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Understanding and Living Respectfully within Indigenous Places

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Introduction

To many Aboriginal Australians, Country means place of origin in spiritual, cultural and literal terms. It refers to a specific clan or a tribal group or nation of Aboriginal people and encompasses all the knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that particular area - that particular Indigenous place. The notion of Country is central to Australian Aboriginal identity, history, and contributes to overall health and wellbeing. Women and men both have a central role within Country, in terms of ownership, care and rights. With an increasing shift of Aboriginal people to urban areas or living in the Country of other Aboriginal people it does not mean that one's connections to Country are lost, or that the significance of Country is no longer present. It does mean that many Aboriginal Australians now pass through, dwell, and live within the Country belonging to other Aboriginal Australians. While we as Indigenous people might live within the Country of another Indigenous nation, they are still, Indigenous places. A map available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Horton, 1999) pictorially depicts over 500 Indigenous nations in Australia.

Dr Pamela Croft (See Figure 1) names her Country as that of the Kooma clan of the Uralarai people, South West Queensland. She lives in Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland within the Countries of the Darumbal people (mainland and coastline) and the Woppaburra people (Keppel Islands), who are intricately linked through history and relationship (Horton, 1999). This area is known as the Central Queensland region in numerous State of Queensland documents. As a geographical area, it comprises tablelands, flatlands, plain lands, open scrub, wetlands, river and creek systems, coastal areas, islands, mountains and now cityscapes and urban sprawl. Within broader Australia, this region is marketed and written about as the 'Beef Capital of Australia' (Forbes, 2001: 1). Sometimes uses the slogan where 'the beef meets the reef' (Great Barrier Reef) in advertising materials so that people know that it is close to one of the world's greatest wonders; the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef. Pamela Croft has practised as a visual artist since the mid-1980s and uses both: Aboriginal Australian and Western techniques, education and style to tell the stories based on identity, sense of place, and the effects of colonisation. She was the first Aboriginal Australian to gain a Doctor of Visual Arts (Croft, 2003).



Figure 1. Dr Pamela Croft, 2006. (Photo by Kardia Stokes).

In her artworks, Dr Croft focuses on concepts of place and space and change within Country. A recent series of artworks were undertaken on the muddy banks of the upper regions of Pumpkin Creek at Keppel Sands. Pamela knows the way the moon and the sun impact on the tidal flows and how the time of year affects the temperature of the water. She has traced the tracks of animals and other people who at times dwell within the area. She has watched, observed, hunted and gathered in ways of Aboriginal women, past, present and future.

In the Creek, Pamela left special paper to capture the gentle nomadic nature of the tides which result in delicate patterns left on the mud that change with each ebb and flow of the water. The crabs imprinted their presence as they foraged for food, so too did the Ibis and seagulls. This evidence of water and animals became stories, recorded in the mud like texts that have been imprinted within the artwork. Croft later used the paper as canvases for her art works and added local ochres – black, brown and red to symbolise the water's connection to land, people, place, and a sense of past, present and future. The colours and lines flow within the artwork just like the contours of the Creek. They are tied within the artwork to a sense of Country that binds water, land, animals and us as human beings. Over time, the changes in Country became mapped in Croft's 'Mud Map' series and other artworks. Croft's Mud Map series has been exhibited in Atlanta and Houston, the United States of America.

Interview with Dr Pamela Croft

I interviewed Dr Pamela Croft in her studio at Keppel Sands to specifically talk about her research and arts practice within Country and how she incorporates a sense of Indigenous place within her artworks.

Dr Pamela Croft [PC]: I am a Kooma woman of the Uralarai people. I give honour to the Darumbal dreaming ancestors and acknowledge the Darumbal people as the Traditional Owners of the Capricorn Coast where I now live. I additionally give honour and acknowledgement to the Woppaburra people who are the Traditional Owners of the Islands and waters off the Capricorn Coast mainland where I sometimes dwell and forage for food and items for my artworks. It is important to me to recognise that the site of my home and studio and where the majority of my artworks have been carried out is within Darumbal Country and Woppaburra Country. It is the places within their Countries that inspire, motivate and give me continued purpose for my work.

Dr Bronwyn Fredericks [BF]: Pamela can you tell me about the foundations of your artworks.

PC: Most of my artworks are land-centred. They are centred on places within Country. From my positioning as an Aboriginal woman, I try to portray the importance of tradition, recognition of ancestors, respect for uniqueness in spiritual expression and facilitate an understanding of history and culture, a sense of place and connections to family and community. It has been estimated that we have lived on the Australian continent for over 100,000 years. As a result we have a long history of relationships connected to Country: Australia's landscapes and seascapes and all the animals and plants and peoples that inhabit them. I try to honour the Countries in which I work. I undertake my research of and within the places, deep within Country and I undertake my work incorporating ceremony.¹ I try to challenge non-Aboriginal people to come to an understanding of our world. I try to show them just how long Aboriginal people have been here within Country, that we have our special places, our sacred spaces and how we have cared for and lived within Country and how we still care for and live within Country, even if it is now the Country of other nations. The history of these places within Country, are not just tied to British and European invasion, pioneer, settler and immigration history.² These are our belonging places.³ I try to show them all of this in my artworks.

BF: Your Mud Map series of artworks is of particular interest. They detail the movements in the water, the tides, and the animals found in different areas of Coorooman and Pumpkin Creek. What has undertaking this type of artwork told you about this place?

PC: I see the day-to-day things, the changes in the water, along the coastline, in the Creeks and on the land that laps the water. I see what is happening to the mangrove areas. I have witnessed the removal of the areas where the crocodiles used to forage for food. The process of undertaking the Mud Maps reveals all of this (See Figure 2).

¹Carolyn Kenny (2000) describes how ritual and ceremony can be incorporated into research. Pamela Croft made reference at a later point to Kenny's work.

² Bird, 1999; Huf, McDonald and Myers, 1993; and McDonald 1981 all write about the history of the Rockhampton Region / Darumbal Country and other Central Queensland regions from the perspective of the pioneers and settlement of the Australian bush.

³Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) offers a powerful theoretical analysis of the differences between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous understandings of Belonging and Place in Australia.



Figure 2. Dr Pamela Croft in Pumpkin Creek making her Mudmaps, 2006. (Photo by Mark Warcon).

Each Mud map is likened to a cultural text which records the past and present journeys of that particular part of the Australian landscape. The process maps out the connections to place revealing sets of relationships including the physical, physiological, social, spiritual and metaphysical. It also maps the botanical, colonial and the Indigenous layers of memories within the landscape sites. The tracks of animals and peoples, connections and relationships to spaces and places, symbols, patterns and colours are all recorded. It is all connected and we are connected. They are all showing me changes within the sites, within my mapping and my artwork practice (See Figure 3). To represent all of this I use different colour clays as my printing block and include a variety of mixed media in these works (clay, ochre, acrylic, charcoal, pigment, oil paints, and mud).



Figure 3. *Mud Map series: landlines and watermarks*, Mixed-media monoprint (clay, ochre, oil, charcoal, acrylic, oxides, and mud), 2007, 1.6m x 1m, Private Collection in Georgia, USA (Photo by Pamela Croft).

BF: What are the changes that have been mapped and how do you know there are changes within Country?

PC: When I sit in the Creek I can feel the temperature of the water and I use to know exactly when the seasons were changing. Now days, it is harder to pick. The temperatures of the waters around Darumbal Country and Woppaburra Country have changed. The fish follow the tides and the temperature of the water. Other animals follow the fish, like pelicans, and other sea birds. With the warmer water, we now all have less fish. We have to go further out from the coastline to forage for food. The temperatures are not uniform – some areas seem to have changed more than others. The corals tell me that I am not lying. You see, the corals change colour, they become stressed and pale when the waters get too warm. This is called bleaching. Some corals might regenerate; it is hard to say. There seems to be an increase in the number of areas where you can see that the corals have been bleached. We hear on the TV in Australia that the frequency and severity of the coral bleaching is inevitable if global warming continues.⁴ It concerns me that there will be further deterioration of the corals within the Reef. To me, that says that other aspects of the Reef that depend on the corals and these ocean gardens will also deteriorate and die.

BF: What about the animals within the reef, along the coastline and in the Creek?

PC: There are now not as many crabs and ibis and seagulls. In my last series of Mud Maps there were so few crab prints. It really bothered me. I will be going back down into the Creek soon to do another series of Mud Maps to see if the crabs have returned or if they are no longer there.

Fishing has become a problem. The biodiversity within the waters has been damaged by large-scale commercial fishing and by large numbers of people recreational fishing. People have fished for more than just what they need for food. There have been incidents where fish have just been left or discarded. In 2001 a big cod washed up on the beach near the Creek. It had been pulled up by a big trawler chasing smaller fish and just discarded. I tried to incorporate that incident into my artwork at Yeppoon main beach but the local Council didn't take it up. Maybe it was too political. What has happened now is that there are large areas where there are no fishing zones. This is vital if the area's ecosystem biodiversity is going to be fixed up and protected. I sent the bones of the cod to Brisbane and they have now been cast in bronze. The bronze work is now waiting to be installed along the Coastline. I wait for the time when the cod will be placed back in the position of guarding his ancestral waters, even if he will be on land and in bronze. I feel in a way that his dignity will be reinstated.

BF: You have also concentrated on the pollution that washes up on the beach in some of your other artworks.

PC: Pumpkin Creek, Coorooman Creek, Long Beach and the other beaches in the area are always scattered with litter from people on boats out at sea. Most of the litter washes up in with the tides. Over a 3 month period in 1996 I collected much of the discarded rubbish that washed up along a 20 kilometre beach line where I live. I then made a huge net (4.5m x 3.5m) with all of that rubbish. I used small bits of other nets along with small

⁴ Coral bleaching is considered one of the biggest threats to the Great Barrier Reef. See CSIRO (2007) and Buchheim (2008) for more information on Coral Bleaching.

pieces of rope, twine, rubber and plastic. I also incorporated all the skeletons of sea animals that I found trapped within the rubbish and feathers were woven through the net. I put some of the found objects into pockets that I made on the net. I assembled the net across one entire side of my house and members of my small village would watch as it progressed into this huge net (See Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 4. *land home place belong: Water helping us see, connecting the knots*, Net assemblage, feathers and ropes, 1996, 4.5m x 3.5m. Private Collection held in Queensland, Australia. (Photo by Kardia Stokes).



Figure 5. *land home place belong: Water helping us see, connecting the knots*, Net assemblage, feathers and ropes, 1996, 4.5m x 3.5m. Private Collection in Queensland, Australia. (Photo by Pamela Croft).

Sometimes they would also bring me bits that they had found too. They were offerings and gifts for the work. The fishing net image reinforced the notion of fragmentation and slipping through the net and getting caught in the net. For me the interwoven strands of fragments became emblematic of the sometimes fragmentary interwovenness of Aboriginal life.

Destruction has come with the western domination of water and waterways and is likened to the domination and colonisation of Country and of Australia. The ocean somehow is able to cast the rubbish out of itself as if knowing the destruction it does within the water. I have tried to push these issues with my artworks. I too try to show the dysfunctional thinking within society and encourage people to cast this out of the way they live. Just as the ocean casts out rubbish, we can cast our rubbish (or those things we think are rubbish) from our lives too.

BF: Tell me Pamela what do you try to do in your artworks when you put them into the public domain?

PC: Through my artwork, I try to ask the questions to people about how they know about Country, how do people understand Country and how will they contribute to the care of Country for now and the future. What decisions and actions will they take that will impact on the natural activities within the Darumbal landscape, the Woppaburra landscape, Country, and the other landscapes on this continent and on this planet? I ask how can we all best work to safeguard the landscapes and seascapes so they can continue to be enjoyed; and so that future generations will be able to see and know Country as we see it today and as it was seen yesterday? I want to ask the people who view my work, what are you doing? What are you doing to care for this place?

Conclusion

In her interview Pamela Croft, a Kooma woman of the Uralarai people has shared what she has observed, and come to understand within Country of the Darumbal and Woppaburra. Her knowledge of the environment and the ecology of Country is rich and provides a source of learning for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. When non-Indigenous people read Aboriginal art narratives and other forms of narrative, they learn alternative text and stories about their own history. Pamela Croft asserts that she wants to “raise their political unconsciousness” and “challenge the norms, values and ideologies of the dominant social order and culture”. She does this through her use visual narrative (art works and art stories) as a tool for remembering, reclaiming, retelling and healing and generating alternative ways of seeing and being within Country. She shows us and teaches us how we can exist, survive and thrive within such spaces if we offer the same respect and understand her messages.

What is powerfully demonstrated through Pamela Croft’s art works are the connections and relationships between all things and between the personal and the political. In her work within the Coorooman Creek and along the coastline of Darumbal Country and within the waters of Woppaburra Country, Dr Pamela Croft maps and encompasses the climate and environmental changes within Country in her artworks. In this ways her art work storytelling embodies the repetitive rhythm of the unfamiliar, the familiar and the everyday experiences and discourses of being within land-centred spaces. She undertakes map paintings, prints and assemblages and in doing so, she challenges us all to consider how

we live within the Country of other Indigenous people and how we can demonstrate respect and custodianship for Country.

Pamela Croft's work contributes to the knowledge base from within Country and informs the dialogue of what is happening in other parts of Australia and throughout the world. She brings the local to the global and instils within all us through her artworks and words what action we can take to reduce the pollution in our waterways, over-fishing and the impacts of climate change and more. Croft's works while distinctive also represent a terrain of common concerns around the environment, social justice, identity, land, and reconciliation that criss-cross boundaries between Indigenous and the non-Indigenous in Australia. In this way she is able to use her artwork as a site of communication for exchanging knowledge and understandings. Her artistic narratives and expressions conceptualise cultures in the likeness of maps of place within Country and in this way reflect far more than merely an aesthetic piece of art.

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