

# pompom

**Kylie Banyard**

***The Hereafter***

When Josef and Anni Albers arrived at Black Mountain College as two of its first faculty members in 1933, a student asked what Josef would teach them. “To open eyes,” he replied. The Albers had fled Germany following pressure by the Nazis to close the Bauhaus and been invited to Black Mountain to participate in the founding of what would be the first interdisciplinary art college in America, situated in rural North Carolina. The radical vision of its founders was a progressive arts education environment that sculpted the minds and characters of its community into well-rounded citizens. Black Mountain was one of the first colleges in the South to enrol African American students, a decade before the landmark legal case *Brown vs. Board of Education* ensured the desegregation of schools. The college stipulated no required courses but students were expected to assist with the running of the school and its grounds, encouraging a collegiality of shared purpose. As the college prospectus of 1952 stated, “our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content, to emphasize process, not results; to invite the students to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than facts themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Accounts of the college’s short lifespan focus on the calibre of the faculty the school attracted, among them Willem de Kooning, Walter Gropius, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell. Carl Jung and Albert Einstein were on the school’s advisory board. It was from beginnings at Black Mountain College that Merce Cunningham launched his dance company. In 1949 Buckminster Fuller constructed and raised his first geodesic dome with help from students. John Cage staged his first ‘happening’ at the college in 1952. Albers developed his colour course at Black Mountain, eventually captured in the landmark book *Interaction of Colour*.

The college closed permanently in 1957 for lack of finances. It was never accredited. In 24 years of operation only 66 students ever graduated, but its outsize legacy endures.

Kylie Banyard’s practice explores the radical potential, and terrestrial realities, of such utopian communities and models of alternative living. Her thoughtful investigations of the politics and aesthetics of these often short-lived experiments unpick the official legacies to uncover their untold stories and trace the fault lines that mar their optimism. Banyard’s focus on the Black Mountain College in *The Hereafter* does not centre on its most lauded luminaries, but on the many women who built and sustained its utopian vision and who are overlooked in its histories. While previous series depicting stylised interiors or experimental dwellings feel conspicuously uninhabited, the paintings in *The Hereafter* are full of people and activity – a photography class held in a cabbage patch, dancing figures bounding through space, students holding venetian blinds aloft. They are imbued with an optimism and a vibrancy all their own.

Banyard developed this series of paintings and painted banners from archival photographs taken of students and staff in the acts of teaching and learning. Gleaning these images primarily from

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<sup>1</sup> Black Mountain College Prospectus, (1952), pg. 13, cited in Emile Bojesen, “For Democracy: Lessons From Black Mountain College”, *Black Mountain College Studies Journal*, vol. 3. 2012. (<http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume-3/3-1-emile-bojesen/>). Accessed 15 January 2017.

internet research, she retains a critical distance from their source by manipulating and moulding them into new forms. These paintings are far from a straight transcription – they are a reframing of the official narrative, allowing new stories and new legacies to emerge, literally bringing them new colour. Their degraded, monochrome source material gives the works a graphic quality. Objects and figures are flattened against ambiguous backgrounds in romanticised shades of dusky pink and butter yellow. *Confetti Dance* shows expressive figures in red and yellow against a pink sky, a classmate in a lavender dress watching from the foreground. *Group Work* is anchored by the statuesque figure of Elaine de Kooning in bold red and blue, a web of venetian blinds held by the teacher and her students ribboning across the composition. Their joint effort is mirrored in the building behind them – the faculty building constructed by the students. Banyard has diverged from the original photograph by flipping the image, adding colour, and, most significantly, erasing Buckminster Fuller from the cluster of gathered figures. Elaine de Kooning becomes the central focus.

Banyard's affinity for the teaching philosophies of Black Mountain is reflected in these works. The work *Interaction of Colour* depicts one of Albers' colour theory lessons. Banyard has activated the scene with colour: lessons from Albers's own theory. Students with intent expressions concentrate on the sheets of paper in flat colours that fill the bottom third of the painting. The auburn hair and royal blue jeans of one student centre the work, while the pastel blouse and skirt of the woman at the left of the frame are reflected in corresponding paper sheets. It is an enactment of Black Mountain's utopian desire for art and life to be intermingled.

Six hanging banner paintings, each commemorating the contributions of women to Black Mountain College, are the most overt reappraisal of the gendering of historical legacy. Again drawing on archival photographs, Banyard focuses in on the figure of each woman, releasing them from the pictorial context of the archive. A muted palette of blues, greens and purples emphasises their labour and concentration: Anni Albers in profile at her loom; Connie Spencer wielding a hammer; Ruth Asawa with one of her wire works. Elaine de Kooning, often photographed with her husband, is here commemorated on her own merits. The exposed canvas of the banners reveals their material history, cut up and repurposed from a previous exhibition. They too have been granted a hereafter.

As the exhibition's title suggests, Banyard encourages reflection not only on the afterlife of an unlikely mid-century experiment, but on the essential value of progressive and inclusive environments for teaching and learning: perhaps now more than ever. The act of historical reflection must not harden stories into legends, it must allow for ambiguities, alternatives and regeneration.

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