THE LEGEND OF
MOONDYNE JOE
A VISUAL ODYSSEY

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Moondyne Joe

After years of irritation from Moondyne Joe, Governor John Hampton (Governor of Western Australia from 1861-1868) had lost patience. There were rumours of his corrupt use of prisoners for financial gain. He was unpopular with the prisoners, with an unprecedented number of ‘breakouts’ and the ‘settlers were openly mocking him in the streets’.

“The Governor’s son has got the pip
the Governor’s got the measles
for Moondyne Joe has given them the slip
Pop goes the weasel”

He was said to have put a ‘bounty of 20 pounds on Joe from his own pocket’. Dead or alive!
The area of Moondyne is near Julimar Brook in the Toodyay district and was an area Joe used for horse trapping. The moniker ‘Moondyne Joe’ was given to him in 1865, after escaping from the Canning Flats Work Depot.

Joseph Bolitho Johns was born on the 18th of February 1826 (a birth date we share) in the Cornish village of Wendon. (‘The Ballad of Moondyne Joe’, John Kinsella and Niall Lucy)

In the introduction to Ian Elliot’s book ‘Moondyne Joe, the Man and the Myth’, he notes, “A colonial observer of the period noted the reluctance of schoolboys to take the part of a policeman when the game of ‘Bushrangers’ was to be played, and it is the ‘Bushrangers’, not the police who hunted them, who have become folk heroes.”

“Moondyne Joe became prominent during Governor Hampton’s unpopular rule in the 1860s, and he became a legend in his own time because of his ingenious escapes and outstanding bush skills.”

Joseph Bolitho Johns was often known as ‘Moonie’ to his many friends. His time on the run and his many ‘break outs’ enthralled the colony from the time of the early settlers to the period of the ‘Gold Rush’.

His determination to be free is acknowledged with the inscription on his gravestone in Fremantle Cemetery, ‘Rhyddid’ meaning freedom. His journeys across the Western Australian landscape has a continuing ‘romantic’ appeal to artists and writers, and from my experience a huge significance to the descendants of the colonists, who played their part in the legend of Moondyne Joe.

Michael Doherty, 2013
On a cold November night, two young men, sacks over their shoulders, were challenged by Sergeant William Fuller. He ordered them to disclose the bags contents, and out rolled several cheeses, loaves of bread, bacon and a shoulder of mutton, sealing the fate of Joseph Bolitho Johns and his companion William Cross.

After four years of being interned at Shorcliffe army camp and Dartmoor Prison and the Prison Hulks ‘Justitia’ and ‘Defence’ (‘The Ballad of Moondyne Joe’, John Kinsella and Niall Lucy) he is finally sentenced to penal servitude in Western Australia. Cross’s fate lay in the harsher Van Diemen’s Land.

The painting shows the temptation of ‘Young Joe’ and hints at the consequences, and of a window into the future.

Small fires were once set in the hills of Kalamunda (Kala, fire) (Munda, elder) to warn of the movements of troops and police by the Nyoongar people.

In John Boyle O’Reilly’s book ‘Moondyne, A Story of Convict Life in Western Australia’, although fictional and designed to thrill American readers in the late nineteenth century, places Moondyne in an esteemed position as a trusted hero in colonial Western Australia. In one tale, ‘The Gold Mine of the Vasse’, he is seen by a group of convicts working on a road as a supernatural presence and he is the only ‘White Man’ entrusted with the secret path to the cave of gold, watched over by Chief Te-mana-roa and his warriors.

While working on this painting, I constantly had to get my head around the seemingly brief period between Moondyne roaming the hills, searching for suitable hideouts in the eighteen sixties and the moon landings only a hundred years apart.
When visiting the site of the Martin homestead in Kelmscott, I met with local historians Christen Bell, Kath Coulthard, Kim Fletcher and Elaine de Ruiter, a descendant of the Martin Family. I was told of Joe’s popularity in this area, and he knew he could always get a ‘feed’. He was noted for eating Bogan moths, a sure sign of being a bushman. He was also said to have helped a man he came across build a coffin for an unfortunate that had drowned in the Canning River close-by.

Joe was clearly a skilled hunter and ‘survivalist’ and in my work I allude to this, against the background of the familiar scene of ‘Down on his Luck’, by Frederick McCubbin, a painting born out of nationalism to portray the ‘hero’, against all odds in an alien world, often painted from models in the studio. I have always admired McCubbin’s work, and wanted to place Joe as the ‘real deal’, as he survived years at a time in this toughest of landscapes.

The steer known as ‘Bright’ was easily recognisable by the bright red marking on it’s rear and the unusual shape of it’s horns. It was known to wander between the early ‘ribbon’ plots of land that led to the river. Moondyne Joe was working as a casual labourer for the Martin family, one of the earliest settlers in Kelmscott, he was imprisoned for killing the steer and leaving it’s remains in the river, however out of all his crimes he always maintained his innocence of this one.

He was well known and popular in the district and often used the route as access to the hills and could be sure of a meal in the area. At one point Martin’s young daughter came upon him hiding and he called out “Who goes there?” and he led her safely back to the family farm.

We were honoured to meet Elaine de Ruiter, a Martin descendant who informed us of many interesting events regarding Joe, at the exact location of the ‘Bright incident’.
Upon being captured and returned to Fremantle Prison, an escape-proof cell was prepared for Joe. Governor Hampton displayed him, chained by the neck before the other prisoners. The cell was constructed with heavy jarrah sleepers, and was only the length and width of a man, and poorly ventilated. As Joe’s health lessened, the prison doctor advised he be given time away from his cell, and so he was put to work breaking rocks near the prison wall. The broken rocks were supposed to be taken away at the end of the day and when the guards failed to clear them and the pile grew above his waistline, he began to work away at the soft limestone. In this work I refer to Sir Sidney Nolan’s ‘Ned Kelly’ series and cover Joe’s head with the canvas sack used to discourage interaction between prisoners in the Victorian era. I once again align him to Vincent Van Gogh through the ‘Starry Night’, implying he already is planning to map his way back to his beloved Moondyne Hills.

Joseph Bolitho Johns was renowned for his ‘bush skills’ as much as his escape attempts. I read with interest in Ian Elliot’s book ‘Moondyne Joe, The Man and the Myth’, of his attempts to fool his captors by wearing “home-made Possum Slippers” and “sheep shoes”, with the wool on the inside, not unlike the ‘Ugg Boots’ of today. I thought of him hiding out near the ‘Avon’, his unusual foot wear drying off in the hot Western Australian sun. I also thought of his narcissistic reflection that could give him away, and a Primary School boy I’d known, who had hid out overnight on one of Perth’s Hyde Park Islands after seeing the 1960s film ‘My Side of the Mountain’.
ANGEL EYES, GUN FOR HIRE
46cm x 46cm, oil on linen

In one of my favourite films ‘The Good the Bad and the Ugly’, Director Sergio Leone, pits three protagonists, (‘Blondie’ Clint Eastwood, ‘Tuco’ Eli Wallach and ‘Angel Eyes’ played by Lee Van Cleef) against one another during the time of the American Civil War, in a race to find a chest of payroll gold. All three know part of the secret to the treasures location, but it is ‘Angel Eyes’ who was the most ruthless in his methods in gaining information.

In the painting, ‘Angel Eyes’, stalks his prey in the streets of Northbridge. Joe was known to have lived close-by in Norfolk Street, North Perth, this, ironically is known, based on him submitting a police report dealing with his items that were stolen from a house at that location. The Great Western Hotel (The Brass Monkey), built in WA’s ‘Goldrush’, (which saw many American Civil War veterans seek their fortunes in WA’s Goldfields) is in the background and further back is my studio at Gotham Art Studios, formerly the Bank of New South Wales.

EASTERN DAWN
76cm x 76cm, oil on linen

“I will be alright in the bush if I have a gun and a ‘roo dog”.
Moondyne Joe
(‘Moondyne Joe, the Man and the Myth’, Ian Elliot)

I recall working night-shift in Fremantle and the view of the dawn to the eastern hills from the top of Canning Highway on the way home. A feeling of serenity and relief always came over me as I passed the day-shift workers in my 1964 Beetle. I imagine for Moondyne, dawn would be the time to be at his most wary, especially on open ground.
Legends passed down over time can take on a life of their own. The story of Moondyne Joe evading capture by climbing out of the attic window and escaping on a policeman’s horse is hotly disputed by some and supported by others. While visiting the historic inn to visit the attic, a nice old-fashioned barney erupted between locals and a historian over what had really happened. It is also believed that the event may have occurred at another of the many inns down the Great Eastern Highway, however what wasn’t in dispute was Joe’s love of a drop of grog and that he had visited The Mahogany Inn.

“After escaping from a Greenmount work party, John James, Thomas Bugg, and John Bassett teamed up with Joe. They broke into the ‘Dodd’s’ place with force and Dodd begged they not harm his wife. She, more courageous than he, pulled off her slipper and began pitching into the fellows that held Dodd down (ref, The Enquirer August 1866). Another report stated that Mrs Dodd strongly objected to them taking away her husband’s arms and one of the men proposed ‘settling’ her, but Joe forbid [sic] his touching the old lady.”

(‘Moondyne Joe the Man and the Myth’ Ian Elliot)

In this work I imagine the many times on the verge of capture, circumstance would intervene, shifts in weather, washing away tracks, the police being recalled on a false sighting and Moondyne passing false leads to people he met along the way.
While conditions were bleak for prisoners in the settlement, they were more brutal for the Indigenous population on Rottnest Island. Moondyne Joe must have had an awareness of the situation due to his kinship with the Nyoongar people.

In Stephen Spielberg’s film ‘Jaws’ the larger than life ‘rogue’ shark, causes mayhem on the small holiday island of Amity. The police chief, Brody appears to be the only voice of reason in recommending the townsfolk and tourists stay out of the ocean, whilst in constant battle with the Council and tourist developers. At one stage an ‘overkill’ reaction occurs, which sees anyone with a boat killing anything that is moving in the water, using methods including hurling grenades into the ocean.

This work partly parodies the recent ‘shark problem’, in Western Australia and echoes another time when Victorian values mixed with Church and State, created a strict imposition on freedoms.

The Rose and Crown Hotel 1841, is the oldest hotel in Western Australia and the third oldest licensed hotel in Australia. The detached stables at the back were built around 1880 to house the camels that were trekking in from the ‘goldfields’. According to the hotel’s literature “A spooky feeling descends over the 169 year old hotel when you speak of the ghosts. One of them could be the publican who was killed in the convict built cellar when a beam fell on him, another could be the notorious ‘bushranger’ Moondyne Joe, as legend would have it he apparently hid here briefly before being captured in the Houghton’s Winery cellars.”

If there is any truth in the story I imagine the convict built tunnels leading from the cellar, used for moving illicit grog to the river, would have been a handy escape route for Joe.
The myth of making a pact with the ‘Devil’ for a charmed life or special talents is evident in many cultures. The idea of intersecting pathways or a ‘crossroad’, by an old Hickory tree at midnight, where the ‘Devil makes a bargain for soul’ has been attributed as the reason for the amazing guitar ability of ‘Delta Blues’ legend Robert Johnson and even Bob Dylan.

Moondyne Joe appears, at times, to have the luck of the ‘Devil’, and this work hints at the American ‘Wild West’ and similarities to the Australian West in the same era, set against the Perth foothills.

While researching Moondyne Joe, I came across several fascinating books on his life and learnt of an early film on his life, not unlike his Eastern States counterpart Ned Kelly. I found, when visiting the gift-shop in Fremantle Prison, Moondyne t-shirts, book markers and even a board game. I wondered if a play had ever been performed on his life, and what it would have been like for him to see its portrayal, and whether or not he would be checked for his I.D. or ‘ticket of leave’.
In 1883 Joe and Louisa move to Bunbury where Joe finds work for a timber construction company. It is possible he may have run a brothel around this time (anonymous, Mooondyne, 9, ‘The Ballad of Moondyne Joe’, John Kinsella and Niall Lucy).

When cycling to my studio in Northbridge, I pass an old building at the corner of Beaufort Street and Newcastle Street. It was rumoured to once have been a brothel upstairs, and the shop-fronts have displayed odd assortments of shells and stained glass windows over the years. I imagined what Joe might have displayed in a shop front.

While working on the picture I was listening to Simon and Garfunkel and a line from the song ‘The Sounds of Silence’, “And the words of the Prophet’s are written on the Subway walls and the Tenement halls...” and I thought of present day ‘street artists’, and how they would have responded to the conditions under Governor Hampton, so I asked my friend Kyle Hughes Odger’s aka ‘Kreepy’ with his street art background, if he would paint some Pensioner Guards, marching toward the City. In the background is a version of the old East Perth Cemetery, where I heard about some of Perth’s Colonial history on a National Trust tour, several years ago.

Later in his life Joe was free to move around and spent time in the Vasse district. In this work I wanted to show a reflective Joe, looking back on his life and where he came from. While enjoying the beauty of the land and southern beaches he wonders at what is beyond the sea and remembers his time on the cruel ‘Hulks’, when he was young. The Western Australian landscape holds some consolation for the many who left their homeland, never to return.
PORTRAIT OF MOONDYNE JOE

46cm x 46cm, oil on linen

This portrait is based on the only known photograph of Joe, wearing a Kangaroo cape. I was immediately drawn to his mischievous smile and self-contained confidence.

I wanted to symbolise his indomitable spirit through the lit candles and link him to his contemporary, the determined Vincent Van Gogh. Vincent would place candles in his hat so he could paint through the night and was to become a folk hero to artists and the public. Sadly they both also ended their days in asylums.

FREMANTLE LUNATIC ASYLUM

46cm x 46cm, oil on linen

After spending many years incarcerated, from the prison ‘Hulks’ of London’s Thames to the gaols of Perth, Joe’s last imprisonment was in Fremantle’s Lunatic Asylum, where he passed away in nineteen hundred. The Asylum had been built to house approximately one hundred but at around the time of Joe’s occupancy there were up to three times the inmates, many there for minor infractions and mild diseases by the standards of today.

While on a site visit to its present incarnation, the Fremantle Arts Centre, I was told the grounds once extended past Finnerty Street and the present day Aquatic Centre. In the work I show some of the residents roam outside of the building, and Joe’s indomitable spirit rising toward the full moon.
A major thematic concern in Doherty’s work is layering— a layering of meanings, and through his painting technique, a layering of paint and glazes. Imagery is sourced from myth, fact, his own memory, and from memories of places that may no longer exist. These real and imagined memories bring atmosphere to his paintings through juxtapositions.

Doherty frequently references popular culture, recent artistic trends and filmic scenes. The titles of his work add further detail and dimension, giving insight into their surreal qualities, through an intricate weaving of at times diverging then paralleled narratives he seeks to make the viewer aware of a new kind of sense.

Michael Doherty has exhibited across Western Australia, New South Wales, in New York, Japan and Paris. He is in the collections of Edith Cowan University, Royal Perth Hospital, Murdoch Hospital Collection, New Norcia Collection, King Edward Memorial Hospital, Geraldton Regional Art Gallery, the Ministry of Justice and many national private collections.
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