performances the passengers would gradually have become aware of the co-operation or even “reconciliation” between the ferry driver and the actor standing on the shore, whose actions are necessarily synchronised, even if they could not actually see them signalling to each other.)

But – to pick up the analogy to sailing that the work proposes – we might indeed think of Bailey as the wind that animates Thomas’ flag. Bailey in cutting up the flag might appear to destroy it, but in fact his act queries how it might travel further, how it might occupy sites – real, historical and ideological – the original might never otherwise have got to.⁷ He merely continues that process of dissemination that is already at play from the very moment that Thomas made his flag and gave it to others to fly. At that point any original meaning it might have had was lost as it became a boat – a kind of Argo – that others could sail in. And, indeed, for Bailey – who was a keen sailor in his youth – the wind always does have something of this utopian dimension about it. In his 2001 *Schindler Shelter* project, he not only created sail-like structures covered with maps in a style that recalled Malevich’s Suprematism, but reconfigured the architect R.M. Schindler’s famous Kings Road House in West Hollywood to resemble a community shelter after a natural disaster by bending bamboo trees down on one side with sheets to form temporary shelters. The sail for Bailey is always the sign of a certain openness, a receptivity to the future, an ability to respond to unknown circumstances and make the best of them.



And, in truth, nothing is lost in Bailey’s cutting up and putting back together of Thomas’ flag. Another day will dawn tomorrow, just as in each of his designs Thomas’ famous yellow sun remains intact. It is around this empty circle – and, of course, it cannot but remind us of those roundels or waterholes we find in Desert painting – that we gather, each of us identifying with something that seems particularly to speak to us. If our skin and land divide us, the same sun shines down on us all. And this is the miracle of all good flags like Thomas’. Everyone can find themselves in them. No matter how dispersed or divided they are, they always

regather themselves, always remain the “same” flag. One might even predict that, judged by the epic standards of the Dreamtime, it will be not too long before we have the various flags on that tower at the University of Queensland joined together not under the Union Jack and Southern Cross but under the magnificent tricolour of Thomas’ flag, with its red, black and yellow expressing what all true flags do: an equality, a fraternity and a liberty.

Rex Butler

Notes

1. Harold Thomas cited in Robbie Brechin, ‘Symbol of Aboriginal Unity Still Flying Proud 30 Years On’, *The Australian*, 9/7/2001, p. 5.
2. See on this Vivien Johnson, ‘Cross-Cultural Exchange’, in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 478.
3. Debra Jopson, ‘Fly the Real Flag or None, Says Designer’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18/7/2000, p. 4
4. Damien Brown, ‘Flag Designer Blast for Black Protestors’, *The Mercury*, 8/10/2009, p. 9.
5. Claire Miller, ‘Designer Wants Aboriginal Flag Kept Off New National Standard’, *The Age*, 28/1/98, p. 6.
6. See on this Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 6. Perhaps the equivalent of this flag in Australian art is Juan Davila’s *The Australian Republic* (2000), which is simply a painting of a blank canvas inside an ornate gold frame.
7. Bailey asks: “Is it more important, culturally and politically, to keep the flag design sacrosanct, or to allow a bit of (literal) shape-shifting in order to occupy new spaces where its presence would not be expected?” (email to author 5/10/2012).

Illustrations

1. Forgan Smith Tower, The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
2. Dave Hullfish Bailey and Sam Watson, *CityCat Project*, 2006. Performance view, Brisbane River, December 2, 2006 (photo: Carl Warner).
3. Dave Hullfish Bailey, *Untitled (Running, Reaching, Beating)*, 2011. Adhesive vinyl on wall surface, dimensions variable.
4. Dave Hullfish Bailey, *Set for Shelter/Loaded for Bear (Tape Dispenser)*, 2001. Installation view, *Groundhog Day*, Pestorius Sweeney House, Brisbane, 2004 (photo: Richard Stringer).
5. Dave Hullfish Bailey, *Seismic Shelter*, 2001. Installation detail, *20/35 Vision*, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, The Schindler House, Los Angeles, 2001 (photo: Stephen Shauer).

Bibliography

- Dave Hullfish Bailey, *Union Pacific*, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1999.
- Jan Tumlrir, ‘Dave Hullfish Bailey: Visitation Rites’, *Artext*, Los Angeles, 2002.
- Dave Hullfish Bailey, *Elevator*, Secession, Vienna, 2006
- David Pestorius (ed.), *TURRBAL-JAGERA: The University of Queensland Art Projects 2006*, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane, 2007.
- Catherine Chevalier, ‘Dave Hullfish Bailey, Queensland University, Brisbane, December 2006’, *Frog*, No. 5, Paris, 2007.
- Rex Butler, ‘Dave Hullfish Bailey’, *Artforum International*, XLVIII, No. 1, New York, 2009.
- David Pestorius, ‘Dada in the post-colonial field: Dave Hullfish Bailey’s CityCat Project for Brisbane’, *Column 4*, Artspace, Sydney, 2009.
- Dave Hullfish Bailey, *What’s Left*, Casco Utrecht/Sternberg Press Berlin, 2009.
- Dave Hullfish Bailey, ‘CityCat, deflected in response to a system built up from under-examined details, 2 December, 2006 and 9 May, 2009, Brisbane River’, *May*, No. 3, Paris, 2010.