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# Policy and Practice

Collecting Contemporary Australian Art

1980 - 1995

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A thesis  
presented in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy in Museum Studies  
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*To the Memory of my Mother, Bicky,*

*and*

*For my Father, André and my Brother, Andrew Peter*

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s contemporary art has been considered “a hot item”. Art practice has been marked by diverse styles and innovative techniques and was often accompanied by a radical critique of art’s production and its reception.

In this period, there have been shifts in the sensibilities of some intellectuals and artists and a growing cultural critique which questioned or rejected the homogenizing values and universalizing notions of the ‘grand master narrative’ espoused by art museums. Instead, a growing consciousness about ‘the politics of difference’ has challenged the art museum to acknowledge the importance of cultural diversity and adapt its policies and practices to reflect such dynamics.

This thesis examines the way in which art museums have developed and enacted policies to collect contemporary Australian art between 1980 and 1995 and the consequences of those policies for the construction of public collections. The discussion is framed by the context of government policies for the arts and cultural heritage which underwent significant ideological transformation in this period.

The thesis investigates the acquisition policies and practices of four leading Australian art museums between 1980 and 1995. It compares and contrasts acquisitions in those institutions and illustrates findings through a quantitative analysis of their collections.

The thesis argues that there is a substantial difference between the rhetoric of acquisitions policies and actual collections of contemporary art. It reveals the anomalies and tensions which surround ‘the finely honed discursive and rhetorical devices created to justify the structural and institutional support for elite practice.’

It concludes that the collections of contemporary art are conservative, partial, incomplete and impoverished anthologies of contemporary art practice and that the art museum finds difficulty in overruling the traditional values of art history and the ‘grand master narrative’. By establishing, perpetuating and institutionalizing the canon, the art museum systematically regulates and reproduces cultural representations. Furthermore, government cultural policies which increasingly support elite producers in ‘cultural industries’ and aim to disseminate the resulting ‘Australian culture’ to more consumers through cultural tourism and art export, assist the art museum to maintain its position.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Martin Shub, Discovery Media provided access to NATSIVAD, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists DataBase. Information on the Taxation Incentives Scheme for the Arts came from Susan Nolan, Australian Department of Communications and the Arts, the National Association for the Visual Arts and Tom Lowenstein, Lowenstein Sharp Feiglin Ades. Senior Policy staff at Arts Victoria, Arts Queensland and the NSW Ministry for the Arts provided policy documents, annual reports and answered correspondence. Librarians at Massey University, the College Liaison and Inter-loan sections, assisted with overseas loans and access to ABN. The Parliamentary Library, Canberra, provided research reports and House briefings. Pamela Lovis assisted with proof reading. Andrew Abaza offered commentary and advice on constitutional law, economic theory and taxation issues. Roimata Olson helped shape and produce the final print copy. I am grateful to Professor Mason Durie, Head of the School of Māori Studies, Te Pūtahi-ā-Toi, for smoothing administrative arrangements on several occasions.

A substantial part of this thesis relies on data from the art museums surveyed, which in raw form were incompatible. The Art Management System database created especially for this project holds almost 30,000 records. Phillippe Limsowtin designed that system, presided over early data retrieval and tutored me in the basics.

My special thanks go to Henry Barnard for his patience and perspicacity in supervising this thesis. Fragmented and long as the research process has been, his guidance, knowledge and good humour have sustained me in the task. David Butts, my senior colleague in Museum Studies, has been a steadying influence, asking challenging questions. He also commented on drafts, interrupting his leave to do so. As advisors these two share important characteristics - they possess, and nurture in others, a respect for ideas and value the dignity which is achieved through the expression of creative excellence. I have learned much from them and am strengthened by the association with them on this project.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in the thesis. They are explained in context.

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGDC	Art Gallery Directors' Council
AGNSW	Art Gallery of New South Wales
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CMC	Cultural Ministers' Council
CLR	Commonwealth Law Reports
DASETT	Department of the Arts, Sport, Environment, Tourism and Territories
DCA	Department of Communication and the Arts
DCITA	Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
EOC	Equal Opportunity Commission
HCC	Heritage Collections Committee / Council
NATSIVAD	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base
NGA	National Gallery of Australia
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria
QAG	Queensland Art Gallery
QLD	Queensland (State of)
SQL	Sequential Query Language
TIA	Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme
UNESCO	United Nations Education Scientific & Cultural Organisation
Vic	Victoria (State of)

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

(Sources indicated in italics)

- Aboriginal Art** For the purposes of this project, the database categorises all works of art made by artists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent as Aboriginal Art.
- Australiana** Refers to material which may have value above and beyond that suggested by its inherent nature due to its association with Australian history or culture. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)
- Avant-garde** A term implying interest in advanced forms of contemporary art. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)
- Ceramics** Objects made of clay and subsequently fired. Includes all accepted sub-disciplines such as porcelain, pottery and earthenware. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)
- Decorative Arts** Visual art forms which derive from design and / or elaboration of objects of practical utility. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)
- Drawings** Two dimensional works of art dependent on the predominance of linear representation of masses. Principally a work of art created by means of linear media such as pencil, charcoal, chalk, conte, crayon / oil crayon, pen and ink, felt-tipped pen or fibre-tipped pen etc., Used where a work of art relies on these mediae. It is recognised that paintings may incorporate drawing in these mediae.
- Glass** A compound made from the fusion of silica and an alkaline flux under intense heat and often in combination with other ingredients.
- Jewellery** Artefacts fashioned from precious or semi-precious metals, stones or enamels designed to ornament the body. Contemporary jewellery may be made from a wide range of non-precious materials; its designation as jewellery is confirmed by its purpose. The database categorises jewellery as silver/metal which encompasses decorative arts made in metal.
- Paintings** Two dimensional works of art dependent on the predominance of representation of masses as opposed to drawings which depend largely on linear representation. In a technical sense this refers to works created with a brush by means of a medium orientated to the depiction of mass areas such as oils, gouache, synthetic polymer paint (acrylic), tempera or watercolour. Other media such as pastel and collage may be regarded

as a form of painting. The data base created for this project identifies such works as mixed media. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)

- Photographs** Images reproduced through the chemical action of light on sensitised paper or other support. Refers predominantly to still images. Moving images are classified in this project as film or video.
- Print** Images produced in multiples based on master designs created by artists on suitable supports including a copper plate, woodblock, screenprint etc., and printed under the artist's supervision. Monoprints - a single impression print - is classified as a print. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*)
- Sculpture** A work of art in three dimensions, including relief works or works in the round. It excludes three dimensional work with utilitarian purpose. The database recognises furniture in this category.
- Textiles** All cloth works of art. The database includes costume and fashion in this category.
- Video / video recording** Magnetic tape recording used to capture visual images. The term encompasses video cassettes, video discs and any other receptacles of implanted signals, capable of translation into visual images. (*Cultural Gifts Program, 1985*). The database includes only original works in this medium.
- Watercolour** A transparent painting medium of which water is the vehicle, and its opaque variant gouache, most often applied to paper.

#### References

Mayer, R. (1969). *A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Rowlinson, E. (1980). Glossary of terms used in the description of painting, sculpture and drawing media. In T. Varveris, *A Cataloguer's Manual for the Visual Arts*. Sydney: Australian Art Gallery Directors Council



## READERS' GUIDE TO THE THESIS

### Authorities

Before undertaking analysis of the quantitative data on which this thesis is based, it was necessary to verify the orthography of artist's names as well as their biographical details.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists dates of birth may not have been recorded in official documents and therefore information on older artists, in particular, may be imprecise. Similarly, artist's names may differ as current linguistic conventions change. In an attempt to standardise information, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base (NATSIVAD) has been taken as the authority for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists biographical details.

NATSIVAD was first established by Dr. Luke Taylor for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in the period 1987-1990, listed some 1,300 artists and published by *Discovery Media* in 1991. The current database was updated and expanded with financial assistance from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) between 1993 and 1995. The NATSIVAD database comprised 5,500 records at the time my research commenced but has been extended since then. However, some artists represented in collections analysed in this current project did not appear in NATSIVAD. Every effort has been made to verify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists' details and to ensure that inaccuracies and inconsistencies have been eliminated from the database established for this thesis. Despite this, it is likely that some errors remain.

The following Authorities have been consulted in the process of checking data and appear below in the priority order.

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base (NATSIVAD). 4th edition. Discovery Media  
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- Kleinert, S. and Neale, M. (Eds.). (2000). Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art. Melbourne: Oxford University Press
- McCulloch, A. and S. (1994). The Encyclopedia of Australian Art. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin
- Varveris, T. (1978). Cataloguers' Manual for the Visual Arts. AGDC: Sydney

### Cultural protocols and respect

It is customary for some Aboriginal communities not to speak the names of the deceased during periods of mourning.

I am aware that several significant and senior Aboriginal artists have died during the course of preparing this research and that the official period of mourning may not be over. I wish to acknowledge their passing with respect for them and their kin. Wherever it was possible to remove their names from the narrative which follows, I have done so. In a few cases this was not possible.