



## Christopher Charles

AUSTRALIA

What really goes on in the Aussie outback?

In 1993 the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo (AS) bought a remote pastoral station at the edge of the Great Victorian Desert, 800km north-east of Perth.

It is believed that the planning and experimentation for the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack was undertaken at *Banjawarn*. The ongoing aura of mystery surrounding the cult's activities at *Banjawarn* station is evoked in this exhibition, which contains photographs and film footage of the site, together with cult paraphernalia from the time and a notorious "god helmet". The exhibition begs the question if how could this have happened in the Australian outback without being revealed at the time.

The exhibition explores the psychology behind AS and their practices, which include: appropriating elements of science fiction; the syncretistic blending of religious faiths; chemical, biological and electrical experiments; and mind control its many forms – behavioural, chemical, and technological.

The AS sect was formed in Japan in 1984 by leader Shoko Asahara and claims to teach "The Supreme Truth". They recruit young, wealthy university students, particularly scientists, and, at the time of the 1995 subway attack, claimed to have an estimated forty thousand members worldwide, with offices in Russia, Ukraine, Germany, United States, former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan, and a net worth of around \$US 1.2 billion. They perform bizarre and brutal purification and devotion rituals, deprive followers of food and sleep, and use psychedelic substances and electromagnetic mind-altering devices in their teachings. They purport

through demonstration to have supernatural powers including levitation, extended underwater submersion and the ability to predict the future.

Banjawarn station, measuring 404,680 hectares (100,000 acres) is located at the edge of the Great Victorian Desert, 800km north east of Perth. When AS established its facility they flew in chemicals, mining equipment, computers, laboratory and electrical equipment. Evidence suggests that they manufactured the nerve agent sarin and tested it on sheep: the carcasses of 29 sheep were found to contain methylphosphonic acid (MPA), a product of the breakdown of sarin. This same agent was used in the Tokyo subway attacks of 1995. After the Tokyo attacks Ashara and many of the key members of AS were sentenced to death.

Aspects of AS propaganda will be incorporated into my artworks, such as animated cartoons (manga), recruitment videos, songs and comics. The exhibition will also include a display of artefacts and samples including shearing combs, ear tags from the sheep that were tested with chemicals, wool samples, soil and rock core samples.

Visually there is a beauty in the stark contrast between the colourful imagery, robes and musicality of the AS propaganda, and the desolate West Australian landscape at Banjawarn. Heightened by the knowledge and suspicion of the activities undertaken there, the works in the exhibition will capture a sense of place, a place that's imbued with the dichotomy of the physical remoteness and dilapidation, and its contrast with the colourful optimism propagated by the sect

Perth-born artist Christopher Charles delves into the mystery surrounding the cult's activities at Banjawarn station in his latest exhibition. Incorporating found propaganda such as animated cartoons, recruitment videos, songs and comics into his artworks alongside a display of artefacts and samples from the site, he presents a chilling yet fascinating investigation into the psychology behind AS and their bizarre practices.

## Christopher Charles biography

***"I explore both the social and natural sciences, and examine the oscillations of harmony and dissonance between humankind and the natural world. I see my approach to art as a kind of contemporary social archaeology. There are spaces between history, memory, and perception. My work is concerned with incongruences, these gaps that give rise to folklore and mythology."***

– Christopher Charles

Christopher Charles was born in Perth in 1981.

He spent his childhood in between Western Australia and the Pacific coast of Canada and the United States.

After a brief return to Perth in his late teens, Charles travelled the world until his mid-20s. During this prolonged, formative period, he developed his skills as a mark-maker, installation artist, filmmaker and documentarian. He indulged an insatiable desire for adventure and studied the perennial impulses of human behaviour and social conditioning in ritualised practices from Myanmar to Eastern Europe and the deep south of the United States.

From 2007 to 2017, Charles lived and worked in Berlin. After a long period of observation, exploration and incubation, he made an active decision to exhibit work as an artist.

He received the Jury Prize for site-specific installation work in the 2012 Zinkovy Arts Festival, Czech Republic. His films featured in the 2013 Ikono On-Air Festival, with screenings at Ars Electronica, Linz; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Collegium Hungaricum, Berlin, among other international venues.

Charles' exhibition *Rite On*, with curator Nadim Samman, was held at West Ends IPMB in Berlin 2013. The works in *Rite On* included smoke drawings, sound art, video works, performance art events and site-specific installations. In the installation *Hardly Recognise Your Voice*, he suspended a one-tonne concrete block from the roof by using only the weight-bearing surface tension of the interleaved pages of two telephone books. His work is concerned with "the nature of things", the tendency for objects, processes and information to be reconfigured and degraded through constant repetition and re-interpretation over time. He explores the construction of identity and community through the act of recording and transferring knowledge, memory and history through practices that include ritualism, idolatry and fetishism.

Banjawarn, his Perth Festival expedition into the mythology of the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo at Gallery Central, is his first exhibition in Australia.

**Gallery Central: 7 February – 3 March**  
**North Metropolitan TAFE, 12 Aberdeen Street, Perth**

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*Wendy Martin is the Artistic Director 2016 – 19.*

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