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## **Art as an Experience and a Political Act**

### **Bronwyn Fredericks**

Aboriginal<sup>i</sup> Australian artist Dr Pamela Croft's states that her art practice utilises *bothways*<sup>ii</sup> methodology which draws from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of seeing the world, exploring the relationships, connections and disjunctions and is additionally a site for reconciliation, a tool for healing, an educational experience and a political act<sup>iii</sup>. Bricolage is a feature in much of her work and she argues "the political significance of bricolage and design elements, processes and techniques"<sup>iv</sup>. Croft interplays bricolage with bothways methodology in a way that utilises concepts of old ways/ new ways, dualism and transforming something into new meanings whilst maintaining a land-centred space to maintain spiritual connectedness to Aboriginal ancestors and relationships to Country. In this way, she uses bricolage as a medium for the retelling and remaking of history, meanings and understandings within the context of artistic expression. Croft sees her art works and cultural narratives as a means for reflecting on the political; "documenting history, as a form of history making with evolving and repetitive concepts and references or representations to expose layers of spaces (environments, people), journeys (tracks, narratives), and encounters (the realms of personal and cultural memory)<sup>v</sup>.

Croft's work does not reflect the western desert style or X-Ray imagery from other regions of Australia. Nor does her work reflect the style of Aboriginal artwork, which often captures the eye of the tourist in search of a piece of Aboriginal art or Australians who are seduced by their perceptions of what they think is Aboriginal art. In short, Croft's works are not what some people believe to be "Aboriginal" and may be a little too challenging and confrontational for some and this may be why in some circles she doesn't appear to be widely exhibited, featured or collected.

One of Croft's most recent and highly political and confrontational works *The Sorry Wall* will feature in the Australian Museum from February 2007 as part of a national exhibition featuring urban Aboriginal artists and themes. *The Sorry Wall* undertaken with her cousin Cheryl (Moodai) Robinson measures 10 metres in length and is 4 metres high. It consists of 4 rows of barbed wire from which 95 birdcages were hung from ceiling to floor. The barbed wire fencing symbolises the fences that European settlers used to section off Aboriginal ancestral lands; displacing Aboriginal peoples and claiming land ownership. Each birdcage contains an individual narrative, which links to the other cages. There are stories of Croft's family and others, the dispossession

of land, symbolism that plays on cultural knowledge that is both secret and public, and memories and images of past policies and understandings.

Croft has undertaken an Aboriginal hunting and gathering process in preparing this work, evidence of this is in the symbolism and use of salvaged and found objects, shells, coral, seeds, bark, icons, and items that would be generally regarded as Aboriginal and Australian memorabilia. For examples, old wooden boxes, a 1950s plate painting with a 'native', old bibles, paint pots and bakelite containers. She incorporates dried parts of road kill such as feathers, bird claws and wings, kangaroo bones and echidna quills. These animal elements signify the destruction caused by the process of colonisation, just as animals are killed by the processes of living today. They additionally portray the connection between Aboriginal people, land, totems and spirituality along with loss of freedom, ancestry and lifestyle. The use of bricolage is evident within each birdcage and within the entire work.

*The Sorry Wall* in its entirety tells the story of colonisation, displacement, domination, massacres, assimilation and attempts at integration and explores concepts of identity, whiteness, gender, grief, land, memory, religion and power. The work places a challenge to those who view it and those that choose to walk through the doorway within the wall, a small entrance constructed as a narrow passage way. *The Sorry Wall* states Croft possesses "a subculture of underpinning emotion which parallels with the 'wailing wall' in Jerusalem, 'the Great Wall of China', the eastern wall of Germany to name a few"<sup>vi</sup>. There is no escaping the reality of the collective story of colonisation as presented in *The Sorry Wall*.

*Matters of her Heart*, another bricolage based installation work will also be exhibited nationally with *The Story Wall* early next year. *Matters of her Heart* undertaken in 1993 additionally uses the wall concept and visually depicts Croft's personal history. Croft shares the trauma experienced by so many Aboriginal peoples in Australia and in other parts of the world, that of being taken away from your Aboriginal mother and family in your early years and placed with a new set of parents and a new family, who were non-Aboriginal. In 1997 in Australia, a national inquiry took place to explore the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families<sup>vii</sup>. The children who were removed either by compulsion, duress, undue influence, or by justification, have come to be known as *The Stolen Generation*<sup>viii</sup>. This is despite the multiple denials that it ever happened<sup>ix</sup>

Croft's work presents the human face of those that were dispossessed and of those that were left bereft of the most elementary thing, the bond between mother and child. It portrays the loss of the bond between child and family in a cultural environment where the kinship networks involving obligations of care and nurture of children. Croft allows people to enter her personal filing cabinet and to view what are often regarded as confidential documents; her birth certificate, adoption papers and marriage certificate. These are all displayed, along with photographs and personal artefacts, such as Croft's own hair and childhood books. These items are all juxtaposed with a self-portrait made of acrylic paint, mixed media and card and bronze sculptures. Due to the

importance and the strength of the narratives within this work many of the images have been used over the years within other works. *Matters of her Heart* was undertaken and exhibited before the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families and still continues to be exhibited. As an artwork it is a significant political and human contribution in its portrayed lived reality of those Aboriginal people that were removed.

Dr Pamela Croft's artworks utilise *bothways* art practice to present her individual story and our collective story as Aboriginal peoples. The use of bricolage offers a means of retelling and remaking history. What is also evident is that her works expose multiple layers of the experiences and impacts of trauma of colonisation and displacement, questions and concepts of identity and whiteness, and outline personal and collective stories and cultural interpretations. Croft's works share and reveal secrets, imparting knowledge and experiences and hence give power by the reclaiming of individual and communal stories and retelling history using subjugated knowledge. Her works fall into the general practice of intermedia, installation and her art practice with much of her work a political process and these recent works political statements.

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<sup>i</sup> Pamela is a Kooma woman, of the Uurlarai people of South Western Queensland, Australia.

<sup>ii</sup> Also called or known as two-ways.

<sup>iii</sup> Croft, P.J. (2003) *ART song: the soul beneath my skin*, Doctor of Visual Arts, Griffith University, Qld, Australia, unpublished thesis, page3.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid.* page 3.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid.* page 70.

<sup>vi</sup> *ibid.* page 93.

<sup>vii</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (1997) *Bringing them home. Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> Manne, R. (2001) 'In Denial. The Stolen Generation and the Right', *The Australian Quarterly Essay*, 1.