

ARCHIE MOORE

Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)

Samstag Museum of Art
11 October—29 November 2024



TERTIARY EXHIBITION GUIDE

Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)

Archie Moore's *Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)* is an installation work that interrogates the nature and meaning of memory—its importance, its potential and its limitations—within the context of Australian First Nations peoples living in a country created through colonisation. With *Dwelling*, Moore (Kamilaroi/Bigambul) attempts to let others experience his memories of growing up as an Aboriginal boy in a small country town with a predominantly Anglo-Celtic Australian population, whilst being simultaneously aware of the ultimate impossibility of this task. As Moore explains:

That's an ongoing motif in my work; I'm trying to put the viewer in my shoes. It's highlighting the impossibility of knowing another person, how they feel or what they think. I think that might be a metaphor for [the] failure of reconciliation. Maybe we'll never fully understand or know the other person, or group of people.⁰¹

Nevertheless, he persists.

Through a combination of visual, auditory, haptic and olfactory elements, Moore creates an immersive installation that seeks to transport us into his mind. The work invites us to physically step into Moore's childhood as he remembers it. Open one door and you are inside young Archie's bedroom, replete with sketches, books, a mix tape and other teenage paraphernalia. Another door leads to the kitchen of his family home, while yet another opens into a school classroom sparsely furnished with a simple desk and chair. These public (educational) and private (domestic) spheres are entwined together in this physical embodiment of memory in the same way that they overlap as fragments within our remembered experience of childhood. This sense of *Dwelling* as a representation of both Moore's very specific, personal memories and of the intrinsic nature of memory itself is enhanced through the combination of real artifacts from Moore's childhood with building materials, furniture and other objects that resemble the environments being recalled. This blend of the one-hundred-percent-accurate and sort-of-similar echoes the way in which our memories are a collection of the real, the half-remembered and the spaces where our imagination—or the stories of others—has filled in the gaps.

Moore's memories of childhood are inseparable from the racism that underpinned the society he was born into. He remembers that:

'Aboriginal' as a descriptor was always either negative or of little importance, whether that was from white people, my own family, or from other Aboriginal people I met. I did my best to be less Aboriginal—to be inconspicuous, quiet, avoid the sun, and avoid other Aboriginal people... Although I didn't really fully know what the word meant, just that it was something horrible.⁰²

Dwelling contains some specific references to the unquestioned and socially accepted racism of the 1970s and 80s, such as the popular children's book *Little Black Sambo* (with its caricatured depictions of African people) that Moore remembers reading, and the racist tropes within the television programs that play in the lounge room. For the most

01 Tamsen Hopkinson, "STUDIO presents: In Your House, Archie Moore and Tamsen Hopkinson in conversation," *Artlink* 42, no. 3 (2022): 99.

02 Steven Dow, "Archie Moore interview," exhibition catalogue, *Archie Moore 1970 - 2018*, 31-32, Brisbane: Griffith University Art Museum, March 8 – April 21, 2018.

part, however, the effects of racism are intuited, rather than shown directly, through the atmosphere of the house and the clues that it reveals to us. The small rooms that open directly into each other (in government housing, no space was 'wasted' on a hallway), a hubcap used as decoration on the wall, and the violent imagery in a child's drawings point to the transgenerational poverty caused by dispossession—"...the things that contributed to my Aboriginal grandparents living in a corrugated iron hut on their own land in a town where everyone else lived in houses..."⁰³, as Moore describes it. Each room, each memory, bears the invisible tension of being 'different'.

For First Nations peoples, the idea of memory is charged with a special importance in a country that still struggles to accept the realities of its past. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' stories and experiences remain without a firm foundation in our nation's official, collective memory, it is up to individuals to ensure that the truth is not forgotten.⁰⁴ Yet, while memory is an important part of truth-telling, it also has the dangerous potential to lock its holder into a state of suspension between the past and the present. The smell of Dettol disinfectant lingering in the installation's bathroom is a vivid memory for Moore—his mother would bathe him in Dettol before sending him to school to ensure he appeared overtly 'clean'. Moore believes that his mother learnt this from her own mother during the era when removing children who possessed both Aboriginal and European ancestry from their families, under the pretext of neglect, was government policy. This policy no longer existed, but the memory (and the fear) remained and continued to shape the present—a process referred to as 'transgenerational trauma'. The concept of transgenerational trauma, evoked by Moore through the harsh, chemical fumes of the disinfectant, is evidence of both the power and complexity of memory.

Dwelling (Adelaide Issue) is the fifth iteration of this installation concept. Each time the concept is brought to life, it is both the same and slightly different from the one before. There will be an appropriate television in the lounge room, for example, but it probably won't be the same television that appeared in the last iteration—and neither television will be the actual one owned by the Moore family. This restaging echoes the nature of memories. Like the installation, memories are not perfect copies of the past but reconstructions of it. As Moore notes, "...every time you remember something, something gets added to it."⁰⁵ The process of repeatedly remembering and reconstructing memories, especially difficult or traumatic ones, is a key element in the practice of psychology. Through techniques involving remembering and reframing, psychologists seek to help their patients process events from their past in order to move forward. Moore talks about a similar form of catharsis he achieves through the practice of transforming memory into art:

A lot of my work is cathartic I suppose. I've always been interested in memory, my past... It's really important to me while I'm making it and it's a big cathartic release at the end of purging stuff out.⁰⁶

The suggestion that a similar catharsis could be achieved on a national scale if we were prepared to listen to the memories of First Nations people and integrate them

03 Hopkinson, "STUDIO presents: In Your House," 99.

04 For a more detailed discussion on this concept, see Helen Hughes, "Archie Moore's Memory-Work," exhibition catalogue, *Archie Moore: Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)*, 5-9, Adelaide: Samstag Museum of Art, October 11 – November 29, 2024. https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/samstag/docs/catalogues/2024/samstag_archie-moore_dwelling-adelaide-issue_catalogue.pdf.

05 Lancaster University, "Archie Moore, Artist: Biographical Interview," YouTube video, 17:09, posted by "A Cross-Cultural Working Group on 'Good Culture' and Precariousness," Feb 29, 2016, accessed October 02, 2024, <https://youtu.be/aqQITSpNlbo>.

06 Hopkinson, "STUDIO presents: In Your House," 99.

into our national identity, rather than hiding from them to avoid discomfort or shame, is difficult to avoid.

Moore spent much of his childhood trying to “be invisible”.⁰⁷ Like most young people, his bedroom was his haven—a place where he could hide from the outside world and express himself through the creativity that would one day become the basis for an artistic practice. Drawing, reading and music were an escape from the sense of isolation that Moore felt in a community where “people would not encourage you to do anything other than drink, fight and chase feral pigs.”⁰⁸ The music of post-punk band The Cure, and its lead singer Robert Smith, was particularly important to him. Moore has said “I really related to the lyrics which is kind of weird—this Aboriginal teenager relating to this white English goth.”⁰⁹ While on the surface it does seem unexpected, dig a little deeper and the connection is easy to understand. With his outlandish makeup, described by Moore as “big black eyes and red lipstick on and crazy hair. He kind of looked like a panda,”¹⁰ Robert Smith was giving physical expression to his sense of alienation from British society. Through his lyrics and persona, Smith was able to connect with a young boy on the other side of the world, in very different circumstances, who felt the same difference and alienation from the world around him. The ability of art, in all its forms, to communicate and forge connections between people who ostensibly have nothing in common is undoubtedly one of its greatest powers. Moore has said that *Dwelling* is:

...more about the impossibility of having a shared experience with another—the idea that two people or two groups can never fully understand one another. All the objects in that show had a significance for me—an aura, a feeling attached to a memory—and they would have different associations, or none at all, for the viewers of the show. But there’s a kind of paradox, too: I can never be certain that others haven’t had the exact same thoughts and feelings as me.¹¹

It may be impossible to completely share an experience with another person, but when the power of artistic expression allows us to see the connections between our feelings and experiences and those of others, perhaps we don’t need to. Perhaps what is important, as Moore’s work suggests, is that we try.

07 Dow, “Archie Moore interview,” 31.

08 Ibid., 31.

09 Hopkinson, “STUDIO presents: In Your House,” 101.

10 Ibid., 101.

11 Dow, “Archie Moore interview,” 31.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Consider the meaning and implications of the word 'dwelling'. How does it differ from the words 'house' or 'home'? Why might Moore have chosen to title this work *Dwelling*? Read Dr Debra Dank's poetic catalogue essay *Migulugbi—a bed, a room, a memory...* to help inform your discussion.
- *Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)* is a particularly effective example of an immersive artwork. Discuss the different elements that Moore has used to achieve this sense of immersion, and their impact on your group. What do you think is the benefit of creating an immersive experience in the context of Moore's artistic intentions?
- This is the first iteration of *Dwelling* that has incorporated original moving image elements. How do you think this use of moving image enhances the illusion of entering the artist's memory in this work?
- Moore's work plays with the tension between what he would like to achieve and what he thinks it is possible to achieve. As discussed above, *Dwelling* aims to "put the viewer in [Moore's] shoes", yet the artist questions whether it is ever really possible to "fully understand or know the other person, or group of people". Moore sees this work as a potential metaphor for the difficulty of Reconciliation.

Do you agree with the artist that the reason Reconciliation is so difficult is because many people cannot empathise with the experiences of First Nations peoples? Do you think that personal histories, such as this work, can help others to understand the experiences of First Nations peoples or do you think that some people simply do not want to know? In other words, no matter how effective an artwork may be, will there be some people who refuse to engage with it at all?



Archie MOORE, *Dwelling (Adelaide Issue)*, 2024. Mixed media installation with moving image, commissioned by Samstag and the Adelaide Film Festival. Installation view at Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 2024. Photography by Sia Duff.



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