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# Warwick Thornton: Mother Courage Education Resource

Tuesday 5 February – Sunday 23 June



Image Credit: Warwick Thornton, *Mother Courage* (production still), 2012. Image courtesy of the artist and Scarlett Pictures





# CONTENTS

About the Artist..... 4

About Mother Courage ..... 4

Exploring Mother Courage .....6

Respond.....6

Reflect.....6

Explore .....7

Research ..... 8

Create.....9

Resources .....9





## WARWICK THORNTON: *MOTHER COURAGE*

*Mother Courage* (2012) has been commissioned by ACMI and dOCUMENTA (13) and is part of the ACMI Commissions Series.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

A celebrated cinematographer, filmmaker and artist, Warwick Thornton is a Kaytej man who grew up in Alice Springs where he still lives. During his teens, Thornton worked as a DJ at the public radio station run by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA). This experience inspired his celebrated short film *Green Bush* (2005). When CAAMA expanded to include filmmaking, Thornton was given the opportunity to participate in a media traineeship. He subsequently studied cinematography at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS).

Thornton received international acclaim for his first feature film *Samson & Delilah* (2009), which he wrote, directed and shot. *Samson & Delilah* has won a number of awards including the Camera d'Or for best first feature film at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. The short films Thornton made prior to *Samson and Delilah* are similarly driven by Thornton's distinctive vision and perspective and offer a unique insight into the complexity of Indigenous experience. Thornton's films are personal; they reflect his deep connection to Aboriginal culture and his sense of responsibility as a filmmaker to instigate change.

Thornton has had an ongoing interest in art throughout his career. The creation and commodification of Aboriginal art is explored in his films and, in 2010, he worked with curator Hetti Perkins on the documentary series, *Art + Soul*, focusing on contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art practice.

In 2011, Thornton exhibited his art installation *Stranded* at the Samstag Museum of Art in association with the Adelaide Film Festival and he was subsequently commissioned by dOCUMENTA and ACMI to create *Mother Courage*.

### ABOUT MOTHER COURAGE

The installation comprises a white kombi van housing a dual screen projection of an elderly Aboriginal woman artist and her grandson. Surrounded by paint pots, utensils and bedding, the woman (played by artist Grace Rubuntja) applies herself to her work, while the boy sits, bored, listening to loud Aboriginal rock music that blares out of a radio inside the van.

*Mother Courage* is inspired by Bertolt Brecht's famous character Mother Courage. In Brecht's 1939 play, *Mother Courage and her Children*, the title character, displaced by war, survives by moving and adapting to whatever life throws at her. In this way, she shares common ground with many Aboriginal people, particularly those Aboriginal women who, like Mother Courage, know what it is to lose children in a hostile world.

Thornton's *Mother Courage* was first exhibited in 2012 at the prestigious contemporary art exhibition dOCUMENTA (13) held in Kassel, Germany. For the period of the exhibition, it was constantly on the move, 'parked outside the most prestigious galleries in town, for art aficionados to peer in its grimy windows and



through its rear doors, to wonder at the business inside'.<sup>i</sup> At ACMI, the work has been reborn within the space of Gallery 2, no longer on the move, but cutting against the grain of the white cube/black box experience of the art gallery space.

One of the key themes explored in *Mother Courage* is the history of displacement suffered by Aboriginal people. Yet, as in Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Thornton's main character is also a survivor:

If she stays in the desert, she is going to be screwed by carpet-bagging, unscrupulous art dealers. She is slightly annoying, she is trying to sell these paintings, going to every biennale in the world, every documenta, selling works; she is going where the crowds are, turning the music up and trying to sell these dot paintings – like the Brecht [Mother Courage] character going from war to war, battle to battle, selling food and bullets and leather.<sup>ii</sup>

Thornton's work is about suffering and self-determination and the artist leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether his Mother Courage is a victim or in charge of her own destiny.

Thornton's Mother Courage character has been described by the artist himself as 'lost in her own country', but the vibrant paintings she produces and the rock music that fills the space imply an ongoing connection to country. Although the elderly artist's dogged application of dots may seem to suggest that she paints purely as a pragmatic response to the demands of the market, her work is filled with vitality. The paintings that adorn the walls of the campervan transform it into a magical Aladdin's cave, and the painting hung on the outside of the van, alongside the Aboriginal flag, is a proud assertion of identity.

While the artist and her grandson are physically confined to the cramped space of the campervan, the work invites the viewer to place the pair in a much larger context that acknowledges the influence of culture and tradition, but also the impact of colonisation. The title, with its reference to a character destined to lose all her children, alerts us to the loss that defines Thornton's Mother Courage character and so many other Aboriginal people affected by the forced removal of children during the time of the Stolen Generations. The young boy accompanying the elderly artist on her journey draws attention to the missing generation of Aboriginal parents and the significance of grandmothers and older women in the lives of many Aboriginal children. The song lyrics and commentary on the radio point to a number of the challenges that face many present-day Indigenous communities, as they struggle to function effectively.

Aboriginal art is a growth industry, but it has also been prey to unscrupulous agents who profit from the work at the expense of the artists themselves. Even when this is not the case, there is the danger that once the works reach the gallery or are placed on an investor's wall, they have become detached from the artists who created them. By contrast, Thornton's Mother Courage character travels with her works and is very much present to anyone who views the work she produces.

For Thornton, who has achieved so much as a filmmaker and cinematographer, working as an artist provides a freedom and immediacy of expression that he cannot always get from filmmaking. Not only do films take a long time to develop and realise, they tend to allow viewers less interpretative leeway.

I have a lot more freedom than I do with cinema. And a piece like this here, it's totally up for interpretation and I love it when people say it's about this or they say it's about that. Because I think everybody's right because it's your experience through your living that you recognise different things in a piece.<sup>iii</sup>



## EXPLORING MOTHER COURAGE

### RESPOND

Describe your initial response to the work.

- How did you first approach the work?
- What impact did the music have on your response? Explain.

Consider the way the work is positioned in Gallery 2.

- Why do you think the van has been placed in this position in the gallery?
- How did this contribute to your experience of the work?

*Mother Courage* is a complex, multi-modal work.

- How do all the separate components (e.g. sound, print, video, found objects, painting) contribute to your understanding of the work?

When viewing *Mother Courage*, we are peering into the private space of the artist's home and studio.

- How does this affect the experience of viewing the work?
- What is being communicated when the artist looks back at the viewer? What is the effect of the artist's gaze?
- What was your response to the artist's grandson?
- How does the grandson's relationship with the viewer differ from his grandmother's? Why? How does this add to the meaning of the work?

### REFLECT

Warwick Thornton has said that his artwork, like his films, is about storytelling.

- What is the main story being told in *Mother Courage*?
- How does *Mother Courage* tell this story?
- What other stories are contained, or alluded to, in the work? Explain.

When *Mother Courage* was exhibited at DOCUMENTA (13), it was continually moved from one place to the next. At ACMI, the work is displayed in a gallery.

- Do you think this fixed location changes the meaning and experience of the work? Explain. Give specific examples to justify your opinion.



Within the art market, Aboriginal artworks can become a mere commodity, separated from the artist and culture that produced it. When *Mother Courage* is exhibited at ACMI, the artist remains connected to her work within the gallery.

- Do you feel that *Mother Courage* is trapped within the gallery or is she in fact 'occupying' the space – asserting her existence as an artist? Justify your ideas.
- When responding to this question, you will need to balance features such as the blocked gallery entrance and the walls with the impact of the soundscape.

Thornton has suggested that after being displayed at ACMI, his installation may go back on the road: 'He would like to park it in fashionable alleyways, in front of the Arts Centre, or close to the front doors of the National Gallery of Victoria when it has a blockbuster opening'.<sup>iv</sup>

- Where else could the work be displayed for maximum impact?
- Create a 5-6 stop itinerary within Australia giving reasons for your choice of locations.

## EXPLORE

The component parts of *Mother Courage* invite the viewer to fill in the details of a 'backstory that is much bigger than the world you see'.<sup>v</sup>

- What are some of the ways that Thornton draws the viewer's attention to the bigger story, or history, that informs the work?

In *Mother Courage*, Thornton drops 'clues' to prompt the viewer to look beyond the present moment and the walls of the kombi van. He places the work in a wider historical and political context.

- Focus on two or three elements of the work and consider how these 'clues' add to its meaning.

The young boy represented in *Mother Courage* is travelling with his grandmother but maintains an ongoing connection to country through the radio show he is listening to. As well as forging this link, the radio show also provides an insight into some of the problems that may have led the pair to leave.

- What do we learn about the community from the DJ's commentary?
- Focus on the songs featured in *Mother Courage*:
  - *Black Boy* by Wedgetail Eagles, Writers: Pumani Michael, Amos Lennon, Victor Tunkin;
  - *Tjamu Tjamu* by Ilkari Maru, Writers: Warren Tunkin, Larry Brady;
  - *Patrola - The Petrol Sniffing Song* by Punch Thompson, Writer: Punch Thompson;
  - *Make More Spear* by Frank Yamma, Writer: Frank Yamma

Consider how these songs contribute to the 'back story' of the piece, offering an insight into some of the reasons why the artist and the grandson have left their community and travelled to Melbourne.



After filming *Samson and Delilah* and before creating this work, Warwick Thornton filmed the documentary *Art + Soul* focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. This documentary series, written and narrated by curator Hetti Perkins, places the artists' work in context and gives them the opportunity to share the stories behind their art. Thornton talks about the project in a web extra video at this location: <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/artandsoul/video/default.htm>

- Watch this clip.
- How does Thornton's work on *Art+Soul* (2010) connect with the story being told in *Mother Courage*?

Thornton's short film *Mimi* (2002) and his feature *Samson and Delilah* each deal with problematic aspects of the Indigenous art industry. To make *Mother Courage*, Thornton visited an artists' co-operative and recruited artist Grace Rubuntja to appear in the video at the centre of the installation.

- Find out more about Indigenous art cooperatives and the Indigenous art industry.
- What are some of the issues that Indigenous artists may have to deal with when selling their work?
- How does *Mother Courage* dramatise and engage with the challenges faced by a number of Indigenous artists?

## RESEARCH

Aboriginal radio has played an important role in Thornton's life. As well as making it a feature of *Mother Courage*, he explores its significance in building community and maintaining connections in his short film *Green Bush* (2005).

- Find out more about the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and Aboriginal radio.
- Watch Warwick Thornton's short film *Green Bush*, inspired by his time as a DJ at CAAMA. How does this film add to your understanding of *Mother Courage*?

For many Aboriginal people and communities, songs and music have played a significant role in highlighting issues of significance and documenting shared experience.

- To learn more about the important place of Aboriginal music in the formation of identity and community, read this article written by singer and songwriter Paul Kelly: <http://www.themonthly.com.au/thirty-years-australias-hidden-hit-parade-desert-songs-paul-kelly-6477>

*Warwick Thornton: Mother Courage* is complemented by an Australian Mediatheque view-on-demand program focusing on Thornton's work and ideas. Located on-site at ACMI, this screen culture resource centre provides access to a wealth of audio and video content from the collections of ACMI and the National Film and Sound Archive. For more information about the Australian Mediatheque visit: [http://www.acmi.net.au/australian\\_mediatheque.htm](http://www.acmi.net.au/australian_mediatheque.htm)

To book a group of students for a visit to the Australian Mediatheque please complete a student booking form noting your needs in the comments section at the bottom of the form. The Australian Mediatheque is available to education groups on week day mornings, subject to staff availability.

<http://generator.acmi.net.au/studentbooking/>





## CREATE

Consider the connection between a work and where it is displayed.

- Come up with a concept for a work that gains meaning from the place, or places, where it is displayed.
  - Describe the work.
  - Explain how its exhibition context adds to its meaning.

## RESOURCES

Warwick Thornton Interview, *Generator*, ACMI <http://generator.acmi.net.au/gallery/media/interview-warwick-thornton>

Dreaming in Colour Education Kit, *Generator*, ACMI  
[http://generator.acmi.net.au/sites/default/files/ACMI\\_DreaminginColour\\_12.pdf](http://generator.acmi.net.au/sites/default/files/ACMI_DreaminginColour_12.pdf)

'Thornton's Mother Courage Charms Art Lovers at Documenta', ABC Arts Online  
<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3527013.htm>

O'Hara, Marguerite, Jones, Jonathan and Peacock, Amanda,

*Art + Soul: A Personal Journey into the World of Aboriginal Art Study Guide*

<http://www.abccommercial.com/librarisales/sites/abccommercial.com.librarisales/files/studyguides/art-soul-study-guide.pdf>

Gruber, Fiona, 'Only Connect, Not Compete as Artists converge on Kassel for Documenta', *The Australian*, 9 June 2012 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/only-connect/story-fn9n8gph-1226386328170#>

Stephens, Andrew, 'In the Spirit of Mischief', *The Age*, 19 Jan. 2013  
<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/in-the-spirit-of-mischief-20130118-2cxyf.html>

*Australian Screen* for clips and information about Warwick Thornton's short films and Samson and Delilah  
<http://aso.gov.au/>

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*i* Gruber, Fiona, 'Only Connect, Not Compete as Artists converge on Kassel for Documenta', *The Australian*, 9 June 2012,  
<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/only-connect/story-fn9n8gph-1226386328170#>

*ii* Stephens, Andrew, 'In the Spirit of Mischief', *The Age*, 19 Jan. 2013 <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/in-the-spirit-of-mischief-20130118-2cxyf.html>

*iii* 'Thornton's Mother Courage Charms Art Lovers at Documenta', ABC Arts Online <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3527013.htm>

*iv* Stephens, Andrew

*v* Stephens, Andrew