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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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THESIS

SEE WHERE IT DRIFTS
The Influence of Aboriginal Art on an
Australian Ontology of Painting

By

Hayley Megan French

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Statement

This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the influence of Aboriginal contemporary art on an Australian ontology of painting. This investigation is driven by the questions that arise as an emerging artist working in the unfolding discourse of the contemporary, the historical legacy of colonialism, and the unparalleled impact and influence of Aboriginal contemporary art on the Australian artworld. The methodology and concerns of the research have emerged directly from the studio practice and have been examined through both the thesis and studio work.

The influence of Aboriginal art on an Australian ontology of painting is addressed through three major areas of impact and intersections between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art at the core of contemporary Australian painting—the possibility of influence, the idea of landscape and appropriation. The author’s work is considered throughout the thesis, in particular as the core case study of influence. The thesis emphasises the important viewpoint of emerging artists in this evolving discourse.

A significant part of this research project has been the collection of empirical data: through interviews, exhibitions, research trips to remote art centres and curatorial projects across Australia. The discourse surrounding this field is one that is rapidly developing, and has increased significantly during the research project. The increase in publications and articles not only indicates the significance of this field to current discourse and artistic practice, but also its evolving nature. For this reason the thesis has highlighted literature that has been published in the last five years.

Introduction

Research project and motivation

The topic of this thesis is the influence of Aboriginal contemporary art on an Australian ontology of painting. This research stems directly from the associated studio practice of working as an abstract painter in Australia today. Entering the artworld in the 21st Century, the author has experienced Aboriginal contemporary art as prevalent in the visual culture of Australia. This has driven an investigation of its influence on studio practice, leading to a questioning of the social, political and cultural layers of the landscape in which we live. In this endeavour, the author has also been strongly influenced by Australian theorist Ross Gibson—from whom the title of this thesis has been drawn.

Similar to Gibson's interest, this research comes from a desire to better understand this place in which we live and our own position in relation to place. In his book *South of the West; Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Gibson seeks to present a redefined idea of Australia, bringing into question key concepts of 'the West, Nature, Culture, Nation, Time, Space, History and Mythology.'¹ Through a realignment of these concepts, he sets the idea of Australia free from its traditional spatial and temporal definitions as a 'sea-thing' discovered into existence by the Europeans—in order to understand what Australia might be in the time in which we live.

Return the sea-thing to time and space.²

In a similar endeavour, the author will reconsider key ideas and influences on Australian painting today. This investigation comes directly from the

¹ Ross Gibson, *South of the West; Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), ix-xii.

² Gibson, *South of the West*, xii.

perspective of an emerging artist working in the unfolding discourse of the contemporary, the historical legacy of colonialism and the unparalleled impact and influence of Aboriginal contemporary art on the Australian artworld. The author will present the problematic field of the intersections between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting, not as an impasse, but as a set of possibilities for the future of Australian painting.

Return the sea-thing to time and space. See where it drifts.³

The discourse surrounding this field is rapidly developing, and has increased significantly during the candidature. As such there has been an evolution of highly nuanced debates throughout the progression of the thesis. The publication of art historian Ian McLean's anthology *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art* (2011) marks a significant shift in attitudes towards the value of Aboriginal contemporary art in the Australian artworld. McLean's anthology is successful in charting the discourse that shows the journey of the Aboriginal art industry over six decades in a way that provokes further inquiry and dialogue. This anthology is the first attempt to do so, due to the difficulty critics and writers face in defining and discussing the impact of an art that has emerged outside of the dominant paradigm. The increase in publications and articles not only indicates the significance of this field to current discourse and artistic practice, but to its evolving nature.

Throughout this thesis there is a particular focus on literature that has been published since the beginning of the candidature in 2011 that tracks this shifting perspective.

Whilst publications in this field have increased, there are significant voices missing from the discourse. The voices of Aboriginal artists, curators and writers are under-represented. There is also a significant lack of voice from emerging artists, or indeed simply artists themselves. By undertaking this research, the author hopes to contribute to this field from the context of an

³ Ibid.

emerging generation of artists who have entered the artworld in the 21st Century. Ultimately the author endeavours to locate the associated studio practice within this contentious and highly nuanced field.

It is important to note that in this paper, the phrase 'Aboriginal contemporary art' refers to the art made by Aboriginal artists, which is not homogenous but vast, complex and often contradictory. This is inclusive of art made by Aboriginal artists living in both remote communities and urban areas.

Research methodology, limitations and thesis structure

A significant part of this research project has been the collection of empirical data: through interviews, exhibitions, research trips to remote art centres and curatorial projects across Australia.

The author has conducted twenty interviews with Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, curators, art historians, gallerists, writers and art centre workers. Interviews were conducted in Sydney with Adam Hill, Nick Pike, Bronwyn Bancroft, Djon Mundine, Nana Ohnesorge, Glenn Barkley, Tim Johnson, Christopher Hodges, Emma Hicks and Katie Williams, Mark Shorter and Jonathan McBurnie; in Brisbane with Michael Eather, Richard Bell and Rex Butler; in Warmun with Gabriel Nodea, Alana Hunt, Rusty Peters and Cate Massola and in Alice Springs with Dallas Gold and Hannah Kothe. Edited transcripts of these interviews have been included in the appendix as a further outcome of the research project, forming a significant resource of the conversations that are currently driving this field.⁴

Central to this research has been three research trips to Warmun Art Centre in the East Kimberley region, Western Australia in 2012, and Buku-

⁴ Due to a technical failure, the interview conducted with Christopher Hodges, artist and Director of Utopia Galleries, Sydney, was lost. This interview has been listed here as it informed the authors' thinking and remains a part of the body of research conducted.

Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala, North-East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory in 2013 and 2014. These art centres were chosen not only for the authors' interest in the Warmun and Yolngu art practices, but also for the connections to these centres facilitated by Sydney College of the Arts Indigenous senior lecturer and artist Danie Mellor.

Warmun is part of Gija country in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was settled only 30-40 years ago as a community of people displaced from their own specific countries by the pastoral industry. The author spent one month working in the Warmun Art Centre in January 2012, observing the practices of Gija artists Rusty Peters and Churchill Cann, in consultation with studio coordinator Alana Hunt and gallery manager Cate Massola. As a result of this time, the work of Cann has formed one of the case studies in *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape*. Following this research trip, the author attended Cann's solo exhibition *Wariwoony Joolany (Wild Dog)* at William Mora Galleries, Melbourne (April 2013) where Cann exhibited the series of work that was being created during the author's residency. The writing on Cann's work is ultimately the result of this research trip, exhibition and ongoing correspondence with Hunt in 2012-2014.

The second and third research trips conducted were to the Buku Larrnggay Mulka art centre, Yirrkala in November 2013 and July/ August 2014. Yirrkala is situated in North-East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and is home to the Yolngu people. The word 'Yolngu' means 'Aboriginal person' in the languages of North-East Arnhem Land.⁵ During the first research trip to Yirrkala, the author observed the practices of two senior artists working in the art centre: Nyapanyapa Yunupingu and Nonggirnga Marawili. Marawili subsequently became the case study of *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence*. Following the first trip to the Northern Territory, the author attended Marawili's solo exhibition *Yathikpa* at Alcaston Gallery,

⁵ Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 39.

Melbourne (2014) before returning to Yirrkala in July 2014 to conduct further empirical research on her practice. Art centre coordinators Will Stubbs and Kade McDonald have been fundamental to this research in their consultation and support.

Ethical concerns were encountered in the process of conducting the interviews in Warmun in 2012. As part of the author's ethics clearance, a signed participant consent form was required. Interviews were not conducted with artists whom the author felt that this was not appropriate, or that sufficient information regarding participation in the project could not be communicated due to language and cultural barriers.

As a result of these concerns, the interviews conducted with Gija artists Gabriel Nodea and Rusty Peters took place only after the author had established a working relationship with the artists, and in the presence of the Warmun Art Centre studio coordinator Alana Hunt.⁶ Due to difficulties in translation, Warmun Art Centre Cultural Programs Coordinator, Anna Crane, has transcribed the interview with Rusty Peters. After the initial trip to Warmun, future research with regards to the work of Gija artist Churchill Cann and Yolngu artists Nonggirnga Marawili and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, was based on observation and conversations with those art centre workers closest to their practice. Where possible, informal conversations were conducted with the artists and have strongly informed the writing.

The gaps in translation inherent in cross-cultural research have been the most significant limitation to this research, impacting meaningfully on the approach taken to interacting with and writing about the work of artists living in remote areas. The arguments of this thesis are consistently brought back to the context of the author to acknowledge the constraints of western discourse and to consider differences and connections beyond the western paradigm.

⁶ Hunt has developed a long-term working relationship with the artists and has a growing understanding of Gija language and culture.

Emerging from the interviews and research trips, the author co-curated two exhibitions to explore a shifting idea of landscape, in relation to the influence of Aboriginal art. These exhibitions formed a major part of the research methodology and are considered in-depth in *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape*. The exhibitions are also discussed at length in interviews with the participating artists: e.k.1 (Katie Williams and Emma Hicks), Mark Shorter and Jonathan McBurnie. The accompanying catalogues are included in the appendix for further reading.

The first exhibition, *Out of Site* (2013) held at Articulate Project Space, Sydney was coordinated with Sydney-based artist and collaborator Katie Williams. *Out of Site* included the work of five Sydney-based artists—Emma Hicks, Richard Kean, Carla Liesch, Emma Wise and the author, Hayley Megan French—and two collaborations—e.k.1 and Distanciation.⁷

As a development from this exhibition, the author co-curated *Landscape Too* (2014) with Sydney-based artist and collaborator Carla Liesch at AirSpace Projects, Marrickville, Sydney to further examine these ideas: to expand the context of the exhibiting artists and produce an accompanying booklet of texts. The exhibition included the work of Alice Buscombe, based in Alice Springs, Catherine Parker and Stephen Spurrier, based in Toowoomba, Townsville-based artist Ron McBurnie, and Sydney-based artists: e.k.1, Chris Williams, Jonathan McBurnie, Kate Beckingham, Mark Shorter and the author, Hayley Megan French.

The *Landscape Too* booklet included contributions by Kate Beckingham, Alice Buscombe, e.k.1, Richard Kean, Jonathan McBurnie and Ron McBurnie, Chris Williams, Sydney-based artists and collaborators Ally Bisshop and Gemma Messih, artist and writer Luke Strevens, and writer Saskia Beudel.

⁷ Hayley Megan French, Richard Kean, Carla Liesch and Katie Williams.

The booklet was edited by the author and includes an introduction co-written with Carla Liesch.

These exhibitions facilitated new work by the participating artists and produced new texts in the field. The booklet has formed an important resource of ideas of landscape in Australia today, with a strong contribution from emerging artists. This booklet has been included in the appendix as part of the research output.

The research plan and methodology for this project has been fundamentally driven by the studio practice—the context of working as a painter in Australia today. The thesis begins with an examination of the studio practice as the core case study of influence in *Chapter Two*. The author's work is then considered throughout the subsequent chapters. Documentation of the work presented for final examination is included at the end of the thesis.

Chapter structure

Chapter One: Literature Review establishes the contemporary and postcolonial context of this research, outlining recent literature and thinking in the field. The research is grounded in the discourse of expanded painting as both the historical framework, and a conceptual space to question the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. This chapter establishes the unique cultural situation in Australia due to the unparalleled impact of Aboriginal contemporary art on the Australian artworld. This impact is examined through a series of exhibitions that have considered the growing influence of Aboriginal painting on non-Indigenous artists.

Chapter One also identifies the major tensions that have arisen in this area of research within the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and the resulting discourse. In conclusion, this chapter identifies the gaps in this discourse that will be addressed in the following chapters.

Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence identifies the key research questions: what does it mean to be influenced by Aboriginal painting? How can contemporary non-Indigenous painters negotiate this influence? How then does the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists reframe the way we read the field of painting in Australia?

These questions are addressed through discussion of the circulation of remote Aboriginal painting in the writings of Australian curator Quentin Sprague, the idea of influence with reference to British art historian Michael Baxandall and the postcolonial critique of this field. The influence of Aboriginal contemporary art on non-Indigenous artists is considered through a case study of the associated studio practice with the work of Marawili. This case study sets the framework for the resulting thesis, grounding the research in the author's context and studio practice.

The growing influence of Aboriginal art is explored in *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape*, with an examination of shifts between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous understandings of the land. Addressing the sentiment of former Museum of Contemporary Art Australia curator Glenn Barkley, this chapter identifies the evolving paradigm of landscape and the growing discourse of country as central to Australian contemporary painting through the case studies of Sydney-based artists Tim Johnson and Ildiko Kovacs, and Gija artist Churchill Cann.

Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape examines the two aforementioned exhibitions, *Out of Site* (2013) and *Landscape Too* (2014). These exhibitions posed the question of contemporary artists: what is it we are responding to when we consider landscape? Through the process of coordinating these exhibitions, further research questions were identified: Is the landscape we inhabit physically the same as the landscape we inhabit imaginatively? Do we need to find a new approach to incorporating Aboriginal understandings of landscape?

Evidence of the discourse of country and a grappling with these questions in light of postcolonial debates is evident in the works and texts addressed. The discussion of *Out of Site* focuses on the work of the two collaborations, Distanciation. and e.k.1, and the author, Hayley Megan French. In discussing *Landscape Too*, this chapter focuses on the work of Sydney-based artists Jonathan McBurnie and Mark Shorter.

The final chapter, *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art* addresses the tensions of representation and appropriation. This chapter first considers the importance of these debates to the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art today and the ethics associated with practices of appropriation. This chapter then discusses Brisbane-based Indigenous artist Richard Bell's aphorisms, 'Aboriginal Art, it's a White Thing' and 'Australian Art, it's an Aboriginal Thing' as particularly pertinent to this field.

The discussion of Bell's work and aphorisms leads into art historian Rex Butler's ideas of 'UnAustralian art'—a theory for thinking through the apparent inconsistencies in Australian art. Butler's theory is questioned for its basis in ideas of separatism. Through reference to interviews conducted by the author, this chapter finally considers how artists, in particular emerging artists, are approaching ideas of Australian art today.

Chapter One: Literature Review

This thesis is concerned with the impact and influence of Aboriginal painting in Australia. The full impact of the Aboriginal painting movement on the ontology of painting in Australia cannot be easily defined as it is one we are still experiencing. In 2004, curator Felicity Fenner wrote that:

The current generation of young to mid-career non-Indigenous abstract painters in Australia have been inspired and influenced by Aboriginal painting more than any other.⁸

A decade later, this influence and the tensions it raises are at the core of Australian painting today. From its position as a contemporary art form developed outside the realm of the western artworld, to its confrontation of Australian history and race relations, Aboriginal contemporary art has long been an area of unease since its emergence in the 1970s. Both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists experience this unease, which stems from disparate world views, the complexities of colonial cultures and the history of western modernism. These tenuous relationships rest uneasily in a broad contextual field, within the emergence of contemporary discourse. This chapter establishes this contextual field and outlines recent literature and thinking in the field.

Context

The context of this research project is the emergence of the discourse of the contemporary and the historical legacy of colonialism in Australia. It is the experience of working in this very specific space and place that is relevant here. The research draws on key texts including *Contemporary Art: World*

⁸ Felicity Fenner, "Thinking Beyond Abstraction," in *Talking About Abstraction*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts 27 May – 3 July 2004 (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2004) 2.

Currents (2011) by art historian Terry Smith; art historian Ian McLean's anthology *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art* (2011); anthropologist Nicholas Thomas' *Possessions: Indigenous art/colonial culture* (1999); historian Bain Attwood's *Unsettling pasts: reconciliation and history in settler Australia* (2005) and French philosopher Jacques Rancière's essay *In What Time Do We Live?* (2013).

Today 'contemporary art' refers to a discourse, an ideology—one that defies the geographical boundaries and teleological limits of western modernism.⁹ Contemporary art derives its conceptual and expansive power from this decentredness. This condition of the contemporary is discussed by Smith as the definition of diversity, creating a new environment for a more encompassing definition of visual art and the interaction of artists from different cultures.

Smith has included Aboriginal art as an exemplary contemporary art in his theorisation of the contemporary, highlighting its decentred spatiality and postmodern temporality.¹⁰ Smith writes that 'the term *contemporary* calibrates a number of distinct but related ways of being *in* or *with* time, even of being *in* and *out* of time at the same time.'¹¹

Smith identifies the postcolonial current of contemporary world art, citing it as 'too diverse, uneven, contradictory, and oppositional to amount to an art movement in any of the usual senses.'¹² The art emerging from the circumstances of postcolonialism, he argues, is diverse to an unprecedented degree, specifically because of its origins and growth outside of the western artworld: 'Overall, this is a content driven art, aware of the influence of

⁹ Ian McLean, "How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art," in *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art*, ed. Ian McLean (Brisbane, Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011) 334.

¹⁰ Terry Smith, *Contemporary art: World Currents* (USA: Pearson Education, 2011).

¹¹ Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question." In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee. (USA: Duke University Press, 2008) 7.

¹² Smith, *Contemporary art: World Currents*, 11.

ideologies, and concerned above all with issues of nationality, identity and rights...' Smith conceives of this current of contemporary art as being in 'volatile states of transition, and requiring translation in order to be negotiated.'¹³ The artists working within these circumstances are increasingly seeking to form connections, acknowledging and working alongside difference. Smith writes:

It is definitive of contemporaneity...that we have become more intensely aware of this presence of difference all around us (and in us?), and that this quality of contemporary experience has come to override all other factors as the most central thing to be explained when we [attempt to] characterize what it is to be alive today.¹⁴

Two prominent cultural commentators, German art historian Hans Belting and US philosopher Arthur C. Danto share similar views on the contemporary to Smith. Belting and Danto both argued in the mid-1990s that a new temporality had emerged. According to Danto, contemporary art, unlike modern art, 'has no brief against the art of the past, no sense that the past is something from which liberation must be won.'¹⁵ Belting argues that in recent times artists 'took leave of a linear conception of history that had forced them to carry art into the future while waging war against its old form.'¹⁶

Belting and Danto both identify the globalisation of art after modernism as another sign of the contemporary. The contemporary then, is defined by a liberated spatiality and temporality in which the technologically globalised world dissolves the barriers of modern space (here and there) and time

¹³ Ibid. 10-11.

¹⁴ Ibid. 9.

¹⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art: Contemporary art and the pale of history*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997, 5.

¹⁶ Hans Belting, *Art history after modernism*, Caroline Saltzweid, Mitch Cohen and Kenneth Northcott (trans.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 7.

(new and old).¹⁷ This is the mark of this 'post-historical' period; that everything is possible at every time.¹⁸

This idea of the post-historical is something we have come to recognise in Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art, by its inherent contemporaneity and distinctive presentness resisted being boxed into the old historicist logic and categories of western art. In doing so, McLean claims, Aboriginal art proposed a new ideology that became known as the contemporary.¹⁹

McLean argues that this new post-historical ontology was first clearly pictured in Aboriginal art, citing Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn in the 1993 Australian Perspecta catalogue '[Aboriginal] traditions are contemporary, and Aboriginal art's contemporaneity challenges western ways of seeing art history in a chronological and divisional fashion.'²⁰

In his text, *Possessions*, Thomas provides a more localised framework for understanding the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia. In his writings on colonial culture, Thomas rejects simplistic notions that suppose that art today is defined by the transnational interactions of globalisation alone. Whilst globalisation has been of profound significance, Thomas argues, 'cultures and cultural relations in particular regions and nations continue to be deeply shaped by more local factors.'²¹ Thomas is referring to the unequal and volatile relations created by colonial cultures—outlining a distinctive interaction in which both the coloniser and colonised have a voice that together create new cross-cultural territories.

In addressing the intersections between indigenous culture and colonial art in settler countries, Thomas establishes an important context for

¹⁷ McLean, "How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art," 339.

¹⁸ Arthur C Danto, "Art after the end of art." *Artforum International* 31:8, 1993, 62.

¹⁹ McLean, "How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art," 339.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 340

²¹ Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous art/colonial culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) 8.

considering the tensions between Indigenous and colonial cultures. The intimate connection between the foundations of settler societies and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples forever underlies the shape of the nation. Australia remains a colonial culture because it is defined by two worlds: Aboriginal and non-Indigenous: 'Most forms of colonial government have given way to political decolonisation, though the process of national liberation has been notoriously accompanied by persisting economic and cultural inequalities.'²² There has been no real intellectual decolonisation²³ in Australia.

Historian Bain Attwood writes of Australia's confrontation with its colonial past as particularly shocking, largely because its settler peoples, 'are not used to thinking of [their] history as contentious, morally compromised or volatile, as dangerous, as, say, Japanese or South African history.'²⁴ Coming to terms with this past and achieving any intellectual decolonisation has been difficult in Australia, not only because of the history of colonisation, but also because of the nature of history-making during the 19th and 20th Centuries, 'which assumed a form of forgetting or disremembering.'²⁵ By the 1990s, an increasing focus on Aboriginal histories has caused a profound change in the way settler Australians have understood the history of their nation. Bain writes:

²² Ian McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," in *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art*, edited by Ian McLean. Brisbane, Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications, 2011, 21.

²³ Intellectual decolonisation entails a re-evaluation of Western epistemological foundations—philosophies and processes for creating and transferring knowledge. Going beyond basic elements of legal and political decolonisation, it includes a serious challenge to the invisible 'colonial grammar,' which frames the dominant society's knowledge and understanding. It is a necessary element for other forms of decolonisation to occur. Source: *Intellectual Decolonisation and Philosophies of Knowledge Transfer*, Research Proposal, 2008, Southern Cross University, www.scu.edu.au/arts-social-sciences/download.php?doc_id=13399&site_id=46&file_ext=.pdf [Last accessed 29/12/2014].

²⁴ David Carter, "Working on the past, working on the future," in *Becoming Australian*, Richard Nile and Michael Peterson (eds), St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1998, 12.

²⁵ Bain Attwood, "Unsettling pasts: reconciliation and history in settler Australia," in *Postcolonial Studies*, 8:3, 2005, 243.

As a result there has been a growing conviction among many Australians that the Aboriginal past is integral to any sense of Australia's future, even though Aboriginal people constitute a small minority—less than two per cent—of the Australian population.²⁶

As indicated by Attwood, while this two-nation paradigm is still dominant, there is increasing movement and dialogue between them. For both Thomas and McLean, art is significant in approaching these cultures and histories through its radical ability to define and redefine social relations and meanings. From the beginning of colonisation, art was used as a mediating force between the different cultures.²⁷ And as McLean recently argued, art remains a form of intercultural communication that is gradually increasing.²⁸

Perhaps the most significant aspect of contemporary discourse to this research is the multiple temporalities of the contemporary, or as Rancière describes, the conception of time as a set of possibilities rather than a linear progression.

There is no global process subjecting all the rhythms of individual and collective time to its rule. There are several times in one time.²⁹

Whilst there remains a dominant form of temporality which provides the calendars and rhythms that define our present and the possibilities of our future, Rancière argues that there are other forms of temporality: 'dissentious forms of temporality that create distensions and breaks in that

²⁶ Ibid. 245.

²⁷ See Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, and *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Boundaries*, Oxford: Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2007.

²⁸ Ian McLean, "Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing," in *What is Aboriginal Art?* Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell, Rex Butler and Ian McLean, June 30, 2012, Sydney Opera House: play.sydneypoperahouse.com.

²⁹ Jacques Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?" opening lecture for *The State of Things*, 1 June 2011, Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti in Venice, transcript published by Michigan Publishing, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0004.001>.

temporality... I will call them intervals and interruptions.'³⁰ Rancière, drawing from French philosopher Michel Foucault, presents a way of theorising these breaks as 'heterochronies': combinations of times that are normally incompatible.

A heterochrony is a redistribution of times that invents new capacities for framing the present... I think that it is possible to investigate the potentialities of art forms that work at the crossroads of temporalities and worlds of experience... Today, just as yesterday, the tension of living in several times at once remains unsolved.³¹

Through this understanding, we are able to theorise the intervals and interruptions of the dominant time, and the way art can disrupt this consensus. This is particularly significant for our understanding of Aboriginal art, its disruption of the linear progression of western modernism and its existence outside of the dominant temporality. An understanding of the different temporalities of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia is one way of understanding the tensions and relationships of the contemporary Australian artworld that will be further discussed in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence*.

This contemporary context then refers to the non-linear spatialities and temporalities that are transforming the way we think about the time in which we live and work. As McLean argues, we need to work with this emerging ontology, which is one that can help us understand difference in contemporary Australia. McLean questions:

Can this be done in the shadow of the colonial divide, which shows few signs of disappearing?³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ian McLean, "What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?" in *The world is not a foreign land* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art; the University of Melbourne, 2013) 53.

How can artists, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, respond to this legacy? These questions are of great importance to artists living and working in Australia, and are further indicative of the tensions facing artists in this field.

Painting

From the moment the artworld took notice of Aboriginal art it has been through the language of western abstraction. As early as 1961 a review of the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* titled 'Unnamatjira' drew parallels to Klee and Rouault. The Perth-based reviewer, R.W. rejected knowledge of the social and historical meanings of the works indicating that it 'is not essential for artistic appreciation.'³³ Instead, it clouds the judgment of this work, distracting the viewer from its abstract qualities. Viewing Aboriginal art under the aesthetic imperatives of western modernism was consistent in art criticism throughout the 1960s and has since been difficult, if not impossible to avoid. Due to its inherent differences, Aboriginal art has proved impossible for the western artworld to understand outside of itself.

The artworld, however, persisted in its modernist approach, reflected in the then Director of the National Gallery of Victoria Eric Rowlison commenting on the 1981 exhibition *Aboriginal Australia*, that the recent 'acceptance of abstract art makes Aboriginal objects a bit easier to approach than they have seemed previously.'³⁴ Rowlison, however, also noted that this association was a superficial one that did not lend itself to a genuine relationship with western artistic movements.

On this point, McLean argues that no matter how superficial, a 'relationship with our artistic movements'³⁵ was exactly what was needed. This was demonstrated later in 1981 when the Art Gallery of New South Wales'

³³ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 27.

³⁴ Ibid. 33.

³⁵ Ibid.

(AGNSW) inaugural Australian Perspecta included three Papunya paintings hung with non-Indigenous abstract art. This exhibition, McLean states, had a significant impact on the artworld, causing a dramatic reconsideration of Aboriginal art as contemporary art. The artworld was indeed attracted to Aboriginal art for its aesthetic relevance to the avant-garde norm of abstract expressionism and minimalism.

This thinking is evidenced through Victoria Lynn's exhibition *Abstraction* (1990) at the AGNSW. The exhibition claims to present the work of fifteen artists whose 'sources of inspiration for their abstract approach often lie outside the logic and traditional trajectory of the abstract avant-garde. They derive such inspiration from the tenets of Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Minimalism, Pop Art, Feminism and, for the Aboriginal painters, the language and symbols of an indigenous art practice.'³⁶ Lynn saw the complexity of abstract art as a field that could bring together artists despite their approaches being fundamentally different. It is this expansion of the ideas of abstraction that for Lynn breaks out of the discourse of a 'dead end.'

Contemporary Aboriginal art contributes a fresh set of meanings to abstraction. It denies the self-reflexivity and purity of form common to much abstraction from the mid-century as well as providing alternate conceptions of spirit.³⁷

Despite the aesthetic connections to 20th Century western abstraction, Lynn notes the imagery is unrelated to this tradition. It is her hope that in hanging the work side by side with artists working in this tradition, that 'the differences between artists in this exhibition will be seen to imply different contexts.'³⁸

³⁶ Victoria Lynn, "Abstraction," in *Abstraction*, Art Gallery of NSW (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1990) 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Abstraction does not operate within a closed circle of predetermined sources and influences: rather, as these contemporary developments show, abstraction engenders perpetual expansion.³⁹

In 2004, Felicity Fenner discussed the abstract reading of Aboriginal art in her catalogue essay for *Talking About Abstraction*: 'It is now accepted that the successful international reception of Aboriginal art is largely contingent on a resemblance to certain genres of western abstraction. Ironically, it is also accepted that Aboriginal art's link to Modernism is a convenient invention of western critics and the marketplace.'⁴⁰ Fenner also indicated this relationship as a tactic of commercial galleries seeking to broaden the appetite of the market by placing Aboriginal art in the context of western abstraction.

The relationship between Aboriginal art and abstraction continues to be argued in current discourse. The publication of *Volume One: MCA Collection* in 2012 places a number of essays on Aboriginal art under both the chapter headings of Aboriginal art and abstraction.

In her essay *Abstraction now: on 'the-artist-formally-known-as-abstract' (with apologies to Prince)*, Ruth Waller acknowledges a significant impact on the 'way we think about art, the processes of making work and the ways artworks embody meaning and reflect our experience'⁴¹ from centuries of appreciation of the diverse and distinctive qualities of Aboriginal art. Her essay goes further to suggest the continued reading of Aboriginal art under the language of abstraction.

The reading of Aboriginal painting through the language of abstraction has been heavily critiqued in critical discourse and is discussed further under

³⁹ Ibid. 11.

⁴⁰ Fenner, "Thinking Beyond Abstraction," 4.

⁴¹ Ruth Waller, "Abstraction Now: on 'the-artist-formally-known-as-abstract' (with apologies to Prince)" in *Volume One MCA Collection* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012) 67.

the subheading 'misrepresentation.' Brisbane-based artist Vernon Ah Kee, critiques this framing of Aboriginal art in his essay *There goes the neighbourhood*.⁴² Ah Kee points to language as the tool for the Australian artworld to define Aboriginal art on its own terms, whilst simultaneously excluding Aboriginal artists from the artworld:

It is a White Australian idea of the Aborigine that is being academically, scientifically and politically structured and enforced... Language is the problem. The language was and still is designed to popularise Aboriginal art for western appreciation and consumption. When reading Aboriginal art, it is the language that provides entry points, points through which the art can be appreciated and made accessible.⁴³

In discussion with Ah Kee, McLean confronted this problematic framing of Aboriginal art in a panel discussion in 2012. It is often stated that Aboriginal art can never be truly abstract because it always stands for something, tells stories and uses iconography.⁴⁴ McLean questions this implication that western abstract painting does not contain content or convey meaning. McLean argues that while Aboriginal artists and western abstract painters are working from very different traditions of painting, they are both using systems of abstraction to work through metaphysical questions.⁴⁵ Indeed anthropologist Howard Morphy writes on Yolngu painting that:

⁴² Vernon Ah Kee, "There goes the neighbourhood- it is in the language," in *Volume One MCA Collection* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012) 42-47.

⁴³ Ah Kee, "There goes the neighbourhood- it is in the language," 43.

⁴⁴ Independent curator Djon Mundine is one who is outspoken on this matter, arguing that Aboriginal painting cannot be abstract because it does not fit intellectually into Western abstraction. See: Djon Mundine, "Travelling from Utopia," *Art Monthly Australia* 250 (June 2012) 39-42.

⁴⁵ McLean, *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing*.

Contemporary Yolngu art exploits the boundaries between figuration and abstraction as a means of conveying the metaphysical underpinnings of the artists' world-view.⁴⁶

Despite coming from very different places, these traditions have shared aesthetic qualities and it is in these relationships that artists and viewers have found a starting point for dialogue.⁴⁷

While in discourse Aboriginal painting has been predominantly compared with abstract painting for its shared aesthetic qualities, it is arguably the development of the expanded field of painting and conceptual painting that has seen the rise and influence of Aboriginal painting. This influence is difficult to define, as it is one we are still experiencing. What is evident, however, is a number of painters being influenced by and responding to a kind of painting that re-conceptualises painting. Emerging in the 1970s, around the same time as conceptual art in Australia, Aboriginal art has contributed to an idea of conceptual painting through paintings that communicate ideas and expand on possibilities of space, place and time in conventional painting practices.

The expanded field of painting references American theorist and critic Rosalind Krauss' essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* from 1979. Krauss identified that since minimal sculpture appeared in the 1960s 'rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture.'⁴⁸ A paradigm shift was taking place and 'categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded, and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity'⁴⁹ blurring these two mediums so as to no longer be distinct from one another. At the conclusion of her essay, Krauss suggested the shift-taking place in painting was best understood in terms of 'uniqueness and reproducibility.'⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Boundaries* (Oxford: Berg: Oxford International Publishers Ltd., 2007) 78.

⁴⁷ McLean, *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing*.

⁴⁸ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979) 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 43.

In his 2006 essay, *Shapes of Inhabitation*, the Sydney-based artist and writer Mark Titmarsh notes that in the decade following Krauss' essay, painting was discussed in exactly those terms. Now, he argues, 'expanded painting', while undefined, 'functions as a field of possibilities that questions what painting is and what it can become.'⁵¹

As Titmarsh argues: whilst expanded painting has roots in abject art, installation art, minimalism, conceptualism, arte povera, fluxus, Rauschenberg, Pollock, Duchamp and Picasso;⁵² Minimalism 'above all...placed painting radically in question,'⁵³ and painters, such as Donald Judd, Robert Smithson and Ian Burn 'abandoned' painting out of frustration with the limits of the medium.⁵⁴ In *Conceptual Art as Art* (1999), Australian artist Ian Burn argued this trajectory,

...following Minimalism, the artist's choice was either to 'conceptualise' and discard the whole object framework or to 'retinalize' and 'return to Abstract Expressionism.'⁵⁵

Displacing the U.S. formalist art critic Clement Greenberg's ideas of medium-specificity, minimalism brought sculptural concerns together with painting, calling both mediums into question while simultaneously expanding their possibilities. That minimalist art eliminates the distinction between painting and sculpture was American artist Donald Judd's message in his 1965 article *Specific Objects*—the first extended attempt to theorise the minimalist project.⁵⁶ Judd saw that painting had now become an object just like any other three-dimensional thing, thus ending the distinct medium-specific

⁵¹ Mark Titmarsh, "Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field," *Art Monthly Australia* 189 (May 2006) 27-32.

⁵² *Ibid.* 28.

⁵³ Stephen Melville, "Counting/as/painting," in *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2001) 3.

⁵⁴ Titmarsh, "Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field," 27.

⁵⁵ Ian Burn, "Conceptual Art as Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999) 190.

⁵⁶ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965.

qualities of both painting and sculpture. Works were hence now no longer identified as painting based on the basis of Greenbergian flatness or the formalist concerns of canvas or brushwork, but by a hermeneutics of painting: what at an historical moment can be proposed as painting.⁵⁷

What remains constant in contemporary painting, despite its many possible permutations, is that it is informed by the history of what has been done in painting up to the current moment. As Krauss argued of sculpture, so too it is that painting is a historically bounded category with its own 'internal logic, its own set of rules, which, though they can be applied to a variety of situations, are not themselves open to very much change.'⁵⁸ While American painter Allan Kaprow argued that artists should consider themselves simply as an artist making art,⁵⁹ the American conceptual artist Mel Bochner claims, 'Without the history of the practice of painting as the background for all my work, it becomes a series of disparate gestures.'⁶⁰ For Bochner it is essential that his works question the 'space of painting' and hence are a continuous investigation into painting's 'functions and meanings.'⁶¹

In considering the expanded field, Titmarsh concludes his essay with a speculation on the nature of painting: 'The riddles of expanded painting show us that painting is not one thing but two, always separated from itself by the division between its 'thingliness' and its discursiveness.'⁶² In the expanded field, painting now exists as a conceptual practice and a number of artists, such as Burn and Bochner, have 'returned' to painting as a conceptual tool.

Berlin-based critic and theorist Jan Verwoert, discusses conceptual painting in his 2005 essay *Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they*

⁵⁷ Titmarsh, "Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field," 30.

⁵⁸ Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 33.

⁵⁹ Titmarsh, "Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field," 30.

⁶⁰ Mel Bochner and James Meyer, "How Can You Defend Making Paintings Now?" in *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, edited by The Ohio State University Wexner Center for the Arts (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001) 199.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Titmarsh, "Shapes of inhabitation: Painting in the expanded field," 32.

think it's a good idea. For Verwoert, conceptual art represents 'a threshold that no one can step back over.'⁶³ Hence, after conceptual art, the basis of all art production is set by Krauss' post-medium condition.⁶⁴ In her essay *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the age of the post-medium condition* (1999), Krauss reiterates the argument that Joseph Kosuth proposed in 1969 in *Art after Philosophy* that conceptual art dismisses the relevance of medium-specific art practice in favour of a general and fundamental inquiry into the nature of art.⁶⁵

In light of the post-medium condition, Verwoert suggests a strategic way of thinking about painting as a conceptual gesture: 'a strategic intervention into the history of art with a situational meaning.'⁶⁶ These gestures, then, are made with awareness of both their history and their current moment and aim to constantly challenge those conditions.

Verwoert places the conceptual project of painting as one of its time, always concerned with both its mode of historicity and its particular situational moment:

Since painting is realised today within the horizon of conceptual practice, it must be grounded in a context that is no longer its own... Painting can no longer be just painting.... But this also means that painting as practice can take strength precisely from the fact that by way of an immanent dialogue with its own history and conditions as a medium it arrives at a (situative strategic) self-justification within a more widely-spread conceptual horizon.⁶⁷

⁶³ Jan Verwoert, "Why are conceptual artists painting again? Because they think it's a good idea," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 12 (Autumn/Winter 2005) accessed online: <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

⁶⁶ Verwoert, "Why are conceptual artists painting again?"

⁶⁷ Ibid.

These are the questions that Titmarsh argues artists in the expanded field of painting are approaching.⁶⁸ Painting hence is an avenue for artists to think through complex ideas, often held in tension with each other. As argued by Verwoert: painting is both aware of its history and context, and is an action of its time. This thesis then, argues that expanded and conceptual painting is a way of thinking and making that encompasses the contemporary acknowledgement of difference and non-linear temporalities. This mode of expanded painting has philosophically allowed for the incredible impact of Aboriginal painting on an Australian ontology of painting.

The impact of Aboriginal painting

At the threshold of the new century, Tillers declared that in the previous 30 years 'Aboriginal art unexpectedly and incredibly became the mainstream of Australian contemporary art.' Further, 'many of us have been looking at, thinking about and consciously or unconsciously absorbing the new forms of this art for at least twenty years.' He concluded: 'this is really the distinctively unique cultural situation in which Australian artists find themselves in the late twentieth century.'⁶⁹

As Australian artist Imants Tillers remarked, the Aboriginal art movement has been an artworld revolution in Australia,⁷⁰ and the impact and influence on artists has been profound, inspiring 'a new way of conceiving and living with difference that is the matrix of today's globalised world.'⁷¹ The unique cultural situation Tillers describes is echoed by McLean:

No Australian art movement has produced so much work by so many artists for so long, and in the process established a whole new market

⁶⁸ Mark Titmarsh, "Thinking the Phenomenology of image through the Poetics of Contemporary Expanded Painting." *Limes: Borderland Studies* 5: 1, 2012, accessed online: doi: 10.3846/20297475.2011.641722 [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

⁶⁹ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 17.

⁷¹ Ibid. 68-69.

along with a string of specialist galleries, indeed a brand new industry, as well as created new departments in state art galleries and new courses in academia. At the same time, the dynamism of the art and the efficacy of its ideas have been maintained for more than 30 years... it has changed the ways in which both Australian and contemporary art are conceptualised.⁷²

Further to this, the impact of Aboriginal art is unparalleled internationally. While art historian Bernard Smith argues that there are 'many cases in which the culture of the victors has converged with the cultures of the vanquished,'⁷³ none match the recent achievement of Aboriginal art. In his seminal Boyer Lecture, *The Spectre of Trugannini*, Smith discussed the convergence of Indigenous and colonising cultures in Latin America and other former settler colonies such as New Zealand and Canada. Whilst Indigenous art retains 'prominent positions in their national psyche and culture,'⁷⁴ in Australia, Aboriginal art has in fact meaningfully impacted contemporary mainstream artworld discourse.⁷⁵

As McLean notes, this sharply contrasts with the artworld in the U.S. and Europe: 'Despite the world having been subject to unprecedented cross-cultural traffic for several hundred years, art museums in the U.S. and Europe remain extremely Eurocentric.'⁷⁶ Aboriginal art has long held a more prominent position in Australia. This is reflected in curator Roberta Sykes' introduction to Sydney's Artspace exhibition *Koorie art '84*, 'the contribution of Aboriginal artists to the artworld, indeed the entire world, is to fill a void regarding the Australianisation of this country's art.'⁷⁷

⁷² Ibid. 17.

⁷³ Bernard Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, 1980 Boyer Lectures (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1980) 51.

⁷⁴ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Roberta Sykes, 'Introduction', in *Koorie art '84*, Artspace, Sydney, 1984.

McLean poses the questions: Why is Australia so different? Why did Aboriginal art suddenly gain prominence as contemporary art in the Australian artworld? And how did Aboriginal aesthetic expressions become an integral part of contemporary art?⁷⁸

The full impact of Aboriginal art on the Australian artworld is difficult to define or measure. Certainly it has proved difficult for art historians and critics to explain the Aboriginal art revolution, both with Albert Namatjira and the Arnhem Land renaissance in the 1950s, and then with the rise of the Papunya Tula movement in the 1980s and its aftermath. This difficulty, as McLean succinctly states, 'derives from the failure of Australia's founding discourses (moral, legal, aesthetic and historical)'⁷⁹ to understand or account for this phenomenon. As McLean writes:

If we are yet to see a full historical investigation of the subject, it is not due to the poverty of criticism but the difficulty and profundity of the exercise.⁸⁰

In his anthology McLean states that 'the impact of Aboriginal art should not be overestimated.'⁸¹ This statement is supported by figures on the percentage of discourse in the principal art journals devoted to Aboriginal art: 'A generous estimate is that during the final decade of the twentieth century, Aboriginal art occupied roughly 10 per cent of the Australian artworld discourse when it probably accounts for nearly 50 per cent of production.'⁸² Furthermore, the absence in recognition of the importance of Aboriginal art in Australian art history is noted in many historical writings.⁸³ McLean acknowledges Andrew Sayers's *Australian Art* (2001) as the first

⁷⁸ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 21.

⁷⁹ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 63.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ McLean specifically mentions art historian Bernard Smith's writings on Australian art.

survey to give Aboriginal art a significant place in the story of Australian art.⁸⁴

McLean, however, acknowledges that statistics do not accurately represent the impact of Aboriginal art on the Australian artworld. This thesis will argue that this impact could be better measured in terms of the influence of Aboriginal art on the attitudes and practices of Australian artists. Whilst a few exhibitions have considered the formal parallels in the work of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous abstract painters as early as Victoria Lynn's *Abstraction* (1990) and Michael Eather's *Balance 1990 Views, Visions, Influences* (1990); the direct influence of Aboriginal art on non-Indigenous artists is considered in Christine Nicholls' *From Appreciation to Appropriation; Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art* (2000), *Talking About Abstraction* (2004) curated by Felicity Fenner and Vivien Johnson, Glenn Barkley's *Almanac- The Gift of Ann Lewis AO* in 2010 and most recently *roads cross: Contemporary Directions in Australian Art* (2012) curated by Vivonne Thwaites, Fiona Salmon and Anita Angel.

Talking about Abstraction was the first to directly premise an exhibition on 'the belief that Aboriginal painting assumes an authoritative influence on the practice of many non-Indigenous artists.'⁸⁵ The exhibition brought together leading Aboriginal painters—Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Regina Wilson, Mitjili Naparrula, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, Dr George Tjapaltjarri, George Tjungurrayi and Paddy Bedford—with non-Indigenous abstract painters—Debra Dawes, Jemima Wyman, Angela Brennan, Melinda Harper, ADS Donaldson and Ildiko Kovacs—to emphasise the formal and technical relationships between their works.⁸⁶ While these artists were selected for the shared visual and performative qualities of their paintings, the exhibition does not claim an abstract reading of the Aboriginal works.

⁸⁴ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 64.

⁸⁵ Vivien Johnson, "Surface Tension," in *Talking About Abstraction*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2004) 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Rather, it seeks to simply demonstrate a direct influence of Aboriginal art on the non-Indigenous artists, as Fenner writes:

A generation after Aboriginal art was first revealed to the wider world, its influence continues to become more profound, particularly on this (and in all likelihood the next) generation of artists, exposed in their formative years to the recent innovations that now define this most ancient of cultures.⁸⁷

Fenner discusses the generational impact of Aboriginal painting, acknowledging that for those entering art school since the early 1980s, Aboriginal art has been a formative influence, integral to study and visual experience. Arriving on the heels of the rumoured 'death' of painting, Fenner and Johnson suggest that Aboriginal art has provided abstract painters with new possibilities in abstraction. This is, however, still a largely one-sided conversation. Fenner does acknowledge that outside influences on Aboriginal art are often downplayed due to the market demand for 'authenticity.' In fact, she states, it is arrogant to expect Aboriginal painters, even those living in remote areas, to remain immune to Western culture.

The Aboriginal artists in *Talking About Abstraction* were selected on the basis of their departure from traditional modes of narrative representation. Kngwarreye, in particular, is noted for her significant influence on both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists alike. Whilst dispensing with traditional iconography, Kngwarreye's systems of abstraction maintain a culturally specific intent. It is for this reason that critics see Kngwarreye's work as the requisite bridge between Aboriginal and western painting. Similarly, Tjupurrula and Bedford's work have been significant in forging fresh visual languages that find parallels in western art, in addition to inspiring other Aboriginal artists to new and independent forms of expressing traditional culture.

⁸⁷ Fenner, "Thinking Beyond Abstraction," 14.

The major influence identified in this exhibition is the link between painting and performance. Fenner writes in particular of Sydney-based painter Debra Dawes perception of painting as an extension of the self, not only in the sense of the body's role in mark-making and mindfulness but also in expressing the rituals of everyday life. This performative connection is echoed by most of the non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition, who also note coming to Aboriginal art from an existing rapport with European and American abstraction.

In 2010, *Almanac: The Gift of Ann Lewis AO* further examines this influence and suggests relationships between the works of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists. This private collection presented a dialogue of abstraction, an exploration of the potential and relevance of abstraction's relationship with Aboriginal art. Former Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCAA) curator Glenn Barkley⁸⁸ argues that a major shift in Australian painting began in the 1960s that prepared the ground for Aboriginal art and its influence on the artworld from the 1970s. Barkley links this shift to the move away from outback landscape and figuration painting as abstraction rose in popularity, supported by the emergence of conceptualism. Barkley goes on to argue that the paintings by Aboriginal artists from remote communities also fit within the context of modern, or contemporary, abstraction.

For Barkley, interaction and dialogue can emerge from placing works with shared formal qualities side-by-side, linking works across time and geography. In particular, bringing Ildiko Kovacs' works together with Emily Kngwarreye's works initiates a dialogue between two distinct views of the natural world: a Western observation of the landscape and an Indigenous sense of being within the landscape. Barkley argues that the 'shifting back and forth from these alternative view points lies at the heart of contemporary painting in Australia.'⁸⁹ This statement is explored in-depth

⁸⁸ Formally senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (2008-2014).

⁸⁹ Glenn Barkley, *Almanac: The Gift of Ann Lewis AO*, Museum of Contemporary Art. (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010) 6.

through *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape* and *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape*.

Similarly to *Talking About Abstraction*, Barkley identifies an emphasis on the process of painting as an important link between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous works in the Ann Lewis AO collection. In the works of remote artists: Dorothy Napangardi, Gloria Petyarre, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula and Timothy Cook, the repetitive actions of dotting and mark-making are akin to a performative mode of painting. In this sense, Barkley compares these artists with the work of Neil Roberts, *92 bounces 30.11.95*, in which Roberts systematically bounces a ball, covered in boot polish, on a sheet of paper 92 times (see Figure 1). There is a poetic connection to consider here, as the artists enact their repetitive processes to reveal more intimate connections: between the land, time, memory and between ideas and objects.

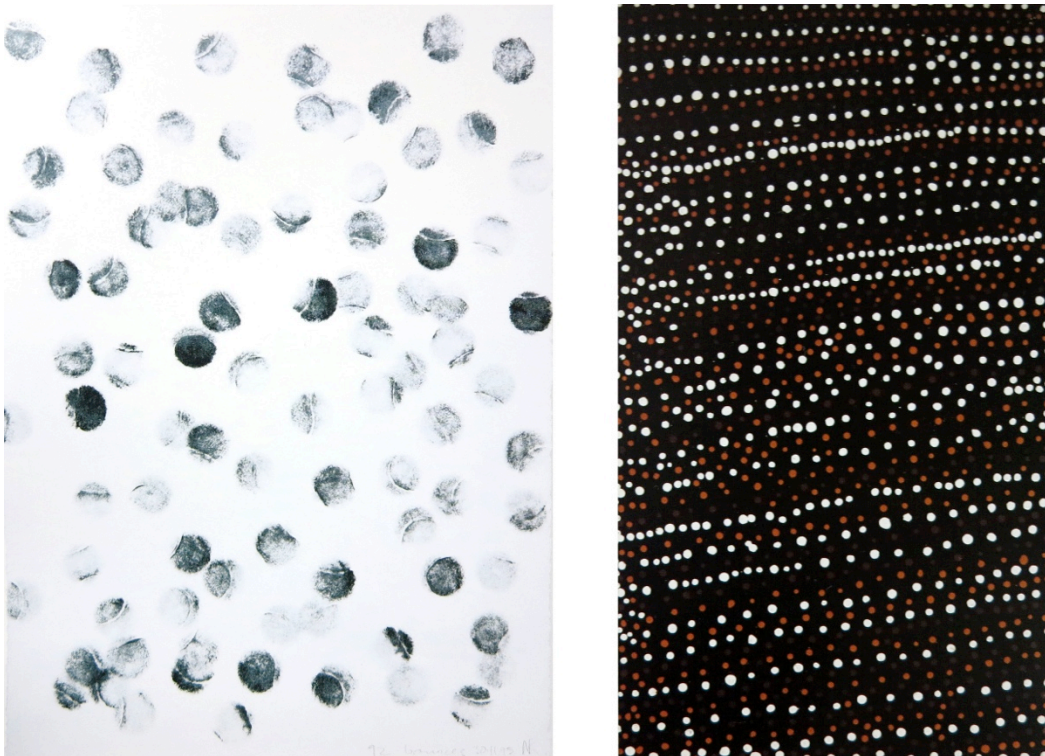


Figure 1 Neil Roberts, *92 bounces 30.11.95*, from the series *Bradman's tank*, 1995, boot polish on paper, 76.5 x 56, Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Ann Lewis AO, 2009 and Timothy Cook, *Untitled*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 89.5 x 51.5cm, Collection of Moree Plains Gallery

The exhibitions *Talking About Abstraction* and *Almanac: The Gift of Ann Lewis AO* are indicative of the enduring impact of Aboriginal painting on non-Indigenous artists. The most recent of these exhibitions, *roads cross*, endeavours to portray an increasing engagement with Aboriginal art from sixteen non-Indigenous artists —Franck Gohier, Una Rey, Jonathan Kimberley, Quentin Sprague, Nalda Searles, Robin Best, Alison Alder, Therese Ritchie, Pamela Loft, Tobias Richardson, Gus Clutterbuck, Ildiko Kovacs, Angela Brennan, Lauren Berkowitz, Hossein Valamanesh and Richard Dunn. Considering a climate of growing cross-cultural engagement in Australia, ‘the project explores how this development has left traces and echoes in recent Australian art’⁹⁰ through the works of these artists.

As Salmon and Thwaites state in their introduction, these works, comprised of collage, photography, printmaking, fibre and textile construction, ceramics, found-object installation, sculpture and painting represent the impact, or ‘impress,’ of Aboriginal people, culture and art. They argue: ‘The experience is optical and visceral, manifested through subject matter, materials and ideas, as evidenced in the artists’ research and creative processes, and in the final execution of their work.’⁹¹ According to McLean, this exhibition signals a considered shift from aesthetic engagements with Aboriginal art—which have been taking place for over 100 years—to direct personal engagements.⁹²

In opposition to *Talking About Abstraction*, *roads cross* does not hold abstraction as a ‘two dimensional and conceptual meeting place where creative and cultural paths have crossed between Australian Indigenous and

⁹⁰ Fiona Salmon and Vivone Thwaites, “Introduction,” in *roads cross: contemporary directions in Australian art*, Flinders University City Gallery, Charles Darwin University Art Gallery (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum, 2012) 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 9.

⁹² Ian McLean, “Between Indigenous and European Art,” in *roads cross; contemporary directions in Australian art*, Flinders University City Gallery, Charles Darwin University Art Gallery (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum, 2012) 31.

non-Indigenous art.⁹³ Curator Anita Angel argues that the inclusion of a broad range of media, indicative of contemporary practice, rather demonstrates the opposite to be true. Whilst Angel's claim seems to be increasingly true of the growing and diverse influence of Aboriginal art, it is certainly the case, as previously argued, that abstraction has been a conceptual meeting point for Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists.

Four Aboriginal artists, pura-lia meenamatta (Jim Everett), Nyukana Baker, Molly Nampitjin Miller and Yaritji Connelly, are represented in *roads cross* as co-creators of artworks, and the works of the late Rover Thomas (Joolama) provide the exhibition with its title, and its 'visual and art historical points of departure.'⁹⁴ These collaborative works, however, seem to act as a footnote to the overarching premise of the exhibition and ideas of cross-cultural engagement in both directions are not fully explored.

In his commissioned essay for this exhibition, *Between Indigenous and European art*, McLean highlights the politics that often act as a barrier to cross-cultural engagement. He argues: 'Particularly problematic are collaborations between non-Indigenous artists and Indigenous artists in remote communities because here politics and intersubjectivity are unavoidable whatever the aesthetic imperative.'⁹⁵ Yet, despite cross-cultural barriers, McLean argues, engagements and collaborations increase. This is demonstrated through the work of Australian artist Imants Tillers and Papunya Tula artist Michael Nelson Jagamara, discussed later in this chapter.

While these exhibitions present an influence that is predominantly one-way, relationships developed between artists through shared artistic exchange has created productive dialogue, conversations that have extended not only

⁹³ Anita Angel "'Standin' at the crossroad': contemporary directions in Australian art," in *roads cross: contemporary directions in Australian art*, Flinders University City Gallery, Charles Darwin University (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum, 2012) 20.

⁹⁴ Salmon and Thwaites, "Introduction," 9.

⁹⁵ McLean, "Between Indigenous and European Art," 30.

into each other's work, but into the broader context of Australian painting. Barkley discusses this broader context in a recent article concerning the *Volume One* collection at the re-opening of the MCAA in 2012. Barkley's essay *Zoom: The shape-shifting painting of Helen Eager*, presented a curatorial bent that sought to create ongoing dialogue between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous works in the collection.⁹⁶ Barkley places the new wall work of Helen Eager in the context of contemporary expressions of abstraction. His hang of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists in this context is aimed at questioning what a contemporary expression of abstraction might mean and how it is manifested in the work of Australian artists.

Barkley writes of tonal relationships that recall Aboriginal art in Eager's work, however focuses further on the influence of Aboriginal art on the artmaking practice. Barkley suggests the most obvious influence is in the spontaneity and informality of Aboriginal painting and the intuitive sense of form and composition. Barkley directly adds, 'any abstract painter working in Australia today has to work out an approach to artmaking that must at least consider Aboriginal art and a way of working with or through it.'⁹⁷ This necessary engagement has changed the way we think about art, proposing a challenging dialogue for contemporary Australian artists. This indicates a shift in consciousness in contemporary art, as artists are now called to consider intersections in their work in new ways. This shift is characterised by a more practice-based and conceptual influence from Aboriginal art, rather than simply an aesthetic confluence. This thinking is further examined through the *Volume One* collection hang in *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian art*.

As McLean aptly noted in his anthology, if statistics underplay the impact of Aboriginal art on the Australian artworld, then it is time for 'new histories of

⁹⁶ Barkley, Glenn. 2012. "Zoom: The shape-shifting painting of Helen Eager," *Art and Australia* 49:3. 406-408.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 408.

Australian art to be written that recognise this.⁹⁸ McLean and Barkley's comments are indicative of a growing understanding of the impact of Aboriginal painting in artworld discourse.

Tensions

Since Aboriginal contemporary art established a leading presence in the Australian artworld in the 1980s it has consistently demonstrated 'the potential to make us nervous.'⁹⁹ Tension is experienced by both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists; this is an inherent part of colonial cultures and cross-cultural engagement and will be discussed further in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence* and *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art*.

McLean's anthology gives a succinct overview of the artworld concerns that arose in response to Aboriginal art's contemporaneity: aesthetics, modernism, politics and gender. McLean presents the many sides of each argument through the major voices in Aboriginal art discourse. As argued, the conceptual nature of painting in itself renders it a political act of its time. Further to this, the depiction of Dreaming, land and ceremonial functions means that Aboriginal art is a highly political act in and of itself; and one that has been a most successful political strategy and 'an agent for social justice.'¹⁰⁰ Art has been an integral part of the Aboriginal political movement for land rights and self-determination since the Yirrkala bark petition in 1963.¹⁰¹ The major tensions that have arisen in this research in relation to

⁹⁸ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 64.

⁹⁹ McLean, "How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art," 333.

¹⁰⁰ Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn, "Blak Artists, cultural activists," in *Australian Perspectives*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993, x-xii. Republished in *How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art: Writings on Aboriginal contemporary art*, edited by Ian McLean (Brisbane, Sydney: Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications) 301.

¹⁰¹ In response to Yolngu land being excised from the Arnhem Land Reserve in the early 1960s for bauxite mining, Yolngu elders sent a petition to Parliament, gummed to a piece of stringybark surrounded by sacred designs. These bark paintings became known as the Bark Petition (1963) and played a significant role in the eventual overturning of the notion of Terra Nullius. They are still publicly displayed in Parliament House and have been described as Australia's Magna Carta. This information has been adapted from: Djon Mundine, "Saltwater," in *Saltwater; Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country* (Neutral Bay,

Aboriginal art and its relation to non-Indigenous art have been misrepresentation and appropriation.

Misrepresentation

The seminal ethical debate in the Australian artworld has been in regards to the misrepresentation of Aboriginal art and the impossibility of an Aboriginal art criticism. The politics of representation were initially challenged by Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell by his famous aphorism, 'Aboriginal Art- It's a White Thing' in 2002.

There is no Aboriginal art industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal.¹⁰²

Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art- It's a White Thing, published in 2002, is a critique of the non-Indigenous construct of the Aboriginal art system—that is the methods through which Aboriginal art is produced, promoted, exhibited and sold. This paper came about as the result of many discussions with fellow artists and colleagues and brought together thoughts on this field that had not yet been published. Bell writes that 'it is a great source of discomfort to Aboriginal People that Aboriginal Art is not controlled by Aboriginal People.'¹⁰³

Terry Smith acknowledged the constraints of the western art discourse in representing Aboriginal art in 1993, 'Can artwriting match the challenges coming from the art itself?'¹⁰⁴ Smith argued that it is only the contemporary

Sydney: Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre in association with Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, 1999) 20-27.

¹⁰² Richard Bell, "Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art- It's a White Thing," in Volume One MCA Collection (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012) 31.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Terry Smith, "Second person/ first peoples: Writing about postcolonial art," *Art Monthly Australia* 64, 1993, 11.

practitioners, 'purged by feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and postcolonial theory'¹⁰⁵ that can pursue real dialogue:

Valuable communication can occur if both parties recognise that, while cultural incommensurability is the bottom line, it does not erase the positive potentials of difference.¹⁰⁶

In his 1998 article, *The Impossible Painter*, art historian Rex Butler uses the brief and noteworthy career of Emily Kame Kngwarreye to argue the impossibility of an Aboriginal art criticism. During her eight-year career, Kngwarreye's paintings were compared to American Minimalism, Pointillism and Abstract Expressionism, as well as artists: Monet, Matisse and Pollock.¹⁰⁷ All of these comparisons limit Kngwarreye's work to Eurocentric readings, neglecting the tribal, ceremonial and spiritual aspects of her work. Butler notes, however, the unease with which he employs even the term 'spiritual,' which 'strikes us as colonising, as seeing the work from an exclusively Western perspective.'¹⁰⁸

This is in fact the case for all critical language used in art discourse, terms such as: expressiveness, innovation, originality, authenticity, formal success or failure. The language possessed by the western artworld is not appropriate for discussing work made on such different ground. For Butler, the impossibility lies in attempting to speak about something that lies completely outside our frameworks and understanding.

Nicholas Rothwell expresses a continued dissatisfaction with Aboriginal art criticism in 2004 in his article *Crossing the divide*. The issue remains, he argues, that if you judge an artwork by 'formal or received aesthetic standards you repeat the sins of colonialism.'¹⁰⁹ Echoing Smith's earlier

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Rex Butler, "The impossible painter." *Australian Art Collector* 2 (1998) 42-45.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 43.

¹⁰⁹ Nicolas Rothwell, "Crossing the divide." *The Australian*, 3 April 2004.

sentiments, Rothwell calls for an engaged response to Aboriginal painting, one that involves dialogue and exchange between the artists and the audience. In 2012, Rothwell has further written that ‘constructive, engaged western criticism of Aboriginal art in contemporary Australia is virtually unknown.’¹¹⁰

It is an undeveloped field, for several obvious reasons: the ground material of much of the art is sacred and secret, and hence beyond review by the outside critic; the languages of the artists are not spoken by metropolitan cultural explainers, and only rudimentary information about remote area art and culture circulates.¹¹¹

Indeed the ‘gaps in comprehension across which translation must occur’¹¹² is an ongoing problem.

Leading Bandjalung curator Djon Mundine—a senior figure in the Australian art world—echoed this issue in his 2012 article *Travelling from Utopia*.¹¹³ Mundine wrote of an anthropologist friend who spent a day with Kngwarreye. Kngwarreye spoke to her for hours, however due to the language barrier the anthropologist could not understand anything that was said. Mundine surmised ‘and most probably that’s a metaphor for the art world’s struggle to verbalise its appreciation of Emily’s work.’¹¹⁴ This is in fact a pertinent analogy for the challenges faced in discussing and relating to Aboriginal art.

Independent curator Stephen Gilchrist echoes the need to address this gap in representation and critique in his essay *Indigenising curatorial practice* in 2013:

¹¹⁰ Nicolas Rothwell, "Foreword," in *Hot Springs; The Northern Territory and Contemporary Australian Artists*, edited by Daena Murray (Victoria: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2012) 7.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Djon Mundine, "Travelling from Utopia," *Art Monthly Australia* 250 (June 2012) 39-42.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 41.

Curators of indigenous art should aspire to create detailed localised art histories that have been co-authored with community members to tease out cultural significations in ways that resist interpretive banalities and help facilitate a new critical language. The inherited language of art criticism used to write about Indigenous art is falsely universalising and largely inadequate.¹¹⁵

Misrepresentation is also extensive in the institutional categorisation of Australian art.¹¹⁶ Artist and art critic Ian Burn acknowledges that our questioning of this representation is restricted by the conventional institutional categories of 'Australian' and 'Australian Aboriginal,' which do not allow for the complex interaction of cultures in Australia. Whilst this statement was made in 1983, this institutional categorisation still persists in almost all of Australia's major museums and galleries. The National Gallery of Australia, to which Burn was directing his critique, only recently built a new wing to house eleven Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander galleries. This move, in 2010, only further serves to segregate Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australian art. Institutional segregation and representation are further discussed in *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art*.

Aboriginal artists are classified further within the terms 'traditional' or 'remote' and 'urban.' Aboriginal art is not homogenous, however, and cannot be confined to 'fixed representations of diversity within the terms "traditional" and "urban."' ¹¹⁷ These terms, although contested, persist as convenient categories within Australian art discourse. In his review of *unDisclosed: the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial* Rothwell defines remote and urban artists as they are often referred to in artworld discourse:

¹¹⁵ Stephen Gilchrist, "Indigenising curatorial practice," in *The world is not a foreign land* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art; the University of Melbourne, 2013) 58.

¹¹⁶ Ian Burn, "The Australian National Gallery: Populism or a new cultural federalism?" *Art Network* 8 (Summer, 1983) 39-43.

¹¹⁷ Perkins and Lynn, "Blak Artists, cultural activists," 302.

Artists from remote community backgrounds almost all create work in state-funded art centres, their work guided to market by art coordinators, who are almost invariably non-Indigenous.¹¹⁸

Rothwell defines urban Aboriginal artists:

The artists who live and work in regional or city contexts are more strongly engaged with the professional culture system of contemporary Australia: they show in galleries, execute commissioned pieces and tend to offer up a politically coloured picture of their position in the world.¹¹⁹

Returning to Bell's aphorism, in 2012, the panel discussion *Aboriginal Art: It's a White Thing*—held at the Sydney Opera House as part of NAIDOC¹²⁰ Week 2012—brought together artists Bell and Ah Kee with art historians McLean and Butler to consider what has changed in the Aboriginal art industry over the ten-years since *Bell's Theorem* was published. Little has changed systematically, they argued, since the 1980s. The major shift, Bell spoke of, was the way in which Aboriginal art is marketed. Aboriginal art is now marketed as contemporary art, despite the fact that Bell contends it is still perceived on ethnographic terms.¹²¹

A significant part of this discussion was the aforementioned representation of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists together under the banner of 'Australian art.' In discussing what Australian art might be, Butler returned to Bell and his second aphorism, that Australian art is Aboriginal. The combination of these two ideas, that Aboriginal art is a western construction and that Australian art is entirely Aboriginal, offers a brilliant insight into Australian culture. Butler argues 'they offer ways for all of us to completely

¹¹⁸ Nicolas Rothwell, "Surveying the landscape at the 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial." *The Australian*, (online) May 05, 2012, www.theaustralian.com.au [Last Accessed 1/11/2014].

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee

¹²¹ Richard Bell, *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing*.

rethink what it is that is Australia, what Australian art is, and in fact, the relations, and in many ways, the non-relationship between aborigines and whites in contemporary Australia.¹²² This discussion was certainly provocative in considering not only the representation of Aboriginal art, but all Australian art.

Appropriation

White excursions into the terrain of Aboriginal representation are now highly problematic. But they are equally imperative in order to contradict in practice the dismal doctrine that no rapprochement is possible.¹²³

This prevalent quote by sociologist and arts writer Vivien Johnson characterises the problematic relationship of appropriation and Aboriginal art—it is at once crucial for furthering cross-cultural understanding and incredibly difficult to negotiate. The overwhelming presence of Aboriginal art in Australian visual culture, as discussed earlier, inevitably informs approaches to artmaking, yet remains fraught with cross-cultural tension.

Appropriation, as it is discussed today, emerged predominantly from the post-modernist art movement ‘appropriation art’, ‘which continued conceptualism’s critique of modernism’s reification of style as an index of subjectivity and originality.’¹²⁴ Rex Butler’s anthology *What is Appropriation?* is a key text on the practice of appropriation in Australia, focusing on the 1980s and early 1990s. This book does not attempt to answer the question posed by its title, however argues that it is a question that fundamentally cannot be answered. Appropriation is not simply a

¹²² Rex Butler, *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing*.

¹²³ Vivien Johnson, "The art of decolonisation," in *Two worlds collide: Cultural convergences in Aboriginal and white Australian art*, Artspace (Sydney: Artspace, 1985).

¹²⁴ Ian McLean, "Ian McLean" in "Notes from the field: Appropriation: back then, in between, and today." Georg Baselitz et al. *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2) 179.

theme or category in art history; but is in fact a *logic*.¹²⁵ Butler argues that the logic of postmodernism took particular form in the Australian art of the 1980s and early 1990s. For the idea that the original comes after its copy, that the meaning of a work arises as an effect of its reading, was seen as peculiarly relevant to the cultural conditions of Australia.¹²⁶

The appropriation debates during this time were characterised by the paradox of this logic—that the copy makes the originality of the original possible and at the same time destroys it. These theoretical propositions were ‘stimulated and accompanied by a new questioning of Australian identity and an assertive expanding indigenous arts presence.’¹²⁷ Butler outlines the important issues at the core of the relationship between appropriation and Aboriginal art that remain incredibly pertinent today. He first questions:

...what constitutes the ‘appropriation’ of aboriginality, whether it has to be conscious or not, whether it is exclusively artistic or whether any dealing with or discussion of aboriginality is always an appropriation of it.¹²⁸

It is Butler’s argument that the ‘logic’ of appropriation means that the appropriation of aboriginality cannot be qualified as good or bad, right or wrong, and is instead unavoidable. The question of appropriation is then an ethical one, asking what form this appropriation should take. Butler also comments that, consistent with the logic of appropriation itself, the appropriation of Aboriginal art is not one-way but flows in two directions, suggesting that ‘at the same time as an aboriginal image is appropriated

¹²⁵ Rex Butler, “Introduction,” in *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s*, Second Edition, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane, Australia: Institute of Modern Art, 2004) 13-46.

¹²⁶ Rex Butler, “Introduction,” in *Radical Revisionism; An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane, Australia: Institute of Modern Art, 2005) 7.

¹²⁷Michael Snelling “Foreword to the First Edition,” 1996, in *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s*, Second Edition, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane, Australia: Institute of Modern Art, 2004) 9.

¹²⁸ Butler, “Introduction,” in *What is Appropriation?* 41.

there is an equal and opposite appropriation of white art and culture by aborigines.¹²⁹ Butler cites the exchange between Tillers' *The Nine Shots* and Gordon Bennett's *The Nine Ricochets* as an example of the two-way flow of appropriation.¹³⁰

Artist Juan Davila, design theorist Tony Fry and cultural critic Anne-Marie Willis represent the counter argument in the anthology.¹³¹ In their writing they argue that white artists, curators and academics 'adopt' aboriginality to make strategic gains in their careers. Davila comments that painting influenced by Aboriginal culture 'is being used as a sublime venture to reconquer the white man's imaginary landscape, to endorse the "art of white aborigines;"¹³² an argument illustrated by Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell's work *Bell's Theorem (Trippy Dikky and friends)* (2005), discussed in *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art*. Appropriation remains a controversial debate in contemporary art. The scope of the current debates in this field are shown through the 2012 exhibition, *The Loaded Ground*, the recent media concerning Melbourne-based artist Lucas Grogan and the responsive roundtable discussion put together by the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia *Contemporary Visual Art and Culture Broadsheet* (42.1 2013).

The pivotal moment of appropriation in Australia occurred in 1985 when Imants Tillers painted *The Nine Shots* (see Figure 3), a work appropriating motifs from Michael Nelson Jagamara's *Five Stories* (1984) (see Figure 2). Since then, Tillers and Jagamara have gone on to develop a collaborative relationship, somewhat groundbreaking in its cross-cultural potential. The exhibition *The Loaded Ground: Michael Nelson Jagamara and Imants Tillers* curated by Michael Eather, Imants Tillers and Nancy Sever at the Drill Hall

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ See: Juan Davila, "Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game?" *Art & Text* 23/24, March-May, 1987; and Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, "Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success?" *Art in America*, Vol. 77, No. 7, July 1989. Both articles have been republished in *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s*, Second Edition, edited by Rex Butler. Brisbane, Australia: Institute of Modern Art.

¹³² Davila, "Aboriginality: A Lugubrious Game?" in "What is Appropriation?" 195.

Gallery in Canberra presented a survey of Jagamara and Tillers' works prior, during and within the context of the debate surrounding appropriation and Aboriginal art. A catalogue was published with the exhibition, presenting six critical essays from prominent voices in the field: Brisbane-based artist and administrator Michael Eather, Imants Tillers, Ian McLean and painter and arts writer Una Rey, Rex Butler, Vivien Johnson and anthropologist Howard Morphy.



Figure 2 Michael Nelson Jagamara, *Five Stories*, 1984, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 188cm, Private Collection

Eather's essay, the introduction to the catalogue, discusses what *The Rules of Engagement* are with Aboriginal art.¹³³ Whilst the discourse concerning appropriation has been largely academic, Eather talks of the real, daily exchanges between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists. In the case of Jagamara and Tillers, Eather writes of the natural ongoing and balanced relationship that the artists share: 'There is a cyclical gesture of admiration at work here that defies any political correctness.'¹³⁴ Eather, the initial

¹³³ Michael Eather, "The Rules of Engagement." In *The Loaded Ground*, ANU Drill Hall Gallery (Canberra: Australian National University, 2012) 11-15.

¹³⁴ Ibid.15.

facilitator of this relationship, sees this mutually beneficial collaboration as a sign of what could be possible 'post-reconciliation.'¹³⁵ He writes:



Figure 3 Imants Tillers, *The Nine Shots*, 1985, synthetic polymer paint and oilstick on 91 canvas boards, overall 330 x 266cm, Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Gift of the artist, 2008

The artworks Tillers and Jagamara create continue to go backwards and forwards—amidst shared backgrounds and foregrounds. Their resolution is essentially about an artists' dialogue through private

¹³⁵ Ibid.

vernaculars of colour, design and texts... The language is at once Aboriginal, English, Warlpiri, poetic and universal...¹³⁶

It is arguably this backwards and forwards movement that makes Jagamara and Tillers' collaboration successful. Not only do the paintings physically move back and forth between the Papunya settlement in Central Australia (Jagamara's home), Brisbane on Queensland's south-eastern coast (Eather's home, the FireWorks Gallery and the Campfire Group) and Cooma in the Southern Tablelands in NSW (Tillers' home) as the artists layer paint; there is also an exchange of culture, ideas and growing understanding moving back and forth across these vast geographical and cultural distances. Tillers' *An Auspicious Entanglement* is a significant essay in this catalogue, in which he discusses his controversial work *The Nine Shots* in 1985, the fall out and the collaborative relationship that ensued. Tillers writes:

In 1985, I painted a controversial work *The Nine Shots*, which drew its imagery from both Michael Nelson Jagamara and the German neo-expressionist Georg Baselitz. The process was not that of a simple overlay of one image over another but a more complex interspersal of both sources that involved a certain struggle to find what I felt was the right fit between them.¹³⁷

Tillers goes on to say that his naivety in Aboriginal culture meant that his borrowing from Jagamara's work was unauthorised. However, it is out of this action that a productive collaboration between the two artists began.

Whilst there is no essay from Jagamara himself, he is quoted by McLean and Rey with regards to his response to Tillers' first appropriation,

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Imants Tillers, "An Auspicious Entanglement," in *The Loaded Ground*, ANU Drill Hall Gallery (Canberra: Australian National University, 2012) 9.

He can't paint over my painting like he did. It was a very clever painting, the way that snake bit that man, but he can't paint over my painting. He didn't have permission. It was wrong.¹³⁸

McLean and Rey include an important explanation of traditional Warlpiri law that is paraphrased here. Appropriation is a key feature of Warlpiri art. Jagamara uses Tjuringa and rock art designs made by Ancestral Beings in his work to affirm the authority of the Dreaming. This appropriation is a means of transmitting ancestral knowledge, hence, improper appropriation can have terrible consequences, whether intended or not. The practice of postmodern appropriation is to recontextualise, rather than reiterate the original. Jagamara's complaint was not in fact that his painting had been appropriated but rather that it had been appropriated improperly. In the case of *The Nine Shots*, Tillers did not consult with Jagamara—he was not an incarnation of the appropriate ancestors, he was not initiated to tell the story he had appropriated and had no kin relationship with the appropriate people. Furthermore, Jagamara would be held responsible for Tillers' improper actions.

Artworld critics tended to view this incident in terms of the unequal power relations of colonial cultures. McLean and Rey state that Jagamara did not see it this way—he was much more concerned with the violation of Warlpiri law than anything else.¹³⁹

The process of establishing Jagamara's and Tillers' relationship is also worthy of noting. Fifteen years after *The Nine Shots*, Tillers' expressed his enduring discomfort with the situation, leading Eather to organise a meeting. Building from his experience curating *Balance: Views, Visions, Influences* in 1990 at the Queensland Art Gallery, Eather worked with Brisbane's Aboriginal community to develop the Campfire group, an

¹³⁸ Ian McLean and Una Rey, "Black and White: A Tale of Cities and Men," in *The Loaded Ground*, ANU Drill Hall Gallery (Canberra: Australian National University, 2012) 29.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 33.

informal association of artists engaged in collaboration, activism and experimentation. Eather invited Tillers and Jagamara to participate in this group in 2001 and continued to play a supportive role throughout their relationship. The cooperation and collaboration of a gallerist, a gallery and community-based group was essential to the success of this relationship and speaks to the need for a wide support network to ensure the ethical realisation of cross-cultural collaborations.

The final collaborative work in this exhibition is *Hymn to the Night* (see Figure 4), created in 2012. Breaking with the familiar pattern of their collaborations, Tillers and Jagamara met to discuss this work face to face in Brisbane. Jagamara had the freedom to complete the painting without Tillers masking out his text. The result is an emphatic and emotional painting, consisting of one hundred and sixty five boards, the largest of their collaborative works to date. McLean and Rey comment that in this work 'Jagamara has appropriated Tillers' story, text and all, and incorporated it into his own.'¹⁴⁰



Figure 4 Michael Nelson Jagamara and Imants Tillers, *Hymn to the Night*, 2011-12, synthetic polymer paint on 165 canvas boards (No. 8973-89927), 277 x 532cm, Private Collection

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 39.

Tillers' appropriation of Jagamara's work also initiated a relationship with Gordon Bennett. *The Nine Shots* eventually brought about Bennett's powerful retort *The Nine Ricochets* in 1990 (see Figure 5), which in turn borrowed images from Tillers. This dialogue, one that moves backwards and forwards between two cultures and multiple artists, seems one of the most pertinent conversations in this field. Where *The Loaded Ground* may have seemingly progressed open discussion in this debate, arts writer Bridget Cormack listed a number of recent cases that have 'refocused debate on how non-Indigenous artists need to tread carefully when making use of, respectfully or otherwise, Aboriginal culture.'¹⁴¹ Her article, *The ethics of cultural borrowing* published in *The Australian* in December 2012 shows that appropriation of Aboriginal art is as fraught as ever.



Figure 5 Gordon Bennett, *The Nine Ricochets* (Fall down black fella, jump up white fella), 1990, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas and canvas boards, 220 x 182cm, Private Collection

¹⁴¹ Bridget Cormack, "The ethics of cultural borrowing," *The Australian*, (online) December 18, 2012 [Last accessed 1/11/2014].

Cormack cites non-Indigenous Melbourne artist Lucas Grogan as one example of these sensitive relationships (see Figure 6 for an example of Grogan's work). In what *Broadsheet* describes as a 'storm-in-a-teacup beatup by the media about a long confused domestic issue,'¹⁴² two headlines were printed in *The Australian* within two days of each other, 'Painter quits in row over artist' and 'Another artist quits in revolt against style.' These articles claimed that Grogan's referencing of Indigenous styles has caused Aboriginal artist Ryan Presley and Australian-born Indian artist Textaqueen to walk out on Jan Manton Art and Gallerysmith respectively. Further to this, one of the co-curators of the Fringe Festival, Margaret Farmer, resigned over Grogan's inclusion, and after being selected as a finalist in the *Off The Wall* emerging artists' exhibition at the 2013 Sydney Art Fair, Grogan was deselected because 'senior curators in the indigenous community...had ethical concerns or issues.'¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ed., "Appropriation: no longer appropriate?" Roundtable discussion with Adam Geczy, Ian McLean, Danie Mellor, Blak Douglas (Adam Hill), *Contemporary Visual Art and Culture Broadsheet* 42.1 (March 2013) 24.

¹⁴³ Bridget Cormack, "Another artist quits in revolt against style," *The Australian* (online), November 29, 2012, www.theaustralian.com.au [Last Accessed 29/12/2014].



Figure 6 Lucas Grogan, *Folklore 1*, 2013, ink and acrylic on wood, 61 x 61cm

In an earlier article on Grogan, Cormack included a statement by Grogan, released by Gallerysmith, 'I made some work that referenced Aboriginal painting because I realised there were some striking similarities between my mark making and bark painting. But my inspiration comes from a whole range of sources.'¹⁴⁴ According to the media, it was not cross-cultural engagement or copyright that were the cause of these protestations, 'There are many positive examples of Aboriginal artists collaborating with others.'¹⁴⁵ The main issue cited was 'the context that he presented them in...gross portrayals...with Aboriginal people engaging in oral sex, boozing and vomiting.'¹⁴⁶ Independent curator Djon Mundine was one of many to publicly denigrate the work of Grogan, arguing that his work 'demonised'

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ian McLean, "This belongs to me, the one dollar note: The eternal returns of appropriation," *Contemporary Visual Art and Culture Broadsheet* 42.1, no. (March 2013) 21.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Aborigines through the use of cross-hatching styles in the representation of subject matter that alludes to alcohol. Borrowing should be done fairly and respectfully, he says.¹⁴⁷

Cormack concludes the article with a quote by Tillers on Aboriginal art, 'It is part of contemporary art so it becomes harder to defend special treatment for it with regards to influence or appropriation.'¹⁴⁸ The imbalance of power between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians remains a dominant concern.

In response to Cormack's article, along with the media surrounding Grogan and the high levels of activity regarding this issue on the social media site Facebook, *Broadsheet* approached artists, curators and academics:

...with view to pursue a balanced roundtable discussion, not directed at the singular artist and his apparent cultural transgression per se, but to articulate the larger issues inherent in cultural appropriation, copyright and "the ethics of cultural borrowing", nationally and globally—to lessen the focus on one individual, and to illuminate the bigger picture.¹⁴⁹

Despite an 'unexpected silence' from many sectors, *Broadsheet* published a roundtable mediated by Adam Geczy—with singular presentations by Ian McLean, and Sydney-based artists Danie Mellor and Blak Douglas (Adam Hill).

The roundtable presents the basis of these debates. Aboriginal art has been most successful in the cultural and political advancement of Indigenous rights in Australia. As a result, many non-Indigenous peoples in developing a love for Aboriginal art 'have learned to take greater interest in Aboriginal

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Cormack, "The ethics of cultural borrowing."

¹⁴⁹ Ed., "Appropriation: no longer appropriate?" 24.

affairs and to take heed, to keep remembering the grisly plight they have endured, and in many respects continue to endure.¹⁵⁰ Considering the continuing adversities faced by Aboriginal people, 'it is only understandable that many indigenous people should be protective over their imagery and take its misuse as a slight.'¹⁵¹ However:

The counter argument is one that has been active for two decades now, namely that if Aboriginal art wishes equity with non-Aboriginal art, it must then not quarantine itself from critical debate, and perhaps from appropriation...¹⁵²

The contribution of Danie Mellor speaks to a common situation among younger artists and students:

One of the dilemmas that I see confronting artists- especially students and younger artists that I am in contact with- who have backgrounds other than indigenous in Australia is a very natural trait of curiosity; I meet many people genuinely interested in artistic and cultural exploration, and not always for personal gain or credibility under the guise of 'authentic exchange', although it may (unfortunately) become so. This has been written about extensively, and a rule of thumb in my experience-relevant perhaps for the subject of this discussion- is not always 'what' is done, but 'how' it's done.¹⁵³

Whilst the views presented are only 'the smallest taster of debates in flux,' the dominant ethical concerns are discussed, along with the essential understanding that 'we must now embrace Aboriginal culture as a plural and one that is estimably complex and dynamic.'¹⁵⁴ *Broadsheet* concluded:

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 25.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Danie Mellor, "Appropriation, no longer appropriate?" 24-25.

¹⁵⁴ Ed., "Appropriation: no longer appropriate?" 25.

The process of assembling the various voices and views turned out to be complicated, emotive and fraught with hesitations, retractions, suggestions and silences. Distilled down to their base elements, the issues here are admissibility and entitlement.¹⁵⁵

In his essay *This belongs to me, the one dollar note: The eternal returns of appropriation*, published in the same issue of *Broadsheet*, McLean acknowledges the role of Australian politics in this debate. McLean notes that Grogan is only one of many non-Indigenous artists 'directly engaging with indigenous art in Australia even though it remains a fraught zone.'¹⁵⁶

Nevertheless, Australians (indigenous and non-indigenous) have not been reticent in criticising Grogan.¹⁵⁷

Why then has there been such a response to Grogan's work? McLean argues that Mundine's complaint of the demeaning representation of Aboriginal people resonates particularly due to the political climate exacerbated by the Intervention,¹⁵⁸ which amongst other abuses of human rights repealed anti-racism laws in Australia: 'Criticisms stem from a moral outrage at colonial injustice,' brought to the forefront of affairs through the Intervention. 'In this troubled atmosphere, Grogan's art opens old wounds.'¹⁵⁹

These texts provide an overview of the current arguments in the field, highlighting the ethical concerns of cross-cultural appropriation and

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ McLean, "This belongs to me," 21.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ 'The Intervention' is the common term for the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007—a legislative response from the Federal Government to the Northern Territory Governments Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, or the 'Little Children are Sacred' report. The context to which McLean is referring is the passing of the Stronger Futures Legislation in 2012, despite fierce resistance, extending the Northern Territory Intervention for another 10 years. For further reading see: <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/northern-territory-emergency-response-intervention> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

¹⁵⁹ McLean, "This belongs to me," 21.

echoing the sentiment of Butler and Mellor in that it is how appropriation is approached that needs to be at the forefront of the discussion.

Conclusion

As a non-Indigenous painter, this research directly stems from the impact and influence of Aboriginal painting on non-Indigenous artists. Recent publications and discourse represent a significant shift in attitudes towards the value of Aboriginal contemporary art in the Australian artworld. The need for artists to be critically considering or engaging with Aboriginal art is presenting a challenging dialogue for contemporary Australian artists. As suggested in this chapter, the impact of Aboriginal art could be better measured in the attitudes and practices of Australian artists and curators rather than what is reflected in artworld discourse. The author has conducted twenty interviews with artists, curators, historians and art centre workers, along with curating two exhibitions in order to further consider this influence and the developing attitudes and practices of emerging artists.

Whilst the western classificatory languages of abstraction and modernism have defined the artworld's relationship with Aboriginal art in the past, it is apparent that the shared language of painting has allowed for connections and dialogue within the artworld and between artists. It is important now, for artists, theorists and writers to acknowledge the restrictions of this language and consider differences and connections beyond this paradigm.

Our contemporary context refers to the non-linear spatialities and temporalities that are transforming the way we think about the time in which we live and work. This thinking, along with the developments of conceptual and expanded painting, are providing a space for artists to consider and experience difference, outside of the dominant temporality of the artworld. In order to negotiate this field, as McLean argues, the truth of the colonial divide must be where the conversation begins. Rancière's model for theorising the artistic disruptions of the dominant temporality is

productive in thinking through the impact and influence of Aboriginal painting in Australia. This will be further considered with regards to the work of Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili and its influence on the author's practice in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence*. Due to the historical tensions outlined in this chapter, there has been limited discussion on what it means for non-Indigenous artists to be influenced by Aboriginal painting.

The growing influence of Aboriginal art has called for a necessary engagement by all Australian artists, changing the way we think about art. This indicates a shift in consciousness in contemporary art, as artists are now called to consider intersections in their work in a new way. This shift is characterised by a more practice-based and conceptual influence of Aboriginal art, rather than simply an aesthetic confluence. The shifting between understandings of landscape has been identified as a major intersection between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting, forming a core consideration of painting today. This is explored through *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape* and *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape*. Further to this, the growing discourse of country in Australia has not yet been rigorously examined with reference to the impact on emerging artists.

The tensions outlined in this field continue to be defined by artworld discourse that is significantly lacking in the generational viewpoint of emerging artists. The nature of this debate is one of disengagement and ethical and political stalemates, particularly with regards to appropriation. This thesis then will consider these debates from the context of the emerging generation of artists who have entered the artworld in the 21st Century. This is reflected throughout the thesis, and considered in-depth in *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art*.

Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence

This chapter investigates the influence of the Aboriginal painting movement on the wider field of contemporary Australian painting since it entered the Australian artworld in the 1970s. This influence is one that calls forth key questions of the circulation of Aboriginal painting: what does it mean to be influenced by Aboriginal painting? How can contemporary non-Indigenous painters negotiate this influence?

These questions are the starting point of the research project, directly investigated by the author's associated studio practice. The focus lies in the crossovers and reciprocal relationships between Aboriginal contemporary painting and the broader field of painting in Australia. This research is grounded in the field of painting as both the historical framework for this influence, and a conceptual space to question these relationships, both on an individual scale and in the wider field of Australian art.

First, this chapter considers the circulation of remote Aboriginal painting, specifically through the research and writings of curator Quentin Sprague on the work of Yolngu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu. Sprague puts forward an alternative reading of Aboriginal art that focuses on the relational aspects of its circulation, rather than solely on the intrinsic meaning of the work.

To better understand the notion of influence, this chapter briefly considers British art historian Michael Baxandall's views on artistic influence, providing a more critical approach to this notion than is commonly applied.

This chapter then addresses the major critique of the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists—being that of a postcolonial power imbalance and the ethics of cross-cultural engagement, as discussed by art historian and theorist Ian McLean.

This chapter then considers these key questions of influence through a case study of the author's studio practice. This research is grounded in time spent working in the Buku Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre in Yirrkala, North East Arnhem Land. This provided a unique opportunity to observe the culture and the artistic process of a number of Yolngu artists, particularly those producing work in the art centre—Nyapanyapa Yunupingu and Nonggirnga Marawili. This case study considers Marawili's practice for its influence on the author, as an example of the possibilities of influence in the wider field of contemporary painting in Australia.

Circulation

As outlined in *Chapter One: Literature Review*, the wider circulation of Aboriginal painting, which began with the Papunya Tula movement in the 1970s, has had a significant influence on non-Indigenous artists in Australia. The circulation of the work itself raises a number of questions regarding the possibility of this influence. Curator Quentin Sprague works directly in this field, describing his focus as the space between Aboriginal contemporary art and the broader field of contemporary art in Australia.¹⁶⁰ His essay, *White Lines: The Recent Work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu* (2013), focuses on the work of Yolngu artist Nyapanyapa Yunupingu to critically consider the reading of Aboriginal painting and the way it operates in the wider field of contemporary Australian art. Through Yunupingu's work, Sprague puts forward an alternative way of reading Aboriginal art that focuses on the relational aspects of its circulation, rather than solely on the intrinsic meaning of the work.¹⁶¹

Sprague attributes his thinking in part to anthropologist Alfred Gell. In his influential book *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory* (1998), Gell proposes art objects be viewed as the 'equivalent of persons, or more

¹⁶⁰ Quentin Sprague, "The World is not a Foreign Land," Last modified November 21, 2014, <http://theworldisnotaforeignland.com> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

¹⁶¹ Quentin Sprague, "White Lines: The Recent Work of Nyapanyapa Yunupingu," *Discipline No. 3* 3(2013) 59-68.

precisely, social agents,' defining art as a 'system of action' that is realised within specific relational contexts.¹⁶² For Sprague, this moves us beyond notions that an 'artwork is simply a vessel that mediates communication from artist to viewer and thus divests meaning in one revelatory moment.'¹⁶³ It is certainly the case that artworks are mostly experienced outside of the context of their own creation and intention. Limiting meaning to a specific encounter with a work then ignores the broader context the artist is working in and the relationships that form both before and after its creation.

Sprague's essay begins by discussing Yunupingu's *White Paintings* (see Figure 7), originally titled *Mayilimiriw*, a Yolngu Matha word that translates as 'meaningless.' Sprague notes that these paintings, now titled by their formal features, were changed as a convenient measure to identify each work. Both titles however, draw us to the materiality of the works. The irregular shape of the barks is an immediate contextual reference in the Yolngu bark painting tradition—the paintings are sculptural in the way they protrude from the wall. Sprague writes, 'in a similar fashion the loosely interwoven networks of cross hatching that cover their surfaces also embed them in place, foregrounding the white ochre pigment dug from the locality in which Yunupingu lives and works.'¹⁶⁴ The movement of the cross-hatching is emphasised by the fluctuating grounds of the bark. Yunupingu's process is evident in the mark making, each line emanating out from her seated position on the ground with the bark. The paintings map their own temporality, as each movement of the bark or interruption of the artist is evident through the changing directions of the cross-hatching.

¹⁶² Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 6.

¹⁶³ Sprague, "White Lines," 61.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 60.



Figure 7 Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, *White Painting #5*, 2009, natural earth pigments on bark, 95 x 89cm

This specific materiality of the bark paintings places them within the lineage of Yolngu art, as identified by anthropologist and Yolngu art historian Howard Morphy's extensive research. Morphy has traced this tradition back to the earliest exchanges between Europeans and Yolngu in the 1930s when the Mission¹⁶⁵ in Yirrkala began commissioning and collecting artefacts and material culture.¹⁶⁶ Exchange between cultures has underlined the

¹⁶⁵ The Methodist Church of Australasia established a mission at Yirrkala in 1935. Over the following decades, members of the 13 clans that owned land in the surrounding area were gradually drawn into the mission. Source: <http://www.eastarnhem.nt.gov.au/yirrkala/> [Last Accessed 29/12/2014].

¹⁶⁶ See: Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Boundaries*. and Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*.

development of local art practices in Yirrkala; and is understood as a key part of its function by contemporary practitioners.¹⁶⁷

Morphy identifies that Yolngu art has always been part of a network of ceremonial action, as both a function and an effect of these relationships. Yolngu art is 'part of the ancestral knowledge that is transmitted from generation to generation, yet in addition, paintings encode meanings about the ancestral past and are one of the main ways in which people gain access to knowledge of the events of the ancestral past.'¹⁶⁸ Even as Yolngu art undergoes significant categorical change in the contemporary Australian artworld, Morphy argues contemporary Yolngu art maintains its 'value in internal contexts,'¹⁶⁹ and its importance in the process of social reproduction. For Morphy, Yolngu art communicates this specific local meaning of ancestral knowledge in its circulation in the wider field of contemporary art.

As Sprague argues, Yunupingu's works function somewhat differently. They are not embedded with ancestral clan designs, known as *miny'tji*, their titles self-consciously point to a meaning beyond the Yolngu world of ceremonial action and ancestral narrative. This reading moves away from 'conventional understandings of Australian Aboriginal art as material embodiment of custodial ownership and traditional systems of belief.'¹⁷⁰ In contrast to Morphy then, Sprague sees their meaning in the different contexts that collectively inflect the work, rather than the work's intrinsic meaning.

¹⁶⁷ Morphy, *Becoming Art*, 72-82.

¹⁶⁸ Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* 75.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁷⁰ Sprague, "White Lines," 60.

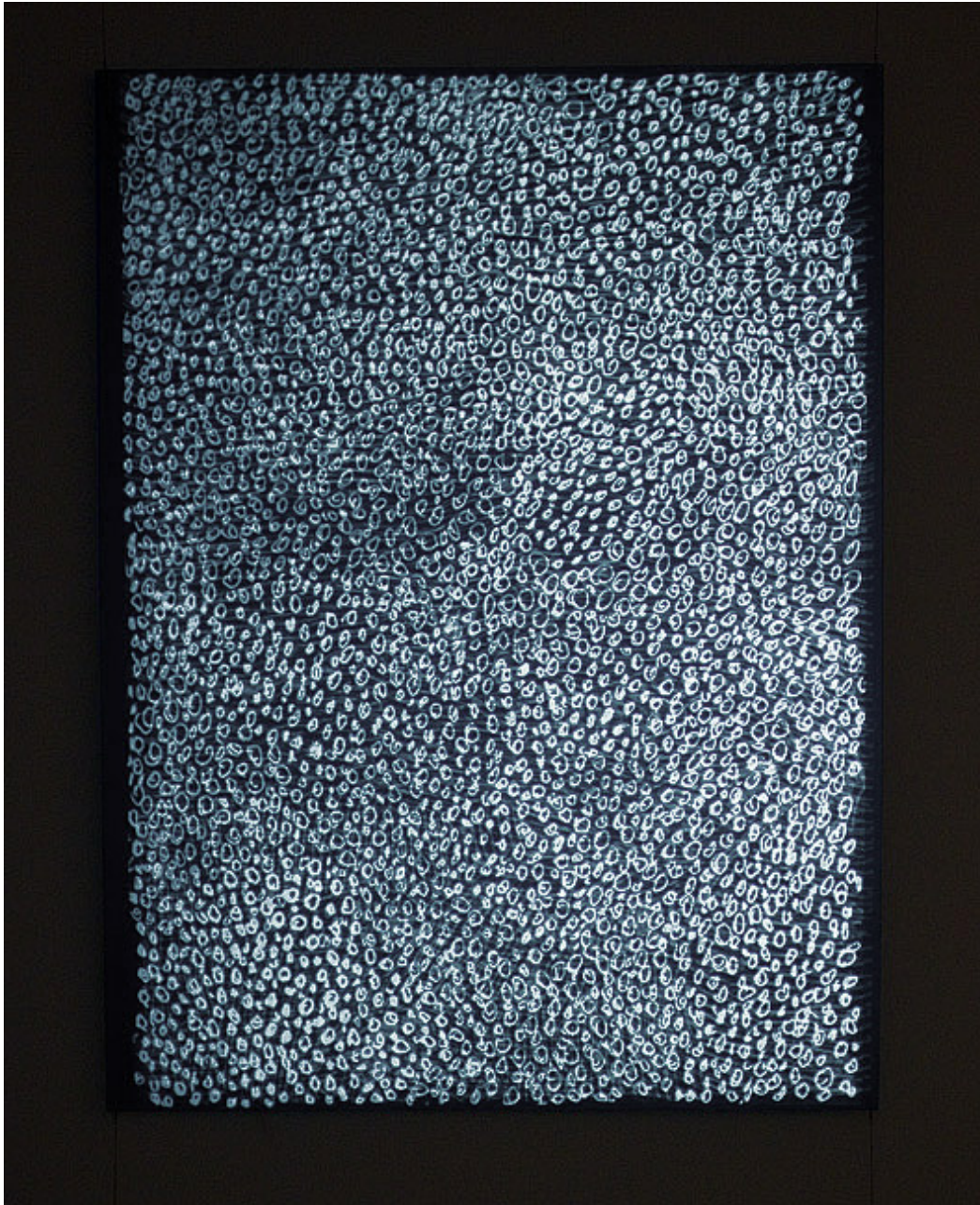


Figure 8 Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, *Light Painting*, film still, 2010-11, animated white paint pen on 110 acetates, dimensions variable

Sprague notes a number of key cross-cultural exchanges that have been integral to the development of Yunupingu's practice and the circulation of the work. In particular *Light Painting* (see Figure 8), a 'digitally projected, constantly changing overlay of Yunupingu's drawings on acetate'¹⁷¹ is a collaborative multi-media work that is unique in the canon of Aboriginal contemporary art in Australia. The work on acetate was initially prompted

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 67.

by the lack of availability of barks during the dry season in 2010 and encouraged by long-term art coordinator Will Stubbs. The digital iteration of the work exhibited at *All Our Relations*, the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012 was realised by a group of participants including Stubbs, fellow art coordinator Andrew Blake, Mulka Project director Rob Lane, Digital Archive Manager Araluen Maymuru and programmer Joseph Brady. According to Sprague, it is these certain 'actions' between people and cultures, rather than intent to communicate specific cultural information, that has formed the basis of Yunupingu's inspiration. The reciprocal relationship with Stubbs is also important in indicating that the cross-cultural influence is not one-way, as Sprague writes:

We might better understand an exchange in which artist and intermediary are drawn together within the same charged cultural interface, a process that aligns and sparks the creativity of each.¹⁷²

McLean has also written of the reciprocal relationships between art advisors, anthropologists and Aboriginal artists in his anthology, noting that they were a necessary means of mediation with the settler world: 'In this sense the artworld revolution is the culmination of a conscious convergence initiated decades earlier by Aboriginal artists... rather than an act of cultural imperialism on the part of the artworld.'¹⁷³ This contingent relationship then is key to understanding that it is possible to draw 'disparate forms into a system of equivalences that still allow for the articulation of difference.'¹⁷⁴ New developments to the tradition of Yolngu art can thus be seen to manifest within a lineage of cross-cultural exchange.

Sprague notes that established frames of interpretation for Aboriginal contemporary art remain important, however can be limiting, particularly in the case of artists working outside the typical parameters of their local community. This is an important consideration for an increasing number of

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ McLean, "Aboriginal art and the artworld," 20.

¹⁷⁴ Sprague, "White Lines," 62.

artists pushing the boundaries of local tradition, and for the freedom for artists to do so. Whilst Yunupingu's work belongs to a tradition that it continues to participate in, the relationships underpinning the work suggest that its meaning resides beyond the established interpretive frame of embodied connections to her custodial country, and instead lies within the shifting and reciprocal relationships that facilitate its circulation. By foregrounding these relational aspects of the work, Yunupingu's recent work 'quietly suggests new ways of thinking; not only about Aboriginal contemporary art, but about the world in which this art circulates.'¹⁷⁵

As such we might see a deeper prompt within the often subtle network of lines that cross the surfaces she paints and draws on, a prompt that urges us to consider the possibilities of dialogue, however fraught, that lie at the charged interface that marks contemporary Australia.¹⁷⁶

Yunupingu continues to push the boundaries of her practice today, through a new large-scale series of works on paper (see Figure 9). Again this project is the result of collaboration and input from the art advisors Stubbs and Kade McDonald, who work closely with Yunupingu. First working with pen on paper, Yunupingu is now experimenting with drawing back into the works with ochre. This project is allowing Yunupingu to work on a scale previously impossible with the limited availability and size restrictions of barks and Larrakitj.¹⁷⁷ Yunupingu's works on paper will be exhibited at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, for the first time in January 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 68.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Hollow memorial poles.



Figure 9 Nyapanyapa Yunupingu, *Djorra (paper) 3*, 2014, felt tip pens, white clay, acrylic paint on discarded print proofs, 228 x 224cm (overall), 76 x 56cm each.

Sprague suggests his model as a particularly useful way to frame key aspects of Aboriginal contemporary art in Australia. What this reading offers is an approach that is less confined by the historical definitions of the field, allowing a wider consideration of each individual artist's context, grounded in the understanding of inherent cultural differences. In this thinking, the notion of influence is less burdened with the postcolonial power imbalance and could be understood, instead, as the acknowledgement of difference and the potential for intercultural dialogue.

Influence

Before considering the major critique of this field, it is important to note the negative assumptions associated with 'influence,' as they often taint our understanding of the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists. The notion of influence—that elusive agency, by which someone or something infects, informs, provokes, or guides the production or reception of an artwork¹⁷⁸—is often cast in a negative light. This is because, in much discourse, it implies a passive and casual relationship. French philosopher Michel Foucault has criticised the concept of influence as being 'of too magical a kind'¹⁷⁹ to be rigorously examined. For Foucault, influence refers to a casual process of transmission and communication through the phenomena of resemblance or repetition.¹⁸⁰

Baxandall discusses the critique of artistic influence in his seminal book, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanations of Pictures* (1986). The 'curse' of influence, he argues, is that it grammatically places the agency with the influencer, inferring that the artist who has been influenced is a passive agent:

¹⁷⁸ Robert S. Nelson, "Appropriation," in *Critical Terms for Art History; Second Edition*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 162.

¹⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 21.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X.¹⁸¹

According to Baxandall, the second is the more significant reading. He argues, that when an artist 'has recourse to or assimilates himself to or otherwise refers to'¹⁸² another artist or movement, they are responding to contextual circumstances to make an intentional selection from the resources available to them. There are questions then, to be asked about the institutional or ideological frameworks of these circumstances. Baxandall encourages this more critical approach to artistic influence—one that recognises that artists actively re-read other artists and traditions through their own context:

By returning agency to the one seemingly influenced as acting upon a preceding artistic source, this model emphasises the importance of linking questions of influence to questions of how artists interpret other artists, and questions of the artistic, social and cultural contexts in which authorial selections of influence are performed.¹⁸³

Baxandall's model of influence further argues that every time Y refers to X, the field in which both are now operating is rearranged.¹⁸⁴ In this relationship, both X and Y are repositioned in their field. Sprague touches on this when he argues that the relational aspects of Yunupingu's work, circulation and reception, inform the meaning of the work more so than any intrinsic meaning. In this model, the way Yunupingu's work is received consistently repositions and redefines her practice, as well as those working in the broader field. We can see this repositioning as Yunupingu and her collaborators continue to push the boundaries of her practice, and Yolngu practice, most recently in the works on paper.

¹⁸¹ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanations of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) 58-59.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* 59.

¹⁸³ Colin Burnett, "Transnational auteurism and the cultural dynamics of influence: Mani Kaul's 'Non-Representational' cinema," *Transnational Cinemas* 4 (2013).

¹⁸⁴ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 60.

How then does the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists reframe the way we read the field of painting in Australia? One example of this repositioning of the field is in the way abstraction has come to be read in Australian painting. This is demonstrated in art historian and theorist Rex Butler's re-reading of Abstract Expressionism through Aboriginal art in his paper 'What was Abstract Expressionism? Abstract Expressionism through Aboriginal art,' delivered at the *Abstract Expressionist Symposium: Action. Painting. Now.* at the National Gallery of Australia in August 2012.

In this paper, Butler inverts the usual Eurocentric comparison, that it is Abstract Expressionism that helps us to understand Aboriginal art. On the contrary he insists that 'against all chronology, all conventional conceptions of cultural influence and dissemination'¹⁸⁵ that it is Aboriginal art that helps us to understand Abstract Expressionism. For Butler, this is through Aboriginal art's embodiment of the idea of 'meaningful without meaning.'¹⁸⁶ That is, 'we have the sense in its works that everything is meaningful, intended; that there is always more to understand about them.'¹⁸⁷ Through this meaningfulness we have come to understand in Aboriginal art, Butler makes sense of the endeavours of the Abstract Expressionists, that is the very voice and presence of the artists themselves.

Butler's paper is indicative of his broader view that 'abstraction in Australia reads as Aboriginal today.'¹⁸⁸ Butler spoke of this reading in the panel discussion *What is Aboriginal Art?* held at the Sydney Opera House in 2012. He argues that 'increasingly Aboriginal art is the model through which one reads all the other kinds of art in Australia.'¹⁸⁹ While this is a developing understanding of Australian art, Butler's assertion has specific implications

¹⁸⁵ Rex Butler, "What was Abstract Expressionism?: Abstract Expressionism through Aboriginal Art," in *Abstract Expressionism Symposium: Action. Painting. Now.* (National Gallery of Australia, 2012).

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Rex Butler, *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing.*

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

for artists working in this field. If all art in Australia is read through Aboriginal art, it is then read in terms of its relationship to Aboriginal art and its place in the present history of postcolonialism.

Butler's theory indicates that influence is not a passive reception of ideas but rather an active reflection of and engagement with the artists' context. The Australian context of postcolonialism further complicates the notion of influence through cultural difference. As Sprague points out in his essay, these risks are also implicit in dialogue between cultures. Socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that dialogue is guided not only by the possibilities of both communication and miscommunication, but also by the fundamental differences of each party, which unavoidably shape the boundary between them. Although the inherent challenges of this process are why, for Appadurai, dialogue between cultures is by definition fraught, the structure of the contemporary world still calls upon us to seek common frameworks of exchange.

Cultural differences are always a challenge to negotiate, even as art establishes ground for commensurable exchange of differences, it remains bordered by the incommensurability of the worldviews it exists between.¹⁹⁰

Postcolonial critique

The major critique of the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists is that of a postcolonial power imbalance and the ethics of cross-cultural engagement. As Morphy writes:

While 'borrowing from', 'being influenced by', 'finding inspiration in', 'learning from', and 'building upon' other people's artworks is always going to be an integral part of art practice, it is never going to be

¹⁹⁰ Sprague, "White Lines," 67.

without its dangers since art is not limited to particular kinds of objects.¹⁹¹

Indeed any cross-cultural engagements between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia raises questions of this power imbalance and cultural divide. McLean notes 'no relationship, even the most intersubjective, is ever equal, but the legacy of colonialism shadows all relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians no matter how equal and hospitable they might seem.'¹⁹²

Cross-cultural engagement deepened in Australia on both sides around the mid-20th Century. This is evidenced in the Hermannsburg and Papunya Tula art movements, along with the response to these movements in incorporating Aboriginal visual culture as a defining feature of Australian contemporary art and culture. These engagements have been increasing between artists ever since. However, McLean argues:

...the outcomes of these engagements are difficult to assess. On the one hand, each side has its own agenda that reflects the uneven relations of power in the colonial and postcolonial periods. These factors have continued to shape the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian art and keep them distinct practices. A sense of incommensurable difference remains.¹⁹³

The legacies of modernism and colonialism still constrain cross-cultural exchange. While postmodernism freed Aboriginal art from its anthropological classification as primitive, opening the way for more creative and dialogical exchanges, it also presented a critique of these

¹⁹¹ Howard Morphy, "Impossible to ignore: Imants Tillers' response to Aboriginal art," in *Imants Tillers; one world many visions*, National Gallery of Australia, last modified November 21, 2014, nga.gov.au [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

¹⁹² Ian McLean, "Between Indigenous and European art," in *roads cross; contemporary directions in Australian art*, ed. Flinders University City Gallery; Charles Darwin University Art Gallery (Adelaide: Flinders University Art Museum, 2012) 30.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 27.

exchanges. According to McLean, this effectively closed off any creative engagement between artists. The catalyst for this reaction was the critical response to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* (1984); and at a local level, in the critique of Imants Tillers' *The Nine Shots*, included in the catalogue of *Origins, Originality + Beyond*, the 6th Biennale of Sydney in 1986.

In the 1990s, engaging with Aboriginal art became so controversial that most non-Indigenous artists avoided it. McLean refers to it as an 'ethical minefield.'¹⁹⁴ It became impossible to engage with Aboriginal art except through an Indigenous voice. This cynicism was particularly evident in the forum on influence and appropriation held in conjunction with the Flinders University Gallery exhibition *From Appreciation to Appropriation; Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art* curated by Christine Nicholls in 2000.¹⁹⁵

Coming at the end of three decades of a fierce identity politics in Australian art and politics, the exhibition and forum revealed how much the legacies of modernism and colonialism still constrained cross-cultural exchange between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art.¹⁹⁶ In the first session of these discussions, anthropologist Julie Marcus argued that non-Indigenous Australians should learn to step back from engaging with Indigenous art. McLean notes that this does not apply to the reverse relationship: 'The very inequality of power relations is sufficient reason for Aboriginal artists to engage with non-Indigenous art.'¹⁹⁷ It is apparent, however, that non-Indigenous artists have chosen not to disengage from Aboriginal art. This is not because the ethical questions have receded. Cross-cultural engagement remains fraught, and yet as McLean writes:

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 30.

¹⁹⁵ Christine Nicholls, "From Appreciation to Appropriation: Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art," ed. Flinders University (Adelaide: Flinders University, 2000).

¹⁹⁶ McLean, "Between Indigenous and European art," 29.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 30.

...the engagements and collaborations increase, as if the only ethical position is to engage, to respond positively to the invitation of art. In short, the ethics of art, symbolic exchange (translation) or what might be called aesthetics, is currently testing and pushing the ethics of politics and vice versa.¹⁹⁸

The ethical demand of art is a legacy of postmodern and postcolonial art, which has been concerned with the ethics of aesthetics. McLean concludes that unlike the 1990s, the difficulties of postcolonial power and the politics of disengagement no longer seem to be restricting the ethical imperative of art to explore and reveal complexity and nuance. Aboriginal art has become a more familiar experience for non-Indigenous artists. In an increasingly globalised and decentred world, more and more artists are engaging with a cross-cultural influence.

As referenced in *Chapter One: Literature Review*, this increasing engagement is evident through a number of exhibitions which have considered the formal parallels between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting including *Abstraction* (1990), *Balance 1990 Views, Visions, Influences* (1990), *From Appreciation to Appropriation; Indigenous Influences and Images in Australian Visual Art* (2000) and *Talking About Abstraction* (2004); and more recently the direct influence of and engagement between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists in *Almanac- The Gift of Ann Lewis AO* (2010) and *roads cross: contemporary directions in Australian art* (2012). The most recent of these exhibitions considering the growing cross-cultural engagement, *roads cross*, emerged from Curator Vivonne Thwaites 2010 project, *Responses to working on Indigenous lands*, an exhibition which shared non-Indigenous experiences of remote community life. Whilst this exhibition also includes five Aboriginal artists, it is predominantly concerned with the influence of Aboriginal art, life and culture on sixteen non-Indigenous artists—Franck Gohier, Una Rey, Jonathan Kimberley, Quentin Sprague, Nalda Searles, Robin Best, Alison Alder, Therese Ritchie,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 30.

Pamela Loft, Tobias Richardson, Gus Clutterbuck, Ildiko Kovacs, Angela Brennan, Lauren Berkowitz, Hossein Valamanesh and Richard Dunn—many of whom have spent time in remote communities and some of whom have engaged with Aboriginal art through exhibitions and books.

Curators Fiona Salmon and Vivonne Thwaites write in their introduction that,

...roads cross signals an important shift in non-indigenous creative practice in Australia, and thus in our understanding of contemporary Australian art. It is our view that since the late twentieth century, opportunities to engage with Australian Aboriginal art, its makers and their communities have increasingly informed Western approaches to art-making.¹⁹⁹

Further to this, they argue that in the work of these sixteen non-Indigenous artists, the ‘impress of Aboriginal Australia – its people, country and art – can be both *seen* and *felt*. The experience is optical and visceral, manifested through subject matter, materials and ideas, as evidenced in the artists’ research and creative processes, and in the final execution of their work.’²⁰⁰ According to McLean, this exhibition signals a considered shift from aesthetic engagements with Aboriginal art—which have been taking place for over 100 years—to direct personal engagements, ‘as if in the current climate any aesthetic engagement must risk the complications of politics.’²⁰¹

Indeed, *roads cross*, is premised on a cross-cultural influence that extends beyond a shared aesthetic or medium and speaks to the growing understanding of Aboriginal cultures since the rise of the Aboriginal art movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The curators write:

¹⁹⁹ Salmon and Thwaites, “Introduction,” 8.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 9.

²⁰¹ McLean, “Between Indigenous and European art,” 31.

For many of the exhibition's artists, new understandings of Country afforded by their experiences with Aboriginal people on Aboriginal land have been profound. In particular, insights into notions of Aboriginal Dreaming/Law have offered them alternative ways in which to consider their existence and order of all things... For an outsider, coming to terms with this system of belief and the values, and the behavioural codes and practices it embodies, precipitates fresh thinking on many levels: identity, relationships with land and the possibilities of 'engaged' representation.²⁰²

This growing engagement with cross-cultural influence in Australia was further supported by the interviews conducted as part of this research. Speaking of her experience working with Gija artists, artist and Warmun Art Centre coordinator Alana Hunt says, 'it will influence my practice in terms of understanding a different world view.'²⁰³ Admittedly, there are substantial limits to our cross-cultural understanding, however this exchange is imperative to cultural expression. This research has identified that many Australian artists are working within the field of landscape to further cross-cultural engagement and understanding. This is the investigation of *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape* and *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape*.

Understanding the divide

As McLean argues, we are no longer in the grip of the postmodern postcolonial critique, however we are still operating in the shadow of the colonial divide. The historical and cultural divide between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists is why many critics, curators and historians remain wary of the influence of Aboriginal art on non-Indigenous painters.

²⁰² Salmon and Thwaites, "Introduction," 9.

²⁰³ Alana Hunt, interview with the author, January 2012, Appendix A.

McLean poses an important question: how can a contemporary artist, critic or curator, whatever their background, respond to the legacy of colonialism? If cosmopolitanism enables difference, then the colonial divide is a challenging space for the cosmopolitan ethic but also a meaningful one.²⁰⁴ For this to occur, the truth of the colonial divide must be the starting point of negotiation—it must be where the conversation begins not ends.²⁰⁵

The non-linear temporalities and spatialities of the emerging ontology of the contemporary are relational, cosmopolitan and collective. However, the cosmopolitan outlook of the contemporary doesn't do away with divisions; it works them differently. As McLean argues, it is the nature of nations to be divided: 'All nations are artificial constructs that divide one from another, creating an imaginary unity across internal divisions.'²⁰⁶ It is not a matter of being still divided: the Australian nation will always be divided no matter how cosmopolitan it may become. In this contemporary time, it is important to acknowledge difference and divisions, and continue to work between them.

McLean employs the analogy of Aboriginal skin systems as a sophisticated network that creates unity through acknowledging difference. As Stubbs writes on Yolngu kinship, every person is connected, no matter how distant that connection may be, 'the Yolngu system stretches our idea of what kinship means. It is a holistic concept that relates all things within the experienced universe to each other.'²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴Ian McLean, "What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?" in *The world is not a foreign land* (Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art; the University of Melbourne, 2013) 53.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Will Stubbs, "Water, Kinship and the Cycle of Life," in *Larrakitj: Kerry Stokes Collection* (Perth: Australian Capital Equity Pty Ltd, 2008) 39.

The wisdom of these networks, McLean argues, is in the layering of negotiated identities:

In clearly demarcating an essential difference, this clarity of demarcation creates the grounds for identity. Perhaps we can draw a more general law from this: only in our divisions are we united. So let us praise division and banish the desire for others to be like us, as if identity is simply a matter of sameness. This is the ethic that drives the relational-type practices of 'contemporary art.'²⁰⁸

The contemporary has broken down certain barriers of postcolonialism, however postcolonial critique still informs what we do, laying an uneasy path for artists to navigate.

The possibility of influence: Nonggirnga Marawili and Hayley Megan French

It is the influence of Aboriginal painting on the author that has formed the basis of this research. In light of this discussion of the relational aspects of circulation and the possibilities for influence, this chapter will now consider some of the questions raised through a case study of the work of senior Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili and the author.

This chapter will specifically address a series of paintings created by Marawili in November 2013, whilst the author was working at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre in Yirrkala, Northern Territory. During this time, Marawili produced the core of a body of bark paintings as part of her *Baratjula* period²⁰⁹ that were subsequently exhibited in August 2014 at the Melbourne Art Fair through Alcaston Gallery (see Figures 10, 11, 12 & 13).

²⁰⁸ McLean, "What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?" 53.

²⁰⁹ Will Stubbs has described this series of bark paintings as the *Baratjula* period. Baratjula is a Madarrpa clan estate adjacent to Cape Shield where Marawili camped with her family when she was a young girl.

As McLean acknowledged, the ethics of cross-cultural engagement are still of major concern here, particularly in remote communities where gaps in comprehension across translation can be highly problematic. It is for this reason that the research undertaken in Yirrkala is grounded in observation and discussion with those closest to Marawili's practice.

On Yolngu culture, senior artist Laklak Burarrwanga writes, 'you'll see the bark; this peels away and below it is more bark. It is all intertwined. That's our Yolngu knowledge – there are layers and layers of it...'²¹⁰ Marawili's series of paintings, begun in October 2013, recall this metaphor of the paperbark tree, unfolding layers of power and meaning. As with Yunupingu, the materiality of Marawili's bark paintings embeds them in place, connecting to a tradition of Yolngu art-making. As senior artists continue to push the boundaries of this tradition, Yolngu paintings 'are involved in the process of creating new meanings and understandings about the world, and in communicating these understandings to others.'²¹¹

²¹⁰ Laklak Burarrwanga, *Welcome to My Country* (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2013) xiii.

²¹¹ Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, 75.



Figure 10 Nonggirnga Marawili, *Lightning*, 2013, natural earth pigments on bark, 176 x 62cm

In the *Baratjula* period, Marawili paints a body of water that has not been painted before. The diamond shapes in the works refer simultaneously to water and fire. She is a prolific worker, creating more than eight large bark paintings over three weeks.²¹² As the works develop, each bark refers back to the previous works, altering the way the paintings are perceived. This series is not static: the works are not developing on a linear scale; rather, they are producing new meanings, redefining that which came before. This process unfolds not only for those viewing the works as they are created, but also for the artist. Bringing a new work into the series, Marawili revisits the previous bark to develop the yellow netting and negative spaces (as seen in Figure 11)—learning more of her own subject matter and style with each new iteration. A composition that at first glance may feel uneasy soon becomes the stand out feature of the work, often brought into context through the creation of the next painting in the series.

Marawili's non-linear process recalls French philosopher Jacques Rancière's theory of the intervals and interruptions of the dominant time, as discussed in *Chapter One: Literature Review*. Rancière's statement of the time in which we live, 'There are several times in one time,'²¹³ is felt in both Marawili's process and the works she produces. This grammatical temporal tense does not exist in the English language, however it does in Yolngu-matha. The phrase 'everywhen' has been adopted in an attempt to understand this tense. Stubbs defines 'everywhen' as:

Something is happening a long time ago, before time, in the creative phase or period. It is still happening now and it will be happening in the distant future. It's doing, existing, happening in all those temporal zones simultaneously.²¹⁴

²¹² During the authors visit to Yirrkala in November 2013.

²¹³ Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?"

²¹⁴ Stubbs, "Water, Kinship and the Cycle of Life," 45.



Figure 11 Nonggirnga Marawili, *Gurtha*, 2013, natural earth pigments on bark, 138 x 72cm

Significant to these works is the development of Marawili's personal style, from that of her late husband Djutjadjutja Mununggurr. Marawili's father was Mundukul Marawili, a great warrior ally to Wonggu Mununggurr.²¹⁵ She lived an extraordinary life in the bush, moving about the Blue Mud Bay region with her family consisting of over fifty close relations. As a senior woman and mother, Marawili has primarily resided in Yirrkala for more than 20 years: 'With equal and senior authority, she participates indomitably at ceremony and as an artist with Buku-Larrnggay Mulka. Since her husband's death, she has taken his design with similar authority to paint her own.'²¹⁶ Marawili has had two solo exhibitions at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, in 2013 and 2014.²¹⁷ Her current works are part of her *Yirritja* period, which defines the movement away from her husband's Djapu clan style—the series of works in Marawili's first solo show *And I am still here*, 2013. The *Yirritja* period begins with Marawili's second solo show *Yathikpa* at Alcaston Gallery in January 2014 and includes the *Baratjula* period. The *Baratjula* period is characterised by a divergence from the strict Madarrpa clan Yathikpa style to looser more undefined abstraction. These works are not intended to be a rendition of miny'tji—sacred clan design. According to Stubbs, these works are abstract and unprecedented in their raw elemental rendition of Marawili's clan designs.²¹⁸

Marawili's paintings work with negative space in a way that is innovative to Yolngu art, which characteristically covers the entire surface in intricate white detail, as seen in the work of Yunupingu. There is a tension between the spaces of her compositions—between the yellow crosshatched sections and the voids (see Figures 12 & 13). The areas of cross-hatching immediately stand out, drawing the viewer into this network of lines and back out again. The more time spent with each work, the more the negative

²¹⁵ Wonggu Mununggurr was a renowned warrior and leader of the Balamumu at Trial Bay.

²¹⁶ Andrew Blake, "Illustrating a Continuum; Fish Traps and Freshwater," in *Yirrkala Drawings*, ed. Cara Pinchbeck (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales) 39.

²¹⁷ Marawili has also exhibited in significant group exhibitions including *Yirrkala Drawings* in 2014. Her works are included in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, The National Gallery of Australia and The Art Gallery of New South Wales as well as many private collections.

²¹⁸ Email correspondence with Will Stubbs, November 2014.

space comes into play in these paintings. The tension between these spaces sometimes creates uneasiness, an imbalance. This rhythm is the resolution of the paintings.

When asked by Stubbs where this body of water is that she is painting, Marawili replied that it could be anywhere, 'my country, your country,' despite what Stubbs considers to be obvious signifiers to particular places and clans.²¹⁹ This response suggests that it is not what she is painting, but that she paints, that is important.²²⁰

In Marawili's paintings, Rancière's theory of heterochronies—discussed in *Chapter One: Literature Review*—is apparent. Marawili's lifestyle, her rhythm, is different to what we are used to in the western artworld—these paintings embody the 'crossroads of temporalities and worlds of experience.'²²¹ Their movement, negative space and sense of imbalance create a tension that disrupts the dominant consensus. As we begin to experience this disruption, this difference, we can further our understanding of the tensions and relationships of the contemporary Australian artworld.

²¹⁹ According to Stubbs, the diamond-based designs in these works refer to a Madarrpa clan design for the ocean at Yathikpa. If questioned, however, Marawili will deny this and refer to a different Madarrpa estate, Baratjula, with no recorded sacred clan design.

²²⁰ In conversation with Will Stubbs, Yirrkala, July 2014.

²²¹ Rancière, "In What Time Do We Live?"



Figure 12 Nonggirnga Marawili, *Gurtha II*, 2013, natural earth pigments on bark, 129 x 85cm

Stubbs elucidates this difference in temporalities in his writing on Marawili's work, comparing it as the difference between organic and mechanic rhythms:

The rhythm of Marawili's life is different from the staccato, repetitive, machine-like beat of the 'working week.' It is better to 'zig' when another instinct would 'zag.' That's how to avoid the crocodile, the cyclone, the illness, the ambush, the dispute.²²²

Stubbs uses the analogy of the music of the didgeridoo. 'The colour and flavour comes from the rhythm,'²²³ but there is no metronomic beat, there is a structure, and 'within that the tongue of the player dips and darts seemingly without a pattern.'²²⁴ The Yolngu are at one with this discord, and as Stubbs writes, this overrides the mechanic, the 'robotic economic unit'²²⁵ and cannot be replicated.

In Marawili's work then, we experience an interruption, another temporality. It is perhaps this rhythm, this instinctual 'zig,' that has had such a significant influence on the author. These paintings open us not only to another time, but another culture, one that breaks us free from the dominant temporality, if only for a moment.

²²² Will Stubbs, "No points for neatness," exhibition essay for *Nonggirnga Marawili; And I am still here*, 5 March – 5 April 2013, Alcaston Gallery, 2013.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.



Figure 13 Nonggirnga Marawili, *Gurtha III*, 2013, natural earth pigments on bark, 145 x 61cm

Marawili's paintings and the insight gained into her practice during the time spent in Yirrkala continue to have a significant impact on the associated studio practice of the author. To understand this influence it is important to consider the author's context. The author is an emerging artist, creating abstract paintings since undergraduate studies, completed in 2008 at Sydney College of the Arts. Coming from a tradition of western abstraction, there are a number of ways in which these paintings could be read. The reading of an Aboriginal influence or aesthetic is the most contextual in Australia, and indeed the most contentious.

After identifying this tension as an area of interest at the outset of the career, the author has intentionally engaged in this influence to further understand the context of working as a contemporary painter in Australia today. This associated studio practice is always responding to contemporary art, and deliberately engaging with Aboriginal art to investigate this influence.

The wide circulation of Aboriginal contemporary painting has made it largely accessible to a generation of emerging artists, who as McLean writes, are feeling more and more familiar with Aboriginal contemporary art.²²⁶ This art is not only part of mainstream contemporary Australian art but has been embraced as a signifier of national identity and formed a major part of Australia's visual culture since the 1990s. Arguably, Aboriginal painting is as prevalent in Australian artistic visual culture as the history of western abstraction and modernism. In the wake of postmodern and postcolonial debates, then, for the generation of emerging artists, it is perhaps no longer a question of influence, but a question of how an artist has positioned themselves in relation to this influence.

²²⁶ McLean, "Between Indigenous and European art," 31.

The path of influence here has been an intentional positioning, through research, to negotiate this problematic field and articulate difference through confluence. To focus then on the series of paintings made after the research in Yirrkala was undertaken (see Figures 14 & 15) allows for an examination of how this influence may translate into the making of works and the positioning of both artists in the field. As mentioned, this influence is derived not simply from an exposure to the creation of a particular series of paintings, but informed by exposure and study of Yolngu—and wider Aboriginal—art since 2008.



Figure 14 Hayley Megan French, *See where it drifts*, installation shot, Galerie Pompom, 2014, photograph by docQment



Figure 15 Hayley Megan French, *Two, Too*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 180cm

The series of paintings *See where it drifts* (2013-2014) has developed from painting sketches on paper (see Figures 16, 17), made during the time spent in Yirrkala in November 2013. It is here that the direct influence is most apparent—the works on paper functioning as a way of thinking through certain ideas of negative space and composition posed by Marawili's paintings. The series of paintings (see Figures 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21), however, are distanced from these sketches, both imaginatively and geographically. Created from the context of the artist's studio and home in Sydney, the paintings speak to an ongoing investigation in the author's practice, one of a negotiation of space and an evolving conceptual understanding of landscape.



Figure 16 Hayley Megan French, *sketch one*, 2013, acrylic on paper, 30 x 30cm



Figure 17 Hayley Megan French, *sketch two*, 2013, acrylic on paper, 30 x 30cm

As Australian author David Malouf writes, it is the landscape we are born into that we are most deeply connected to.²²⁷ It is then through a connection to Sydney, to urban places, both suburbia and city dwelling, that other landscapes in Australia are viewed and understood. Further, as Australian theorist Ross Gibson observed in his writing on the narrative construction of Australia, the place of Australia—encompassing a nation, a dream, and a time—is one that we can imagine ourselves in relation to.²²⁸ These paintings drift back and forth between specific experiences of a landscape that we continue to shape and move in.

²²⁷ David Malouf, *A first place* (Sydney: Random House Australia Pty Ltd, 2014) 165.

²²⁸ Gibson, *South of The West*, xii.



Figure 18 Hayley Megan French, *Drift*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150cm

Artist and theorist Sean Lowry writes of the author's proposition to record 'the kinds of tensions that play out between cultural projections and geological formations within a relationship between the immateriality of the art condition'²²⁹ and the materiality of painting. As Lowry argues, the space of painting offers a ground to play out the literal register of information and a space for the imagination to flourish. He writes:

Just as vast expanses of landscape can provide solace and histories imbue feeling simply via our knowledge of their existence, art can facilitate forms of experience that exist beyond direct sense

²²⁹ Sean Lowry, "Hayley Megan French: new paintings," in *See where it drifts*, 28 May – 22 June 2014, Galerie Pompom, ISBN: 978-1-921661-44-0.

perception. By building experiences in the mind through the tangible materiality of paint, yet mindful of the paradoxical insight that full comprehension is impossible, French provides us with an effective vehicle for imagining the poetic play of absence and transsubjective identity.²³⁰

The paintings then, are strongly placed in a desire to understand the place we inhabit both physically and imaginatively. This conceptual understanding of Australian landscape is one that has been significantly influenced by Aboriginal understandings of the land and translation in painting. This considered in depth in the following two chapters.



Figure 19 Hayley Megan French, *Echo I, Echo II*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, each 150 x 150cm

In retrospect, the reflection on Marawili's paintings and investigation of shapes in space through the sketches allowed for a significant shift in the larger-scale paintings. The colours in this series of works are layered, white

²³⁰ Ibid.

over black, orange over white, black over the top. The background is often brought forward through this layering, as forms are discerned through a process of erasing. More so than in previous works, fragments of shapes are foregrounded and detached from the edges of the canvas. What is negative space in Marawili's paintings could be seen as the shapes foregrounded in these new works.



Figure 20 Hayley Megan French, *Fragment*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100cm

These 'specific yet formless shapes'²³¹ seem to float about in expanses or voids of black. Upon closer inspection, however, the black is not empty, but heavily layered, revealing 'textures of previous registers of gestural

²³¹ Ibid.

incursion.²³² The shapes are in fact not floating, but anchored by a larger form beneath the surface, parts of which have ‘disappeared in erased markings that still echo gestures that can now only be imagined.’²³³ Lowry writes of the work:

French transposes the kinds of relationships, gestures, and erasures that have played out within and across this ancient land into the language of painting. Offering no horizons or specifically mappable points of reference, French’s shapes appear to float in space and place, faintly echoing latent, invisible, and stubborn contradictions that dwell within the dreams, fictions and errors through which we have constructed our sense of being in this land.²³⁴

What is captured then in these paintings, is the investigation of the author, the embracing and questioning of the influence of Aboriginal painting on the studio practice and thinking. As Lowry succinctly remarks:

For painting, like landscape, is finally a register of performance enacted upon its surface.²³⁵

The influence of Marawili’s work is one that can be both seen and felt by the author, and is perhaps best considered by the paintings themselves. As Stubbs adapted the saying, ‘writing about Aboriginal art is like dancing about architecture.’ What is written is not the meaning, but once we understand that we can begin to find small points of comparison or meaning that can further our understanding and engagement.²³⁶ Through considering the different rhythms and temporalities of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting, we may better understand the influence that has so greatly impacted contemporary Australian painting.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ In conversation with Will Stubbs, Yirrkala, July 2014.



Figure 21 Hayley Megan French, *See where it drifts*, installation photograph, Galerie Pompom, 2014, photograph by docQment

Conclusion

The chapter began by posing the question of what it means to be influenced by Aboriginal painting. In considering Baxandall's ideas of influence as excursus and Sprague's consideration of the relational aspects inherent in the circulation of Aboriginal art; it is argued that engaging with this influence, artists are actively responding to the context of working in Australia in the 21st Century. To embrace this influence is to 'break out of culture-bound categories and look at the relationships between artists' work in terms of the practice and intentionality.'²³⁷

This chapter also posed the question of how contemporary painters can negotiate the influence of Aboriginal painting. In the broader field, this influence has ostensibly been simultaneously celebrated and criticised. If a non-Indigenous artists' work has a range of colours, imagery or

²³⁷ Morphy, "Impossible to ignore: Imants Tillers' response to Aboriginal art."

brushstrokes relating to Aboriginal art, it is often quickly questioned as to the validity of this engagement. As argued by Butler, this is increasingly the way all art in Australia is read—through Aboriginal art. On broader national scale this shared aesthetic is often celebrated because it speaks to something commensurate between these two disparate cultures. Artistic influence, however, does not do away with cultural divisions. As suggested by Sprague, these relationships can be understood in a “system of equivalences” that allow for the articulation of difference—an idea of confluence through difference.

While relations remain uneven, this notion of influence is arguably less infected with a postcolonial power imbalance and could be understood, instead, as the potential for intercultural dialogue. Once we consider the possibility of this influence, while acknowledging and understanding the divide, perhaps instead of creating barriers we can start to create dialogue, or recognise and engage where it already exists.

This chapter has introduced the studio practice of the author in an attempt to understand how to negotiate this influence and position the work in this field. The increasing engagement of non-Indigenous and Aboriginal artists in cross-cultural influences and relationships demonstrates not only the developing contemporary context of Australian art but also the inherent necessity of individual engagement. In actively posing these questions through the making of paintings, the debate is moved beyond the ethical and political impasse of non-engagement and into a new space of negotiation and acknowledgement of difference.

Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape

The growing influence of Aboriginal art has called for a necessary engagement by all Australian artists, altering our understanding of Australian art and both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultures. This shift is characterised by a process-based and conceptual influence from Aboriginal art. By engaging with this influence, artists are actively responding to the context of working in Australia in the 21st Century. For independent curator Glenn Barkley,²³⁸ relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting initiate a dialogue between two distinct views of the world: a Western observation of landscape and an Aboriginal sense of being within the landscape. Barkley argues that the ‘shifting back and forth from these alternative view points lies at the heart of contemporary painting in Australia.’²³⁹ Indeed, the idea of landscape is an enigmatic one in Australian culture, integral to how we engage with our mode of being in the world.²⁴⁰ The ideological significance of the landscape in Australia’s highly urbanised culture and sparsely inhabited continent is striking. Artists continue to grapple with ideas of landscape—a place where nature and culture contend and combine in our history.²⁴¹ This chapter addresses the shifting between understandings of landscape in contemporary painting as a major intersection between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art, suggesting that the idea of landscape is central to an experience of being in, and making work in Australia.

Barkley’s statement is addressed as a major conceptual and philosophical thread of contemporary Australian painting through a discussion of the work of Sydney-based artists Tim Johnson and Ildiko Kovacs, and Gija artist Churchill Cann. These artists communicate views of the land and landscape;

²³⁸ Formally senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (2008-2014).

²³⁹ Barkley, *Almanac: The Gift of Ann Lewis AO*, 6.

²⁴⁰ Jeff Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape,” in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011) 19.

²⁴¹ Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2002) 2.

their experience of being in Australia is inherent in this process. Their work then, is reflective of what an idea of landscape is today, and its relevance to contemporary painting.

Landscape and country

The term landscape is in itself a problematic one. The notion of landscape in Australia has been invented and reinvented in diverse ways since white settlement, each time according to the political, social and cultural needs of the time.²⁴² As such, landscape has always been imbued with a western view of the world,²⁴³ dominating the representation of Australia to others and ourselves. Emeritus Professor of Heritage Anthropology (UK) Barbara Bender describes landscape as 'the western gaze: a historically defined way of viewing the world that creates a separation between nature and culture.'²⁴⁴ Further, Australian anthropologist Dr John Bradley argues the idea of place, in contrast, is a 'relational concept' embedded in the ontology and epistemologies of people throughout the world.²⁴⁵ These theorists argue then, that place offers further potential to examine the interrelationship of people to their worlds, beyond the western gaze.

In *The Place of Landscape*, a survey of writings on landscape, Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas suggests that this is reflective of a widespread view of landscape among many contemporary artists and critics. Malpas cites Tasmanian artist Jonathan Kimberley's views that the term landscape is 'symbolic of an outmoded cultural paradigm, and is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of relationships that people have with place in Australia.'²⁴⁶

²⁴² Ian Burn, *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900-1940* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990) 8.

²⁴³ John J. Bradley, "'Whitefellas Have to Learn about Country, It Is Not Just Land': How Landscape Becomes Country and Not an 'Imagined' Place," in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011) 47.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Jonathan Kimberley cited by Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," 21.

Malpas argues however, that there has been a shift in the understanding of landscape, towards one that encompasses ideas of place. Landscape, he writes, is in itself a function and a representation of our relationship to place.²⁴⁷ In his introduction Malpas frames the discussion in terms of the place of landscape. His argument opens landscape to a place that combines both the spatial and the temporal and 'constitutes a mode of engagement with, rather than separation from.'²⁴⁸ This reflects the shifting understanding of the term landscape, from one that separated nature and culture to one that encompasses both. Continuing to use this term is important here as it acknowledges the shift from historical definitions to the ideas examined in current discourse. Landscape imagery has been a crucial site of conflict, change and innovation in Australian art.²⁴⁹ Rather than disengaging from historical understandings, as they have defined our perception of Australia and ourselves, it is important to consider how artists approach these ideas today. Landscape then, as it is understood in this chapter, draws on Australian theorist Ross Gibson's definition—as a place where nature and culture contend and combine in our history.²⁵⁰

The human-land relationship in Western culture has been one of great change, constantly reshaping our intellectual and emotional responses to the landscape. Through the history of western landscape painting it has become strongly linked to aesthetic experience: Romanticism imbued the landscape with a spiritual connection in the 19th Century; and, more recently, as a result of the environmental change, it has become an area of 21st Century anxiety and ethical debate. Typically for non-Indigenous Australians, attitudes towards land are characterised by ownership; land is a commodity, a source of wealth and authority. Australian writer David Malouf writes of this attitude: 'Land, that real yet mystical commodity of

²⁴⁷ Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," 21.

²⁴⁸ Jeff Malpas, "Introduction," in *The Place of Landscape*, edited by Jeff Malpas, (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011) ix.

²⁴⁹ For a comprehensive account of this history, see Ian Burn, *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900-1940* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990) and "Australia," Royal Academy of Arts (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013).

²⁵⁰ Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, 2.

measured dirt that can raise a man (or as it happened, a woman) from a mere nothing to an individual of status and power...'²⁵¹ The promise of land was a defining part of Australia's colonial history. The story of Samuel Terry, who was sentenced in 1800 to seven years for stealing 400 pairs of stockings and transported to Australia in 1801, is often quoted to illustrate this.²⁵² On his death in 1838 he owned 19,000 acres, more than the greatest aristocratic landowner in England.

This anecdote is an important reminder of the inherited idea of possession based on advancements in land use, an idea that had its origin in John Locke's philosophy—the chief influence on English political thinking in the 17th and 18th Century.²⁵³ Locke argued that to own the land you had to work it.²⁵⁴ This philosophy, coupled with the legal fiction of *terra nullius*²⁵⁵—an empty land without owners—legitimised the appropriation of the land from Aboriginal people and demonstrates the ingrained philosophical and social differences between cultural understandings of land in Australia:

For Aboriginal people land is the foundation of spiritual being. For Europeans it represents security and status, or it is a source of wealth. The desire of ordinary men and women to become property owners was the making of this country. To own a piece of Australia, even if it was only a quarter-acre block, became the Australian Dream.²⁵⁶

The work and writings of conceptual artist Ian Burn are significant in considering these ideas of landscape and their shifting over time. Burn

²⁵¹ David Malouf, *A first place* (Sydney: Random House Australia Pty Ltd, 2014) 132.

²⁵² Kathleen Soriano, "Australia: An Introduction," in *Australia*, Royal Academy of Arts (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013) 23.

²⁵³ David Malouf, "A Spirit of Play," *Boyer Lectures - ABC Radio National*, 1998.

²⁵⁴ Henry Reynolds and Bruce Dennett, *The Aborigines* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002) 17.

²⁵⁵ The legal fiction of *terra nullius* should be read as an early attempt to territorialise Australia as a British colony by declaring the land unoccupied, literally, 'empty.' See Allaine Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation: Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 9.

²⁵⁶ Malouf, *A first place*, 133.

wrote extensively on the idea of land and landscape throughout the 1980s, culminating in his book *National Life and Landscapes* (1990). Since the late 19th Century in Australia, Burn writes, the 'landscape has been held up as a mirror for national psyche far more than as a mirror for the human soul.'²⁵⁷ Landscape imagery was constructed through its implication in the national self-image. For Burn, there needed to be a re-conception of Australian landscape, recognising dispossession through an acknowledgement that all Australian land is inhabited by histories of prior occupation. While traditionally landscape painting suggested a relationship to place, for Burn it only reaffirmed his sense of displacement, as he struggled with postcolonial debates on Aboriginal land.²⁵⁸

It was after completing *National Life and Landscapes* that Burn began working with amateur painted landscapes as the field on which to 'unlearn' to see. The series of "*Value Added*" Landscapes was made through the period of debate over the Mabo judgement—the landmark High Court of Australia decision recognising native title in Australia for the first time and rejecting the doctrine of *terra nullius*, acknowledging prior occupancy based on Aboriginal laws and customs. As Professor of Law and social commentator Larissa Behrendt has written,

Many would argue that there has been a fundamental shift in the way that Australians think about Aboriginal people and their rights since the 1992 Mabo case. There is no doubt that this decision, with its rejection of the notion of *terra nullius*, was of enormous symbolic significance affecting the way in which we legally conceptualise the founding of the modern nation-state of Australia.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Burn, *National Life and Landscapes*, 8.

²⁵⁸ Ann Stephen, "Seeing between the lines," in *Artists Think: The late works of Ian Burn*, ed. Ann Stephen (Sydney: Power Publications, Sydney in association with Monash University, Melbourne, 1996) 14.

²⁵⁹ Larissa Behrendt, "Playing the 'Other' in Australia's Psychological *Terra Nullius*," in *Republics of Ideas; Republicanism, Culture, Visual Arts*. ed Brad Buckley and John Conomos. (Woolloomooloo, Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre and Pluto Press Australia, 2001) 34.

It is evident that Burn, in this time of change, was concerned with what Behrendt calls the 'psychological terra nullius' ingrained in the Australian psyche through colonial narratives.²⁶⁰ This is an insight Burn perhaps gained through his experience of living abroad and then returning to Australia.²⁶¹ Burn's "*Value Added*" Landscapes (see Figure 22) conveyed the urgency he felt in addressing the disconnection with landscape in 20th Century Australia. The imposing text is at once descriptive and self-reflexive:

Seeing a text seeing a picture, landscape becoming furniture despite visual rhetorics of survival, and dusty language purging viewers. Then the eye dispirited by text, now debased by image; reading outback in blue letters, outside looking.²⁶²

The uneasy movement between the image and the text, created through Burn's use of a camouflaging colour, creates an unanswerable cycle of viewing and questioning. Burn writes:

The text contests the representational limits of landscape painting, opening it up to other competences of the viewer and 'releasing' new qualities of the painting. This exchange transforms both text and image, leaving a sense of incompleteness attached to each element.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Ibid. 35.

²⁶¹ Burn moved to London in 1964, then to New York City in 1967. He returned to Australia in 1977 to teach at the University of Sydney.

²⁶² This quote is an excerpt from the text of 'Value added' landscape no. 5, 1992, in Stephen ed., *Artists Think*, 92.

²⁶³ Ian Burn, "Notes on 'value added' landscapes," in *Artists Think*, 9. "Notes on 'value added' landscapes" was written to accompany Burn's exhibition, *Collaborations*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, July 1993, 9.

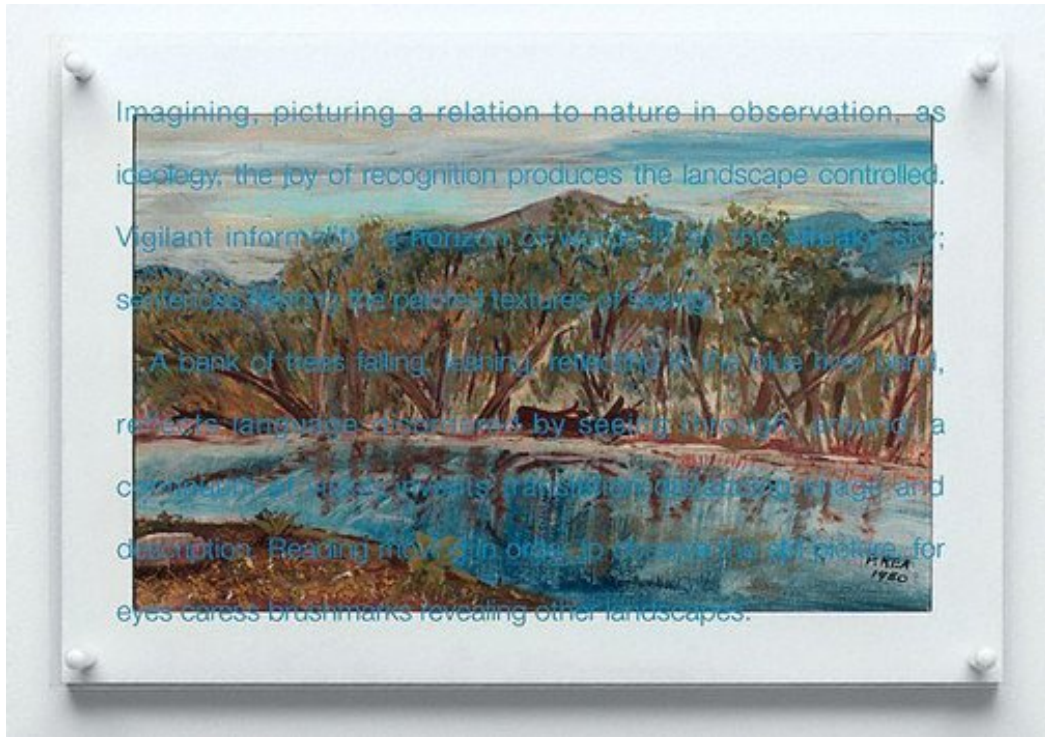


Figure 22 Ian Burn, 'Value Added' Landscape no. 11, 1993, oil and ink on board, transparent synthetic polymer resin, 59 x 87 x 10.5cm, Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

This series also marked Burn's return to painting, as a mode to interrogate what he saw as the necessity and impossibility of landscape as an idea in Australian art. Burn uses his text as a mask, one that self-consciously reads back and forth between itself, the picture and the viewer. The text, like landscape, directs the way we look at land, although, he acknowledges, 'the way we look will inevitably be premised upon our either being possessed or dispossessed of it.'²⁶⁴

Burn's work and writing marks a significant shift in the understanding of landscape in Australia, post *terra nullius*. As it became widely acknowledged, and in turn legally recognised, that Australia was Aboriginal land, Burn saw an urgent need to engage with postcolonial debates in and through landscape.

Since the work of Ian Burn, the discourse of landscape in Australia is now entwined with that of country—a notion encompassing nature and human

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

obligation that white Australia is learning slowly from Aboriginal Australia.²⁶⁵ Gibson writes:

Country is a place with life coursing through it, life that is both a natural force and a configuration of culturally produced effects that get socially managed or damaged by everyone abiding in that stretch of country. Country feels like a place where human beings can have a big impact but they are not the main element. Artists all round the world contend with space and experiment with ways to make places. But only in Australia is there the discourse of country. It's a discourse troubled by colonialism and it's not something that's easily or righteously appropriated without arduous work over long stretches of time.²⁶⁶

In Aboriginal philosophy, the land, and how we treat it, is what determines our human-ness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Aboriginal people 'can achieve the fullest expression of our human identity in a location in land.'²⁶⁷ Aboriginal curator Nici Cumpston writes of country as a mode of being:

When we, as Aboriginal people, talk of 'country', the term takes on a much broader meaning than the notion of 'country' for non-Aboriginal Australians. Country is spoken about in the same way non-Aboriginal people may talk about their living human relatives: Aboriginal people cry about country, they worry about country, they listen to country, they visit country and long for country. Country can feel, think and hear... Aboriginal people are born with inherent cultural responsibility for their country. We believe that the land

²⁶⁵ Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, 178.

²⁶⁶ Ross Gibson, *Space, Place and Country*, 2013, Sydney College of the Arts, Last updated 28th August, 2014, <http://sydney.edu.au/sca/research/space-place-country/index.shtml>, [Last Accessed 1/11/2014].

²⁶⁷ Mary Graham, "Some thoughts about the Philosophical underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 3, no. 2, 1999.

owns us, not the other way around... Our boundaries are drawn by our birthplaces and our relationships to those places, made manifest through the ancient stories connecting people to their country.

It is here in this context, that the stark divide between the Aboriginal and settler cultures is so apparent, and the challenge for artistic dialogue between them can be felt most keenly.²⁶⁸ In the 1980s, Ian Burn spoke of landscape as the space for 'a reassessment of values and attitudes underlying a number of contemporary tendencies.'²⁶⁹ It is in this problematic field that artists can find space for investigation and discussion. The artists discussed in this chapter—Tim Johnson, Churchill Cann and Ildiko Kovacs—today immerse themselves in this space of landscape; they refuse to be limited to one understanding or bound by historical definitions. Through their investigations and risk-taking, their work in the area of landscape makes a claim for connection between cultures through an acknowledgement of difference.

The idea of landscape in the work of Tim Johnson, Churchill Cann and Ildiko Kovacs

Tim Johnson has made a significant contribution to Australian art since the late 1960s, in particular to the space between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting. While painting set the original framework for his work, Johnson was very active in developing an expansive conceptual practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s that materialised as documentation photography, performance, sound recordings, texts and a variety of cross-disciplinary and cross-media experimentation. Johnson then returned to painting in the mid-1970s determined to explore an expanded universe of ideas, methods and references, both in and through painting.

²⁶⁸ It is important to note that whilst the notion of country may be a discourse unique to Australia, this connection to the land is one that is experienced by many indigenous peoples and expressed through art. This is demonstrated in the recent exhibition *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, held at the National Gallery of Canada in 2013.

²⁶⁹ Stephen, "Seeing between the lines," 22.

As a young artist, Johnson could not identify with capitalism or a Eurocentric idea of Australia. It was conceptual art and Australian alternative music in the 1970s that brought his sense of identity home. His travels to Europe, America, then Asia and Central Australia were essential in understanding that Australia was a part of Asia, not Europe.²⁷⁰

This goes back to what I was taught in school about Australia and its connections to Europe and to the idea of art having an almost exclusively Western history. I grew up accepting this. Then found that the things I was interested in were here in Australia and its geographical area.²⁷¹

After leaving school Johnson planned to go to Central Australia. While this didn't happen at the time, the idea came back to him after viewing some Papunya paintings in the early 1970s. During this time conceptual art was breaking from the aesthetic formalism of modernism. Conceptual art, together with Aboriginal art, changed Johnson's ideas about how to make art:

The idea of going to Central Australia and looking at what other artists were doing was consistent with performance art and conceptual art because conceptual art was questioning the nature of art – art as art. It wasn't art for its own sake, it was art about life, art that went beyond the closed walls of the art world.²⁷²

Johnson discussed his return to painting as an inevitable move after his experience of minimalism, pop art and neo-expressionism, performance art

²⁷⁰Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Tim Johnson interviewed," in *Tim Johnson; Painting Ideas*, Queensland Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2009, 47.

²⁷¹ Tim Johnson, interview with the author, May 2013, Appendix A.

²⁷² Nevill Drury and Anna Voigt, *Fire and shadow: spirituality in contemporary Australian art*. Roseville East, NWS : United States: Craftsman House; Australia ; G + B Arts International [distributor], 1996, 104.

and conceptual art. When he returned to painting, he saw it as conceptual art, with paint as the medium.

I stopped [painting] to do conceptual work. But I was still thinking, are there ways to keep painting? When I saw Papunya paintings they were abstract but at the same time they had a story to them, and they were beautifully painted. There were things happening with the dots and designs and the aerial perspective that I hadn't seen in Western art...so I really thought they were completely new and if the artists could reach a wider audience, it would affect everybody and change the way people saw painting.²⁷³

Having felt constrained by modernism, Johnson saw in Aboriginal painting a new way forward, 'I realised how different they were from what white artists were doing... they were painting something extra.'²⁷⁴ Aboriginal painters also 'showed' him how to go forward with painting, to put the painting on the ground, sit on it, make it a part of your life and put everything into it. Johnson recognised a conceptual narrative in these works with a visual language that he felt he could understand and learn from:

Here were paintings that looked abstract, came with stories, used symbols that you had to know how to interpret, and which were also landscapes with a strong feeling of the desert in them. I decided to adopt some of the aesthetics of these paintings – but not the designs because the designs were their language and copyright in their culture. I also felt I should try to use dots. I asked some of the senior men if that was okay, and they gave me permission. So I developed a style in my own work that referred a lot to Aboriginal art.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Johnson, interview with the author.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Zurbrugg, "Tim Johnson interviewed," 44.



Figure 23 Tim Johnson, *Visit to Papunya II*, 1983, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 130.2 x 90cm, Collection: Marianne Baillieu

Johnson was immediately impacted by the idea of having multiple sites on the picture plane, using imagery to map out a story. In *Visit to Papunya II* (1983) (see Figure 23), Johnson arranged multiple sites symmetrically on

the canvas. Each site contained images of particular events that occurred there. Using paint to document his experiences at Papunya, Johnson saw this process of painting as a performative act.²⁷⁶

When Johnson learned about Buddhism, this psychology of life seemed to resonate with Aboriginal culture. He began to fuse these ideas in his paintings. By the late 1980s Johnson had brought together a vast range of influences, combining Aboriginal art, Buddhism with Chinese cave painting, Native American art, Christian iconography and space ships, often drawn together with a visual language of dots initially derived from Aboriginal Central Desert painting. Bringing these diverse cultures and communities together, for Johnson, is like repairing things that he feels have been destroyed—a kind of idealised multiculturalism that has a potent relevance for contemporary Australian art and life.

Johnson has always been driven by a need to contribute to Australian art, and to a sense of Australian identity: ‘Maybe that’s impossible now with so much instant global communication’²⁷⁷ he suggests, however his use of global imagery and the internet to access this imagery does contribute the Australian-ness that is inherent in his works. All of these influences and imagery converge on Johnson’s picture planes, creating an abstract space, an alternate reality that is both reflective of the internet-driven era we live in and yet grounded in the landscape.

The dotting that Johnson introduced into his practice in the 1980s has varied greatly across individual works and still remains a crucial aspect of his visual language.²⁷⁸ The irregular dots seen in *Don Tjungurrayi* (1984) (see Figure 24) begin as a record of the Papunya artist Don Tjungurrayi

²⁷⁶ Connections can also be drawn to many of Johnson’s forebears, in that, Jackson Pollock painted with his work on the ground and many of the first generation of American Abstract Expressionists described their work in terms of painting as performative, or ‘action painting.’

²⁷⁷ Tim Johnson, email correspondence with the author, May 31, 2013.

²⁷⁸ Wayne Tunicliffe, “Pure Land Painting,” in *Painting Ideas*, Queensland Art Gallery, Art Gallery of NSW (Sydney, Brisbane: Art Gallery of NSW, Queensland Art Gallery, 2009) 62.

creating his work and emanate out from this to create the ground and space of the work itself. The space of the painting then becomes the subject both within and beyond the frame; the painter and the landscape are one and the same. In 1986, Johnson described Papunya dotting as 'Accuracy, size, closeness, overlap, offset, stipple, focus, perspective and shifting planes of light,'²⁷⁹ the influence of which is seen in the fluid dotting technique of his paintings in the late 1980s.



Figure 24 Tim Johnson, *Don Tjungurrayi*, 1984, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 99 x 81cm

²⁷⁹ Tim Johnson as cited by Tunicliffe, "Pure Land Painting," 63.

Johnson's use of dots becomes more meticulous in the early 1990s, detailing that causes colour to shine like light—dispersing space, light and time. In these paintings, such as *Amnesty* (1993) (see Figure 25) Johnson was trying to create a more 3-dimensional surface, 'highly complex and illusionistic in a way that was actually more like reality itself.'²⁸⁰



Figure 25 Tim Johnson, *Amnesty*, 1993, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 183.2 x 244.6cm, Gerstl Bequest, 1995, Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

This technique becomes further meticulous in later works such as the multi-panelled, *The way things are* (2010) (see Figure 26) creating a gridded effect through circular patterns that radiate out from figures. This more controlled dotting technique creates an opaque screen, linking all elements of the work together. The influence of the Central Desert painters' depiction of time and space—encompassing multiple narrative moments occurring simultaneously—is strongly referenced in these paintings.

²⁸⁰ Tunicliffe, "Pure Land Painting," 62.



Figure 26 Tim Johnson, *The way things are*, 2010, acrylic on linen, 5 parts each 183 x 61cm

Johnson's use of dots, in the collective Australian consciousness, refers to constructed notions of Australian identity:

...it doesn't show you something and tell you what it is- it shows you bits of things, fragments of experiences, images that are in the process of forming or breaking apart, and images that are related to other images. All of this is like throwing out a net or holding up a mirror to find something in yourself.²⁸¹

Johnson has taken on this technique of dotting in very specific ways and through this appropriation has drawn together different ideas of Australian-ness, enabling dialogue with different visual systems, which transcend more simple forms of appropriation. The dots remain a clear reference to Aboriginal culture, a controversial gesture of solidarity with Aboriginal Australia, which has also been viewed as potentially exploitative. Johnson, however, is not working with the postmodern practice of appropriation, rather, responding to and incorporating influences, experiences and collaborative relationships at the time of making.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 64.

Johnson's landscapes then, are highly constructed social spaces—a representation of Johnson's experiences and an imagining of shared cross-cultural landscapes. Allaine Cerwonka—Assistant Professor of Women's Studies and Political Science at Georgia State University and author of *Native to the Nation; Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia*—writes that geography (or in this case landscape) is made political through the role it plays in how people define their collective political identity as well as their personal identity:

Space and geography are not just the stakes of politics, they are also the process of politics. And as our relationship with space is restructured by highly politicized processes of globalization, displacement, and an unprecedented volume of migration, the imagination is engaged to make sense of and reorder the social landscape.²⁸²

The political and social layers of Australia's geography are inherent in Churchill Cann's delicately layered and imaginative landscapes. Having been immersed in the Warmun and Kimberley art movements in recent decades, Cann has begun seriously working towards his own body of work in the past few years at the Warmun Art Centre in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. The writing on Cann's work in this thesis is the result of time spent at Warmun Art Centre in 2012; and conversations with the artist, and Warmun Art Centre studio coordinator Alana Hunt in 2012-2014.

Cann is just recently beginning to gain recognition for this new body of paintings, which are strongly reflective of a growing confidence in his own style. As Cann has remarked, 'In this work here, I found my liyan'—that good feeling you get in the guts.²⁸³ Cann has developed a distinctive style in the

²⁸² Allaine Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation: Disciplining Landscapes and Bodies in Australia*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 236.

²⁸³ Alana Hunt, "Churchill Cann," in *Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards 2013*, Art Gallery of Western Australia (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2013) 19.

Warmun art movement that draws on many different moments in time, bringing together visual, emotional and historical experiences of his country.

Cann's recent paintings are strongly reflective of his process, evident through very intentional and detailed brush strokes, mapping out directions and lines within large blocks of colour. The ochre is layered to create tonal variations to communicate not only a mapping of the landscape but also its progression over time, from the way moonlight hits the ground to the changing of seasons. In *Snake Creek Hole* (2012) (see Figure 27) Cann maps out his movements and actions mustering cattle around Spring Creek. These movements are layered over locations, both past and present, coexisting. Hunt writes of Cann's work, 'No mark exists without purpose; his work seeks to reflect the direct physicality of his country.'²⁸⁴



Figure 27 Churchill Cann, *Snake Creek Hole*, 2012, natural ochre and pigment on linen, 180 x 120cm

²⁸⁴ Hunt, "Churchill Cann," 19.

The blocks of colour in Cann's paintings are outlined by white dots (see Figure 28), a style that has developed in the Warmun painting tradition. According to Hunt, this style may have developed from a number of places, 'some have said it represents walking across country, others have said they like it at a purely aesthetic level because it brightens up the work,' and there are also connections here to the markings of ceremonial body painting.²⁸⁵ In this sense, Cann's paintings recall U.S. conceptual artist Mel Bochner's comment: 'painting records a physical process, a narrative of revisions which take place *inside* the object.'²⁸⁶ As with Bochner, time becomes a subject matter in Cann's paintings. The paintings record not only the passing of time in the land but also the time involved in the process of creating the works, the subtle detail of the brushwork translating abstract notions of time. As with Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili, we experience a break from the dominant temporality in Cann's paintings.

Berlin-based critic and theorist Jan Verwoert suggests that there is a philosophy of action inherent to painting, a practical philosophy through which you can always read the outcome of on the canvas. He asks, 'What does it mean to act in painting, through painting? What kinds of forms of action do paintings suggest?'²⁸⁷ Cann's paintings are a confirmation of this idea; each meditative action recorded on the canvas draws you in to a sensory experience of an unknown narrative. In an interview with Hunt, Cann himself speaks of the necessity of making things, likening the experience of painting to the act and memory of working with his hands, 'heating horseshoes over a fire, bashing them into shape with a rock, working with sugarbag wax, straightening bamboo spears and preparing kangaroo sinew.'²⁸⁸ Cann's actions create immersive landscapes, alluding to boundless space, time, narrative and memory. A significant difference here between Cann's and Johnson's work is that Johnson's landscapes, whilst

²⁸⁵ Alana Hunt, email correspondence with the author, June 4, 2014.

²⁸⁶ Bochner and Meyer, "How Can You Defend Making Paintings Now?" 202.

²⁸⁷ Jan Verwoert, "Opening-Day Talk: Painting in the Present Tense," in *Painter Painter*, Walker Art Centre (YouTube, 2013) [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

²⁸⁸ Hunt, "Churchill Cann," 18.

immersive, are at times a backdrop to the human narrative. The human element is present within Cann's landscapes, through gesture, time, memory and history.

The actions of Cann's work, however, function beyond this intrinsic meaning, through circulation into the broader institutional domain of contemporary art as discussed in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence*.²⁸⁹ Melbourne-based curator and writer Quentin Sprague considers the approach of anthropologist Alfred Gell as a way of framing key aspects of Aboriginal contemporary art in Australia. Gell proposes art as a 'system of action' that is constituted within specific relational contexts. Sprague argues that the network of interactions that mobilise an artwork beyond its site of production has potential to reveal new ways of thinking about the world and how it works.²⁹⁰ This is particularly relevant for Aboriginal contemporary art, because this art, realised between cultures, embodies a particularly compelling social environment. This argument is interesting in considering the wider context of Cann's work both within the Warmun community and nationally.

²⁸⁹ Sprague, "White Lines," 60.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. 61.



Figure 28 Churchill Cann, *Joorlany Ngarrangarni (Dog Dreaming)*, 2012, natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 120 x 90cm

Warmun is part of Gija country in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was settled only 30-40 years ago as a community of peoples displaced from their own specific countries by the pastoral industry after the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal stock workers in the late 1960s. The distinctive movement of the East Kimberley rose to international prominence through the work of Rover Thomas, who was selected to represent Australia in the Venice Biennale of 1991. Inspired by the vision of Rover Thomas—converging planar and profile views of the Kimberley landscape—the resulting paintings are grounded in social, cultural and political histories while prompting connections outside their own context entirely. This concept of land encompasses multiple perspectives across the space of memory and time, built on the foundations of Ngarrangarni—the Gija word for Dreaming.²⁹¹

²⁹¹ This text has been adapted from: Hayley Megan French, "Challenging Dialogue; Current relationships between Aboriginal art and artists." Presented at *Critical Thinking, Research & Art & Culture*, 2012 SCA Graduate School Conference, Thursday 13th September, 2012.

The Warmun art movement is grounded in relationships between cultures. From the outset, Rover Thomas was embraced in this movement, despite having come to Warmun from different country in the Western Desert. Arts writer Nicholas Thomas has written that the radical proposition in the work of Rover Thomas is that which allows for the coexistence of usually divergent categories.²⁹²

The painting movement became a mode of cultural teaching, a two-way learning movement to pass cultural knowledge to younger generations and a wider Australian population to promote cultural understanding. This is significant to the circulation and understanding of Cann's work, beyond the context of its making.

Cann is very aware of the tradition that he is working in—a tradition that art historian Henry Skerritt argues has 'opened Gija painting to an almost unlimited potential, allowing an extraordinary expansion in the field of what could constitute Aboriginal art.'²⁹³ Skerritt is referring to the work of Cann's predecessors Paddy Bedford, Butcher Cherel, Ngarra and Rammey Ramsey who in their later years produced works that departed not only from the conventions of Gija art, but also from all the formal characteristics that had come to be associated with Aboriginal art through their experimentation with materials and subject matter.²⁹⁴ Cann continues to redefine this tradition through the development of his own distinctive painting practice, where, as with his predecessors,

²⁹² Thomas, *Possessions*, 219-23.

²⁹³ Henry Skerritt, "The politics of 'just painting': Engagement and Encounter in the Art of the East Kimberley," in *Seismopolite; Journal of Art and Politics*, 2012, (online) ISSN: 1894-5449, <http://www.seismopolite.com/the-politics-of-just-painting-engagement-and-encounter-in-the-art-of-the-east-kimberley> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

...both the landscape and the canvas are reimagined as sites for the successive accumulation of meaning, memory and place; conjured into being as the meeting place for our cultural communion.²⁹⁵

Cann's work hence operates on multiple levels, one is a visual language that draws cultures together, and another is the histories, ideas and stories behind the work. Cann's work intuitively speaks to the salient nature of the landscape in Australia, communicating layers of social, political and embodied experiences of landscape today.

The layering of transparent ochres reveals a narrative within a narrative on Cann's canvases. These stories are inextricably linked to Cann's landscape. David Turnbull, lecturer at Deakin University, examines the importance of stories in the making of meaning and the creation of identity:

To tell a story is to organise things in space and time and vice versa, to reference or factor events and people temporally and spatially is to construct a narrative... They produce spaces and forms of spatiality by creating and performing links and connections between places, people, and events. They create time and temporality by identifying, labelling and ordering actions and events. Ultimately, narratives, knowledge, and space-time are linked through movement- the movement of people in the landscape.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ David Turnbull, "Locating, negotiation, and crossing boundaries: a Western Desert land claim, the Tordesillas line, and the West Australian border," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, 2005.



Figure 29 Churchill Cann, *Doogoorrenyinem*, 2012, natural ochre and pigments on canvas, 120 x 90cm

In *Doogoorrenyinem* (2012), (see Figure 29) Cann paints many layers of stories of the Ngarrangarni, his family members and experiences of his working days. These narratives inherent in Cann's country are embodied in his palpable gestures. Cann's slow, reflective movements translate the depth of the narratives and ideas in the paintings, 'Cann is experiencing his country through his hands, the same way he walked it with his feet.'²⁹⁷ The gesture is a strong link between Cann's work and the paintings of Sydney-based artist Ildiko Kovacs, strongly placing the body within the landscape. Moving from Cann's concise repetitive gestures, Kovacs works on a corporeal scale—a gesture made from the shoulder, using the whole body.

Kovacs' work is founded in biography, in an Australian cultural context, and in a wider history of painting. Her work also clearly articulates the impact of Aboriginal painting. Kovacs attended the National Art School in 1979-80. Developing her practice during the emergence of Aboriginal art, its influence

²⁹⁷ Hunt, "Churchill Cann," 19.

was a natural progression in the work. Arts writer and curator Daniel Mudie-Cunningham identifies Kovacs' key influences during this period as Australian painters: Tony Tuckson, Ian Fairweather, Aida Tomescu, Yvonne Audette; Aboriginal painters: John Mawurndjul, Turkey Tolson, Paddy Bedford, Rover Thomas and Emily Kame Kngwarreye and U.S. painters Philip Guston, Cy Twombly and Brice Marden. Influenced early in her career by both Western and Aboriginal languages of abstraction, Kovacs has developed a gestural style which brings these two languages together, 'somewhere between the line and the land.'²⁹⁸ For Barkley, this is embodied in Kovacs' work *T.T.* (2004) (see Figure 30), in the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's (MCAA) *Volume One* Collection. The influence of Tony Tuckson is apparent in the materiality of the masonite, showing through the paint—a reference to his affinity with bark painting.²⁹⁹ Barkley further emphasises the influence of Aboriginal painting on all Australian artists, arguing that non-Indigenous practitioners 'can only move forward with a solid understanding and grasp of the potentiality that Aboriginal art offers.'³⁰⁰

Kovacs has described the line as a metaphor for landscape as well as a personification of her own nature. Mudie-Cunningham draws a connection to the way Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, pioneer of geometric abstract art, theorised line as a transformative mark capable of expressing a perception and experience of the world. Malevich wrote in 1927:

It was through the conscious line—through being conscious of the line before focusing consciousness on the object—that the artist could cognize not the object itself but what lay within that object: the non-objective forces that give structure and movement to it, to the world of space and time as such...³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Daniel Mudie Cunningham, "Down the Line," in *Ildiko Kovacs Down the Line 1980-2010*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, 2011, 9.

²⁹⁹ Glenn Barkley, interview with the author, December 2012, Appendix A.

³⁰⁰ Barkley, "Almanac: The Gift of Ann Lewis AO," 6.

³⁰¹ Kazimir Malevich, cited by Mudie Cunningham, "Down the Line," 10.



Figure 30 Ildiko Kovacs, *T.T.*, 2004, oil on masonite, 60 x 60cm, Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Gift of Ann Lewis AO, 2009

This is yet another road in for Kovacs to appreciate Aboriginal art. The uninhabited and intuitive way in which many Aboriginal artists paint gives a much deeper sense of the time and space of that land rather than merely the land itself. Influenced by this intuition, this lack of inhibition in painting, Kovacs began mapping out landscape and movement:

The line emerges from a kind of nothingness, and in doing so navigates space, contemplating time. Before being coopted by

figuration, the line navigates space, pushing through a landscape sprung forth from a simple mark.³⁰²

The lines of Kovacs' recent paintings evoke movement and mapping of the landscape. Australian abstract painter Roy Jackson has written of Kovacs' work, 'as people move from place to place across the landscape, paths become lines traced on the land.'³⁰³ A path becomes more and more evident in Kovacs' latest paintings using a roller to apply her paint. Mudie-Cunningham likens this consistent line of the roller to that of highways or roads, looping and intersecting as though viewed from an aerial perspective. These lines are mapped out over many layers of paint that show through between the lines and around the edges of the boards. The green roller lines foregrounded in *Acacia* (2010) (see Figure 31) are reminiscent of the marks of ceremonial body painting in Emily Kngwarreye's *Untitled (Body painting series)* (1996) (see Figure 32) that hang next to Kovacs' work in the *Volume One* Collection at the MCAA.

For Australian curator and writer Terence Maloon, these paintings highlight body language, conceiving of abstraction as a 'mode of embodiment.'³⁰⁴ It is this unity, of the body and the landscape, where Maloon sees the common ground for non-Indigenous and Aboriginal artists.³⁰⁵ Indeed, this presence of the body, both in the creation of the work and within the landscape of the work, is palpable in both Cann's and Kovacs' work. The appreciation and influence of Aboriginal art led to a number of collaborative relationships for Kovacs, creating a dialogue that begins between two individual artists and extends much further into Australian contemporary painting.

³⁰² Mudie Cunningham, "Down the Line," 9.

³⁰³ Roy Jackson, cited in Daniel Mudie Cunningham, "Down the line," 14.

³⁰⁴ Terence Maloon, "The Painter as Dancer," in *Ildiko Kovacs Down the Line 1980-2010*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, 2011, 6.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.



Figure 31 Ildiko Kovacs, *Acacia*, 2010, oil on plywood, 240 x 160cm, Private Collection

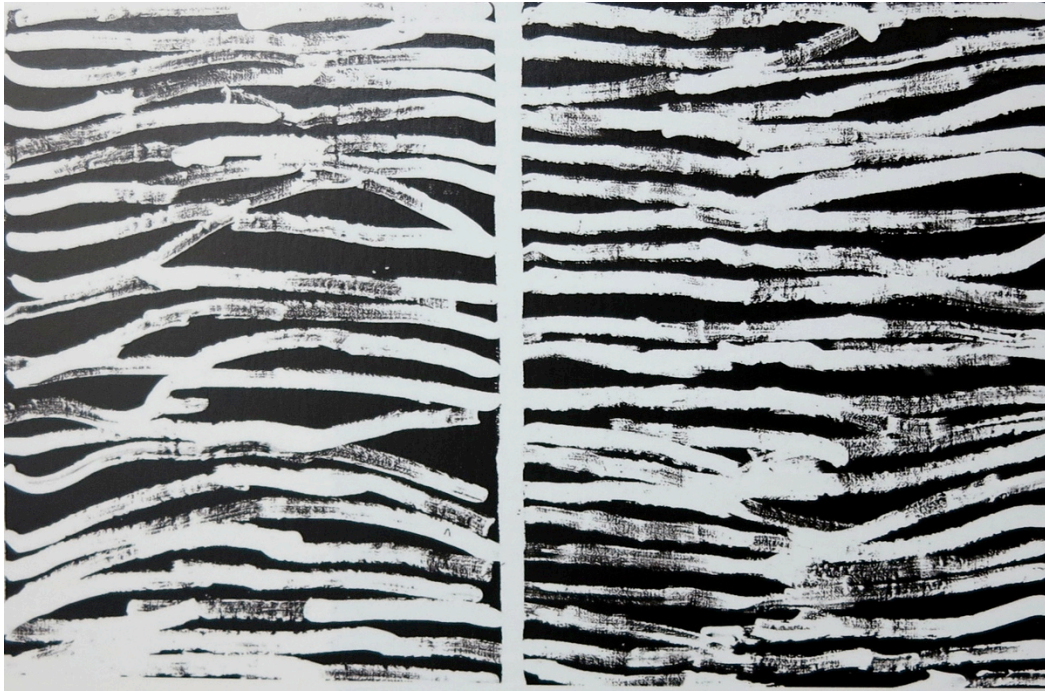


Figure 32 Emily Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Body painting series)*, detail, 1996, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 5 panels, each 121 x 91cm, Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Gift of Ann Lewis AO, 2009

The launch issue of *Australian Aboriginal Art* in 2009 features an article by Louise Martin-Chew on the collaboration of Kovacs with senior Fitzroy Crossing artist Wakartu Cory Surprise. Martin-Chew suggests the reasons non-Indigenous artists are attracted to Aboriginal art are both cultural and painterly: the strength of the connections with family and land, ‘the unfailing surety in the process of painting itself: the lack of inhibition, the ability to transcend doubt, to be in the moment, with the paint, and the intrinsic story to be told.’³⁰⁶ Kovacs describes an experience with one of the artists at Magkaja Arts Centre in Fitzroy Crossing:

I took a sheet of paper and began to paint. After a while Dolly Snell said to me ‘Can I have your painting?’ I gave it to her, and she started painting over it! We stood there, painting together, and it felt natural.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Louise Martin-Chew, “Collaborations: Wakartu Cory Surprise and Ildiko Kovacs,” *Australia Aboriginal Art*, 1, 2009, 104.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

Kovacs spent three weeks in Mangkaja Arts Centre in spring 2008, assisting and working with Wakartu Cory Surprise, Daisy Andrews and Dolly Snell. 'The results of this extraordinary residency were a new vibrancy, particularly in colour, in the work of Wakartu Cory Surprise and a subtle, yet no less significant, shift in Kovacs' paintings' (see Figures 33, 34 & 35).³⁰⁸



Figure 33 Ildiko Kovacs, *August*, 2008, acrylic on paper, 76 x 56cm

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

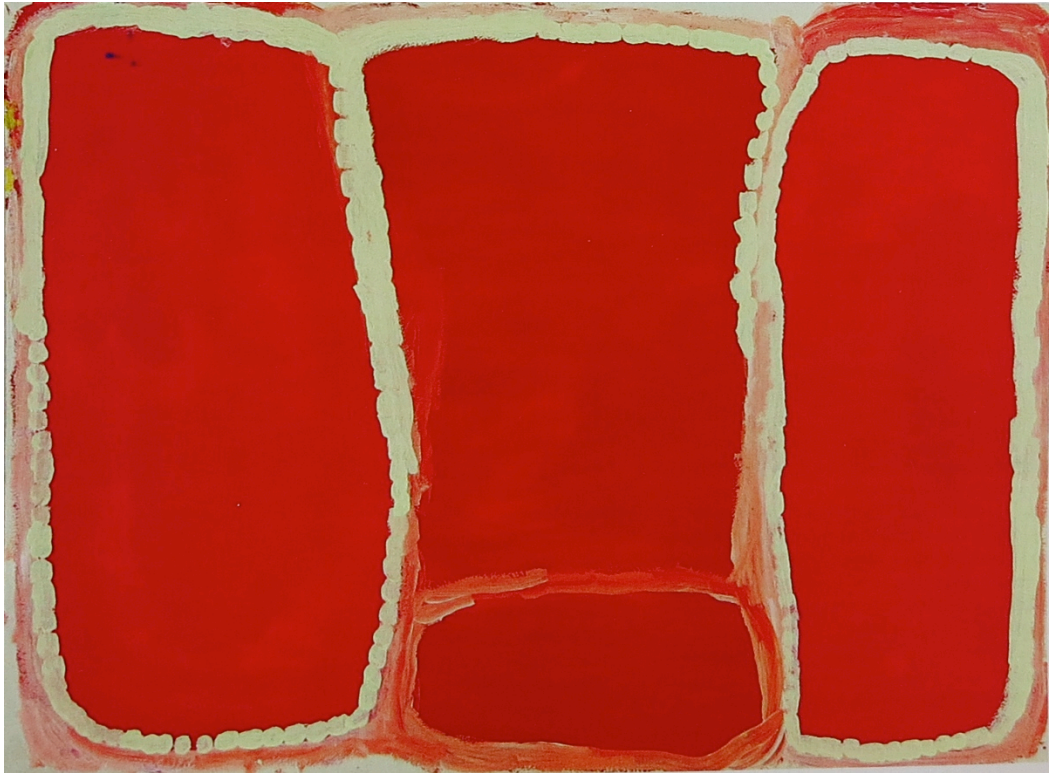


Figure 34 Wakartu Cory Surprise, *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic on paper, 56 x 76cm



Figure 35 Ildiko Kovacs, *Folded Shade*, 2008, acrylic on paper, 76 x 56cm

The resulting collaboration between Kovacs and Surprise was a conversation about paint, colour and shape that ‘speaks across cultures, inspirations and generations.’³⁰⁹ An artistic exchange based in mutual respect, the artists experienced a shared working-space and process, their work growing through observation and inspiration. Kovacs refers to the holistic and experiential impact on her practice; it was ‘a metaphorical process in a sense, relating to the uninhibited way in which paint is applied by artists like Cory.’³¹⁰ After the collaboration with Surprise, Kovacs began showing with Raft Artspace in Alice Springs, a gallery founded as a response to Aboriginal art as a movement.³¹¹ Director of Raft Artspace, Dallas Gold has noted a new quality emerging from this interaction: ‘It becomes a dialogue, a celebration of difference in the work.’ He further notes the reciprocal nature of these collaborations, ‘it’s a two-way process. Indigenous artists themselves have been responding for three decades to outsiders coming in.’³¹²

Conclusion

It is evident through the discussion of this chapter that the idea of landscape is an evolving one, representative of the experience of being in Australia today. In Australia, when we see, discuss, paint landscape; in many ways we think of the Aboriginal cultures of Australia. This has caused a significant shift in the paradigm of landscape. Through a growing appreciation of Aboriginal art and understanding of the discourse of Country, the idea of landscape is no longer dominated by a Western view of the world, however encompasses the shifting between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous understandings of the land, as seen through the work of Johnson, Cann and Kovacs.

³⁰⁹ Ibid. 108.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Dallas Gold, interview with the author, March 2013, Appendix A.

³¹² Nicolas Rothwell, “Kimberley in Harmony,” *The Australian*, 22 June, 2009.

Malouf emphasised the ability of painting to inhabit the land imaginatively.³¹³ It is in this space that Johnson, Cann and Kovacs operate, questioning and shifting our relationship to the Australian landscape. The shifting between different cultural understandings of our relationship to land, and hence ourselves, initiates dialogue of what a philosophy of painting is in Australia today—one that engages with the experience of being in Australia. This constant state of moving between is indeed an essential part of Australian consciousness, perhaps best described by Malouf in the conclusion to his 1998 Boyer Lectures, *A Spirit of Play*:

It is our complex fate to be children of two worlds, to have two sources of being, two sides to our head. The desire for something simpler is a temptation to be *less* than we are. Our answer on every occasion when we are offered the false choice between this and that should be, ‘Thank you, I’ll take both.’³¹⁴

Malouf argues that it is in artistic endeavours such as painting that what Australian poet Henry James called our ‘complex fate’ is most clearly visible, ‘as a tension that has been embraced, as a complexity that has been put to use, a condition made available to all of us as an agency for grounding ourselves both in a particular world and in our own skin.’³¹⁵ For Johnson, Cann and Kovacs, landscape has provided a space to negotiate the complexities of these two worlds through the conceptual and intuitive ground of painting. As Verwoert argues, paintings suggest an action, recording the performance enacted on their surface, as with the landscape itself. Their work then, as Malpas suggested, is a function of their relationship to place, both a way of thinking through and a depiction of their experience of landscape, and their relationship to each other; furthering an understanding of what the landscape is and means in Australia.

³¹³ Malouf, “A Spirit of Play,” 152.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.* 195.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.* 159.

Where Johnson and Cann often convey a sense of narrative and embodied experience through their paintings, Kovacs articulates a relationship between the body and landscape. These artists, while often drawing from memory, respond to a landscape that they experience now, one that both physically and imaginatively encompasses different cultures, crosses boundaries and re-imagines the place in which they live. Their works construct social landscapes that offer a poignant recognition of difference, and an acknowledgement that these differences do not constitute borders. The landscape, and the field of painting itself, is offered as a performative site of reciprocity, a reimagining of Australia through the shared experience of cross-cultural negotiation.

Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape

As this thesis has argued, painting is increasingly realised within the horizon of conceptual practice. Expanded or conceptual painting has created a space where artists can think through the complex interrelations between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and culture, in particular understandings of land. As with painting, the paradigm of landscape in Australia is always informed by its complex history, and has been transformed by the discourse of country. The field of expanded and conceptual painting in which this research is based, allows for a critical and strategic engagement with the intertwined histories of painting and landscape in Australia.

This chapter examines how emerging artists are approaching this shifting paradigm through two case studies in the idea of landscape, centred on the experience of emerging artists working and living in urban areas of Australia; and the conceptualisation of landscape—characterised³¹⁶ by the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and understandings of the land. In light of this context, the following case studies asked contemporary artists working in this field: what is it we are responding to when we consider landscape?

These case studies focus on non-Indigenous urban-based artists working in a shared context to the author—identified and connected through the course of the research. Working in the city, or suburbia, there is a perceived separation from the landscape—whether landscapes iconic to Australia, such as the desert, or the actual urban landscape the artists are living in. And yet the artists engage with the Australian landscape through their personal experiences of living and working in urban places. Evidence of the discourse of country and a grappling with postcolonial debates is evident in

³¹⁶ Both through movement in social, political and art discourse, and through arguments made in this thesis.

the conceptual underpinning, along with the works and texts created for the exhibitions, *Out of Site* (2013), and *Landscape Too* (2014).

Emerging from these exhibitions were a few significant approaches to the conceptualisation of landscape: including an embodied experience of landscape, the problem with landscape and the mapping and narrative construction of landscape. This chapter addresses the work of emerging artists: Distanciation., e.k.1, Jonathan McBurnie, Mark Shorter and the author, Hayley Megan French to illustrate these ideas. To accompany the investigation of these exhibitions in pursuit of the evolving understanding of landscape, interviews have been conducted with the artists discussed in this chapter and are referenced throughout.

Case studies: Out of Site and Landscape Too

In collaboration with Sydney-based artist Katie Williams, the author facilitated the group exhibition, *Out of Site*, held at Articulate Project Space, Sydney. The artists in the exhibition are closely linked through their practice—through collaboration, involvement in artist-run spaces and shared experiences of the Australian landscape. The author exhibited both as a solo artist and as part of the collective Distanciation.³¹⁷ along with Sydney-based artists Emma Hicks, Richard Kean, Carla Liesch, Emma Wise and the collaboration e.k.1.³¹⁸ Significant to *Out of Site* was the dialogue surrounding the conception and exhibition of the work. In each of their practices, the artists consider their intercultural landscape, acknowledging the problems and ambiguity of ideas of landscape in Australia. The resulting exhibition was reminiscent of Australian artist and theorist Ian Burn's sentiment—of the necessity and impossibility of landscape in Australian art.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Distanciation. is comprised of Sydney College of the Arts post-graduate research students and alumni Hayley Megan French, Richard Kean, Carla Liesch and Katie Williams. The collective was born out of a previous group show at Articulate Project Space in 2011.

³¹⁸ e.k.1 is a Sydney-based collaborative duo: Katie Williams and Emma Hicks.

³¹⁹ Stephen ed. *Artists Think*, 8.

Landscape Too, co-curated by the author and Carla Liesch, brought together artists and writers from Alice Springs, Sydney, Toowoomba and Townsville for an exhibition at AirSpace Projects, Marrickville, Sydney, in April 2014. To extend the scope of this investigation, the artists in *Landscape Too* live and work in different parts of Australia to the exhibition *Out of Site*, enriching this discussion through many different approaches and experiences. The dialogue surrounding the conception and exhibition of the work became a significant aspect of the artists' engagement with these ideas. It is out of this exhibition then that *Landscape Too* was conceived as a project with two outcomes, both an exhibition and a collection of texts, which offered an opportunity to record more of the ideas and conversations surrounding the project. The exhibition included the work of Alice Buscombe, based in Alice Springs, Catherine Parker and Stephen Spurrier, based in Toowoomba, Townsville-based artist Ron McBurnie, and Sydney-based artists: e.k.1 (Emma Hicks and Katie Williams), Chris Williams, Jonathan McBurnie, Kate Beckingham, Mark Shorter and the author, Hayley Megan French.

The *Landscape Too* booklet included contributions by Alice Buscombe, Ally Bisshop, Chris Williams, e.k.1 (Emma Hicks and Katie Williams), Gemma Messih, Jonathan McBurnie and Ron McBurnie, Kate Beckingham, Luke Strevens, Richard Kean, Saskia Beudel, Carla Liesch and the author, Hayley Megan French. The submissions in the booklet—edited by the author and with introduction by the author and Carla Liesch—serve to offer a contextual frame to the idea of landscape. As Australian theorist Ross Gibson writes, 'As soon as you experience thoughts, emotions, or actions in a tract of land, you find you're in a landscape.'³²⁰ Once we place ourselves within a space, a landscape is framed by our own subjectivity. The texts included in the booklet seek to find cultural, emotional or embodied frames for our understanding of landscape. The landscape and the frame both

³²⁰ Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, 2.

continue to exist here through a collection of essays, poems, conversations and speculative writing.³²¹

Embodied experience of landscape

In the development of the first exhibition, *Out of Site*, conversations around the work questioned the significance of the landscape to an experience of being in and out of Australia. These conversations were highlighted by the concurrent 'Australia' survey exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London, based on landscape as inextricable from ideas of Australian art, culture and identity. The exhibition, 'designed to tell a story, thematically through landscape, to illustrate the development of an art history,'³²² was heavily criticised by reviewers. Quotes from four of these reviews were included in the exhibition catalogue, two of which are included below:

If the show ends on an incomplete note, it is because its art, like the country at large, seems still uncertain of where it is going.³²³

I am not interested in what might constitute some sort of Australian artistic identity, because I doubt there is one. The fertility of Australian art is a product of successive, unending waves of human migration, as well as part of a global dialogue.³²⁴

These parochial reviews added a layer to the ideas considered in *Out of Site*, allowing us to see in from outside, across the gulf between Australia and the so-called 'mother country.' Malpas argues that the recognition of landscape in Australia, and the questioning of what it may be and what it may signify,

³²¹ This text is adapted from Hayley Megan French and Carla Liesch, "Introduction," in *Landscape Too*. Sydney: MOP Projects, 2014, 1-5.

³²² Paola Totaro, "A worthy display covering 200 years or another cringe festival?" *The Australian*, 28 September, 2013 (online) theaustralian.com.au [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

³²³ Adrian Hamilton, "Australia's day in the sun, at the Royal Academy of Arts," *The Independent*. Sunday 22 September, 2013 (online) independent.co.uk [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

³²⁴ Adrian Searle, "Australia at the Royal Academy: Ned Kelly to the rescue," *The Guardian*. Tuesday 17 September, 2013 (online) theguardian.com [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

'has often been directly tied to the changes in the way in which the landscape is brought into salience through journey and return.'³²⁵ Deborah Hart writes in the catalogue for *Australia* that 'Home is a place to come back to.' It seems ideas of home have been 'contested ground in the history of Australian landscape art for non-Indigenous peoples in a country in which British, European and Asian settlement is relatively recent.'³²⁶

One thing the inclusion of the reviews can achieve is to allow the audience to imaginatively place themselves outside of Australia. As art historian Ian McLean recently observed, the revelation of these reviews is the 'obvious failure of Aboriginal art to penetrate the contemporary artworld beyond Australia.'³²⁷ We are reminded again of our unique cultural situation, represented through the striking physicality of our landscape, which constantly redefines difference, distance and identity.³²⁸

It is interesting then, to question ourselves as artists in Australia: is the landscape we inhabit physically the same as the landscape we inhabit imaginatively? As noted in the beginning of the previous chapter, Australia is the most urbanised nation on earth with over 85% of the population living in cities on the coast.³²⁹ Most Australians live in a city, and when we think of landscape, we picture a painting. And yet we continue to be compelled to consider what landscape means to us in Australia; to look around; to look up. And to look down at the unsettled intercultural ground from which this work manifests.

In approaching these questions, an embodied understanding of landscape was the starting point for the exhibition *Out of Site*. The curatorial premise for the exhibition was a conceptual investigation of landscape in work of

³²⁵ Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," 18.

³²⁶ Deborah Hart, "Australian Landscape: Pathways into the Modern World 1920-50," in *Australia*, Royal Academy of Arts. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2013, 186.

³²⁷ Ian McLean, "Aboriginal art at the Royal Academy in 2013," in *Artlink Indigenous "Blackground,"* 34:2, 2014, 96.

³²⁸ This text has been adapted from: Hayley Megan French, "In and Out of Site," exhibition text for *Out of Site*, Articulate Project Space, August 2012.

³²⁹ Soriano, "Australian: An Introduction," 24.

Distanciation.—a 29-minute video of the sky shot from multiple locations across Alice Springs and a blue monochrome painting travelled from an exhibition at *Watch This Space*, an artist-run-space in Central Australia, to be re-exhibited in Sydney. The sky video was projected along the back wall of the gallery, interrupted by the architecture of the space (see Figure 36). Along the floor lay the 3-metre long monochrome blue painting. The references to the sky through video and painting were a way of abstractly mapping the artists' experience on residency in Alice Springs,³³⁰ also alluding to the relationship between topographic and landscape presentations of painting that connoted local painterly traditions.

This work recalls U.S. conceptual artist Roger Cutforth's *April (1 work in 3 sections)* (see Figure 37) included in the re-staged *Black Box of Conceptual Art* exhibition at the University of Sydney Gallery in September 2013. Cutforth's work consisted of photographs of the sky, a calendar for April 1969 with the days crossed out, and a card displaying the co-ordinates of longitude and latitude of New York. The photographs are ordinary snapshots, however the camera is pointed directly up towards the sky, suspending the viewer in 'a "landscape" that exists between the ideal and the real.'³³¹ Similarly to Cutforth's work, the sky in *Distanciation.*'s video has no visual clues as to place and hence has an uneasy relationship to landscape. Whilst the video was in part an attempt to locate the artists in a particular place—specific sites that locals had directed the artists to visit—to the viewer it could have been filmed in Sydney where the piece is now exhibited. We are reminded then that we are working under the same sky, which in Central Australia acts to balance the weight of the earth;³³² in Sydney seems our only escape, our only memory of the iconic Australian landscape. For *Out of Site*, works were made, or chosen in response to this work, to further consider specific experiences of landscape.

³³⁰ *Distanciation.* completed a 4-week residency and exhibition with *Watch This Space* in Alice Springs in March 2013.

³³¹ Roger Cutforth, cited in Ann Stephen, "1969 The Black Box of Conceptual Art," in *1969 The Black Box of Conceptual Art*, University Art Gallery, University of Sydney in association with Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, 2013, 35.

³³² Rothwell, "Introduction," in *Hot Springs*, 7.



Figure 36 Distanciation. 29:58, installation photograph, 2013, single channel video projection, 30-minute duration and acrylic house paint on canvas [from *Untitled (Installation at Watch This Space)* March 2013] Articulate Project Space, Sydney



Figure 37 Roger Cutforth, *Noon time-piece (April)*, 1969, type C photographs, photocopies, graphite, transparent synthetic polymer resin, cardboard, typed text, cotton, adhesive tape and letterpress (a-gg) 12.7 x 410cm (variable), Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

The artists then, drew on embodied experience in a particular place and time, considering the displaced presentation of this experience into the gallery space. The gallery itself became another displaced landscape to be negotiated and traversed by the viewer. The works proposed a movement through the 27-metre long, 4-metre wide gallery. This negotiation of space was further emphasised by the exhibition catalogue, designed as a sort of dysfunctional map, which visually references both aerial and planar views of the gallery space itself.³³³ The exhibition begins with the author's large painting *freefall*, partially framing the gallery space and directing viewers in and through the portal of Carla Liesch's perspex threshold (see Figure 38), past the wall drawing of Emma Wise, around the distended wall of Richard Kean's *Architectural Weave*, over the iconic Sound of Music landscape of Emma Hick's work projected onto the ground (see Figure 39) and through the corporeal video works of e.k.1. The work of *Distanciation.* was exhibited at end of the long gallery. Visible from the entrance, this sky projection and painting served as both a catalyst for, and reflection of the ideas considered in the show.

The work of *Distanciation.* and ideas of an embodied experience of landscape formed an important starting point for the exhibiting artists. Through their works, many of the artists grappled with the complexities of landscape, postcolonialism and rapprochement.

³³³ The concept for the catalogue came from the exhibiting artists. The design was then realised by Emma Hicks. The catalogue has been included in Appendix B.



Figure 38 *Out of Site*, installation photograph, Articulate Project Space, 2013



Figure 39 *Out of Site*, installation photograph, Articulate Project Space, 2013

The problem with landscape

As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of landscape in Australia has been heavily laden with historical definition and complex social and cultural relations. This problematic of landscape is evident through the works created for *Out of Site* and *Landscape Too*. In particular, in *Out of Site*, there is a questioning in many of the works of the artists' relationship to a particular experience of landscape and how this could be represented in a gallery. Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas writes of this problematic:

The problem with landscape is thus that landscape represents to us, not only our relationship with place, but also the problematic nature of that relationship—a relationship that contains within it involvement and separation, agency and spectacle, self and other. It is in and through landscape, in its many forms, that our relationship with place is articulated and represented, and the problematic character of that relationship made evident.³³⁴

As Malpas suggests, it is through our considered representation of landscape that we begin to understand the difficulty and necessity of our relationship to it. The work of e.k.1 and the author, Hayley Megan French, frame this problematic. This sense of an unresolved tension is immediately apparent through e.k.1's reference to the work of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett in their work *Here/elsewhere*.

There's no lack of void.³³⁵

Beckett's sentiment is echoed in the repetitive but seemingly pointless movements of e.k.1's video installation. *Here/elsewhere* (see Figure 40) consisted of two LCD screens mounted at chest height on stainless steel frames sitting apart from each other, and a stack of black and white cards

³³⁴ Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," 21.

³³⁵ Samuel Beckett, "Act II," *Waiting for Godot*, 1949.

with the stage directions for Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* printed in black and white. Each screen circulated walking footage, the camera shooting directly down at the feet. One screen displayed barefoot white feet walking in iconic Central Australian red sand; the other showing snow boots, walking through deep snow. The first incarnation of this work was filmed on residency at The Banff Centre in Banff, Canada by Katie Williams and was re-staged by the other half of e.k.1, Emma Hicks, one month later. This action was then repeated by Williams in Uluru, Central Australia, a few months later. It was the second recording of this action in Banff that was exhibited aside the recording from Uluru. In all three instances, the artists found themselves in an overwhelming and unreal landscape, feeling detached and alien in their 'postcard' surroundings. As the artists remarked:

There's no real there.³³⁶

The artists know the problematic of this work. The footage was taken in an attempt to ground themselves through repetition and menial actions in an unfamiliar environment, 'with our work there's something about us trying to move into the landscape through our feet, through our grounding of our actual physical body touching the landscape.'³³⁷ However this repetitive action, whilst comforting at the time, was already fabricated, mediated through it's recording on a mobile phone, 'I don't think that worked. I don't think either of us felt grounded.'³³⁸ This sense of failure and mediation is further emphasised by the installation of the screens on metal display stands.

It's Australia I should know this landscape. I should be part of it. This is my home. And yet I felt completely like a foreigner.³³⁹

³³⁶ e.k.1, interview with the author, December 2013, Appendix A.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.



Figure 40 e.k.1, *Here/elsewhere*, installation photograph, 2013

This work then, began in sincerity out of a search for consistency, something to hold on to in a foreign landscape, and yet it is never achieved: “The red sand footage doesn’t make me feel any more Australian than the Banff footage.”³⁴⁰ The footage circulates over and over, the feet moving upwards to nothing, to nowhere.

Nothing to be done.³⁴¹

It is this sense of the absurd that links the video work to the stage directions for *Waiting for Godot*, printed on the accompanying cards (see Figure 41). The reference to Beckett and the theatre of the absurd is indicative of the artists grappling with these experiences of landscape and the difficulty in translating this into the gallery space.

I think it was really interesting in the context of the way the other works were speaking because I think there was kind of emptiness or a lacking or unresolvedness about a lot of the other work as well.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Text used in *Here/elsewhere* by e.k.1, from Beckett, “Act I,” *Waiting for Godot*.

³⁴² e.k.1. interview with the author.

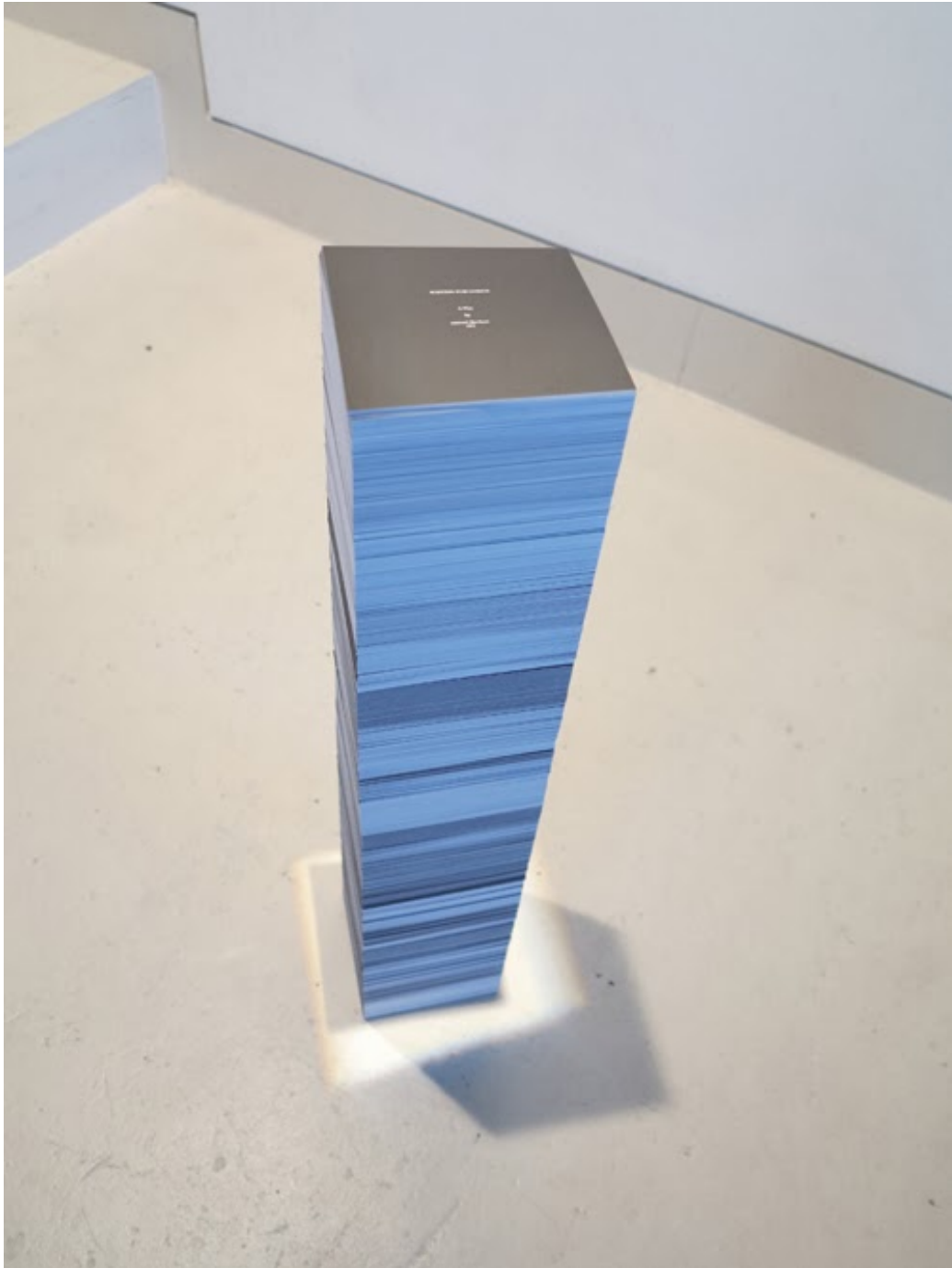


Figure 41 e.k.1, *Here/elsewhere*, installation photograph, 2013

In an interview with the artists, they further commented that this was the resolution of the show, the very sense of unresolved tension that was present in each of the works:

I think the most interesting thing about that show was all of us grappling with these problems at this particular time and place. Because we're in a time of enormous change in the way that we view things and do things. All those problems came out in the show...³⁴³

This tension was inherent in works that attempted to recreate or refer to experiences within landscape, or a movement through landscape. As e.k.1 acknowledged, there was an obvious shift here from the European tradition of landscape painting, 'it's flat, you're not in it, you're always viewing it, you're always back from it viewing it.'³⁴⁴ This shift was also evident in the author, Hayley Megan French's work which similarly attempts to portray an embodied experience of landscape.

In the author's work *freefall* (2013), exhibited in *Out of Site*, (see Figure 42) there are both multiple horizon lines and none. The thick black lines create a partial frame on the top and right hand side of the painting. If this is the horizon line, it extends both horizontally and vertically, destabilising the viewer's ground. However these lines are not complete on either side of the painting, instead acting as a frame or an edge to the white, which makes up the rest of the canvas. In this void there is no horizon line, no discernable ground. The layering and texture of the white has a depth that alludes to unbounded space, which is then, in contradiction, imposed upon by the black edges. The surface of the painting is repeating, white over black, black over white, with no direct background or foreground.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.



Figure 42 Hayley Megan French, *freefall*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 230 x 140cm

The idea of the frame has been an important element in the human relationship with landscape. In his writing on landscape, expert in future global studies Per Raberg points out that comprehensive space has the potential to be all encompassing. We give our environment, he says, ‘a visual outer boundary. This boundary very often consists of existing natural formations which we label as spatial signals.’³⁴⁵ Without this sense of boundary, comprehensive space, rather than expansive and edifying ‘can be bewildering and threatening.’³⁴⁶ *freefall* is directly concerned with these boundaries; the edges of painting, as they define our experience of a space or a landscape. The installation of the 3-metre tall painting on the right hand side of a 7-metre wall implicates the wall and the mirrored architecture in the work, the unfinished frame pointing beyond itself to more expansive possibilities. In this sense it strongly references a landscape painting, which typically frame or allude to an ineffable and infinite world, to possible

³⁴⁵ Wesley A. Kort, “‘Landscape’ as a Kind of Place-Relation,” in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011) 38.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

boundaries that are beyond depiction. The empty space framed in this work could allude to an immersion in Australian desert or sky; or the perceived void of this landscape in city dwelling. The frame remains incomplete, unresolved.

This idea was developed further through the author's painting *Some Distance* (2014) (see Figure 43) exhibited in *Landscape Too*. In thinking of edges—the edge of landscapes, the edge of painting—the work begins again with an unfinished frame, this time inside the frame of the canvas itself. As Gibson writes, 'The frame is a mode by which the profusion of possible meanings can be restricted, delimiting the connotations of the perceptible world so that something can be understood.'³⁴⁷ However the frame is unfinished, and in part erased, leaving a trace in the remaining shapes and the underpainting.



Figure 43 Hayley Megan French, *Some Distance*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 160cm

³⁴⁷ Gibson, *South of the West*, 235.

This painting is not descriptive of land—it is a function of an engagement with the artist’s place in the Australian landscape, imagined from the context of Sydney and affected by time spent in salient Australian landscapes. As Malpas writes:

...it is out of the connectedness to landscape, our embeddedness in particular spaces and places, that imagination itself arises, on which it draws, and to which it also gives shape and form.³⁴⁸

What is framed through the aesthetic of this work then, is an evolving conceptual understanding of landscape through the influence of, and relationship to, Aboriginal painting. In an Australian context, landscape is inextricably linked to colonisation and the ongoing negotiation and conflict of colonial cultures. As Malpas writes, any ‘account that takes our relation to landscape as a significant one must also be committed to the necessarily political character of landscape—all forms of human activity embody and express aspects of the political and social context out of which they emerge.’³⁴⁹ Working in the field of Australian painting then begs the question: do we need to find a new approach to incorporating Aboriginal understandings of landscape?³⁵⁰ ‘The politics of landscape is itself a reflection of the way that landscape operates, as an articulation of place, and of the relationship to place.’³⁵¹ The work then is representative of the author’s relation to the politics of Australian landscape, the cultures layered upon the land and the ongoing complex relations between them.

³⁴⁸Malpas, “Introduction,” xi.

³⁴⁹ Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape,” 9.

³⁵⁰ This question came up in conversation with Mark Shorter in preparation for the exhibition, *Landscape Too*, 2014.

³⁵¹ Malpas, “Place and the Problem of Landscape,” 9.

The mapping and narrative construction of landscape

The Australian landscape is reflective of what Gibson refers to as the narrative construction of Australia³⁵²—and inherent in this, our relation to that narrative and our role in its continued construction. There is significant scholarship examining the centrality of the landscape to systems of representation that construct Australian mythology and national identity.³⁵³ An understanding of the historical mapping of Australia can provide an insight into this narrative construction—this was visually represented in the National Library of Australia's exhibition *Mapping Our World; Terra Incognita to Australia*, 2013-14:

Our very existence was envisaged, and then refined over centuries to allow for new ideas and discoveries.³⁵⁴

Australian researcher Dr Paul Longley Arthur writes of the role of maps in providing context and commentary on the current state of knowledge: 'That maps would incorporate factual information at the same time as lending support to myths, sometimes giving equal visual treatment to each, suggests the flexibility of knowledge before empirical methods of measuring the world were widely embraced.'³⁵⁵ He notes French cartographer Pierre Desceliers' world map of 1550 (see Figure 44) as an example of this—the map must be turned 180 degrees to read the text printed on the southern hemisphere. No matter which direction the map is viewed from, the text of the opposite hemisphere appears upside down, reinforcing the idea of antipodal inversion.³⁵⁶

³⁵² Gibson, *South of the West*. This also links to the discussion in the previous chapter with reference to the writings of Australian artist Ian Burn.

³⁵³ See Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation*, 36-44, for a summary of Australian scholars who have examined the political and cultural significance of space and landscape.

³⁵⁴ Susannah Helman and Martin Woods, "Terra Incognita to Australia," in *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia*. Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2013, xix.

³⁵⁵ Paul Longley Arthur, *Virtual Voyages: Travel Writing and the Antipodes 1605-1837* (Australia: Anthem Press, 2011) 21.

³⁵⁶ For discussion on antipodal inversion refer to: Arthur, *Virtual Voyages*, 24.



Figure 44 Pierre Desceliers, detail of *La Terre Australle*, 1550

We are reminded in the National Library’s exhibition that the idea of a great southern landmass—to balance those of the known world in the north—emerged from the human imagination long before the Europeans discovered Australia. From the beginning of this speculation, Australia was defined in terms of its distance and difference from Europe. Art critic and historian Robert Hughes writes that Australia was imagined and assigned an identity as Europe’s ‘geographical unconscious,’ a projection of desire for a utopian land, and a dangerous, grotesque opposite.³⁵⁷ Antipodean³⁵⁸ myths made up for the absence of real information over many centuries.³⁵⁹ The role of imagination in this mythical and narrative construction of Australia has always been integral and is reflected in the speculative blurring of the real and unreal that has characterised an Australian understanding of landscape.

³⁵⁷ Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation*, 40.

³⁵⁸ The ‘Antipodes’ refers to Australia and New Zealand.

³⁵⁹ Gibson, *South of the West*, 10.

This is poetically illustrated by the first text in the *Landscape Too* booklet, *Sojourn in the Labyrinth* by Sydney-based artist Richard Kean. Kean introduces imagery of mapping and time, 'I step from the boat to the shore. The waves lap at my feet and there I see that the map is being forever redrawn, a line infinitely divisible.' Kean then reminds us that the act of mapping is an act of ownership over the land—a narrative that is written and rewritten over and over. This imagery of layering over the landscape recalls Australian writer David Malouf's view:

A land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times. One of those forms of writing is the shaping of a landscape. In any place where humans have made their homes, the landscape will be a made one. Landscape-making is in our bones.³⁶⁰

These ideas are further examined by the work of Jonathan McBurnie and Mark Shorter in the *Landscape Too* exhibition. Influenced by a desire to incorporate Aboriginal understandings of the land, McBurnie and Shorter unpack this historical mapping and mythologising of Australian landscape.

McBurnie examines the shaping of a landscape through in both his practice and the *Landscape Too* booklet in an interview with his father, Townsville-based artist Ron McBurnie. Discussing their different approaches to drawing the Australian landscape, the interview highlights not only notions of colonial and postcolonial Australian art that trouble this field, but also questions how to continue working in light of this complex history:

One notion I have been interested in is the idea that through the process of colonisation, the vast unknown, *Terra Australis*, was reduced to a smaller Australia, no longer hypothetical but known. Through this process, the land was measured, surveyed, mapped, and

³⁶⁰ Malouf, *A first place*, 167-168.

quantified, and thus lost its mythical aspects to colonials, and this doesn't even cover the implications on Aboriginal culture, which is a whole other enquiry. For me, part of the appeal of making landscapes of Australia specifically, is the idea of re-mythologising the land.³⁶¹

Jonathan McBurnie presents this idea of re-mythologising the land as an alternative to a perceived avoidance on the part of many artists. He concludes his interview with his father with the provocative question: 'Is this simply a cultural cringe associated with self-imposed political correctness and willingness to avoid anything remotely colonial sounding?' This question was taken up in a subsequent interview with the author. McBurnie speaks of a deliberate dissociation from landscape in his generation, 'partly out of ignorance of how interesting the landscape conversation can actually be,' but also out of a 'cultural cringe' and desire to 'distance ourselves away from political unrest.'³⁶² This is a tension McBurnie has chosen to engage with through his ideas of re-mythologising the land, illustrated in his *Precipice* series.

McBurnie began his series of *Precipice* drawings during his Undergraduate studies in Brisbane at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University (2004-2007). Driven by a desire to capture the feeling and experience of landscape, McBurnie created fantastical landscapes, abstracting images of Antarctica through the black and white drawing, 'something happens, there's an abstraction that happens, where you don't know whether they're rock, or ice, or sand...'³⁶³ Through this series, McBurnie became more concerned with the political and sacred aspects of landscape. Feeling limited by the colonial undertones of this field, he began constructing collaged images of the Australian landscape with Antarctica. Antarctica has persisted as a presence in these works, specifically due to the fact that it is a country with

³⁶¹ Jonathan McBurnie, "Conversation with Ron McBurnie," in *Landscape Too*. Sydney: MOP Projects, 2014, 12.

³⁶² Jonathan McBurnie, interview with the author, June 2014, Appendix A.

³⁶³ Ibid.

no Indigenous peoples, 'a safe place to discuss landscape,'³⁶⁴ but with a growing political presence, both in the context of oil and global warming. McBurnie says of continuing to work in the field of Australian landscape:

The only way I felt I could do that was by not making the work about Australia as such, so... I started making a collage of... I'd mash different places together; I'd get images from, say, the Gobi Desert and Antarctica and the Australian outback and Yellowstone in the States, or something like that, and I'd start reconfiguring all of these different places and putting them together...³⁶⁵



Figure 45 Jonathan McBurnie, *Precipice 138*, 2014, ink on paper, 114 x 50cm

McBurnie's work included in the *Landscape Too* show, *Precipice 138* (2014) (see Figure 45) was created through the collaging of an Australian rock formation with an Antarctic ice cap. In creating this imagined, unreal place, McBurnie felt he could engage with colonialism in a way that could allow him to be a more critical observer. Through this process, McBurnie also draws on the mythological and fantastical ideas of *Terra Australis*—the 'creatures and strange humanoid kind of monsters'³⁶⁶ that entertained the European imagination for centuries before the European discovery of Australia. Influenced by the writings of art historian Bernard Smith and art

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

critic Robert Hughes,³⁶⁷ McBurnie works through the tensions of colonial cultures with reference to the way Australia was originally imagined and constructed.

So there's that discomfort, but it's also a discomfort of actually really being very, very interested in it, and for me as a European descendent, as well as third generation artist in my family, possibly even fourth—that is a pretty important part of my own sort of heritage and my own family's story. So there's that tension as well between, say, political correctness and a sort of desire for settling that idea or settling that difficulty, but also a tension within my own family...³⁶⁸

As McBurnie remarks, the idea of landscape and its historical relevance is significant in his family history. The cultural and historical tensions surrounding our relationship to landscape have therefore been a starting point for McBurnie's approach.

McBurnie notes universality in how we respond to landscape, a desire to draw connections between each other and to place. In looking out of Australia to construct his landscape, McBurnie allows us to look back in and question what it is we are looking at.

It's just a matter of figuring out where that connection point is, or just merely trying it on as a connection, giving it a go and seeing what happens...³⁶⁹

In this work McBurnie has shaped a new landscape, both strange and familiar, causing us to consider the cultures laid one above the other or set side by side on Australian land. Whilst it is a natural landscape that is

³⁶⁷ McBurnie names Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore* and Bernard Smith's work on the South Pacific and Terra Australis as major influences.

³⁶⁸ McBurnie, interview with the author.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

pictured, it is in fact a made one—through McBurnie’s collaging technique—with a postcolonial discourse inscribed upon it. In choosing not to address the real physical landscape of Australia, McBurnie’s work is at the heart of what landscape is in Australia—a contested ground, an imagined ground, a cultural clash and a meeting point. His constructions are in themselves reminiscent of the way Australia was constructed and imagined before Europeans first chartered it.

The European narrative construction of Australia also underlies the work of Mark Shorter. Shorter’s work considers the strange sentiments of Antipodean myths of inversion that occupy the Australian landscape. In *Two Sketches for Antipodysseus* (2014) (see Figure 46) Shorter puts his body into two situations—a fish moving on the head of a man in a landscape, and a body buried face down in the red dirt. The two channel video installation portrays simple gestures; meditations on the landscape that reveal the complex histories and myths embedded in the Australian landscape and our perception of it.



Figure 46 Mark Shorter, *Two Sketches for Antipodysseus*, installation view, 2014

Shorter's actions have developed from the idea that the space of Australia was configured and framed through European myths and languages of inversion—informed by the writings of Gibson.³⁷⁰ Shorter is curious to implement elements of these myths into his work to consider their ongoing relevance to the functions and relations of landscape. As Gibson writes, 'the myths that rendered the South Land comprehensible to the European mind were ineffably utopian because of a fail-safe device: the theme of Antipodean inversion. On the upside-down face of the world, perversity could be perceived to be the rule.'³⁷¹ The clichés that developed from this viewpoint—black swans, rivers running inland, wood that will not float, birds that will not sing or fly³⁷²—pervade the cultural landscape in Australia as confirmations of this inversion. The way that Australian space was 'culturally produced' and informed through the mythologies of early explorers and colonists has been argued to have legitimated the British colonisation of Australia from a European perspective.³⁷³

The fish on the head of Shorter's body (see Figure 47) was influenced by an old naval tradition originating in the middle ages, often referred to as the line crossing ceremony or an equatorial baptism. This ceremony was traditionally performed as an initiation ritual of dunking passengers or crewmembers crossing the equator for the first time, usually from North to South. The ceremony would function to appease Neptune, the God of the Sea, with a humbling act to restore balance. The poetics of inversion is at play here and it is this relationship that Shorter seeks to evoke through his gesture. The fish also introduces an element of the sea and its all-encompassing and sublime nature. For Shorter, the fish touches on all these ideas; it is not an allegory of the naval tradition, but rather an allegory of its symbolic function and the unfathomable concept of the body of the ocean.

³⁷⁰ Shorter also attributes his thinking to Australian historian Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* and Paul Longley Arthur, *Virtual Voyages*.

³⁷¹ Gibson, *South of the West*, 10.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Cerwonka, *Native to the Nation*, 37.



Figure 47 Mark Shorter, *Two Sketches for Antipodysseus*, detail, 2014, Two Channel HD video installation, 9:34, camera: Jürgen Kerkovius

Further to this, the symbolic movement of the fish from the sea inland—seen through the iconic Australian red dirt—is reminiscent of the movement of the early explorers and colonisers. In an interview with the author, Shorter discusses the problematic symbology of the red dirt. Shorter was concerned about this direct reference to the ‘red centre’ commenting: ‘I think it almost simplifies a far more complex idea of the space.’³⁷⁴ He acknowledges the contradiction of then realising this work in Broken Hill. This contradiction is significant to the work. As such a strong signifier of Australian landscape, the symbology of the red dirt is implicit as much in its presence as it would be in its deliberate absence.

Through this symbology, however, the passage through the landscape is evident, and for Shorter, is an important one to consider.³⁷⁵ The body buried face down in his second video work (see Figure 48) indeed looks directly into the land as opposed to out of it—a passage that considers the layers of meaning and culture embedded in this land. A linear progression of time across this landscape is disrupted through this action and at once, the

³⁷⁴ Mark Shorter, interview with the author, April 2014, Appendix A.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

history of Australia embedded within the landscape, is brought to the surface. A desire to consider a historical understanding and Aboriginal perspective of the land is present in Shorter's body, face down and immersed within the landscape.



Figure 48 Mark Shorter, *Two Sketches for Antipodysseus*, detail, 2014, Two Channel HD video installation, 9:34, camera: Jürgen Kerkovius

The title *Two Sketches for Antipodysseus*, is revealing of the artists' intention for the work. The works are titled 'sketches' as they are part of an ongoing exploratory process. Shorter's practice sits between performance art, installation, painting, drawing and sculpture. The sketches perhaps bring a new perspective to his exploration into 'the spectre of the grotesque in the contemporary and how this force can promote change or reconsideration by revealing life's contradictions.'³⁷⁶ Shorter conducts his explorations through these seemingly simple actions laden with complex historical references. The title further references the term 'Antipodes,' which historically emphasised qualities of oppositeness and otherness associated with the Southern Hemisphere as well as highlighting the connection between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery.³⁷⁷ Considering the context of

³⁷⁶ Mark Shorter, "Biography," last modified 22 November, 2014, markshorter.com.au [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

³⁷⁷ Arthur, *Virtual Voyages*, xv.

landscape in Australia today, qualities of opposition and otherness are found in the growing discourse of country.

Shorter's work is not referencing a particular Antipodean myth, although he uses these myths as a starting point for considering how the body might exist in the landscape. It is interesting to apply a poetics of inversion to this landscape as a mode to consider the actions that predate his. Shorter acknowledged his work questions:

How might my body exist within the landscape; how might it respond to the landscape with that kind of knowledge, that kind of history as part of the body?³⁷⁸

The body then becomes a conduit to allow these complex histories to come into play in the present. Shorter's work demonstrates a desire to consider the landscapes we are moving in and between beyond the timeline and paradigm of European colonisation. For Shorter this investigation is just as critical in the urban place in which he lives and will be an ongoing aspect of his practice. In discussing this investigation Shorter commented:

Maybe what we're doing now is that. It's just that we haven't created or authenticated an aesthetic response to it, but what we're doing now is that. You know, merely speaking or talking about it.³⁷⁹

This questioning is consistent with that of the artists and writers who participated in the *Landscape Too* project. Through both exhibitions discussed in this chapter, the artists responded to the history, culture and politics of Australian landscape, inherent in their experience of living in a postcolonial culture. The discussion progressed from an embodied experience of landscape in *Out of Site*—as seen in the work of Distanciation., e.k.1 and Hayley Megan French—to a desire to learn more from and

³⁷⁸ Shorter, interview with the author.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

incorporate Aboriginal understandings and histories of the land in *Landscape Too*, as illustrated by the work of Jonathan McBurnie and Mark Shorter.

Conclusion

With a growing knowledge of Australian colonial and postcolonial histories then, how do we approach the landscape, how do we make work about it? Understanding landscape means understanding the forms of action out of which they arise, to which they give expression, and to which they may also contribute.³⁸⁰ The two exhibitions discussed in this chapter are indicative of how contemporary artists, in particular those working in Sydney, are working through these questions and trying to develop an understanding of landscape in Australia. This historical and situational investigation of landscape is articulated by Malpas:

It is thus that landscape finds its connection to structures of power and authority, as well as to modes of self-formation and identity, of topographical exploration and articulation. In this respect, all landscape already presupposes involvement in it and influence by it. In fact, what is properly represented in the artistic representing of landscape is not a mere representing of a scene or view, but rather a representing of the particular influence and involvement, different in each case, of the landscape and of the place in the life and modes of that life that arise within and in relation to it.³⁸¹

The texts and works in *Out of Site* and *Landscape Too* come from a desire to understand the place we inhabit both physically and imaginatively, driven by a growing appreciation of Aboriginal art and philosophical approach to the land. The growing influence of the discourse of country, as outlined in the previous chapter, can be seen through the practices of these artists. As

³⁸⁰ Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," 14.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

remarked by McBurnie, the significant impact of Aboriginal art has ‘helped us as artists really get into landscape.’³⁸² This reinvigoration and shift in the paradigm of landscape incorporates different temporalities, beyond the timeline of European colonisation; and attempts further understanding through this acknowledgement of difference.

The work of *Distanciation.*, e.k.1, Jonathan McBurnie, Mark Shorter and the author, Hayley Megan French, articulate an engagement with Australian landscape from a specific urban context that is urgently invested in understanding and addressing the tensions of postcolonial cultures. The artists address this discomfort through the blurring of the real and the unreal—often drawing on Antipodean myths—as a way of negotiating the necessity and impossibility of the idea of landscape. Through the evolving paradigm of landscape, the artists grapple with problems of location and dislocation, difference and connection, in this particular time and place.

As non-Indigenous artists question how to incorporate Aboriginal understandings of the land, the idea of landscape is no longer dominated by a western view of the world, however it encompasses the shifting between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous approaches. Working in the field of expanded painting, this investigation significantly informs an ontology of Australian painting.

³⁸² McBurnie, interview with the author.

Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian Art

Art historian and theorist Rex Butler and arts researcher and writer Morgan Thomas wrote in 2003, that:

The question of location became a contentious issue in Australian art in the 1980s, and nowhere more so than with regard to debates around the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery by white artists.³⁸³

While the major appropriation debates of the 1980s and 1990s have progressed, the question of location—location in land, location and dislocation in the landscape of Australia—is a continuing source of contention, urgency and discovery for contemporary artists. The debates surrounding appropriation, in particular the relationship between appropriation and Aboriginal art, also persist in current discourse, as evidenced by the recent media-storm regarding the work of Melbourne-based artist Lucas Grogan.³⁸⁴ However there is also a resounding desire to move on from these debates by a number of important voices in the field. This chapter first considers the importance of this debate to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art today. The appropriation debate in Australia is a complex and evolving one; one that continues to shift significantly with the influence of Aboriginal art. This chapter argues that a way forward is to allow a space for artists to examine and engage in this field in ways that are productive for a growing understanding of what it means to be living and working in Australia.

This chapter also includes a discussion of Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell's aphorisms, 'Aboriginal Art, it's a White Thing' and 'Australian Art, it's an Aboriginal Thing' as particularly pertinent to this field. While Bell has spoken out against the appropriation of Aboriginal art—referring to the

³⁸³ Rex Butler and Morgan Thomas, "I am not sorry': Richard Bell out of context," (online) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 4, no. 1 (2003) [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

³⁸⁴ As discussed in *Chapter One: Literature Review*.

work made in remote communities—his work and his methods of appropriation speak to an inherent circularity between the work of remote Aboriginal artists, urban Aboriginal artists and non-Indigenous artists. Through his latest series of paintings and video works discussed in this chapter, Bell articulates the vast range of voices and arguments surrounding these issues, indicative of wider Australian politics and race relations.

Considering Bell's seminal statements, Butler presents an idea of 'UnAustralian art,' as a way of thinking through the apparent inconsistencies in Australian art. Butler's theory is questioned for its basis in ideas of separatism and a counter argument is presented from the context of an emerging artist. Through reference to interviews conducted by the author, this chapter finally considers how artists, in particular emerging artists, are approaching their Australian context.

Appropriation

The discussion of appropriation in this chapter is with reference to Butler's understanding of appropriation as a 'logic' that has emerged from the post-modern practice of appropriation art. As referenced in *Chapter One: Literature Review*, Butler considers appropriation not simply as a movement or category but a logic that informs the way we now see the art of the past and interact with the art of the present, 'seeing it in terms of cross-referencing, quotation, conscious and unconscious borrowing.'³⁸⁵ Broadly speaking, appropriation is the practice of directly referencing one work of art in order to produce another. The result of this process is to create or uncover new meanings for the original work by placing it in a new context. Underlying this idea is the belief that the meaning of an artwork is always open to displacement, that a work's meaning is to be found not in the original intention of the artist, but in the way it is received by the viewer.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Butler, "Introduction," in *What is Appropriation?* 41.

³⁸⁶ Butler, "Introduction," in *Radical Revisionism*, 7.

Art historian and theorist Ian McLean reiterates Butler's 'logic' of appropriation—which can be dated back to the origins of art—arguing that it is an inherent part of the way we think about art:

That 'appropriate' is one iteration of a panoply of terms associated with art—copy, duplicate, emulate, homage, imitate, influence, mimesis, mimic, mirror, plagiarise, quote, reflect, repeat, replicate, represent, reproduce, simulate—attests to the subtleties, complexities, longevity, and ubiquity of the idea of repetition and imitation in thinking about what art is.³⁸⁷

McLean is referring to 'poetic appropriation,' that which is ever-present in contemporary art. As McLean writes, the practice of poetic appropriation descends from hermeneutics—the ancient art of text interpretation. The methods of hermeneutics derive from theories of mimesis and simulation that have been traced back to shamanistic practices of form shifting—of becoming an animal through the use of mimicry in dance, painting and masks. 'To dismiss poetic appropriation as theft is to miss its purpose,'³⁸⁸ he argues. In this context, appropriation has been particularly important to the idea of an Australian art and the wider cultural conditions of Australia. As an 'importer' of other cultures, appropriation seemed to open the possibility of building an Australian national identity through the re-contextualisation of other cultures.³⁸⁹

This idea has been earnestly investigated through the work of Australian artist Imants Tillers. Where Australian art was considered provincial and behind international trends—as argued by Terry Smith in *The Provincialism Problem* (1974)³⁹⁰—Tillers' methods of appropriation in the late 1970s were remarkably self-reflexive and deconstructive, ahead of global trends of postmodernism, and particular to his experience working in Australia.

³⁸⁷ McLean, "Notes from the field," 179.

³⁸⁸ McLean, "This belongs to me," 18.

³⁸⁹ Butler, "Introduction," in *What is Appropriation?* 7.

³⁹⁰ See Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum*, September, New York, 54-59.

Tillers' interest in overturning perceived ideas about the centre and periphery, while working across cultural boundaries, is an example of the use of appropriation as a technique in deconstructing colonial cultures.³⁹¹

This method is significant to the way we understand the relationship between appropriation and postcolonialism. As Western hegemony diminishes with globalisation, McLean argues we have had to become more open to cultural differences and multiple subjectivities.

We have all had to understand ourselves differently. Appropriation is the way our brains do this.³⁹²

Despite criticism of the appropriation of Aboriginality, McLean argues that many postcolonial artists engaged appropriation to critique colonial discourses.³⁹³ McLean cites postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's argument in 1984 that: 'colonial mimicry is both a gesture of subservience and a type of camouflage or ruse that discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse in order to disrupt its authority.'³⁹⁴ Appropriation then, is a tool artists actively use to engage with or comment on the colonial culture in which they live.

UK Professor of Architecture Iain Boyd Whyte also argues for the process of appropriation as being akin to translation: 'For translation can be interlingual—from one language to another; intermedial—from one medium to another; and intercultural—from one culture to another.'³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ For further reading on Tillers' methods of appropriation in relation to Australian and global post-modern art see: Graham Coulter-Smith, "Imants Tillers: inventing postmodern appropriation," in *Imants Tillers: nature speaks 26 May – 12 June 1999* (Paddington, Sydney: Sherman Galleries, 1999) shermangalleries.com.au/artists_exhib/artists/tillers/nature.html [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

³⁹² McLean, "This belongs to me," 18.

³⁹³ McLean, "Notes from the field," 180.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Iain Boyd Whyte, "Iain Boyd Whyte" in "Notes from the field: Appropriation: back then, in between, and today." Georg Baselitz et al. *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2), 185.

Appropriation then is much more than a colonising gesture, it is incredibly complex and dialogic in nature.³⁹⁶

Appropriation has become a form of translation, a strategy for understanding the other. To mirror the other, it would seem, is to make art.³⁹⁷

Chapter One: Literature Review outlined the scope of the current arguments in discourse surrounding appropriation and Aboriginal art. The appropriation of Aboriginal art by white artists in the 1980s, 'seeming to entail some kind of "dislocation" of Aboriginal art, a loss of its original context, led to a rejection or suspicion of appropriation on the part of many Aboriginal artists.'³⁹⁸ The pivotal moment of appropriation occurred in 1985 when Tillers painted *The Nine Shots*. Since then, the non-Indigenous appropriation of Aboriginal art has become 'particularly dangerous ground.'³⁹⁹ As Australian arts writer Nicholas Rothwell writes, for at least the past two decades then, there has been a separation of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous mainstream Australian art-making:

That separation has grown deeper with time: it has become a border, closely inspected and policed.⁴⁰⁰

A few major voices in this field—including independent curator Djon Mundine and Richard Bell⁴⁰¹—argue that this debate has essentially played itself out. Butler agrees, stating that he genuinely feels that we have moved on, describing the incident with Melbourne-based artist Lucas Grogan as

³⁹⁶ McLean, "Notes from the field," 181.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Butler and Thomas, "'I am not sorry': Richard Bell out of context."

³⁹⁹ McLean, "This belongs to me," 20.

⁴⁰⁰ Nicolas Rothwell, "Foreword," in *Hot Springs; The Northern Territory and Contemporary Australian Artists*, ed. Daena Murray (Victoria: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2012) 7.

⁴⁰¹ See Djon Mundine, interview with the author, Appendix A; and Sharne Wolff, "Richard Bell: 'An ostrich will bury its head in the sand'" published on *The Art Life*, April 9 2013, <http://theartlife.com.au/2013/richard-bell-an-ostrich-will-bury-its-head-in-the-sand/> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

'retro.'⁴⁰² However, the recent controversies surrounding Grogan's work is testament to the still volatile situation of this field. As Rothwell argues, the rules for non-Indigenous artists have been relatively clear since the controversies surrounding Tillers and Jagamara in the 1980s and 1990s:

But the importance of this long-maintained virtual ban lies not so much in the art-making domain as in the realm of thinking. Above all, the cultural difference seems too great. And there are measured reasons for maintaining this divide in thought. The two realms are disjunct. They do not share languages, or points of origin. This is a gap no one is going to close.⁴⁰³

McLean argues that the debates framing this field are closely linked to the political situation in Australia, posing the question: do we have to wait for political justice before artists can play with each other on equal terms?⁴⁰⁴

The reasons for this 'virtual ban' are essentially political, not artistic.

McLean writes:

The failure of political justice has created unresolved ethical dilemmas in regard to indigenous art, which have been amplified by the central role that ethics now plays in critical judgments of contemporary art.⁴⁰⁵

As McLean acknowledges, there are significant ethical concerns in the industry of Aboriginal art and its relationships to the wider artworld, many of which have been discussed in this thesis in the context of postcolonial ethics.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Rex Butler, interview with the author, August 2013, Appendix A.

⁴⁰³ Rothwell, "Foreword," 7.

⁴⁰⁴ McLean, "This belongs to me," 22.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid. 20.

⁴⁰⁶ There remains significant market-level ethical concern in the Aboriginal art industry. The Aboriginal art market has been investigated by art historian Meaghan Wilson-Anastasios. For further reading see Meaghan Wilson-Anastasios, "The Impact of Unscrupulous Dealers on Sustainability in the Australian Aboriginal Desert Paintings Market" published on *Art matters: untangling the awkward relationship between art and*

Appropriation and ethics

Appropriation is one of the main ways the Australian artworld and discourse has understood the evolving relationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. Butler questions this in his introduction to *What is Appropriation; An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s*. His logic of appropriation has led him to the conclusion that both cultures are necessary for each other, both appropriate from and by the other, however he queries whether this 'is of any actual help to aborigines in pursuing social and cultural equity?'

Does appropriation's sophisticated 'deconstructive' logic give artists a freedom in its employment, or is this simply another exercising of colonial power?⁴⁰⁷

The critical response appropriation receives in this context, necessarily implies a politics, an ethics. According to Butler, 'ethical thinking places itself elsewhere, outside of itself, in order to reflect on the place where it is – and precisely the injustice of the place where it is.'⁴⁰⁸ Butler understands this dislocation as the common ground of ethical experience and the experience of art. This is why the practice of appropriation puts those engaged in it into a difficult and challenging position:

We could think of appropriation in art as that which ensures that there is never an easy distance that an artist, critic or spectator can take on what it is they see or what it is they speak of.⁴⁰⁹

McLean's essay, *This belongs to me, the one dollar note: The eternal returns of appropriation* (2013) cites U.S.-based British Contemporary Art Professor Claire Bishop's observation that ethics has become the benchmark of critical

money, <http://wilsonianastasio.com/> (last modified 19 November 2014) [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

⁴⁰⁷ Butler, "Introduction," in *What is Appropriation?* 41.

⁴⁰⁸ Butler and Thomas, "I am not sorry": Richard Bell out of context."

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

judgments in contemporary art, replacing aesthetic judgment as the dominant critique.⁴¹⁰ Nowhere is this more evident, McLean argues, than in non-Indigenous appropriations of Aboriginal art. The ethics of appropriation in Australia is partly due to the legacy of colonialism, and partly because another system of law is involved. McLean is referring to Indigenous law, specific to each language group: 'This makes indigenous art a dangerous activity that can only be made and performed by the appropriate people with the right knowledge and kin relations to the ancestral history being revealed. There is, then, an ethical core to traditional Aboriginal art – a right way and a wrong way.'⁴¹¹

As such, when it comes to appropriation, the rules for Aboriginal artists and non-Indigenous artists are different. As McLean writes:

At present, Indigenous artists can freely appropriate the work of non-Indigenous artists, however it is not reversible. Does this unequal relation between the two traditions signal an incommensurable difference and thus the impossibility of cross-cultural dialogue and postcolonial politics?⁴¹²

Canadian artist and researcher David Garneau echoes this unequal relation in a letter to *Art Monthly Australia* concerning Grogan's work in 2008:

Some Aboriginal artists appropriate Western art styles to deconstruct colonialism. Given that they were forcibly assimilated into that culture, they clearly have the right and duty to 'talk back' in the 'master's voice' as well as their own. The reverse, however, is not equitable.⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells; Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London, New York: Verso, 2012).

⁴¹¹ McLean, "This belongs to me," 20.

⁴¹² *Ibid.* 22.

⁴¹³ David Garneau, "Letters," *Art Monthly Australia* 212, 2008 (online) <http://www.artmonthly.org.au/article.asp?contentID=685> [Last Accessed 1/12/2014].

In Garneau's understanding of appropriation and ethics, it is the role of the Indigenous artist to initiate dialogue and artistic relationships, not the artist operating in the dominant culture. To further understand these 'unequal relations' we should consider Professor of Law and social commentator Larissa Behrendt's writings on the perception of equality in Australia. The political rhetoric of 'equal rights for all Australians,' Behrendt writes, 'is actually a politically loaded concept, aimed at perpetuating the disadvantage of Aboriginal people.'⁴¹⁴ This rhetoric decontextualises the disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal people and assumes that an equal playing field for all Australians already exists. The result of this approach is a separation of the contemporary socioeconomic disadvantage from its historical legacy and institutional bias.⁴¹⁵

Here again we encounter the 'gap no one is going to close.'⁴¹⁶ However, this does not mean that the dialogic processes of appropriation should stop here. Tillers' makes an important observation over two decades after his controversial appropriation of Jagamara's work:

Naive and inexperienced, however, in Aboriginal culture and its protocols, my borrowing and transformation of motifs from Michael Nelson Jagamara's stunning work *Five Dreamings* (1984) were unauthorised. Hence the controversy. However, as Novalis writes: 'Error is the indispensable instrument of truth. With error I make truth. The complete employment of error equals the complete possession of truth.'⁴¹⁷

This is the ultimate tension of any cross-cultural relations—it is at once necessary and problematic. The question is whether ethical concerns can be addressed to allow for the practice of appropriation to be a productive conversation for Australian art and artists. This argument surrounding

⁴¹⁴ Behrendt, "Playing the 'Other'," 37.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Rothwell, "Foreword," 7.

⁴¹⁷ Imants Tillers, "An Auspicious Entanglement," 19.

appropriation in Australian art is one that is incredibly nuanced, and continues to evolve.

Richard Bell's aphorisms

The situation of appropriation in Australian art is perhaps best surmised by Bell's aphorisms, 'Aboriginal Art it's a White Thing' and 'Australian Art it's an Aboriginal Thing.' Bell is a member of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang communities and a founding member of proppaNOW—the Brisbane-based Aboriginal artists collective that also includes Tony Albert, Vernon Ah Kee, Laurie Nilsen, Megan Cope, Jennifer Herd and Gordon Hookey.

Bell has been a leading force within the field of contemporary Australian art since the 1990s. His work deliberately addresses problems of locality and appropriation in an Australian context, making provocative gestures that express the political, cultural, social and economic disenchantment of Aboriginal peoples. In the well-known aphorism of Bell's Theorem (2002), 'Aboriginal Art, it's a White Thing,' Bell seeks to make the point that Aboriginality is not innate and natural to Indigenous Australians, but a kind of construction projected onto them by white Australians.

Bell's Theorem (Trippy Dicky and friends) (2005) (see Figure 49) presents Bell's second controversial aphorism, 'Australian art it's an Aboriginal thing.' In the left panel of this work, Bell asserts that many of Australia's most respected artists gained fame through appropriating Aboriginal art and artists. The right-hand panel of the painting contains a list of the non-Indigenous artists accused. Other than commenting on the prevalence of non-Indigenous appropriations of Aboriginal art, this statement further speaks to identity. The issue of identity is also raised by fellow proppaNOW artist Vernon Ah Kee in a panel discussion on Aboriginal art in 2012. Ah Kee questions why both identities are competing under the banner of Aboriginal art, when they should be competing under the banner of Australian art. The

implications of both of these statements for Australian art and institutional separatism are further discussed in the following section of this chapter with reference Butler's theory of 'UnAustralian' art.



Figure 49 Richard Bell, *Bell's Theorem (Trikky, Dikky and friends)*, 2005, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 5 panels: 240 x 480cm (overall), Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Butler explores what it means to seriously consider Bell's two aphorisms. He argues, the two are not commensurate, they do not add up to make a whole. 'Rather it means that both white Australian and Aboriginal art are cut off, alone in their dreams, their thought bubbles, with no one on the other end of their telephones.'⁴¹⁸ If these aphorisms are correct, then appropriation is in fact unavoidable; it is inherent in the very construction of the work. The statements speak to the construction of Australian identity. They are at once direct and ambiguous.

Bell has long been a vocal opponent of non-Indigenous Australian artists appropriating the work of Aboriginal artists. In his seminal text *Bell's Theorem; Aboriginal art it's a White Thing* (2002) Bell discusses what he terms the 'distasteful and discomfoting'⁴¹⁹ subject of the appropriation of

⁴¹⁸ Rex Butler, "Richard Bell's Psychoanalysis," *Australian Art Collector* 38, (October-December 2006) (online) <http://www.artcollector.net.au> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

⁴¹⁹ Richard Bell, "Bell's Theorem" 37.

Aboriginal imagery. The tensions surrounding appropriation of Aboriginal imagery for Bell are threefold:

Firstly, the artist may not be the sole owner of the copyright of the “story” or the imagery contained in the artwork. Secondly, the “sharing” of imagery between the coloniser and the colonised is suggestive of an equitable agreement between the artists. Not true. Otherwise, the works would be collaborations. Thirdly, Aboriginal People all over the world are adamant that their respective cultures are not for sale...⁴²⁰

When questioned on appropriation by arts writer Sharne Wolff on *The Art Life* (2013), Bell responded, ‘to continually engage in the appropriation of Aboriginal art is a colonial act in this supposedly post-colonial era.’⁴²¹

However he has also agreed, in the same interview, that there probably are times where appropriation is acceptable, particularly if permission is gained. This argument supports the progressing idea that it is not necessarily the appropriation that is the cause of concern, rather the way it is approached by non-Indigenous artists.

Butler and Thomas raise an interesting argument with regards to Bell’s use of appropriation and the growing acceptance by artists of appropriation as a form of ethics.

What Richard Bell’s work shows us here—against the tide of a generation of post-colonial critics and defenders of Aboriginal art—is that it is not the appropriation of the other as such that we must distrust but the “qualified” appropriation of the other, the kind of appropriation that would want to maintain a superior, objective, right-thinking critical distance on its subject matter. In this sense we

⁴²⁰ Ibid. 37-38.

⁴²¹ Sharne Wolff, “Richard Bell: ‘An ostrich will bury its head in the sand’” published on *The Art Life*, April 9 2013, <http://theartlife.com.au/2013/richard-bell-an-ostrich-will-bury-its-head-in-the-sand/> [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

could say that it is only in the unqualified appropriation of the other, in the abolition of the distance that guards the integrity of regions and localities, that the ethical possibility arises.⁴²²

We see this unqualified appropriation of the other in Bell's work. Bell's latest paintings continue to work with processes of appropriation to convey the layers of ideas and histories in his work. Bell's paintings are highly conceptual works with blatant narratives and messages conveyed through text. As Bell commented in an interview with the author, 'if we see text, we're more than obliged to read it, we're compelled to read it.'⁴²³



Figure 50 Richard Bell, *The Bible for dummies*, 2012, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 2 panels, 150 x 200cm (overall)

Experimenting through his new works, Bell has obscured the text behind an abstract image. Moving on from the target—a symbol highly prevalent in

⁴²² Butler and Thomas, "I am not sorry": Richard Bell out of context."
⁴²³ Richard Bell, interview with the author, August 2013, Appendix A.

Bell's earlier paintings—this tree-like abstraction is a cross-section of the human brain. Thinking of Butler's reading of Bell's work as a kind of 'psychoanalysis of Aboriginalism'⁴²⁴ it is fitting to be gazing through the brain to decipher such messages as 'God said to give back our land' in *The Bible for Dummies* (2012) (see Figure 50); 'In The End There Will Be Painting' in *Omega (Bell's Theorem)* (2013) (see Figure 51) and 'The Price is White' in *Now and Forever (Amen)* (2013). While these messages are now more obscured through this foreground image and Bell's use of the Jackson Pollock dripping technique, the narrative remains obvious to the viewer. With his video works, however, Bell takes a more subtle approach—the narrative is buried in the videos, he says, and it is one that is open to interpretation.⁴²⁵



Figure 51 Richard Bell, *Omega (Bell's Theorem)*, 2013, acrylic on linen, 180 x 480cm

Bell's touring exhibition, *Imagining Victory* (2013), first shown at Artspace Visual Arts Centre in Sydney (June-August 2013), presents a trilogy of video works alongside a selection of his paintings. The first in the series, *Scratch an Aussie* (2008) looks at racism in Australia as a disease. Bell assumes the role of therapist for a group of young stereotypical white Australians. Dressed in gold bikinis and budgie smugglers—referencing Australia's beach culture and the Cronulla race riots of 2006—these young adults openly discuss with Bell their concerns and attitudes towards Aboriginal people. As with all three video works, these sessions were unscripted, and

⁴²⁴ Butler, "Richard Bell's Psychoanalysis."

⁴²⁵ Bell, interview with the author.

Bell found himself listening to the familiar complaints of Aboriginal people—of losing their land, of lives lost—only these white Australians were speaking of losing their iPod's or their keys. Driven to therapy himself, these scenes are interspersed with Bell's own therapy session with an 'uber-therapist' played by Aboriginal activist Gary Foley. Bell points out that these somewhat heavenly scenes in their staging, present a rare situation of two blackfellas in an intellectual position.

The second video in the series, *Broken English* (2009) considers Aboriginal political empowerment through posing the questions: 'What are we fighting for?' and 'Do you think blackfellas are getting a fair go here?' in various contexts. These unscripted encounters are interspersed with an Australia Day re-enactment of Captain Cook's landing and a chess game with Foley, who chastises Bell for attending parties with rich white folks.

The final instalment of this trilogy is Bell's *The Dinner Party* (2013) (see Figure 52) premiered in *Imagining Victory*. In watching this video, the audience are privy to what Bell calls 'the Aboriginal discussion,' where the guests discuss their views of the interrelationship between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people over a private dinner party. In particular this scenario is concerning to watch, as we are unable to grasp the level of reality in its construction. As Bell suggests, this is because this 'Aboriginal discussion' is representative of a common dialogue, one that occurs often within 'the context of privilege, both economic and social, and far-removed from the most obvious sites of Aboriginal disaffection and political, cultural, social and economic inequities.'⁴²⁶

⁴²⁶"Imagining Victory: Richard Bell 26 June – 11 August 2013," Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, published on http://www.artspace.org.au/gallery_project.php?i=184 [Last accessed 1/12/2014].



Figure 52 Richard Bell, *The Dinner Party*, 2013, installation view, Artspace, Sydney

The Dinner Party begins by presenting Gary Foley's vision of victory for Aboriginal people, through the role of the first Aboriginal President of the People's Republic of Australia. Before making this film, Bell realised that he and his friends had not had this discussion, had not imagined what victory would look like in the future for Australia.

What does Australia look like? What are the political structures? What are we going to do about the symbolism and the mythologies and these sort of things? ... Has anybody imagined victory?⁴²⁷

What resulted was a presentation of different points of view and dissenting voices; the structure of these video works allowing for the range of opinions to be heard. The first iteration of the work at Artspace, revealed to Bell that his imagining, his voice, was not strong in the video: 'It didn't get me imagining victory, I'll be fixing that up in the next coming weeks.'⁴²⁸ The video is a working document, and by the second iteration in Brisbane at

⁴²⁷Richard Bell, "Artist talk," 26 June 2013, *Imagining Victory: Richard Bell 26 June - 11 August 2013*. Artspace Visual Arts Centre, unpublished.

⁴²⁸ Bell, "Artist talk."

Milani Gallery, Bell was working on new scenes with his daughter's voice to further illustrate a diversity of opinions, but also elucidate his own.

...when the President says, 'We're going to give everybody a million dollars.' I'll get my daughter to cut in there, 'A million dollars my arse,' so just to show that there's a diversity of opinion in Aboriginal society, just as there is, you know, in like every other society.⁴²⁹

In these video works, Bell does not try to impose an opinion on the viewer; instead he presents a range of perspectives on the subject. In this way the works are incredibly important for thinking through Australia's race-relations and future. Bell refers to himself as a 'recovering homophobe,' a 'recovering sexist.' In the same way, his work looks at racism as a treatable illness. What is presented is a vulnerable and progressive approach to racism in Australia. This is something that Bell's work uniquely offers.

Imagine a future where you didn't have to worry about race.⁴³⁰

Sitting alongside these video works, the paintings are no longer seen as brute accusations but incredibly personal pleadings, not only with wider Australia, but with Bell himself.

It is significant in this context that Bell treats *The Dinner Party* as a working document. He learns through the making of the work to identify his stance in the debate on Australia's future. This is an important part of the process of making for all artists, but of particular pertinence to those working in this contentious field. As with Bell, there are ideological discoveries through the process of making. Engaging with the postcolonial and ethical debates surrounding appropriation can allow artists to acknowledge difference between cultures, leading to a greater understanding. Bell's exhibition

⁴²⁹ Bell, interview with the author.

⁴³⁰ Bell, "Artist talk."

Imagining Victory (see Figure 53 for an installation view) then forms an important voice in this evolving debate.



Figure 53 Richard Bell, *Imagining Victory*, installation view, Artspace, Sydney, 2013. Left: Richard Bell with Emory Douglas, *Foley vs The Springboks*, 2012. Right: Richard Bell, *The Cleaner*, 2004.

Rex Butler and UnAustralian art

In 2003, Butler presented an idea of UnAustralian art—a way of rethinking the present history of Australian art. For Butler, that present looks like art that is either local or universal, not concerned with what it means to be in Australia or a certain kind of Australianness.

In an interview with the author, Butler describes the impetus for this framework of UnAustralian art as developing directly from Aboriginal art: 'Thinking seriously about Aboriginal art makes you rethink the notion of Australian art.'⁴³¹ Specifically, Butler had been writing about Bell's work and his two aphorisms, 'Aboriginal art it's a white thing'; and 'Australian art is an Aboriginal thing.' Thinking through the complexities of these two statements, Butler also re-read McLean's *White Aborigines*—a thesis arguing

⁴³¹ Butler, interview with the author.

that the identity construction of Australia is conceived of in relation to a white construct of Aborigines. Disarticulating the relationship between white and black in Australia, Butler questioned what would happen if Aborigines were considered, not as part of Australia, but as an equal separate.

Butler argues for:

...the possibility of another history of Australian art, one not ceaselessly meditating on its distance from the metropolitan centres, endlessly ironising its own insignificance, but attempting to the best of its abilities to belong to a global culture. It would be an Australian art that was precisely no longer Australian, but let us say UnAustralian.⁴³²

McLean writes on Butler's UnAustralian art as a response to 'the impact of globalisation and its indifference to national and ethnic boundaries.'⁴³³ Art always comes out of a specific context, Butler writes, but it is rarely that of a country. As McLean identifies, the definition of 'Australian art' in this argument, is not geographical, but refers to a nationalistic ideology. For Butler, the period of 'Australian art,' or the 'moment of Australian art history' was from 1920 to 1960, a mere forty years where the idea of a pure Australian art was the dominant mode. This is characterised in the great heroic Australian artists such as John Olsen, Charles Blackman and Arthur Boyd. Butler says that today:

No young person, except you know, kind of interesting throwbacks like Ben Quilty, makes Australian art or art about the notion of being Australian.⁴³⁴

⁴³² Rex Butler, "A Short Introduction to UnAustralian Art," in *Australian Culture Boom? Art Forum Berlin 2003* (Berlin: <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:131214>, 2003) [Last accessed 1/12/2014].

⁴³³ Ian McLean, "The necessity of (un)Australian art history for the New World," *Artlink* 26, no.1 (2006) 51.

⁴³⁴ Butler, interview with the author.

Is it for this reason that McLean finds Butler's idea a 'refreshing' departure from the 'gravitational pull of nationalism.'⁴³⁵ Butler's perfect illustration of his theory, the art least concerned with national identity, is Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art is not Australian, he argues, but comes from small isolated settlements such as Papunya, Yuendumu and Utopia.⁴³⁶

Aboriginal art is smaller than Australia and bigger than Australia but it is not Australian... Instead, it is very worldly, and very local.⁴³⁷

Further to this, Butler argues it is impossible to write of, or indeed conceive of, a history of Australian art that includes Aboriginal art in any real way. This is first evident in its absence from Bernard Smith's major text on Australian painting. Andrew Sayer's *Australian Art* (2001) is acknowledged as the first survey to give Aboriginal art a significant place in the story of Australian art, however Butler notes that this is separated, placed at the beginning of the book which does not weave the two narratives together. This argument has only been reaffirmed through the recent *Australia* exhibition at the Royal Academy; criticised for its implied separatism of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art histories.

So if you say you can't put the two different kinds of art that are made in this country together, Australian art is not the name for what happens in this country.⁴³⁸

For Butler then, the only way to account for the possibility of Aboriginal art being made in Australia, is to consider not an Australian art, but one that is not concerned with national identity—an UnAustralian art:

⁴³⁵ McLean, "The necessity of (un)Australian art history for the New World," 55.

⁴³⁶ Butler, "A Short Introduction to UnAustralian Art."

⁴³⁷ Butler, interview with the author.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

It is an art that no longer wishes to maintain the concept of an 'Australian art', either as something that can be directly represented, as in the great landscape tradition, or as that exception or empty point from which all else is remarked... It is instead an art that seeks to forego this position, to show that Australian art is always part of something greater than it, that it has always aspired to the universal.⁴³⁹

Butler sees a connection between all artists working in Australia today in a shared lack of interest in being Australian. Further to this, he believes that this may be the way to bring artists together in this country, not through a shared locality, but through the wider notion of the world and the human.⁴⁴⁰

The paradox here—and it is one that Butler has recognised himself—is that while Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art do come from entirely separate cultures and histories, they are also completely inseparable. Anthropologist Howard Morphy has written that:

The recent history of Aboriginal art has been a dialogue with colonial history, in which what came before—an Aboriginal history of Australia with its emphasis on affective social and spiritual relationships to the land—is continually asserting itself over what exists in the present.⁴⁴¹

As Morphy argues, neither culture as they exist now, exists without the other, and the same goes for the varied art practices, which emerge from both. The history of non-Indigenous and Aboriginal art in Australia has been one of dynamic exchange. Art historian Alexander Sasha Grishin reinforces this idea, writing in 2008 that:

⁴³⁹ Butler, "Introduction," in *Radical Revisionism*, 29.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 30.

⁴⁴¹ Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, 4.

...non-Indigenous art in Australia has always been to some extent involved in a dialectic with Indigenous art and that this together with the multicultural composition of the population as well as the country's proximity to Asia, have all contributed to a visual culture which is unique and distinctive.⁴⁴²

Despite this coexistence, Butler argues, it is easier to separate non-Indigenous and Aboriginal art than to speak of, or hold the two together. This is the same difficulty faced in the argument of institutional separatism.

As Morphy writes: 'the boundaries between Aboriginal art and non-Indigenous art become blurred as Aboriginal art becomes part of contemporary world art.'⁴⁴³ This is a point of contention, especially among a few Aboriginal curators, wary of the homogenising of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art under the inclusive banner of 'Australian art.' Institutional separatism is examined through two essays, by McLean and Aboriginal curator Stephen Gilchrist, commissioned by curator Quentin Sprague for his curatorial project *The World is not a Foreign Land* (2013). Gilchrist⁴⁴⁴—from the Yamatji people of the Inggarda language group—argues that an integrated hang can 'dilute the politics of colonisation and mitigate the register of dispossession that is thematically present in much Aboriginal artwork.'⁴⁴⁵ For Gilchrist, while cultural separatism is an 'imperfect' solution, it is a political necessity to combat the exclusionary and discriminatory processes of many art institutions. On an experiential level, Gilchrist argues that:

The deliberative staging of unfamiliar aesthetics teases out the tensions, contradictions and prejudices that many visitors bring to

⁴⁴²Alexander Sasha Grishin, "A new history of Australian Art: Dialectic between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Art" *International Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 7, 2008, 59.

⁴⁴³ Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 4.

⁴⁴⁴ Gilchrist is a writer and curator who has worked with the Indigenous Australian collections of the National Gallery of Australia (2003-2005) and the National Gallery of Victoria (2005-2010); and internationally at the British Museum, London (2008) and the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College in the US (2011-2013).

⁴⁴⁵ Stephen Gilchrist, "Indigenising curatorial practice," 57.

their experience of Aboriginal art. This cognitive process would arguably not happen in an integrated hang.⁴⁴⁶

In his essay, *What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?*, McLean discusses Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCAA) model of an integrated hang. In the *Volume One* collection hang, there is no separation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. McLean writes: 'This might seem to evade an essential difference between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous experiences but it equally has the potential to ask new questions of this difference.'⁴⁴⁷ An integrated hang does raise the question of how to acknowledge difference within Australian art. The MCAA model, however, suggests that we do not necessarily need to ask this question, but rather let the work pose the ambiguities and contradictions present. Former MCAA curator Glenn Barkley discussed these relationships between the works in the *Volume One* collection in an interview with the author.

In preparation for the new hang of the *Volume One* collection in (2012), the decision was made—in line with the MCAA's past projects—that there would be no segregation of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. This, however, is not wholly reflected in the associated publication, which includes a separate chapter of essays by Aboriginal artists. The integration of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art remains quite rare in Australia's institutions, with the notable exception of the Museum of New and Old Art (MONA) in Hobart, Tasmania. Barkley questions moves such as the building of the new Aboriginal art galleries in the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in 2010 for its separatism. As McLean argues:

There is nothing contemporary about this divide. Indeed, it is almost retro in its binary nature. It has cut through the Western reception of Aboriginal art for longer than we can remember. Aboriginal art may have finally made it into the fine art museum but we still see it

⁴⁴⁶ Gilchrist, "Indigenising curatorial practice," 57-58.

⁴⁴⁷ McLean, "What's contemporary about Aboriginal contemporary art?" 51.

largely segregated from mainstream art, as in the NGA's special Indigenous galleries and in the Royal Academy exhibition. This apartheid only confirms the colonial divide...⁴⁴⁸

For Barkley, the MCAA has more flexibility as a young institution with no departmental segregation. 'Those big institutions suffer from being compartmentalised,' he says. In not making a distinction between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art, Barkley is aware that this may be a contentious move but is confident that the works will speak to these nuanced relationships, and as McLean remarked, ask new questions of this difference.

The prime example Barkley offered was the room looking at abstraction that displayed many Aboriginal artists alongside non-Indigenous. The room included the work of Ildiko Kovacs, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, George Tjungurrayi, John Nixon, Kerry Poliness and Richard Bell. Bell's work *Worth Exploring?* (2002) (see Figure 54) makes the claim that everything subsequent to the illegal occupation of colonial Australians must logically be judged as outside the law. 'Every attempt at reconciliation, every attempt to reflect on Aboriginal art, every attempt to render justice to the Aboriginal people—it is all wrong from the beginning, all countable as one item or another on the unending list of flawed consequences of an initially invalid premise.'⁴⁴⁹ Barkley deliberately positioned Bell's work at the entrance to this room, to challenge the hang, and leave room for debate and conversation. He says:

Now the thing that I wanted to point out, which I think is really important, is that Richard Bell, in a funny way, contradicts everything else in this room. So we put that there very purposefully to actually

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Butler and Morgan Thomas, "I am not sorry': Richard Bell out of context."

go, 'this is a great idea, but it could be wrong.' Because I don't know.⁴⁵⁰



Figure 54 Richard Bell, *Worth Exploring?* 2002, acrylic and gravel on canvas, ink on polypropylene, satin laminated, Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art

Sydney-based artist Bronwyn Bancroft is also an advocate for an integrated Australian hang, which she discussed in an interview with the author:

We don't have to look at hanging an Aboriginal artwork in a Contemporary art museum as being something special. It's part of an Australian art scene, why would you have a separate gallery for Aboriginal artists in an Australian art hang? I have always argued against it. You are not integrating into the mainstream because those people are defined by culture (the people selected), their cultural translation, their connection to country, their spirituality, their art; they're selected on those criteria. Are [non-Indigenous] Australian artists selected on the same criteria?⁴⁵¹

Whilst institutional separatism is a complex question, the integrated model presented by the MCAA makes more sense for the context of Australian art. The ambiguity and uneasiness that Barkley speaks of between the works is an apt representation of the Australian artworld. What exists between the works is the potential for dialogue about what Australian art is. Conversely,

⁴⁵⁰ Barkley, interview with the author.

⁴⁵¹ Bronwyn Bancroft, interview with the author, August 2012, Appendix A.

the separate Aboriginal galleries of the NGA seem to act as a barrier to further conversation and engagement. The relationship here to Butler's views, is the question of whether we can move forward thinking through the possibilities of Australian art through ideas of separatism.

In other words, just as the twentieth century in Australian art was split between provincialism and revisionism, so we might say that the twenty-first century will be split between Australian and unAustralian histories of Australian art. In the end, we cannot have one without the other...⁴⁵²

Butler argues that at least in having a conversation about UnAustralian art we expose the possibility of this argument. Indeed it is a discussion we are currently immersed in.

Generational differences

In contrast to Butler's approach, this thesis argues that what is more interesting in Australian art is to embrace the division and difference of the cultures from which it is made, not through separatism or segregation, but through confluence. The ideology of institutional separatism—reflected in Butler's argument—is a barrier to experiencing and thinking through the relationships between the different kinds of art that is made in Australia. Separating Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art does not provide a space to create and nurture artistic relationships between the different cultures. As discussed in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence*, the cosmopolitan outlook of the contemporary doesn't do away with divisions; it works them differently. It is the nature of nations to be divided. This division can define and enrich Australian art, rather than make it impossible. The confluence of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art doesn't need to make sense; it is a representation of the work that is being made here and now.

⁴⁵² Butler, "Introduction," in *Radical Revisionism*, 32.

When discussing Butler's idea of UnAustralian art in a panel discussion in 2012,⁴⁵³ McLean argued that we don't think about Australian art the way we used to in the 1960s and 1970s. So too, Australia is not like it was in the 1960s and 1970s. When we think of the changing dynamics of globalisation and the increasing exposure to and engagement with Aboriginal culture in Australia, what constitutes Australia today is incredibly different to what characterised the Australia of the 20th Century. For a generation of artists who have entered the artworld in the 21st Century, our understanding of what constitutes Australian art should be approached differently, and within the context of the contemporary acknowledgement of difference.

It is in this context, where several times and multiple spatialities can coexist, that differences can sit alongside one another and do not need to be separated. As seen in the MCAA model, it is in a space that acknowledges difference that the work itself can present the potential for dialogue about what Australian art is. As argued by Barkley, there are new and important questions that arise from this confluence, questions that are more pertinent to the cultural situation of Australia, and hence, to Australian art. A number of these questions have been raised and addressed in this thesis, including: How does the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists reframe the way we read the field of painting in Australia? Do we need to find a new approach to incorporating Aboriginal understandings of landscape? How can appropriation be approached to further our understanding of what it means to live and work in Australia? An integrated understanding of Australian art will continue to raise further questions of what Australian art is, and could be in the future.

Where Butler suggests that young artists are no longer interested in their Australian context, this research presents a counter argument. Most significantly, the prevalence and influence of Aboriginal art is now a

⁴⁵³ Ian McLean in *Aboriginal art: It's a White Thing*. Sydney Opera House: play.sydneypoperahouse.com. 2012.

significant consideration inherent in being an artist working in Australia. Aboriginal art, which Butler calls the most UnAustralian art, has in fact drawn artists back in to consider what it means to be living and working in Australia. In this sense then, it could be considered the most Australian art, one that has led a new generation of artists into thinking through Australia, their place in it, and its wider place in the world. Aboriginal art, while often based in locality, is not confined to it. It embodies kinship connections that extend across the country and into all facets of life. As discussed in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence* and *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape*—with reference to Yolngu artists Nyapanyapa Yunupingu and Nonggirrnga Marawili and Gija artist Churchill Cann—this art is based in cross-cultural relationships and understanding.

Certainly the artists working with appropriation of and between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultures are in that very process of looking at what it means to be in Australia, as we have also seen in Richard Bell's work. In the previous two chapters, landscape has been identified as another area in which artists are considering the place in which they live, and the histories, relationships and politics that embodies. In the work of the non-Indigenous artists discussed, there was an obvious desire to learn more from and incorporate Aboriginal understandings and histories of the land.

As argued in *Chapter One: Literature Review*, we live in a very particular cultural situation in Australia, where the impact of Aboriginal art has dramatically changed the artworld, relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia and our understanding of the land. The artists in this thesis, in particular those emerging artists discussed in *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape*, demonstrate a very real engagement with landscape and country—in many ways influenced by Aboriginal art. Whilst there may not be a collective desire here to establish a national art, there is a considered attempt to better understand the place in which we live.

The nature of the debate until recently has been one of disengagement and ethical and political stalemates, particularly with regards to appropriation. This attitude is epitomised in practices and ideologies of segregation. The attitude of the artists represented in this thesis, and the attached interviews, is one where the only ethical possibility is for Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists to engage with each other, and with what it means to be living and working in Australia in this time.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed two major tensions in the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art—that of appropriation and representation. It is important to consider these debates beyond the political and ethical stalemates that have characterised the discourse, in order to have a productive conversation with regards to two areas in which artists are engaging with what it means to be working in Australia.

The complex and dialogic processes of appropriation are important to the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. This is not a debate that should be avoided or feared, but fully engaged in. As Butler argues:

It is a matter here of arguing not that we should not appropriate the other but that we have not yet entirely appropriated the other, not that we should always be more specific in our characterisation of the other but that we are still too specific. It is to think not that we should not be in a relationship with the other but what is excluded to ensure that we are always in a relationship with it, that any point outside of the other is always defined by it in a way we cannot see.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. 29.

Butler asserts that appropriation ensures there is never a safe distance an artist, critic or viewer can take on what they see or what they speak of. In the context of Australian art therefore, artists cannot distance themselves from the work being made here. In other words, it is as strong of a statement for non-Indigenous artists to ignore or avoid the art made by Aboriginal artists, as it is to engage with it. Rather than attempt to avoid these tensions, cross-cultural influence and appropriation should be embraced for its ethical possibilities. This chapter has concluded that appropriation, as argued by Butler, is a 'logic' inherent and necessary to art-making and cross-cultural relations. The questions of engagement and ethics are, as such, no longer whether to appropriate, but how.

In this context, appropriation has been particularly important to the wider cultural conditions of Australia. Engaging with the postcolonial and ethical debates surrounding appropriation can allow artists to acknowledge difference between cultures, leading to a greater understanding. As discussed in this chapter, this is exemplified in the work of Richard Bell. Bell's contribution to this debate reflects on a critical consideration of what it means to be living and working in Australia today. Appropriation then, is a tool artists actively use to engage with or comment on the colonial culture in which they live.

Prominent theorists in this field, Butler and McLean, argue that emerging artists are not interested in making art that is concerned with Australia. This thesis presents a counter argument—that many artists are in fact thinking through their Australian context, often through practices and concepts informed by their exposure to or engagement with Aboriginal art.

As Butler has himself argued, his ideas of UnAustralian art can be seen as yet 'another revision, another contingent remaking of Australian national identity, a response to particular social and political circumstances...'⁴⁵⁵ The idea itself is tied up in language, and a discourse that cannot explain the

⁴⁵⁵ Butler, "Introduction," *Radical Revisionism*, 31.

apparent inconsistencies in Australian art. Perhaps as a theory it has played its part in allowing us to think through the cultural situation that makes this argument possible. However, grounded as it is in a particular generational understanding of the present, it may not be productive in thinking through the future of Australian art.

It is argued then—from the context of an emerging artist—that a discourse of separatism and disengagement is not productive in creating and nurturing artistic relationships. The chapter poses the question, in response to Butler, of whether we can move forward thinking through the possibilities of Australian art through ideas of separatism, which often act as a barrier to further discussion and engagement. As demonstrated in the integrated hang at the MCAA, the work itself presents the potential for dialogue about what Australian art is.

The artists discussed in this thesis reinforce this argument, as many of them are emerging artists. Their work has raised, and begun to address, a number of key questions that are pertinent to the cultural situation of Australia—based in the desire to further their understanding of what it means to be living and working in Australia. This has been achieved through an acknowledgement of, and engagement with, Aboriginal art and its influence. As argued in the previous chapters concerning landscape, it is our very locality that allows us to understand the wider world and the human. It is evident that artists, particularly those emerging artists examined in this thesis and interviewed in this project, are concerned with their shared locality. This is the effect of Aboriginal art on non-Indigenous artists, a reinvigorated desire to examine the place we live in. What is important in this field is to further consider the viewpoint of emerging artists.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the influence of Aboriginal art on an Australian ontology of painting. This question has been addressed through three major areas of impact and intersections between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art that are at the core of contemporary Australian painting—the possibility of influence, the idea of landscape and appropriation.

As a non-Indigenous painter, this research has been driven by the associated studio practice and the influence of Aboriginal painting. *Chapter One: Literature Review* established the context of this research, that of the emergence of the discourse of the contemporary, postcolonialism and the developments of conceptual and expanded painting. Within this context, the discourse surrounding the impact of Aboriginal art on the Australian artworld has been rapidly increasing and developing since Aboriginal contemporary art established an indomitable presence in the 1980s. Further to this, there has been a significant shift in discourse over the course of the research project, one that acknowledges a growing practice-based and conceptual influence of Aboriginal art and calls for a considered response and engagement from all contemporary Australian artists. The voice of artists, in particular emerging artists, is under-represented in the discourse. In this thesis, this has been addressed through interviews conducted with both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists and empirical research that has continually informed the writing and practice.

The western classificatory languages of abstraction and modernism, along with the ethical and political tensions surrounding influence and appropriation have created a discourse often characterised by disengagement. The thesis has endeavoured to address these tensions from a contemporary perspective, acknowledging difference, not as a philosophical and ethical boundary, but as an opportunity to engage beyond the western paradigm. This has been achieved by approaching the areas of

intersection between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art through the ideologies of expanded painting as a space to consider and experience difference.

Significant to this approach is the application of French philosopher Jacques Rancière's model for theorising the artistic disruptions of the dominant temporality. This model was applied in *Chapter Two: The Possibility of Influence* to the case study of Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili and the associated studio practice of the author—allowing an examination of this influence beyond ideas of aesthetic confluence. This chapter further established the approach of the author, and the positioning of the studio practice in the field. By engaging with the influence of Aboriginal art through practice-led research, the debate is moved beyond the ethical and political impasse of non-engagement and into a new space of negotiation.

This case study represents one way of negotiating the influence of Aboriginal painting in a field that remains contentious. The idea of influence discussed through the theories of British art historian Michael Baxandall and Australian curator Quentin Sprague, is less burdened with the postcolonial power imbalance and could be understood, instead, as the potential for intercultural dialogue. Ultimately *Chapter Two* argued that by engaging with this influence, artists are actively responding to the context of working in Australia in the 21st Century.

It is evident through *Chapter Two* that there are areas of engagement between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art that despite postcolonial critique, are informing the practices of contemporary artists. The paradigm of landscape was identified in *Chapter Three: The Idea of Landscape* as one of these areas at the core of contemporary Australian painting. The developing influence of the discourse of country in Australia and the impact on non-Indigenous emerging artists is apparent through a growing appreciation of Aboriginal art, and correspondingly, philosophical approach to the land.

This shifting approach to landscape incorporates different spatialities and temporalities that break with the European timeline of colonisation.

In *Chapter Three* the work of Sydney-based artists Tim Johnson and Ildiko Kovacs and Gija artist Churchill Cann was examined; three artists for whom landscape has provided a space to negotiate the complexities of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia through the conceptual and intuitive ground of painting. Drawing from their experience of living and working in Australia, their works construct social landscapes that resist cultural boundaries. The landscape, and the field of painting itself, is offered as a performative site of reciprocity, a reimagining of Australia through the shared experience of cross-cultural negotiation.

The following chapter *Chapter Four: Emerging Artists: Case Studies in the Idea of Landscape* considered how emerging artists with a growing knowledge of Australian colonial and postcolonial histories are approaching landscape in their work. This was addressed through two exhibitions co-curated by the author: *Out of Site* (2013) and *Landscape Too* (2014). *Chapter Four* focused on the work of two collaborations: Distanciation. and e.k.1, and Sydney-based emerging artists Jonathan McBurnie, Mark Shorter and the author, Hayley Megan French. These artists engage with Australian landscape from a specific urban context that is directly concerned with understanding and addressing the tensions of colonial cultures—problems of location and dislocation, difference and connection.

As non-Indigenous artists question how to incorporate Aboriginal understandings of the land, the idea of landscape is no longer dominated by a Western view of the world, however encompasses the shifting between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous approaches. This demonstrates a desire by contemporary artists to consider their own context working in Australia.

The final chapter, *Chapter Five: Appropriation and UnAustralian art* discusses appropriation as an important field for cross-cultural learning.

The chapter concluded that questions of engagement and ethics are no longer whether to appropriate, but how to use this tool to negotiate and strengthen cross-cultural understanding. Appropriation is fundamental to the developing relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art, as can be seen in the work of Brisbane-based artist Richard Bell.

Chapter Five also presents a counter argument to art historian Rex Butler's theory of UnAustralian art. Where Butler suggests that young artists are not concerned with their Australian context, this chapter argued that artists are in fact thinking through their being in Australia, often through practices informed by Aboriginal art. This is the effect of Aboriginal art on the wider field of painting, a reinvigorated desire to examine the place we live in and consciously participate in its future. It is argued then—from the context of an emerging artist—that a discourse of separatism and disengagement is not productive in creating and nurturing artistic relationships and thinking through the future of Australian art.

Ultimately the research has placed the author's practice critically in the field of Australian painting. The thesis has outlined a position on the debates that define the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art, making a case for these relationships as the basis of an Australian ontology of painting. This argument has been framed through the author's understanding of expanded and conceptual painting as a way of thinking and making that encompasses the contemporary acknowledgement of difference and non-linear temporalities. The author will continue to develop this framework for future research. The research has also raised and addressed a number of key questions with regards to the future of Australian art, including: How does the influence of Aboriginal artists on non-Indigenous artists reframe the way we read the field of painting in Australia? Do we need to find a new approach to incorporating Aboriginal understandings of landscape? How can appropriation be approached to further our understanding of what it means to live and work in Australia? With further consideration of an integrated understanding of Australian art,

and the voice of emerging artists, this research will continue to raise and address such pertinent questions.

The thesis has also contributed a new resource of interviews with artists, art historians, curators and gallerists working in this field. The collection of interviews in *Appendix A* raises a number of common threads not discussed in the thesis—due to the length constraint—including: the idea of colonial guilt, collaborative relationships, and the plight of NSW Aboriginal artists. Future research will build on the research framework established in this thesis, to further examine this collection of interviews.

As Australian contemporary painting develops, it is important for all artists to consider their practice in relation to one another, beyond the boundaries of western modernism and postcolonialism. In contemporary times, it is not about placing ourselves in a global context, as the boundaries between countries are increasingly disintegrating through globalisation. It is far more important to place ourselves in relation to those alongside us.

As this thesis has established, the attitudes and practices of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, particularly those emerging artists who have entered the artworld in the 21st Century, present an alternate viewpoint to that of the dominant discourse. This viewpoint is one that is concerned with a shared locality, furthering an understanding of the place in which we live, and consciously participating in its future. The relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and artists are at the core of a philosophy of painting—one that directly questions what it means to be making paintings in Australia today. In moving forward, it is imperative to further consider the viewpoint of emerging artists whose approach reflects the encompassing ideologies of the contemporary.

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Appendix A: Interviews

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Interview with Gabriel Nodea, 27 January 2012

Warmun Art Centre, East Kimberley Region, Western Australia

Using the painting *Warmun Dreaming* as a guide, Gabriel takes me (and Alana Hunt) on a short walk with three stops, in the area surrounding the Warmun Art Centre. At each stop he tells the story of the Warmun Dreaming.

Although it is being developed by the Language Resource Centre in Halls Creek, there is currently no standard spelling system for Kimberley Kriol. In this transcript, 'bin' is a past tense marker.



GB This is the Warramarn Dreaming. See that circle there, see that white croppy area on top of the hill there, that white croppy in the middle there? That's the eagle dreaming. Eagle he owned the land, that's called Warranany. That long hill right there, that called Garrallai. That small hill called- see there, all over the place- (that called) Goalla. The Eagle he owns this Warramarn, I mean he owns this land and he decides to call this flat area Warramarn.

HMF In between the hills?

GB This flat country, yeah.
Now pronounced *Warmun*. Ok...

(Walk to second place)



(Pointing to the Kangaroo on the painting)

GN So that kangaroo is travelling from North towards the South.

HMF So which way is north?

GN (pointing) this way

HMF (gesturing) so there, coming this way?

GN Going down that way (direction of the photograph). The eagle thought he owned the land, but (the kangaroo) decided to have a rest here.

HMF The kangaroo decided to rest here?

GN Yeah, but the Eagle thought he gonna own this land so he got his spear and he threw it at 'im but he missed the kangaroo and the kangaroo hopped on towards the desert. And the kangaroo, you find that blacky rock crop down below the bridge, that kangaroo.

(Walking to third place)

HMF How long you been painting for Gabe?

GN I only paint now and then, once in a blue moon.

HMF Did you start when you were young or...

GN No, no, 2005, just before that new gallery bin opened (gesturing towards the Warmun Art Gallery).

HMF Just before it opened?

GN Yeah, I went there, that opened on the Tuesday. That Friday I walked around and them putting up all them paintings up there for that exhibition for that new opening. Official opening. People from all over came. I walked around and said there's no paintings here about Warmun. No story, so I decided to crush some ochre, got myself a big board, worked right through the whole weekend and returned it on Monday.

HMF Oh good.

GN Yeah I wanted it up there and I told them the story, this story now.

(Third place)



GN When he threw the spear, this the *Garloomboony*, the long one, here see, that the spear, and when that spear bin land, the short pointy end of the spear bin snap. This one here, it's all part of the *Garloomboony*. (gesturing to the mountain) as far as your eye can see.

HMF That's the top of the spear (the mountain)?

GN The sharp pointy end of the spear.

HMF And this bit here is part of the spear?



GN Yeah.

HMF Right.

GN This is my interpretation of this one. When the kangaroo got back to the desert, he kept looking back to Warmun. He seen something what the eagle hasn't noticed in Warmun.

HMF What's that?

GN So he was in the spirit world, and man came from the man world. He decided to send a man over to live with the Gija people.

HMF To tell them about it.

GN Yeah, to tell them about it. And in the desert he had a dream and he saw this corroboree. Old man showed them all this corroboree and Gija country. And he told them Gija people, and this man he didn't know how to speak Gija, he took the Gija from the dream. And testing him okay, saying the coroboree and the country, "where this country?" and he pointing to the right direction to where the country was. That man was Rover Thomas and the corroboree was *Goorirr Goorirr*.

Interview with Alana Hunt, 28 January 2012

Warmun Art Centre, East Kimberley Region, Western Australia

HMF Would you mind starting by telling me a little bit about your practice?

AH My practice defies singular definition. Well, I think one of those things is that my art is less about producing an artwork, and more about finding ways to make art work, to get art working in social settings and environments. That's always an important part of my practice, I spend a lot of time thinking about how people will engage with it, what kind of resonance it's having, what it's communicating, what it's making people feel. There is a lot of thought that goes into the works.

I do say that in terms of form, I work with whatever sort of mediums or forms feel necessary at that moment to best communicate or facilitate whatever it is that the artwork is doing. Mostly I use new and old media forms, I use a lot of writing in my work, some video, some bits of photography. But usually the video and photography is secondary to the other things that are going on in the work, which is more about lived social encounters. And I use the internet too, increasingly I have.

HMF When we have been discussing your work over the last couple of weeks, there have been a couple of things that you have said that have resonated with me in relation to how I have been thinking about Aboriginal art and how it functions. One being your idea of art working; another being the idea of culturally charged encounters. Do you see Aboriginal art as creating a space for culturally charged encounters?

AH Yeah definitely, which is probably why I have been interested in it as well. Unlike you I was not so much ever interested in the form of Indigenous art in Australia but more about how that art is moving. Also if you think of pre-European contact, the idea of what art was within Indigenous society—and a lot of non-western societies—they didn't have this term for art, it was a bit different...

HMF It was a part of life.

AH Very much so and that is something I try and incorporate into my own practice, not necessarily just from an Indigenous perspective but just that idea of art being more embedded in life than a lot of art has become in Western environments and non-Western environments now, it's all sort of mingled up together. So I was always interested in what Indigenous art meant culturally in a pre-European context, what cultural practices meant, and also the

transition of what cultural practices mean today in an environment where colonisation has firmly taken root. That's what's interesting because you have to understand these processes as very nuanced and ambivalent in themselves. Contemporary Indigenous practices across Australia are very diverse, obviously, and so shaped by local experiences and histories of encounters with white people that have shaped that. It's not like nothing is non-traditional and it's not like Indigenous culture only exists now in a Western sense when it's a painting that sits on a wall. It also has resonance in a cultural non-Art (with a capital A) environment, as well as in an environment where you have Art (with a capital A). Is that making sense?

HMF Yes.

AH [Referring to Warmun Art Centre] These paintings here—at one time you can look at the Art Centre as a giant production house of art that's going out to fill peoples walls, and basically to fill white people's walls, which it is in some ways, in many ways. But at the same time the cultural resonance of the process of people producing that art now and also the very subtle ramifications of having their voices represented through their paintings and placed in white environments, white dominated environments, also says something. Very gentle undercurrents of accessing and understanding of Indigenous culture from different areas and also just the presence that Indigenous culture exists, that it hasn't been wiped off the face of this continent, which people in India thought often. I would be in seminars and they would speak of Australia as a place where the Europeans wiped all the Indigenous inhabitants out. And I would be like "no, they are still surviving and that's their strongest thing, that they are still continuing, the oldest continuous culture in the world, they've survived that brutal encounter." And sometimes people would not get me. I had this 50 year-old academic journalist just look at me and tell me that I was a white person who was uncomfortable with hearing my country Australia being spoken about as a violent place like that, and I was like no you are completely disrespecting the Indigenous people who are alive, there now and doing things, existing so strongly in different ways. But they didn't really get it.

But it's very hard for people in India to conceive the idea of Indigenous art as spanning urban and remote contexts. In India the equivalent to that would be folk and tribal art which is not considered contemporary and is still very heavily relegated to the realm of craft where the folk and tribal artist's don't have names in themselves. So to be able to speak in a way that would place our practices along-side Indigenous art in an exhibition, that you could curate an exhibition that had Indigenous and non-Indigenous art

sitting side by side, was really misunderstood. I spoke about this in my classes and people really needed me to explain it to them.

HMF So another thing we have been talking about is collaboration and whether or not it can occur in an ethical and effective way that's beneficial to both artists: that's collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists.

AH So what you're asking me is if I believe it can happen?

HMF Yes, and how that would work?

AH Yes I believe that it can happen. It's not easy. People need to get rid of this idea that they are raised the right way. There's a lot of very subtle prejudices and hierarchies that have been conditioned into our general ways of thinking that have their roots in ideas of a Western hegemony and ideas of primitivism in different ways. To really approach that kind of collaboration I think it has to be very sustained and long term. I'm not sure if it can happen quickly, it has to happen in a way, where people can genuinely come together. A lot of non-Indigenous artists could come into this environment in Warmun with the idea that their artistic practice is somehow higher, somehow more developed, more sophisticated.

HMF And that's something that you have seen with artists that have come here?

AH Definitely. I guess it's the basis of all cross-cultural interaction that you really have to approach it with the idea that the other, whatever you are looking at, has wonderful things, really with an open mind to learn from that experience and that other culture without having some prejudice that your way is better. Without trying to place hierarchies of judgement, I guess, and to understand these things of your own terms. It needs a lot of patience and a lot of thought and a lot of equal engagement.

HMF One of the problems with the outcomes of the collaborations seems to be that for the white artists they often end up with more exhibitions, more notoriety, more grants, residencies, things that further their professional development, that the Aboriginal artists don't seem to get. How would it look for the collaboration to be mutually beneficial for the Aboriginal artist living remotely?

AH Just before I answer that, and bring me back to that question in a second. It is sort of different, so in many ways it's quite easy to be an artist in a remote Indigenous community if you have a good art centre there. Because, as an art centre worker, I apply for residencies with people, you get all your materials supplied, you get a free studio space, Maggie writes grant applications, I write

residency professional development applications for lots of people here— Roseleen, Bessie, Gabriel, different people, for them to go different places and do things. So they have numerous full-time workers applying for grants, making sure they have materials, sending works to exhibitions and making sure all that stuff happens. Which I don't have at all. You can imagine if we had someone applying for grants for us, applying for our residencies, organising exhibitions, and selling our work full-time. It's a very different environment. Getting a studio space, materials, exhibitions, everything is sort of there. But at the same time because of my education and also my sense of self-empowerment that I was given growing up, I can go out and get these things myself, although it's hard and you are working all the time and it's tiring, you can go and do that. So remote indigenous artists get a lot of things but they get different things than urban or white artists would get. Also a lot of things don't get to them and things get passed around in different ways. If artists were very proactive, their careers could develop much more, they could develop a more critical understanding of what the artworld is and how their work fits in to that, also how to think critically themselves and creatively themselves and to put that into painting.

HMF I guess what I am wondering, trying to work out is, how would you judge whether a collaboration has been mutually beneficial? Because the two artists are operating in two very different worlds, would you have to judge it on the sense of cultural understanding and gaining of experience and knowledge and understanding of art-making or differing art practices and how they relate to each other?

AH You have to judge it on all these different planes. Like how much money both the artists are earning, what it means to them as friends, as co-practitioners, what it has brought to the remote community, the larger community of that artist and their life. I think you have to judge it on personal and professional levels and short-term and long-term gains. Where we are critical of a lot of the residencies that come in here is that they are very one-way, people come in and artists from outside come in, they learn about Indigenous culture in a very shallow way, sometimes they don't even learn actually, they just watch and place judgements, then they go on and show their work outside in big galleries and no one in the community sees it, no one in the community gets to critically engage with what they've made. No one is really asked about what was produced. They are taken out bush in a token way, 'yeah I'll take you out bush and tell you something' but that's not real collaborative engagement.

HMF It's definitely something interesting to think about, how you could give, what are the best ways of giving back to the wider community

during, and as a result of, the collaboration and their overall participation?

AH I would say showing their work in the community, as well as talking about your work and wanting to understand other people's work. Teaching people in the process and also being taught by them. It should never be that white people are just coming in here to teach Aboriginal people. Their knowledge has to be respected, really respected because it has been so neglected and disrespected in so many ways continuously. It really needs to be placing Indigenous people more in the position of power to disseminate their knowledge.

HMF If there was a collaboration that you deemed successful on all those different levels, what kind of impact do you think that could have on the wider dominant Australian culture?

AH I don't know. A ripple. It would depend what the project was about.

HMF I'm thinking if there was real understanding in that kind of exchange, could it then have a really important educational outcome for Australians?

AH I don't know if you can talk so big. Jonathan Kimberley who is coming here, Jonathan is a painter as well and he did a collaboration with Patrick and apparently that was cool they both painted and stuff. I find it hard to imagine any single project having an impact on dominant Australian culture.

HMF I am thinking more ripples, like you said, but if these relationships started to grow and there were more of these relationships happening.

AH It should happen in a way that doesn't just make the Indigenous community here more Westernised. Make them more able to work on computers. It needs to make the dominant culture more able to speak Gija, more able to understand Indigenous world-views. Not just getting Aboriginal people to fit in to a white society but that society equally, if not more, able to understand Indigenous world-views, histories.

HMF You mentioned to me a couple of days ago, that when you hear someone say they are influenced by Aboriginal art, you feel an immediate tension. Where do you think that tension comes from?

AH Histories of exploitation and appropriation and the larger history of colonisation here and the desecration that's wrought on peoples' culture, stealing their land and everything. So are you going to take their culture and art now as well? And put that to your own uses?

But I also said that influence and appropriation without consent are very different things. Being out here for the past year will definitely have an impact on my own practice. Definitely.

HMF How do you think working here has influenced your work or the way that you think about art?

AH I'm not sure it's changed how I think about art so much. It's probably deepened many things that I already thought about art, it's more about, it's exposed me to a side of Australia I didn't have much knowledge of before, in a very real sense, other than reading about it. It's exposed me to histories that I didn't know about and how very real those histories are in the present moment, how recent they are, how gut wrenchingly recent they are. How there is so much of this country that is not spoken about, not understood or acknowledged and how there is still so much happening in this country that we don't know much about. It's brought home how real colonisation is. It's changed how I relate to urban environments now, definitely.

HMF In what way?

AH Makes me feel very sad when I go there because those environments would have once been as rich with story and special places as this place is and a lot of that isn't there anymore. It will influence my practice in terms of understanding a different world-view, which has been there since my Undergraduate studies in Sydney; was really deepened in India; and now here. I could go on and on. It's more those ideas, those things that are inherent. I am not sure how they are going to come out in my practice but I am sure they will. Unavoidable.

HMF One last question for you, why do you think Rusty Peters is such an important artist?

AH Just as a person he probably he has the most richest knowledge of culture in the community at the moment. He has a very rich understanding of Ngarrangarni stories. His stories are so rich and complicated for his paintings. He has an immense amount of cultural knowledge. He also has quite a strong understanding of art and he is also very strong about what type of art he wants to make and what his own personal art is about. He is quite conscious of the fact that his style is different from others and he is critical of people who copy or people who paint the same thing again and again. Through Jirrawun, he has had an informal critical arts education there, I think. But he is just a deep thinker and education has been central to his life, educating himself, learning other people, he is a very deep thinker. He'll sit and think about his painting for a week or two before he starts it. Or he won't paint for months and then

he'll start. He is able to straddle that deep knowledge of culture and translate that into works on canvas in a very genuine and strong way.

HMF Thanks Alana.

Interview with Rusty Peters, 28 January 2012

Warmun Art Centre, East Kimberley Region, Western Australia

This interview was conducted with Warmun Art Centre Studio Coordinator Alana Hunt (AH) present. The interview was transcribed by Warmun Art Centre Cultural Programs Coordinator, Anna Crane. Crane has provided a few notes on the method:

“Although it is being developed by the Language Resource Centre in Halls Creek, there is currently no standard spelling system for Kimberley Kriol.

There are a few Kriol words that recur throughout the transcript:

'bin' is a past tense marker;

'la' is a preposition that translates as at, in or on variously;

also at one stage Rusty says 'watchin abat' the 'abat' means habitually doing something.”

HMF Okay, Rusty Peters.

Want to talk to me about your art? When did you start painting?

RP Oh lately. Oh I can't remember what year. When Tony was here.

Yeah. Yeah.

HMF When Tony Oliver was here. At Jirrawun.

Why did you start?

RP Well I didn't, you know... I didn't interest much for painting.

I bin start watchin you know and...

And Tony was... he had [with] Freddie [Timms], Churchill [Cann]

out la Wollongong.

HMF Yeah.

AH Gabiya [Where at]? Wollongong?

RP Yeah, that's where they bin paint there you know.

AH Wollongong in New South Wales?

RP Yeah. That's where he [Tony Oliver] comes from now.

He had Freddie and Churchill there painting.

I bin start, I bin start thinking. We bin go up camp there la,
camping la bush camp. You know that bush camp there.

No, la Kununurra.

AH Wollongong? Mm.

RP With Tony and we bin say to Tony "we'll paint."

And Freddie bin ask, well "Wanna join painting?" "Yeah I'll do it."

Well I bin start, I bin start thinking now.

HMF You started thinking?

RP And Freddie bin come, "Ah you interest? Ah this Tony Oliver, me
and him painting from Wollongong."

That two painting.

HMF The ones they'd been doing in Woollongong?

RP Freddie and Churchill. "Alright I'll do that." [I said]

We bin start painting... where I bin painting, start painting?

HMF Did they teach you how to paint or did you just paint yourself?

RP No I know. Nobody didn't teach me.

We bin start painting, out la Kununurra I think. No, yeah but...

We bin come la Crocodile Hole, painting.

When we bin start paint there, oh good thing.

HMF So what stories did...?

RP I bin start painting, I bin start thinking you know. But I don't... I
paint my own country.

I don't I don't paint for somebody else's country now.

HMF You just paint your own country?

RP Well you know before I paint I gotta thinking first you know, before

I paint.

You know what, what painting. Gotta know what country see.

That's what I do you know with my painting. Yeah.

HMF So you started painting your country?

RP And we bin "Ah well", Tony was saying "Oh why don't we borrow some money from bank."

We bin start painting la Kununurra then. Near la Frances side.

You know that next door from Frances [Kofod] place? You seen that house there?

HMF Yep.

AH Next door to where Frances lives.

RP That's where I bin start painting. I bin start thinking "Ah..."

I bin start thinking to paint you know that *Water Brain*.

Good while I bin start thinking.

I bin start to painting that *Water Brain*. Eight panels.

Oh everybody, you know, they got their own different style you know.

And they paint theyself.

And after a while we bin finish from there.

Yeah we bin come Bow River first, painting there. Do painting there.

That's when we bin go back to Kununurra, do painting there.

And Tony was there and Tony bin start lookin around, "Well we gotta..."

He bin talk Wyndham "I got a place over there."

"Might buy that little block up there la Wyndham."

Freddie bin buy that block up there la Wyndham for Jirrawun.

That's what everybody, you know... Every artist here, they got their own way you know, their style.

That's why... and I don't like somebody coming behind and watching and tell me "where this painting?"

I don't like that. Make your head go off. That's what I paint like.

Before I paint I gotta start thinking first for a good while.

Right, we bin painting...

We bin start oh make that place good, you know, everybody bin come there join us.

Rammey bin come there do painting.

Well, he really the first one—from the beginning, just Churchill and Freddie bin painting first.

I bin start thinking "Ah well I'll start." Freddie bin ask "Wanna join?" "Yeah I'll have a go" you know.

I didn't like painting much, you know.

But I bin "Ah, well righto, I'll start painting." I bin start painting, going on with painting now.

Start painting la Jirrawun.

We bin go... Before we bin go to Wyndham we bin go to Darwin. At the university, they bin do painting there and do printmaking. You know, print?

HMF Mm

RP Oh we bin there for nearly a month, everybody.

AH All of Jirrawun mob.

RP Yeah. Yeah.

HMF Went to Darwin?

RP The university, they do print work, you know, everything. Whole lot of people. All the different mob.

AH What, that was before you bin painting with Jirrawun?

What about you bin helping that old man, Jane's father painting. And you seen all that old painting down here.

RP Yeah that's the second thing but the first here with that old fella. He's the one...nineteen, somewhere round sixty one I think. Yeah probably. Well he bin start painting. I bin start watchin abat, he right.

"What you doin there", "Nah I'll just do painting."

He's the top artist. Then this bloke from Roadhouse bin come.

"You wanna paint for me?" This old fella bin say "Yeah righto".

That big painting there la roadhouse see? Get em over there.

Yeah.

HMF At the roadhouse?

RP The old bloke, that shopkeeper bin come there.

"Hey old fella," he bin tell, "Oh, you can paint for me now."

"Oh yeah alright."

And he [Rover] bin ask, "You wanna come help me?" "Yeah alright, I'll go."

He bin start doin' and I bin start too. I bin know his idea, how he paint you know.

I watch how he... everybody paint. I can do that you know.

But his way I bin doing for him, for all them painting.

He didn't pay me but, we didn't worry for money much, that old fella.

Oh we used to have a lot of food and thing there.

Everyone, we'd go up there get that free feed there you know. Oh dinner...

That's the way, we bin just paint for nothing you know.

AH And how did that old man paint?

RP Well he bin paint different way you know.

Oh he bin just paint there and I bin help him for that corroboree, do painting you know.

Help him do them for that corroboree for dance-em, Goorirr
Goorirr.

Doin that painting there you know. Oh even them, even the school you know.

Them old people bin always come teach them young people, them kid you know.

Oh them teenage. But they didn't... some bloke bin paint. Some didn't like to paint much.

That old bloke, he didn't get glue. He bin get gum you know, that river gum.

Boil em up, and the charcoal.

But no brush, he bin do it with his hand sometime...

That's what... you know everything bin goin on and on now, keep going.

Different painting.

AH So he's saying those old people used to paint with the river gum.

RP Yeah, mm. They bin boil-em up.

HMF Yep.

AH Instead of the glue.

RP Boil-em up and...

AH They'd mix it up with river gum and...from the sap.

RP When he's...when he get watery now, you can use it just like a glue you know.

HMF Yeah.

AH And thamany, how was that... you know that kind of painting old people did in Warrmarn,

RP Mm.

AH Was that painting different, was that different painting to what Jirrawun mob were doing?

RP Yeah different, but all the same, but all different style you know.
All different way that paint you know.
Yeah, like here.

HMF All different styles but similar.

RP But I bin thinking, I bin start thinking for this rock painting.
There la my country now.

HMF The rock paintings?

RP Well that's what I'm thinking. Every time I'm thinking.
He got that you know for cultural line, that language, that story, corroboree - that rock.
Well only this fella, I dunno if they know that, biggest story for that rock painting.
My old grandfather bin show me "see there, he got all the different mark there."
"This the language," well he bin tell me that's the... "well if you want to have children you can teach, just like a read and write."
Biggest story that rock painting. That's the way, lotta this... everywhere round this place they got rock painting. They don't know.
But I know myself what old grandfather bin tell me.
All that painting you know; that fingerprint, footprint. Everything.
That's the biggest story there.
That's why I got this bad and good, it is in two different places.
All the marks. I know, I can read it out.
I try... that's what I bin learn. But I didn't want to paint you know.
This, you know they start do painting now. "Nah I can't do that."

That's the important thing for us you know, for that rock painting.

That paint there forever, for everybody you know.

That painting, that story. Big story there for us, for corroborree, for language and teaching young people.

Different place you know. That woman and man side different la that rock painting.

AH But when you painting thamany, when you making your painting, you're thinking of your thamanyji, your jawooj?

RP No no. Yeah that's what I... I don't think about anybody. I think about what my old grandfather bin tell me.

That's the idea... that's when I thinking, that's what I thinking when I sit down, when I'm thinking about do painting.

That's why I do all them painting - they've all got story you know got language. That's why we all lot fighting for English you know, "Two ways," for Gija and English.

So kids can read-em out. We wanna try, like a book. Put-em la school, they can read-em.

Two-way you know, Two-way.

AH Through those paintings.

RP I dunno who can make a book.

All the little book, they might be make... so they can read it out there. That's what we want these young people to do you know.

HMF Yeah.

RP Oh even all these teenage people you know. They can't understand [Gija] they dunno what.

They don't know what that painting [means]. Even all this fella too.

They paint same painting, I can see.

Sometime they copy that painting from somebody else you know.

They want it easy. But they don't follow, they don't thinking really you know.

You know big story and lotta meaning for us, you know.

AH Mm.

RP Well I never la school, but I know my grandfather bin tell me. Bush school, language that's all. I dunno [Western education].
My old grandfather bin tell me "If you go to school, you'll be lost."

HMF Mm.

RP Oh that... we bin do painting there. We bin come to, what-you-call-em, Crocodile Hole do painting there. Phyllis [Thomas] bin showin us there.

Good painting.

Bin start selling, we bin start selling them. That money bin start coming.

We bin shift to Bow River, we bin do painting there. Old fella bin showing us for painting. Bow River boss. For painting, old Rammey bin showing this lot.

HMF Mm.

RP Do painting there. We bin get back to Kunununurra do painting from there, we got that building in Wyndham. Do painting there.

That other bloke do painting there now.

Oh few of that young girl bin come join us for painting you know for... daughter[s] for Kitty [Nocketta].

Lot of these young fellas. But I don't copy anybody for painting. I start thinking another way now.

My way, from my grandfather. Do what my grandfather bin tell me.

HMF Yeah. Always the same.

RP I don't... I can go to have a look at him but you know. I can't copy that.

I can easy copy that thing but I don't want to. That's just for me that.

That's the good way you know.

But some painting here... they do painting here but, they don't put story you know, Gija way in language.

HMF Oh.

RP Oh yeah my sister [Mabel Juli] too, he talk. When Frances [Kofod] come he talk gotta language.

HMF And you've done some painting with some gardiya as well?

RP I don't painting with that what-you-call-em acrylic paints from there Tony bin come and I bin go to Melbourne do a couple there for two months, painting. For that big exhibition in Melbourne.

AH Which one?

RP For William Mora you know.

AH Yep, but you not painting with acrylic?

RP No no.

AH Gardiya paint they call it.

RP I don't, I don't use this acrylic paint. I don't know.

HMF No, the ochre.

RP Mm and bush ochre this. This the really painting.

But a lot a bloke I see, you know, acrylic they do-em.

It's good, but I don't like it.

HMF Yeah.

RP But a lot of this... I think they like acrylic.

AH What about when you bin painting with that... you bin painting with white people - collaborating with them?

RP But I don't like it. What that?

AH You bin collaborating with white people, painting with them, like that Peter Adsett.

RP Yeah, I bin paint. But I bin paint my own way, myself.

AH Mm.

HMF Yeah. Did you enjoy... did you enjoy doing that? Did you enjoy working with Peter?

RP Yeah, yeah.

HMF Yeah?

Did you ah do anything different? Or you just, you just painting your way?

RP I bin paint my own way. I don't, you know... not different. I got my own way, my own way.

That's what I always do myself, you know. I don't...

HMF Yeah.

RP Nobody there to tell me, I know what... I can't tell that bloke, I don't tell him "Ah you do it my way." I don't tell im that.

HMF Yeah.

RP I bin do 'em my own side and he didn't tell me to do it this way you know.

HMF Yeah he didn't tell you to do it his way, yeah.

RP I bin do it my way, my way.

HMF Yeah. So do you think it's good for gardiya to paint with blackfellas?

RP Well I dunno, I never see white people much painting.

I dunno.

HMF As long as they don't copy?

Do you think that would be good to do that? For education?

RP Hm? If whitefella want to do it, they can do it. Whatever. I dunno.

HMF Yeah? So you know how I was saying, lots of gardiya they are are influenced or inspired by Aboriginal painting.

RP Yeah yeah, probably. I dunno.

HMF Do you think that's a good thing?

RP Yeah, yeah.

HMF It's good that they like your work?

RP Well if they do...well if they ask me, they can go get a copyright to ask me.

Whatever, they can.. if they wanna get some painting for, you know what-you-call-em put-em on all the t-shirt. If they ask me, get permission from me. They gotta ask me, they gotta ask me first.

HMF Yeah? You know how...

Yeah they gotta talk to you.

RP You know they talk to me. Well if I say no... I might say yes or no.

Between you know.

HMF Yeah between you, yeah.

RP Well Alana might ask me to do that. "Will you do it for me?" Well I gotta think about it first. I might say yes or no, you know.

AH What's he saying?

HMF He's saying if you wanted to use his work, he might not let you.

And what about that *No Name Station*?

Those Chinamen and the gardiya that came to visit?

RP Hey? Oh yeah.

HMF Did you think that was good?

RP They were real kind people you know them people.

AH No but...

RP Yeah.

HMF Alana's going to get the catalogue.

RP Well that's what my old uncle, well he bin tell me when he was la

Chinaman's Garden. He bin say "Ah..."

My uncle he show me paint, how he paint that paper.

AH Thamany,

RP "Nah," he bin say, "we don't paint there, we do 'em la rock."

But he was a good bloke. Chinese bloke, he had his wife there.

AH But there was a big mob of Chinamen and Afghan men who lived out here and they were always kind to the Aboriginal people.

RP Yeah they bin kind people. And they know, when they bin telling them what that rock painting is you know, all round there.

All the story, they know. This one always... that's a big story in there.

AH So what about when this mob came? Well, there's your painting, but...

Where's all these photos?

When all this mob came, jawooj, you bin like 'em these people?

RP Yeah, they're kind people that mob.

They didn't... they just wanted to look. They didn't ask question much you know.

Yeah, they're good people you know.

HMF They didn't ask many questions.

RP They bin just come here and visit round, look la place.

They bin ask for that place called Chinaman's Garden right.

HMF Yeah.

RP True. Well they bin look around. They didn't ask questions for the painting you know.

They bin just look around there. They bin buy them board from me.

But they bin really ask my brother.

"How Chinese people," "Oh yeah kind people" you know.

HMF Yeah.

RP That's the way, they good people that mob you know.

They bin here before we bin born you know.

They didn't ask to explain "Ah what's this place" you know.

They bin just lookin round la inside that gallery.

Oh they get dinner, we get dinner with them mob.

They bin telling man story, what, how things going themself...

That's why they bin ask, "what this place called Chinaman's Garden?"

Might be couple of hours drive.

HMF Yeah?

RP They bin go see that place.

But they didn't see that place where they bin killing old people
[Massacre site at Chinamans Garden where garidya killed a group
of Gija people].

All that Chinese mob and all this mob bin go close.

HMF Mm.

And you make those big paintings the *Two Laws One Spirit*
paintings. About black people and white people living in Australia.

RP Well that's... white people and black people all the same.

They the same but they, white people, got they own Law, blackfella
got they own Law.

But we together now, the white and black see, we all friend
together you know.

HMF Yeah.

RP Got two Laws you know. That Law, that big spirit that mean he give

you idea. You might be thinking "Oh I'll do this, read and write.

What I'll do? I'll do that job." That's what that painting, that spirit does.

That's one big spirit for we, white and black.

That's what I bin tell 'em for that painting I bin give.

HMF Yeah.

RP White and black well that's what we all, together.

HMF Yeah all together.

RP Well you got your own mind, I got my own mind, he's got his own mind himself. You gotta do that, you can do that - work.

AH I hope so.

RP You and me, I can't tell you "Oh, you do that."

AH Yeah.

RP And I can't tell you and you can't tell me.

HMF Yeah.

RP That's what the spirit that two Law, he's there always. The corroboree, well you know they can put the corroboree.

Or you want to play music, you can play yourself. You know.

That's what he, that's the Two Law is there.

White people got they own way you know.

HMF That's a good story.

RP Well that's why we, Aboriginal people, we joined and white people joined together see? We all friend together.

That's what this...

HMF Yeah that's a good story.

You've got good stories in your paintings.

RP Oh not much. Yeah.

HMF Yeah they're important, they're important stories.

RP That's why I done that big *Water Brain*. I bin start thinking for that *Water Brain*, we from the water. Everybody, white and black. That's what that's like, from the Water Brain well that's that...

When we born we don't know anything about... When we little baby. When you grow up you still got no mind.

HMF Yeah.

RP When you get bigger now you can, this some sort of... that water brain... Everything fallen out now.

When you grow up now, bigger now well catch 'em memory now.

HMF Yeah.

RP That's when you start talking now. That's water brain.

Inside la we body all fall apart, just like a something like a spirit. That's how we got the mind now. We do what we like now, we know what we doin.

That's what that water brain is.

When we grow up, we start thinking now... The old people would come and tell a man how he bin born "You right?" [they'd say]. You'd listen, "Oh yeah."

They'd teach a man like that.

My old grandfather bin teach me everything, language.

He bin tell me "[Gija sentence]." I bin say "What?"

"We bin la water," he bin tell me gotta langauage [in Gija]. I didn't know what he bin say at first.

Then he bin teach me.

Well you can read-em that *Water Brain*, he got a story, full story that one.

HMF Yeah.

RP That's the one, well everybody know what this water brain is, well they know now.

Some white people don't understand much. They don't know.

They don't interest much for [culture?] You know?

HMF Yeah.

RP No matter where, overseas or round the world, all bin come from water.

Oh yeah we might go there some day. Might come down [to where Hayley is from?]

Well that's the word [story], that's the word bout this Two Laws.

You must be thinking today "Oh I'll do that read-and-write, I'll do something story, do something for myself." That's from that Two Laws you know.

HMF Yeah.

RP You might say "Ah I'll do cooking now," he bin start cooking now see? And we kind to one another inside you know.

That's what this Two Laws. We got a one big spirit - Ngarranggarni.

You know what the Ngarranggarni mean?

That mean that's what that Two Laws is.

AH My jawooj bin teaching me, my jawooj bin teaching me.

RP Well that's what, that's what that Two Laws is.

HMF Yeah.

RP You might be thinking today "What I gotta do, oh,"

"I might ring up my friend" you might say, to yourself. "Might ring up."

Or you might ring up la me, "Oh I'll ring him up."

You might be ring up anytime, might be when you're sleepin.

Well that's inside, la your body now.

Or even my son he always ring up from that, from his spirit. We've got one big spirit we.

All round the world right across the world you know.

HMF Yeah.

AH Yeah.

RP We're kind to one another, that's how we are together. You know between us we got the same spirit you know.

That's how we're kind to one another.

HMF So when you wanna make a painting about that, do you think about how you're going to paint it?

RP That's why everytime when I stop, I start thinking, "how I gotta paint?"

"I might do it this way or..." I might do a story for you.

I bin start thinking you know and you bin ask me for interview.

Well I'm thinking real hard first you know [about] how that mind mine, you know, my brain my Ngarranggarni, the spirit.

That's what I'm thinkin'.

HMF Yeah.

RP Hard for that painting, big story. But you bin come there for interview and... That's what that *Water Brain*, ah, that *Two Laws* is.

HMF Yeah.

RP I might start thinking about for you [Alana] start cooking and working real hard.

Very hard to, you know, to think about.

Well not too hard for me, I know.

AH What do you mean?

RP Well how you working and real kind la people, working and cooking.

Me fella gotta do painting for you one day.

I start thinking about my brain, my spirit, my Ngarranggarni.

And even here, you one day.

HMF One day.

RP Nah, I gotta think about it first.

I can't do it, [got to have] a good story.

Well that's what this *Two Laws* is.

HMF Yeah, well thank you Rusty.

Interview with Cate Massola, 30 January 2012

Warmun Art Centre, East Kimberley Region, Western Australia

HMF Okay, so I'll just start by introducing you. So what's the research that you're doing at the moment at ANU [Australian National University]?

CM My research is looking at learning to write in creative practice informally in social settings.

HMF And you're basing a lot of your research up here at Warmun?

CM Yeah, in the East Kimberley generally, but yeah, it's starting out here. We'll see if it goes to Frog Hollow or Bow River or any other outstations. But at the moment yes, people from here.

HMF So you were here in 2010 when the *No Name Station* residency took place?

CM Yeah.

HMF And how did that look to you as a residency?

CM In terms of its outcomes I don't think it was very productive, as a residency it seemed all over the shop. I'm sure that they did want some level of spontaneity and dynamism that comes with a collaborative project such as that but I don't think that there was much time taken to facilitate an understanding of this country here and Gija people and Gija culture between the three loose groups that came up here, and that was the Chinese artists, the Gija artists, and the contemporary Australian artists.

HMF So do you think that that was more a flaw in the organisation of the residency or a lack of engagement from the artists?

CM I think there was definitely a lack of engagement from the Gija artists and some of the Chinese artists. So there were flaws there. And what was the other one you said, it was either the artist or the..?

HMF Or was it more like it wasn't organised well?

CM Oh, it was organised really well. They got heaps of money, they had tents, they had sleeping bags, they had their flights sorted, they had everything mapped out. But I think that it, where it really failed was that there was a lack of understanding across the three, these three loose groups. But particularly a lack of understanding and willingness on some people's behalf to really spend time here with these artists that they're supposed to be collaborating with and

understand where they were coming from not only as individuals but as a community, as a culture, a group of people.

HMF So while the residency took place did anybody make any work?

CM None of the Gija artists made work with the residency.

HMF What about the Chinese artists?

CM Charlie Smart did some work like, she put on a puppet show one night. And there was Newell [Harry] I think his name was, he was taking photos. And Quentin [Sprague] and Michelle [Newton], maybe more Michelle was taking photos too throughout. I saw the Chinese curator, I don't know his name, writing a lot. And there was the female Chinese curator who was taking notes and doing something. But yeah, there was no collaboration with the Gija artists and as far as I could see there were lots of discussions to which a lot of the Gija artists didn't actually attend, people talking about art and collaboration and their own practice. But I don't feel like it was an organic pollination of ideas which as I see the definition of a collaborative project such as this, is what it should be about. It was really forced. From what I saw the Gija artists that I was hanging around, and that's mainly Rusty Peters, didn't want to engage, he didn't want to go out to Chinaman's Garden, he didn't want to have dinner here. Rammey [Ramsey] got involved a bit but that was mainly through Anna Crane because she interviewed him for it. And he came here for food, a couple of the barbeques we had. People turned up for food. And you know, some of the Chinese artists went down one night to the basketball courts and took photos of them playing basketball with the kids. All the work that came from these artists came out of the Warmun Art Centre and was painted before. Maybe Marika Patrick did one.

HMF Why do you think that the Gija artists, so that was Rusty [Peters], Mable [Juli], and Rammey [Ramsey]—why do you think that they were so hesitant to be involved?

CM I think that because a lot of, because they're all strangers apart from Quentin and Michelle. Some of them knew Quentin and Michelle from Jirrawun. Because there was a cross-cultural communication breakdown. Because it was forced upon them. I don't think it was something that evolved organically from their own will and I think that is the shortcoming of that project and it is in other projects when it's instigated by people who are outside. This didn't come from Rusty or Mable or...

HMF And it was very short too wasn't it?

CM Yeah. Really short.

- HMF** They were here for a week?
- CM** Yeah. I think yeah, or maybe a bit over a week. Yeah. It was really forced and people don't want to be forced.
- HMF** And some of the things you've been telling me about this big catalogue that they've made using paintings and photographs from a corroboree and things that had nothing to do with the actual residency.
- CM** Yeah.
- HMF** Do you want to explain?
- CM** Michelle's photo essay on a tjurunga that occurred for an old lady whose husband died that I was at the corroboree and taking photos myself ended up getting printed in the catalogue and the tjurunga didn't happen at the time of the residency. It's based, it's at Bow River Station which is where Rammey, one of the artists is, or was living at the time. So I can see that connection there but this mob, the *No Name Station* people didn't witness it, didn't have anything to do with *No Name Station*. It was a corroboree for someone who died, it was really special, a really, really special corroboree that was quite private in fact for the community and the family members and it got printed along with the ceremonial objects for that corroboree which I find really problematic.
- HMF** Yeah, understandably. And the paintings from the three artists were made before the residency occurred?
- CM** Yeah. Yeah. This is all old Mable's. Yeah, Marissa Kingsley, Marika Patrick, Marika's works, this is old.
- HMF** So as a result of the residency then was there any benefit or change or anything for the Gija artists?
- CM** I think some of them enjoyed going out to Chinaman's Garden because people like going back to country and hearing their stories and seeing those places. Marika and Marissa were happy, they got a trip to China. But they told me it was a joke like, Rusty was not as far as I could tell, engaged or stimulated or interested. Mable partly knew I was happening. And they sold works and they got that out of it which is good because they'll get an income. But I'm not sure what they sold.
- HMF** But they didn't see the exhibition in Melbourne did they?
- CM** No. No, no, no.
- HMF** And they wouldn't have seen any of the works of the other artists?

- CM** No. There was a roundtable discussion during the week, during the residency week where they talked about their practice and I know Gabi [Gabriel Nodea] was there. I'm not sure about Mable or Rusty. Yeah. And these photos, yeah. Yeah.
- HMF** So it's definitely been glorified in that catalogue?
- CM** Yeah, it's been highly glorified and I think that it was really problematic and I question why it went on and what their purposes were. I'm sure they were open in their catalogue essays about discontinuities and people not communicating well, and cross-cultural haphazardness but I thought it was, yeah.
- HMF** So for, when you think about this objectively it sounds like it would be potentially a good idea that could have some nice outcomes, potentially.
- CM** Yeah.
- HMF** How do you think that that would, what would have to be different for that to..?
- CM** If that were to occur what would need to happen?
- HMF** Yeah.
- CM** I think more time with people and I think that people should want to do it themselves and it not come from the outside in and forced upon people. If relationships were built up between, I don't know, I could imagine Alana [Hunt] talking about her practice with Rusty and like, somehow, because they spend so much time together they might decide to do something together one day and that would be totally organic and from their own desires rather than this, "Oh, let's fill out a grant application and get thousands of dollars to ship some Chinese artists because the Government's got money to burn in cross-cultural, or relationship with China building..
- HMF** Especially a relationship with China.
- CM** Yeah, it was like Chinese Year, or it was something about that year was, they got heaps of funding to have projects involved with Chinese people, or some reciprocal relationship. So it needs to come from the ground up.
- HMF** Do you know whose decision it was to base it in Warmun?
- CM** Well, it was supposed to be based up in Jirrawun which was operating, it was on its last legs, and it actually disbanded. It was organised when Jirrawun was still happening up in Kununurra or Wyndham, wherever it was. And this is like, planned ages ago and then Jirrawun disbanded and there was a whole shit fight about

that, something with an art centre, the incorporation. And so Quentin and Michelle who were the last sort of coordinators there suggested coming here because Rusty came down here and Rammey was living down at Bow River and was painting through the art centre. So it was sort of just like, "Oh, we might as well move it to the Warmun Art Centre from Jirrawun." Yeah.

HMF Yeah, okay. Any other comments on it in general?

CM No, nothing that springs to mind. And like, I wrote the catalogue essay with Maggie [Fletcher] and it was like, I was just talking about Warmun and the history of Gija culture and it all felt really compartmentalised and there wasn't much pollination between the sort of different groups. And nothing, no amazing works came out of it. I think Brook [Andrew] showed old work, or work that he'd made not related to this. And Newell ended up doing something about his history which I think was informed by him hearing stories about people's history and family. But it was pretty loose.

HMF So as a result of that experience do you think that the artists who would now be really hesitant to do anything like that again?

CM No, I reckon people are really open but I don't think that they invested time and effort in it so it doesn't really matter. It was just, like for Mable, Rammey, and Rusty it was just another exhibition overseas that they were involved with. And for Marissa and Marika, well they got a trip...

HMF Their works got sent to somewhere.

CM Yeah. I mean, they're top artists.

HMF Okay. Well thank you for talking to me about it.

CM That's okay.

Interview with Adam Hill, 11 April 2012

Campbelltown Arts Centre, Campbelltown, New South Wales

HMF I was looking you up and I read that you trained in graphic design, which makes sense. That aesthetic is quite obvious in your work to me.

AH It is.

HMF How did you end up being a visual artist after you studied graphic design?

AH I was influenced by—I was working at the Australian Museum on an exhibition called the Indigenous Australians, which I think is still hanging, still there. And it was my first job in Sydney, coming in from the west. And so my title was Exhibitions Officer, so it was quite a broad job, which meant dealing with graphics, dealing with photographic imagery and designing the text panels throughout the exhibition, and also liaising with peoples involved in the exhibition. And there was an artist named Kevin Butler from Wollongong, an Aboriginal artist. He was employed to paint a series of small mural boards to be mounted in the middle of the exhibition. And I was kind of feeling the pressure of slaving away behind a Mac at ridiculous hours, then I thought, “well this is pretty cool, getting paid to be an artist-in-residence”. And I thought, “one day, I’d like to do that”. And—well not quite this big, but anyway, here I am. It was Kevin Butler who influenced me and became an inspiration as a visual artist, using a brush rather than a Mac.

HMF Had you been painting before that?

AH No. In fact, it was after I finished that three-month contract that I returned to western Sydney to get some community experience. So I actually needed a complete break altogether, and I changed tact and I worked as an Aboriginal Education Officer in a public school, in Riverstone. And because of the great school hours, I was finishing school and going back where I was residing, and I was painting at all hours of the night.

HMF So you grew up out in the western suburbs?

AH Yeah, Penrith.

HMF I’m from Baulkham Hills. So not too far.

AH No, not too far, but this is quite a distance really [Campbelltown].

HMF It is from the city, it’s quite isolated.

AH Well it’s not too far now with the M7.

HMF I lived in the inner west for a while, while I was finishing undergrad, and then now I'm back at Winston Hills. I know that area quite well.

AH Yeah. So it was like cruisy doing the school hours, and then I contacted this guy that started an Aboriginal resource centre and – it was a quasi-Aboriginal resource centre in an industrial unit in Penrith, where I lived. And so I started to befriend some of the Aboriginal artists who were painting there. I would hang out there late at night and he gave me these massive boards to paint that he just had lying around, so I just started painting those, and then the first actual public artwork is still at Riverstone Public School at the junior school. Actually, I think it's something to do with Juvenile Justice nowadays, like an office. But either way, it's still in the building on Elizabeth Street in Riverstone, and that was the first public artwork. That prompted me to continue painting.

HMF So you started with murals?

AH Yeah, pretty much.

Or at least large sized artworks, which is quite interesting. So I've kind of gone full circle.

HMF Was that a bit of the influence from Kevin Butler, or just what was available to you at the time?

AH Not particularly. It was just the fact of—I worked with a number of artists involved at the exhibition there: some from really remote regions; traditional men, tribal men I should say, who came in and it was a tremendous job to get inspiration from visual art as opposed to graphic. I just felt I really needed to change the rhythm of expression for the rest of my life.

HMF So you've come back to doing wall murals, public art?

AH Yeah.

HMF Why are you so interested in public art?

AH Well because it's fun decorating ugly walls, and also it's fun seeing your artworks on a large scale, especially to make reference to. And I guess it's getting as far away from a dingy dark little graphics studio as possible, in the outdoors.

HMF So in my opinion, I think in the generation that I've grown up in, and going through art school when I did, I see Aboriginal art as being one of the biggest educators in Australian society, on Australian history and race relations. So you worked a lot with the idea of Australia's race relations. Where do you see that at now, as a

result of art? Do you see any progression in that, coming from Aboriginal art in particular?

AH Yeah, a slow progression. There's certainly a lot of people learning about social justice through what has been my kind of interest in art practice, but there's still a long way to go, of course. It's undeniable, monopoly and remote region art, quasi art. But I think if the same people who are dealing in remote region art put half the amount of effort into the exposé of urban Aboriginal art, the world would be immediately brought up to speed on the real fact of Aboriginal Australia, but rather, people are hooked on labels and iconology, I guess.

HMF It's interesting how much money and resources is still being channelled into the remote centres.

AH Yep.

HMF So it was much later that urban artists were recognised, wasn't it? It wasn't until the sort of late 80s and 90s.

AH Yep. The bottom line is marketability of course. So one has to question the responsibility of the major institutions and their role in that education process, but of course, it's more savvy to be involved in more high-end dealership art, which is why the focus remains on promoting only a certain kind of Aboriginal artist, because of the perks that are involved.

HMF So would you see that as one of the major issues that's currently surrounding the relationships with Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art and artists? Is that real lack of acknowledgement of urban artists?

AH Yeah. I mean I guess broadly speaking, we live in such a society that's so much under the thumb, that the conservative weight of the way people think here, that's of course going to be directly reflective of how those works are received by the masses. So it doesn't make sense to confront anybody in a major institution, especially when the major demographic are conservative, extreme right-wing conservatives. So it's taken me a long time to learn to live with that, which is, that it's just the way it is. But it doesn't deter me from acting on it, but still nobody has demonstrated the acceptance of my work and commentary the way that I would've hoped for.

HMF So that reception of your work, is that mainly from the institution end of things?

AH Yeah.

HMF Or are you finding that with journals and publications as well?

AH No, journals have been favourable, like there's been a lot of articles written and so forth, but it is about what hangs on the wall, ultimately, and the fact that after 13 years of painting political commentary, I've been governed all the way, where an image of my choice would end up. And if I had a choice of what was exhibited at the NGA [National Gallery of Australia], it wouldn't have been the one that they bought. So we're always governed. There only seems to be a very select few of so-called naughty artists who are allowed to exhibit their commentary, i.e., Richard Bell. You know how long it takes for people to popularise a thing here, because it's just so subjective, how people view.

HMF And as you were saying, it's so frustratingly slow, any kind of change takes so long. It's one of the things that I think is going to be a focus of my research, is just that idea of tension surrounding these relationships. And obviously with all the artists, it's going to be coming from different places. So I find it interesting that it seems to be the biggest tension for you, like you're saying, is that reception of your art from major institutions. What about from other artists? Do you have any issues with how it's received by other artists, Aboriginal or non-Indigenous?

AH No, not really. I mean there's enough comradery that I've found in, I guess, people I choose to be associated with, within art, but us artists tend to live in our own little artistic bubble. So I would say that one thing that I'd question, in that sense, is a lack of collaborative processes that we could actually pursue, because we're all caught up in trying to make ends meet and trying to fight through, I guess.

HMF But there's definitely a power in collaboration, to do that.

AH There is, and it's certainly waning here in New South Wales. Boomali artists have been hanging on by a fine thread for some time now, and I don't know what that is, but there's no reason why that shouldn't be a world renowned institution in itself. But it took somebody, like proppaNOW to form in Brisbane, where a collective that escalated itself to international notoriety, whereas Boomali's still operating on a volunteer basis and getting few reviews and articles written about it. So I certainly—rather than having forums and talking about how great proppaNOW is, or Richard Bell, the people that they still grasp onto, or talking about Tracey Moffat or whatever, we need to look internally, inside ourselves, and that doesn't happen. There's these illustrious forums and everyone talks about how great each other are, but nobody says, "hey, why is New South Wales Aboriginal art this weak still?" After being in the eighth year of the Parliament of New South Wales Aboriginal Art Prize, which is an amazing exhibition every year, why is there still no interest from international curators for some of the artists involved in that show each year? And part of that is to do with the

internal politics that prevail, and it really sucks. So politics will exist everywhere, but it seems to me as though everybody's run off with their own little highlight. Like everybody's run off and become a curator for a select group.

HMF So it's like they've got blinkers on?

AH Yeah, and the bottom line is I don't believe as an individual, that as a free—well Djon Mundine does a pretty good job, but he's a breakaway as well. He's been forced to—it seems he's been forced to have to accommodate a certain group of artists, and he's done that pretty well in recent times, particularly with the Bungaree Project, which is paying homage to Bungaree, the guy from Broken Bay, where he's specifically got a collective of 25 New South Wales Aboriginal artists together to produce works, together as a national jury and collective, which is about to happen. And why he chose to focus specifically on those artists, he goes through the Mosman Art Gallery, is because we've been consistently ill-favoured over all of these years, because of what I just mentioned about, the lack of interest in promoting urban Aboriginal art in New South Wales. So Djon Mundine has run off, kind of like a Robin Hood, in solely promoting urban Aboriginal art from New South Wales, whereas everybody seems to remain focused on desert stuff because of its marketability. So hats off to Djon Mundine, but that doesn't come without its daggers in the back either. He's kind of running from certain people who once were a collective think-tank, but now they're kind of branched off and gone with their own solo accolades.

HMF So that's starting this year, that project?

AH Yeah. It is actually, as of May. It will be bound together and I'm pretty sure starting a national tour shortly thereafter. It's an amazing project and it's taken someone like him and his gusto to pursue that with his weight in the art world, because I can't imagine the expense of such a project. It's mammoth, which is probably the first time it's happened actually.

HMF So one of the other things I wanted to ask you about was your collaboration with Adam Geczy. How long have you been working with him?

AH Well we've been hypothesising about how to bring down the art world for about ten years, and we get together and enjoy his fine taste in wine and just bitch about everyone. Working with Adam? It's been about five years. So we've done a couple of collaborations, a couple of video collaboratives, and we'll exhibit next year in Holland for the first time together.

HMF So your video works together, they haven't been shown anywhere?

AH They have. We screened one piece at Carriageworks, and there's excerpts of that on YouTube. Adam Geczy, Adam Hill, if you put that on YouTube.

HMF You guys are definitely a very interesting collaboration, because it seems so intentionally political.

AH Well it's such an honour to work with him, because he has considerable weight as well, because of his international exhibition status, but also, his intellect and his respect here as a writer for magazines. So I actually feel like swept up in a way and carried along when I work with him, which is—he's probably the ultimate mentor for somebody who produces stuff like I do. It's one of those universal rogue connections that just came from nowhere.

HMF That's a kind of collaboration you want to be in, isn't it? It's just come out of mutual respect.

AH Yeah, that's the way it's meant to be. It's like when you think about—this is the ultimate in art for me. It's how to create an artwork that attacks the evil in society. And ultimately, the greatest audience is overseas, because people are still growing up here, after 224 years of colonisation. It's still fresh, so people are still—the reality hasn't hit yet. So you go take it to somebody in somewhere like Berlin or France, Paris, places with an artistic history that predates boganism here, then it's more greatly appreciated. People have gone through 500 years of politics. We must be the laughing stock at dinner parties in Prague and whatnot, like what the hell?

And unjustly, because we are producing work, they're just not seeing it.

So it's great to have Adam, who has experience showing in places like that, and who speaks a handful of languages and can speak on our behalf. It's something I'm really looking forward to exhibiting.

HMF Well he mentioned a little bit about that show, just in passing, and he said, "you should ask him about the show we've got coming up in Holland." And in about two minutes, just rattled off ten of his ideas.

AH That's pretty typical.

HMF It sounded like it's going to be really exciting show.

AH Some of my—you know how you get phone calls from people that once you hear their voice or you see their name on your phone, it's just like, "wow, this is like taking 12 Berrocas in one go", and you just really look forward to it. And he rings up and says, "seven silver bullets, and we'll package them in velvet, in boxes. We'll make a series of ten, your job is to tell me whose name goes on those

bullets.” It’s like, “wow, that’s going to leave me with no sleep for a week.”

HMF I get what you’re saying about showing that stuff overseas, and how it’s more appreciated, and it’s probably easier for you guys to make statements like that, but it’d be good for the show to come to Australia afterwards as well.

AH Definitely, and no doubt, he’ll push it to. If it comes off the way I imagine it will, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t be in an exhibit here. The only thing that will hold it back is that conservatism and the potential of burning bridges for the conservative art critics who are in bed with the organisers. So that’s the only thing that will prevent it, but there’s no reason why. Either way, it’s going to look amazing catalogued, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it sells over huge. It’s quite an extraordinary project if it comes off.

HMF And when is it? When about next year?

AH I’m hoping it’s late next year.

HMF What’s the name of the gallery?

AH Utrecht, which Adam’s called the – it’s like the Penrith of Holland, right up my alley. I know how to deal with those people, because I’m sure there’s some mulleted and driving around in Holdens, dropping burnouts every night as well. Anyway, we’ll see.

HMF Are you working in any other kind of collaborations at the moment?

AH I’m working on those [gesturing towards his Campbelltown Arts Centre commission works], but there’s a few little ideas that I’ve got about that, that are formulating, and it’s basically going to be on—it’s going to be the proof in the pudding really, as to where we stand as Indigenous artists, potentially collective, as opposed to running off in our own accord. Because a certain famous member exhibited this year in the Archibald, Aboriginal artist, said to me a few years ago that we’ve all become separatist and we’re not acting as a tribe anymore. It doesn’t matter where we come from, different people, from different language groups, the Aboriginal art world is in dire circumstances, so we should actually all be banding together, which would create tremendous weight, as we discussed earlier, internationally. But since then, I’ve not heard boo, and I don’t have much connection with those artists. So I’m realising it’s time to push that, and it’s going to really test us, to really demonstrate who’s become too caught up with themselves. Because I’m already witnessing it on a grassroots level here. Part of me doesn’t want to pursue that, because like anything, things will mature and as we mature, we tend to soften a little and not pursue

those kinds of things. Part of me wants to just remain in the hills and just make my own stuff, because my stuff is always in public. And also, I've always like to challenge the collective thinking, so we'll see.

HMF Well I look forward to seeing all that happen. So whereabouts were these bus stations, for the project that you're doing now?

AH Campbelltown Station.

HMF Is that a big depot?

AH It's massive. It's like a half a kilometre along really, and there is a huge amount of buses that service the outlining areas here, because it's quite expansive. This was a project that was passed to my colleague. He couldn't do it in the end, mainly—I'm imagining because of the size of it, but he's a very busy individual as well with international stuff. So at the time, he said, "will you take it on?", and I had this window of opportunity before a tour in May. So I fitted it in, and then realised the size of the task, had to bring in a helper, and it's going to be a tremendous thing because of the new style. So there's a massive snapshot, massive advertisement for the new style.

HMF I saw the painting that Andrew Collis bought at South Sydney Uniting, and I noticed the similar kind of aesthetic here.

AH That's right.

HMF With the colours coming down in the foreground.

AH Exactly. So this is a 2D version of that, which is the only way I could figure it would work on such an enormous scale.

HMF So what's the idea behind the new style?

AH The new style, it's really quite poignant actually, and it's a lot of fun because we fed a different story to the Council, but Michael Agostino here after the initial meeting, he picked up straight away, and he was very clever with his observation. And see the new works are an aesthetic attempt at glorifying imprisonment in one's own land. So hence the eucalypt mounted on found objects, on the found boards. So the way I've mounted them, it becomes a quasi-prison cell. So that was largely fuelled by my experience working with the inmates at Goulburn Gaol, a couple of occasions, and saw the beauty and the talent that existed inside there. And then walking out, reading the abhorrent statistic that one in four Aboriginal people are in Gaol. And so I wanted to really address that conspiracy, and this is the way I figure that doing—not only with my national tours working in schools, constantly seeing bush and camping out and whatever, and seeing just about every species

of eucalypt on the continent. And I've always had an affiliation with eucalypt, so I decided to pursue this new style and give myself a refresher. But the poignancy that exists in this one is—I fed to the Council that this is a concept of bringing the bush back to the city. In a sense, it is as well. It's my own personal regrowth or regeneration of what had been taken away in the urban environment, but actually, the bottom line is, it's a giant prison cell.

HMF And they haven't picked up on that, would you say?

AH I reckon perhaps not. Some of them are quite blatant, but all thanks to Michael for taking on the concept. There's nothing wrong with it, it's factual, and once again, it's a tremendous achievement through art. Because people are picking up on it already, just passers-by, "no, it looks like a Gaol, ha".

HMF So for the general public, will there be information up near the boards?

AH Yeah, the alternate blurb. And we've done some tricky things in the main essence of the new works. Where I'm at right now is the odd one out. So there will be a bunch of sticks in a formation, mounted on the board, and then one of them is irregular compared to the others, and it's an off colour as well, so it really stands out. And it's a personal biased comment on my own practice, and that is that I've been the odd one out in the art world, in the Aboriginal art world, for a long time, but whilst being the standout as well. And then not being wholly recognised for both. So I'm not being highly recognised for the latter, I should say, but being a stick in the mud as well. So in these ones as well, it'll be a whole collective of lines representing the eucalypts in a certain colour, and then there's the odd one, that's quite irregularly shaped. And we've gotten really quirky in some of them, some really obvious little symbology, some representing sexual preference, some representing prejudice, in colour format and also the shape of the odd one out. So the idea is that they will—as a collective art work, on one stand, they can use the whole station, quite a similar thing happening in the linear format. But there will be entertainment for those who spot the irregular ones and see the pattern, and hopefully become excited by actually taking a walk all the way along to monitor the irregular shape, and pick up what's going on.

HMF Do you think that the Council wouldn't have accepted that information as a blurb, like your intention behind the works?

AH Probably not.

HMF So you're just sort of safeguarding it?

AH Yeah. Who wants to confront the truth? Especially when you've got the massive Juvenile Justice Centre just up the road, which I've witnessed firsthand the number of Aboriginal inmates there.

HMF Well I think it's going to be a fantastic work.

AH It's going to be a lot of fun seeing it go up.

HMF Can't wait to come out and see it all up. Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Interview with Nick Pike, 2 June 2012

Blue Mountains, Sydney

[The third speaker is Nick's partner, artist Tamara Mendels (TM)]

HMF So if you would mind starting with just giving me a brief overview of your practice and your study and where you've been...

NP Yeah, well, I guess it's always been predominantly painting abstract. I started doing landscape painting, that sort of was the thing at the time but it was really the materials that kind of spoke to me and made me kind of want to pursue painting more.

HMF When was that?

NP Maybe 20 years, or no, a bit less, about 18 years ago, so 1995 probably, and that was just with a friend of mine down in Wollongong, he got these oil paints and I mean, I painted through high school and all that sort of stuff, but using charcoals and things, and never really pursued it any more than that, and we'd all just sit around and get stoned and draw pictures and stuff. And then one day he just got a cheap set of oil paints, like Chinese, a Chinese set and he painted this picture and then showed me this picture and then by stage he'd gone and bought all these other oil paints and said, "Let's just play around with these," and then it was just that application of paint and, you know, having used acrylics and all that stuff before but then the oils had a certain, I guess, soothing or a chemical or whatever it was that made me want to just use oils from then on in. And I have moved away from it more recently into water colours, which I guess are acrylics anyway, but yeah, oils still form the basis of a lot of work. And good quality pigments just have effects on me that I like and that's why I choose to use them.

And then – so then at the time I was doing landscape with this weird figurative stuff in it as well, just looking at Australian landscape painters, and then my friend and I would just go into the bush and paint a landscape, living some weird Australian landscape painter sort of, you know, Brett Whiteley, Arthur Boyd, Drysdale, those sorts of guys, Brett Williams and then I felt like I got as far as I could. I mean, we were picking up books of the—this is down at Wollongong as well where you haven't got the galleries and things so just getting books on American painters or European painters, Van Gogh impressionism, abstract expressionism and then we would just try and imitate those guys really, so we did try—I did try a few different things and then thought—and I wanted to do this full time so the best way to do that for me was to study because that meant that I didn't have to work. That was the main reason I applied for Wollongong University. They looked at my portfolio and said that I should go to TAFE and get more technical ability.

HMF That's interesting.

NP Yeah. And I think the same year I applied for that I also applied for Sydney College of the Arts which was my first preference. COFA at the time expected a really— because I was just below mature age, so they expected a really high TER to get into their course, but Sydney College, which was my first preference anyway—I had a friend that was going there—and I walked into that interview and I was actually quite high at the time and bizarrely enough I had the interview, I think Matthias [Gerber] was in the room, I can't remember the other faces, and when I got up to leave I tripped over my bag and actually almost fell over and I thought that was— yeah, they all kind of laughed and thought it was really funny, so they let me come there.

So I studied first year and then by the end of the first year I'd convinced my other friend, Isriel Adams from Wollongong to come up. I mean, he had taught me so much about materials and things like that, and technique, but there was a whole new world there that we hadn't really explored, so I got him up there for the next year, and moved to a warehouse base in Redfern with about four or five other students from the college and then just started to explore exhibition practice, collaborations, curatorial things, group exhibitions, artist-run spaces and things like that. But by the end of the third I didn't feel that I was getting much—I didn't feel like I was learning a lot from the actual degree. I felt that I was meeting the right people and all that seemed right but by the end of third year I was I guess feeling a little jaded—but my art had changed a lot which I really appreciate—so then I left university and really just went crazy with the paint, not for any exhibition purpose or anything like that, just to do it. There was always, you know, there was always drugs around, it was some sort of weird neo-bohemian thing that I was doing, and yeah, so went through some sort of neo-expressionism. There was always some sort of primitive thing going on. And then I did the painting—after university that was probably the turning point.

HMF Did you start painting abstract at university?

NP Yeah, yeah, definitely.

HMF Straight away or did it take a while?

NP It took a while. I was still trying to—it was still coming from landscape and, you know, a lot of people say that every painting's a landscape or every painting's a self-portrait, but this painting was probably the turning point.



Big Boy and the Red Elk, 2003

There was nothing wrong with that painting and so I tried to replicate that, I tried to keep that thing going, which is not easy, it becomes so like repetition and so then I was having to use technology to do that, sort of employing printing techniques and, digital and projectors to try and repeat the same idea and, you know, flip it over.

HMF It's a really lovely painting.

NP Yeah.

HMF It's interesting because I know a lot of people have more of a lull and a bit of a block when they leave art school, but you were always more driven before you went in the first place as well. It's just interesting.

NP Yeah. And that was pretty much from being around the right people, other people that were motivated. You know, we'd work in groups and I was very fortunate for that.

They would criticise my work, they would say this is no good, this is excellent—so it was really a group moulding process and that's where I've been very fortunate and I know a lot of other people are

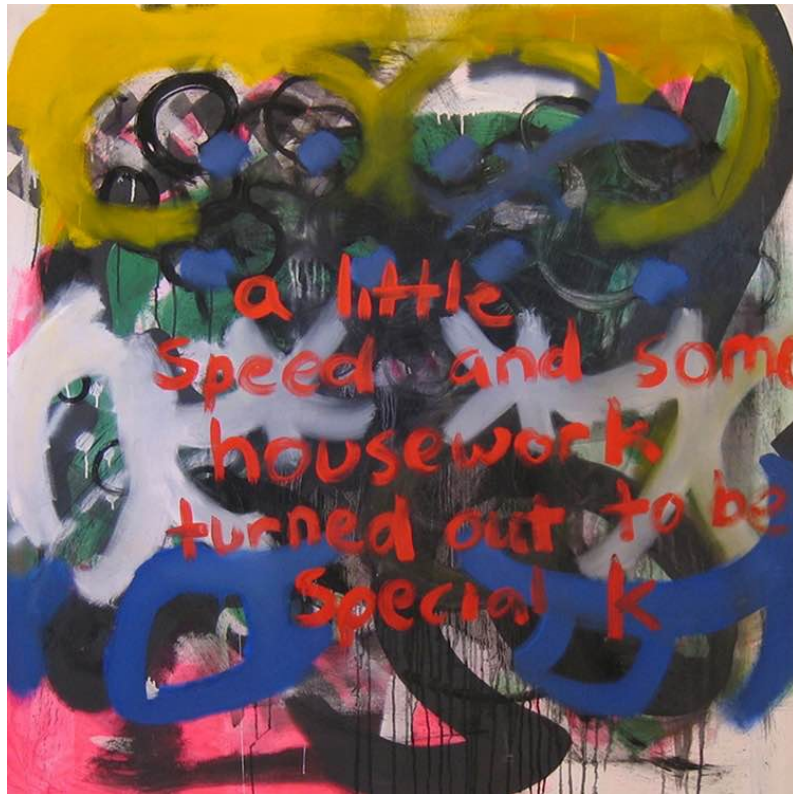
lacking in that area. They can still get to the same point but yeah, I think I got there a lot faster.

HMF Yeah, I think for some people they can only find that kind of group in the institution.

NP Yeah, that's right.

HMF But then that can be very limiting in itself.

NP Yeah. And I guess this is this neo-expressionism or—it's just abstract expressionism really, but that's where I spent a lot of time. I don't know how much of the digital stuff that I've got—but then I got to a point with this where I couldn't—I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to finish the paintings and then one day I sort of had this round, this painting that was almost done and I was like, "Fuck, what do I do," and I didn't know what to do next, which was really weird and then I just went with the text and it was just like some random sort of thought that someone had said, that made me laugh that afternoon, maybe, and I just wrote it down on the canvas, and then I was like, "Wow."



Speed, 2006

So that was this painting and that was sort of the basis of all the text works from there on in. So I did a whole range of these sorts of things and it was always with high quality pigments.

HMF And your text came from...

NP Yeah, just from social experiences, things that have happened to other people, sometimes to myself. This is obviously a more recent one. But the words, I mean, that phrase which was the first one, “A little speed and some housework turned out to be Special K”, I’ve done about four of these, and every time it turns into a good painting and so the words are actually the driving force. And I’d seen this form anyway, I’d seen it in so many different things but for whatever reason these two paintings – that was 2011 and this was 2006 and they’re still very different but for me, from the series that they were creating, they’re sort of the nicer ones.

So I was playing around with the text and the digital, trying to replicate that same painting but—so you’ve got these two paintings that are the same going out—I mean these are quite big ones, 160 by 160.

HMF So you repainted it?

NP So yeah, the text, the repetition which I was doing at the same time—how that all came together, was in this painting in 2007, *DMT*, so just using little squares again, it’s quite big, 175 by 140, each of these squares was individually hand mixed on a pallet with oils and then painted. It probably took a couple of months to do.



DMT, 2007

HMF It’s neat.

NP That was exhibited at the Sulman Art Prize in 2008 and that was good because you know the rewards in the industry aren't always coming, so that was really cool to be shown there and everyone's like, "You should do more of them, that's what people like," and I did a couple, maybe one or two, but it didn't feel like painting to me, it was just so...

HMF Did you do one on the reverse of that?

NP Yeah, I did.

HMF Yeah, I think you emailed that to me.

NP So that's both sides. But this isn't – it's still pretty good but the first one was a lot nicer. But I haven't shown this one yet, that's pretty big, it's like four and a half metres or something like that, long. And it took forever and I don't think I'd ever do another one just because it's horribly time consuming and then half my paintings end up just getting rolled up and, you know, where do you store these things, it's just bizarre. Yeah, so texts, and from here we went to America.

HMF What year was that?

NP End of 2008. And Tamara [Mendels] got a scholarship for Rotterdam so we were saving for that. Then that fell through but at the same time—so at the same time I won the American Green Card in the lotto.

HMF In the lotto?

NP The Green Card Lotto.

So yeah, we said let's go to New York instead. And yeah, it was just awesome living in warehouse lofts overlooking, you know, Brooklyn Bridge.

Yeah, and that's where I started painting the big double one of these. We took a whole bunch of works over there as well, I didn't really know how to approach the whole situation.

HMF I wouldn't know either.

NP We started a gallery where we lived, you know, in an artist building. In the second building, actually. The first one was just studios and then—all the infrastructure is there in America—you know, it's all free advertising and the people really get behind you and at our first show there was—we jumped on the back of an artist studio tour thing [SONYA, South of the Navy Yard Artists Association].

Yeah, Fort Greene, and you know, there was sort of 100 people at our first show or something so it was pretty – about a hundred people we didn't know.

HMF That's insane.

NP Yeah. It was awesome. So that was really rewarding. So yeah, we called that the Jon Frum Art Foundation and we're invited to do Miami Art Fair as part of the Fountain Group which is a bunch of Brooklyn galleries, so we went and did that. That was really cool as well, you know, probably 200,000 people through or something. We all just set up our own galleries in this big warehouse and then I got a work move to Los Angeles and set the whole thing up and just did it there as well, so yeah, America's really cool but I started to get sick, my lungs were really fucked up over there, in Los Angeles especially, with the pollution—I thought it was that anyway—and the healthcare was just not good and so it was like, "Oh, let's go home." And now it's sort of "Oh, why did we leave?" But Australia's awesome too. And I think in Los Angeles I started making these guys.

These are based on, if anything, mushrooms, kind of dealing with the networks and the colours, I guess, just to sort of try and be non-representational, if that's possible. I don't know.



Huichol, 2011

- HMF** Okay. Yeah, they're really interesting, those ones.
So when were you making those, Nick?
- NP** That was 2010—and actually, they came from water colours.
- HMF** They were with...?
- NP** These are oils but I started doing these little—these guys that are like at the back. And that was just because living in America it was nice to paint on paper, it was easier to transport, but there's still a rawness there but it's still really about the materials, you know, about what makes a good painting. Or with water colours people just want to see the granulation, you know, that that sort of gives it this dramatic thing, but it's also about the way you use the space, so really these are just big black crosses. And this ink as well, it's called acid ink, so there's always, for some reason there's this huge drug sort of thing that I like, so to say, "This is acid ink on acid-free paper," was sort of amusing to me.
- HMF** Of a mushroom.
- NP** Yeah. They're some of the digital repetition and things.
- HMF** So would you create that image digitally and then paint it?
- NP** Yeah. Yeah. But always using one of my paintings as a source for that.
- HMF** As a starting point.
- NP** As a starting point.
- HMF** And what program did you do that in?
- NP** Just Photoshop. And so yeah, that was nice too because learning a new program and then it was, you know, I can make these in Photoshop but how do I make them physically. I don't know why I felt the need to do that physically. And then I thought there must be some sort of digital printing technology out there and I got a job down in Alexandria, so this is maybe in 2006 or something, and showed them what I wanted to do and they said, "Yeah, we can do that." But they were sort of the leaders of that technology.
- HMF** So they printed it?
- NP** Yeah, they can print onto canvas—it's very expensive but I had sort of free access to it so I was very lucky there and I was stealing rolls of canvas and printing 50 yards or 50 metres of stuff and then using some to just paint back into it and fully paint over every bit that

was printed—but you know it is an oil painting, it doesn't really matter how you get to that end point, it's an oil painting.

HMF Did you change it when you painted it or you used—

NP Well, initially it does change but I was trying to keep it as precise as possible. There's little differences and these aren't as nice as the original but they're still really, really nice paintings in the end.

HMF How many years were you in America?

NP About two and a half years.

HMF So since you've come back?

NP These were really small so this year I've done a whole big set of these.

Yeah, I've been doing a lot of black and white, just water colours, just with this Indian ink. It's better than Indian ink actually, I mixed about 50/50 with this acid ink and it becomes matt. Indian ink is sometimes a bit shiny and it's like the paper just turns into black or something. It's really amazing and so just a lot of text work and kind of yeah, but with a rawness.

HMF Well, that's definitely a good overview. So has Aboriginal art impacted your practice?

NP I don't—yeah, I think it has. It was only probably four years ago maybe, probably before I went to America, I was always quite fascinated with their stuff—I haven't been up to Arnhem Land or done any of that, but that gallery in or the Art Gallery of New South Wales, that gallery downstairs, that for me is probably one of the best galleries in that venue, just because—some of the paintings there have that optical thing going on which I really like and which I was trying to achieve with the pixels and, you know, after seeing Bridget Riley's stuff in the flesh and realising how paintings could actually work when you weren't under the influence of drugs, I thought that was pretty amazing, but yeah, with the DMT one, the little pixels, I was trying to do this, like, like some sort of weird optical thing, get the vibrations going.

I'm not sure whether I was directly influenced by the aboriginal dot painting to do that but there's a similar vibration thing that I think that—well, I'm pretty sure that they're trying, or which they do achieve with the dots and even the cross-hatching and even—well, I don't know for sure but I think a lot of their imagery—if they're not just like an abstract sort of vibration panel or whatever that is, a landscape I'd guess they'd call it, if they are doing figurative stuff or maybe they're trying to recreate some sort of experience that they've had, a lot of that could be explained with a drug like DMT,

you know, it's like a compound and these flashes, the rainbow serpent, they're figures, entities or whatever, you know, potentially sort of alien encounters, a lot of those sorts of things that I'm quite interested in as well. And they might achieve it through a natural way like resonance from dancing and didgeridoo and things like that but, you know, Australia's so full of these psychedelic compounds that it seems silly to disregard that.

HMF There's definitely plants that were used to enhance perception in hunting and also increase an ability to keep hunting if they hadn't found anything.

NP Yeah. And so it becomes like the survival of the fittest sort of thing, and it's really the same with the artworks, you know, they're doing artworks and the good ones get taken off to commercial spaces and the community thrives and those families or communities are better off than the ones that aren't so good.

HMF So in terms of your art making, were you ever actually thinking about or considering Aboriginal painting that you'd seen when you were making something or trying to resolve some kind of painting thing that you'd seen from their work, or was it more that you see parallels after you'd made things?

NP Probably the latter. I mean, you can't help but be influenced by everything that you see—

HMF Well, it's been a very big part of our visual experience.

NP Yeah, I mean as a child going to the galleries or something like that, you know, you see the dots and things like that and there's that sort of cathartic application of the paint again, just that repetition, you know, that could be any process, it wouldn't have to be dots, which may be just a human instinct not so much a nationality or anything like that. But I guess the parallels come more like later on and, you know, these were done in LA and there's a huge Mexican influence in Los Angeles and living in a building with all illegal immigrants who had a marijuana shops and Mexican parties that we were invited to, and bands and magic mushrooms and all sorts of drugs and with their heritage coming through—and I never tried to replicate that at all either—maybe these are more just sort of kitschy or party decorations, you know, if anything, but paintings are probably meant to be just party decorations, you know.

HMF Can you tell me about the sacred site painting? When was that made?

NP Yeah, that was 2010 as well, so again in Los Angeles and always, like, you know, the colour is Cadmium Red and wanting to just paint on raw canvas – I mean, that's been primed with rabbit skin

glue, so there are always these primitive sort of urges that you sort of try to get back to that make an attractive painting, you know. When I came up with that idea of sacred, where I must have just seen the red word when that word was cut in half, then it was like, because when you are painting it is a sort of sacred thing, you are communicating with these higher things, whatever it is, and that's coming out through you onto the canvas so the studio can become a sacred site, but that was a sort of a humorous thing—humour plays a big part in a lot of my work and knowing that I could just crop the top of that with this red kind of thing that would maybe have connotations towards Ayers Rock, you know, like, I was an Australian living in Los Angeles and I was probably hungry for some home time, so that's why that one was done and it worked. You know, some of them never see the light of day and some people like that painting.



Sacred Site, 2010

HMF I really like that painting. I really love the red at the top.

- NP** Yeah, like Ayers Rock, I think that's what it is.
- HMF** Have you been?
- NP** Yeah, when I was young.
- HMF** Okay, one of the things I'm interested in is whether there is any dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists at the moment; and then with this increasing acknowledgment of the influence on non-Indigenous artists, there seems to be an emerging discourse around that and I'm wondering whether you have any experience in—or whether you think there is any kind of dialogue there.
- NP** Well, yeah, I don't know, I don't think that they're that willing—that the Aboriginal people want to share too much.
- TM** But then you wouldn't really know.
- NP** No.
- TM** You wouldn't know at all.
- NP** No.
- TM** Because you don't really hang out with any Aboriginal people.
- NP** Yeah, no, that's right, I'd have to go and spend some time with them.
- HMF** What about between the art in the contemporary work?
- NP** Well, no, there's definitely not. I mean, you don't see Aboriginal artists showing at artist-run spaces or in artists groups and things like that. I'm quite a good friend of Brook Andrew who I met in New York and that's maybe a different sort of thing, you know, guys like Jonathon Jones, and that's sort of Aboriginal contemporary art but if you're talking about the traditional sort of—
- HMF** All of it.
- NP** All of it, yeah. Well, yeah, I mean those guys are really at the top of their game.
- You're asking what sort of work am I doing, more recently I'm heading back to that sort of exhibition practice idea and playing around with those models and I'd definitely like to work with Aboriginal artists and things.
- HMF** Well, I just find it interesting that, I know Aboriginal art is operating in a number of different markets and on a number of

different levels, but it's definitely a part of the contemporary art world, as we experience it.

NP Yeah, yeah.

HMF But so separate from non-Indigenous artists that, like, there has to be some kind of meeting at some point and I wonder how that's going to happen.

NP Yeah, yeah.

HMF Because there's just been up until now like a relative silence around it, but it's got to change. I don't think it can continue.

I'm wondering whether—I don't know how to—whether there needs to be some kind of engagement or response from non-Indigenous artists who feel any kind of influence, but then that's very one way. And how would that go about happening as well, like would it be a matter of artists personally trying to organise exhibitions together or collaborating together or just actually getting together the way that we often do, like outside of our own comfort zones.

NP Yeah. I think it would be a good start. I don't know, but living in a warehouse in Redfern, we would have Aboriginal people come round and we'd have parties and gatherings and things like that. I guess there was always a segregation or something like that—later on they sort of—I don't know where they are now.

HMF Do you feel any tensions or challenges surrounding that idea of working with or being influenced by Aboriginal art?

NP No. No.

HMF That's good. And how about working in America for a while, did that change your view of the Australian art world and Aboriginal art?

NP I'm not sure. When we rocked up in Fort Greene and we were sort of the only white people on the street, in New York, like that was pretty scary, straight off the plane, but then you get to know the community and it's awesome, you know. They're awesome people. Not that that's anything like the Australian Aboriginal thing but—

HMF It is to an extent though, I think, because a lot of problems come from the fact that a lot of non-Indigenous people have not met any Aboriginal people.

NP Yeah. Fear of the unknown.

- TM** You don't realise how racist you are until you are around so many different cultures and then you realise.
- HMF** Until you are out of your own culture. Unfortunately, it's been sort of built into our culture.
- NP** Yeah.
- It's great with the traditional Aboriginal painting that they have got a way of painting, like, you know, when we're sort of going, well what do we do, you know, and have to sort of come up with our own ways of re-inventing it, but they're not really—with the traditional stuff aren't really trying to re-invent that, they're just sort of doing what sort of comes naturally or what—
- HMF** I think it would definitely be interesting to what happens with remote artists over the next 20 to 30 years, because a lot of these artists that, like you said, we've kind of commercially grabbed onto, their style has often evolved from the style of their country and the people they're painting with, it's taken a step forward from that to their own personal style and then that's been latched onto.
- NP** Right.
- HMF** And then they've gone with that and painted more and more like that, and so the more successful artists are kind of, they're still painting their country and their dreaming but in a more personalised way, I guess, is what it seems like.
- NP** Right, yeah.
- HMF** So I think that even the art centre scene could change dramatically in the next couple of decades. It will be interesting to see.
- NP** Yeah, yeah.
- HMF** One more thought: so do you think in this context now that, like yourself, if you're a non-Indigenous artist who has discovered a relationship between their own work and Aboriginal art after-the-fact, do you think that there's any need to comment on that in any way, or just go, yep, there are definite similarities there and go on with your practice?
- NP** No, I wouldn't comment on it. I'm comfortable in the way I got to that point. There's not that much of a—it's a completely different thing anyway—no, I don't think there's any need to comment on it.
- HMF** Did you want to talk specifically about any of your paintings?
- NP** Not necessarily.

HMF Let's have a look at the ones you put up.

NP Yeah. Here, painting on raw canvas and raw linen, that's what's sort of lacking from a lot of the contemporary stuff. I think there's a warmth in tradition and there's a warmth in the Aboriginal painting as well. A lot of contemporary stuff is based on just the annihilation of that and sometimes it feels really cold and sterile and I definitely don't even want to get involved in that sort of thing now. The world can seem sort of confused enough as it is, without having to worry about it but... But yeah, I did about nine of those sort of dottish – the dot paintings, but you know, again, employing these little white dots here, you know, you've got this cathartic sort of feeling you know, and it's very soothing so you know, painting is sort of a healing tool, you know, it's awesome as well.

HMF Yeah, and it's very meditative.

NP Meditative and, you know, I'm not too interested in galleries at the moment, I'm just painting for myself a lot and then wondering, in this modern age how much more stuff do we actually need to be creating, you know, probably the paintings should be created out of light so that we're not leaving too much more mark and wasting materials and products and things. But cave paintings and painting on bark stuff like that is pretty cool, not a bad way to go.

Follow up question via email, June 2012

HMF Do you think that Aboriginal art has expanded the possibilities for abstract painting in Australia?

NP Aboriginal art has definitely expanded the possibilities for abstract painting in Australia by acknowledging spirituality. This could provide progression on an international level. The practice of art and experiencing art in a gallery should (I think), be seen as holy.

I think artists have always sought the primitive, the history of abstract painting and it's major movements such as cubism, abstract expressionism, Dada, op-art etc would not have occurred without the artists affinity with the archaic.

I do think that Aboriginal art has expanded the possibilities for abstract painting in Australia. I think that Aboriginal art is a much better starting point for any practicing artist than say Abstract Expressionism.

I also had some thoughts after you left, perhaps institutions and galleries should acknowledge the art of the Aboriginal people as whenever we exhibit or practice we are connecting with this land. All of the major cultural art festivals in Australia would acknowledge Aboriginal Art, it does seem a bit strange that

galleries and institutions are not doing the same. Painting is a very spiritual process, we put pressure on the world when we make art and sometimes the results are positive.

Aboriginal art has offered us an insight into our connection with the land, which really must influence the paintings we make.

Interview with Bronwyn Bancroft, 9 August 2012

Balmain, Sydney

The interview below is a re-take of the original interview conducted on the 24th July 2012, lost due to a technical failure.

HMF Bronwyn, let's start again with a bit about your practice...

BB The core aspects of my artistic practice probably is the fact that I work across multiple disciplines. I'm a public artist in the sense that I work on public commissions: I book illustrate, I paint, I have mentored Aboriginal kids and artists at Boomalli and throughout Australia for decades. I work across all mediums and I love it. We discussed earlier that it's not that fashionable for a fine artist to do book illustrations but one of the reasons why I do that, that I want to reassert here, is the fact that when I was growing up we had books that were about Captain Cook discovering Australia. So even when I was a kid I wanted to illustrate books so that we could have books about Aboriginal Australia in there too. To have completed 30 books means that I have fulfilled that life goal as an illustrator, getting into the psyche of young people and planting the fact that having an Aboriginal history is a natural thing. Like in New Zealand with the Maoris, that's how natural it should be in Australia, but it isn't.

The central thing that ties it all together as Aboriginal people is this urgency to get things down, to record it, to put stuff out there so that people can start to appreciate the Aboriginal voice within the context of Australia and our history. You want to be able to deliver a personal story but you also want to deliver a historical story to reassert the fact that we come from NSW, the fact that we were the first colonised, the fact that we are last recognised and probably have to do 20 times more than the non-Aboriginal artist to even get the basic accreditation.

HMF In your opinion, is there currently any dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists?

BB I think there is some preliminary stuff. I was reading something the other day that says that there is quite a lot of guilt out there. I think guilt is a strange emotion for people. It is utilised for benefit of some people and it is utilised for disregard of others. At the end of the day I believe that people should come to the table as equals, even if they're not, to try to find a way to move forward together. Ultimately we are all part of a human existence and we've got to start relating to each other as humans and then our differences will just be something we can start to explore together, something we do as humans. So I think there's not enough dialogue together.

Sometimes what happens is that the selection process for curators is such that they only get a couple of people that they want to promote and that's highly problematic because there is such a diverse range of Aboriginal artists out there that are creating fantastic work, but because they're not in the inner clique, they are not getting their works brought to public attention, which is a real concern.

HMF We discussed this—the idea of focusing on individual artists is a real block to dialogue...

BB Yes and what it does is that it extracts the Aboriginal person out of their community. It's a bit like the old fashioned idea of teleporting, one second you're in one place and the next you are there. For instance, there are darlings of the art elite set at the moment. At the end of the day those onerous obligations as the ambassador for all things Aboriginal, which no Aboriginal artist or any artist should have to have that responsibility, or even undertake to do that, will be a negative because they are going to be doing so much work that's precluded or be pushed to do so many things that they probably are not going to do the work that they want to. And so it's got an element of compromise in it where the artist is changing the tangent because they are popular and favourable. You see it often, you see it, people producing work because a curator has come up with a scenario and people are producing work around that and they've got the theme and they've rationalised it and maybe the artist hasn't. It's a diversion and I think it's probably not that healthy.

HMF What do you think the role of collaboration is in creating dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists?

BB Collaboration is always something that I have done, personally. I come from a diverse family with a lot of different characters so at the end of the day if you can collaborate with your own family you can collaborate with anyone. Ultimately, if we don't work with each other and know the inner story of each other's lives, then how are we going to present anything that becomes part of an Australian persona? So as such... Collaborate. Elaborate. Create. The whole idea about being an artist is that it is free. It is free to create thought. It is free to make work. It is your mental thought and your heart indicating to you what you want to produce as an artist. It's not conscripted, you're not a part of the arts army, you're actually a free independent thinker and that's what you should be valued for. We should all value each other for what our thoughts are and our hearts and our own personal journeys which are all incredible.

HMF Can you share with me your anecdote of collaborating with the curator for your solo show at Carriageworks?

BB Susan Gibb. We thought about the curators, being an Aboriginal curator or Non-Aboriginal curator. I didn't pursue that, because I thought "a curator is a curator." As long as they are good! I hadn't met her [Susan] and she was doing some work in the Philippines, and from the minute I met her it was just like fantastic, she was totally in control of how the work would look, she was incredibly detailed in terms of her interrogation of my life, because she had to select from over 30 years. She wasn't arbitrary at all, she just looked at the way things could connect, that gave people an understanding of my journey and she was just fantastic to work with. If she hadn't done that, the show would never have been so broad in terms of its appeal and the way that people could relate to it. I thought that she did a brilliant job. I would have been happy to work with an Aboriginal curator too but I'm sure it would have had a different take. I love the fact that our Aboriginal curators are out there doing fantastic things but there are very few of them. Why wouldn't you want to be able to pick from a dirth of talent instead of just from people who are really being over-utilised at the moment—all the good curators are just being sucked out a year in advance so they are not going to be able to do the work. People want them all the time because they are the Aboriginal curators. So it makes it a vexed problem. But if you're happy to be independent around the process, I think it can only be of value. Professionalism first. Of course you have to have a common aim. The artist and the curator have to have a synergy that's about delivering the story, it's like writing a kids book but doing it with an exhibition program. It's ultimate collaboration.

And I have collaborated with non-Aboriginal authors when I illustrated books too. Like Katrina Germaine who did *Big Rain Coming* and *Leaving*. She was a teacher in an Aboriginal community and her thoughts around that Aboriginal community were so beautiful that I didn't have a problem with that. With Dianna Kidd I illustrated *The Fat and Juicy Place* (1992) there was so much criticism for me collaborating with a non-Aboriginal author in 1992, people were like, "this is fucked." And she did all the research, she had gone into the community, she was a Jewish woman—she is deceased now. But my collaboration with her was about the story and the story was fantastic. I didn't care because she wasn't actually taking a traditional story, it was a story about this kid who was lost in an Aboriginal community, which kids are. Can't tell me that we don't have any problems, don't hide it. So I got into heaps of shit over that. I said well, "she's written the story, I like the story, I'm doing it."

Everything's politicised. That's another deafening moment that people aren't being honest about. Stop politicising every fucking thing that we do and start just getting out and saying that's really

good what you're doing, it shows initiative. Congratulate people, do stuff and support them but stop saying that you can't work with non-Aboriginal people. We live in a society where 98% of the people aren't Aboriginal. I don't want to live in an exclusive zone. I live an Aboriginal life with my immediate family and community, I want to be able to meet with different people and say I like you because you're a good person. It's irrelevant where you actually come from.

HMF What do you think are the major tensions or obstacles in developing relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists?

BB I just think it's all a bit elite. My biggest problem is probably aligned to the fact that once we get an Aboriginal curator that's got a few runs on the board then they just get cherry picked to do all the major shows and that's only one person's interpretation and that's unhealthy. What I would like to see is some of the major institutions actually collaborating with Aboriginal people, collaborating with the artists themselves to create a conversation or a viewing from source. Go to the artists and say, "how do you see it?" That's what artists are for. And I think the institutions are so self-contained in their programming there is no essential vitality around anything because it is all planned to buggery. There's nothing spontaneous happening in Australia around the institutions. It's so boring because they select a traditional artist for one component of the program, then they'll select angry artists to do an angry show, and then they'll do a soft country show which is all about the spirituality connected to country and they'll flog the guts out of that. They're not looking at these really vital and interesting things in people's lives, like how they can manage to keep all of the information in their families through all these hardships, that's the nub of it. Get the stories out there but don't make it a preclusive streamline moment. So much planning, not enough spontaneity. There are some many fantastic artists out there that would take people's breath away with their work if they were well curated. What ever happened to the idea that you create work and then you work out how it's going to hang later. You don't work out how you're going to hang your work when you first start it. That's not creating, that's like being an architect. Getting a plan down and working towards a plan. It's too tight. Whenever you criticise curators, you get in shit and you don't get collected. But I've done it for years and I've just got my work recollected by the National Gallery after 17 years so...

HMF Bronwyn, we discussed the future of the Australian art world. How do you feel about hanging Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists together?

BB It's pretty bloody straight-forward. We don't have to look at hanging an Aboriginal artwork in a contemporary art museum as being something special. It's part of an Australian art scene, why would you have a separate gallery for Aboriginal artists in an Australian art hang? I have always argued against it. You are not integrating into the mainstream because those people are defined by culture (the people selected), our cultural translation, our connection to country, our spirituality, our art, they're selected on that criteria. Are Australian artists selected on the same criteria? When they buy Imants Tillers, do they say to him, "what's your connection to country?" Because he is an immigrant. "What's your spiritual connection to country?" I don't know if he has one. "What's your language group? What's your hardship? Tell us about how hard your life has been. How angry are you with the white man? Please tell us so we can put it in a little wall mount so we can say, you know, this is an angry artist who hates all you white people, but please buy me." So when they stop identifying Aboriginal artists in those contexts and just look at the work, I think that's when we'll start to make some inroads. Art is all about what people relate to. If they love it they love it.

HMF There are a lot of people who take issue with looking at Aboriginal art for its aesthetic value alone.

BB There are Aboriginal groups now with Elders leading it who are not putting any stories with the work. They are forming quite a resistance pack around it, saying, "no, we don't want you to pick over this story of ours. We want to keep that story for our community and we will tell it ourselves." Do we have to put everything on display? When Ewan McLeod does a landscape, do people say to him, were you angry, were you sad? How were you feeling? People have got to stop being so personal around it and stop demanding that we give over every single scrap of information. It all gets put in institutions, other people become experts about it and they end up being the people who write about it, like Terry Smith. I really like Terry, he's great, but surely the Aboriginal custodians are the experts on their own culture. That's what I think.

HMF The last thing I want to discuss, is what do you feel is the major struggle for NSW artists?

BB I think the major struggle for NSW artists is the cultural connect to major institutions so that they can get exposure to the public sector in a larger way. Connecting to regional galleries and basically getting them to be vocal, show local. Boomalli, of course, has to be the major connect for artists in the city. It has the integrity, it's the longest running cooperative—27 this year—but it needs to be funded. We've only just managed to get funding this year, which is

minimal, after 3 years. When they do fund it is not enough. We need to get an action plan for our regional members because that's where the majority of our people live, except for Campbelltown. We need to get something in place across the state where people get exposure for their work but they also get supported and mentored and that's where Boomalli has been fantastic. They've been doing the work but no one's seen it.

I think every regional area should have an Aboriginal art gallery. The only way to overcome ignorance and for people to have an understanding of all things Aboriginal-culture is for people to be immersed in it. For it to become an ordinary everyday thing that you would go to an Aboriginal art gallery. You might visit it three or four times a year and look at a show and that becomes normal. Really good shows, quality shows.

I've always said that NSW people would lead the renaissance. Because we have always been under-qualified by the institutions and also the public sector. Because our society says that you've been taken away from country, you don't have any language, you've been removed to missions etc, basically you're not Aboriginal people you don't have the connect. We are connected, always will be, to our families and communities and our art is the conduit for this history.

Interview with Djon Mundine, 13 August 2012

China Town, Sydney

HMF I thought we would start by talking about some of the ideas that came up in the panel discussion “What is Aboriginal art?” before your presentation at the Opera House recently.

The panel was discussing abstraction and Ian McLean suggested that we’re all dealing with different systems of abstraction, suggesting Aboriginal art could still be understood that way.

DM Yeah, well it can’t be. It’s in that article I wrote—I talked about just the danger of putting names like slogans on to describe things, describe art styles that might look like something to us, but that just doesn’t mean they are that thing. It reminds of like *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, that film that the guy finds the Coke bottle but there are a million stupid things even stupider than that where people see something and they think it’s something and not something else. Like in that thing about dark matter where when you look at the Milky Way there’s an image of an emu in the Milky Way but you’ve got to stop looking at the Milky Way and look at the dark gap, and that dark gap is in the shape of an emu and that’s why people are looking at it they can’t see it. They’re looking at the light they’re not looking at the dark. Well that’s sort of an oblique type of example.

Well the thing I said is that it’s representational rather than abstract in the real sense of the meaning of the word. Western art abstraction is an art that’s not about anything. It’s about there being no point of reference in a composition. That’s what’s called abstract. I don’t know. I didn’t do a PhD like Ian McLean or somebody in art history or Howard Morphy. I mean these people they’ve got brains ten times the size of mine. They’ve been to Oxford and they’ve developed that stutter. Sometimes I think that’s about all they developed. So anyway, I won’t keep going on. They keep trying to describe Aboriginal art as something like that about being Modernist or being—well Modernist is the latest thing. Modernist is a real blanket cover of everything then, rather than it being Minimalist or Surrealist or some other thing, considering that Minimalism or Surrealism most probably comes from Pacific art or African art anyway. It all develops from that no matter what they think, so that’s the problem with it.

The article was *Travelling from Utopia*—is what it’s called. So what I said was that there’s a whole series of steps where people discovered Aboriginal art and then they discovered this art and that art and they keep trying to pin it down somehow and say “It’s this or that” when in fact it’s not any of those things. Every society has its own logic and its own form of expression. The problem is that the European view seems to think that European logic fits with

everything else. So I know I talk about big benders with the *Wings of Desire* film, he says “You can’t place another story from another place on top of that site. Every place has its own story historically and spiritually” and he talked about how Hollywood took his film and prompted him to Los Angeles. City of Angels yeah, a story about angels “Yeah, we’ll stick it in there” and it’s such a German film, the *Wings of Desire*, it’s very German and German metaphysical. I used that as an example to get things going. Aboriginal art is art made by Aboriginal people and inherent in that it is that all our Aboriginal art is contemporary art. So I mean contemporary in a Western sense of the description. Going through modernism. I don’t mean that. I’m going through modernism, post-modernism, blah, blah, blah. In fact the discovery and naming debate seems to be one step behind the reality all the time. It’s more probable you should talk about Aboriginal art as being post-modernist rather than modernist—if you’re going to use those categories.

HMF So when you say Aboriginal contemporary art, all Aboriginal art is contemporary?

DM Aboriginal art is contemporary art.

HMF What you’re talking about contemporary in the sense of it being...

DM Made now.

HMF ...made now and being and living culture?

DM It’s made most probably within the last 50 years. Well, nearly all art in Aboriginal art collections around the world are all made in the last 50 years. So that’s pretty contemporary.

HMF So what do you think about the discourse that’s coming out about the contemporary? Like Terry Smith?

DM Oh, it pays a lot of money. It gives someone a job. Seriously. It’s racist in that it always thinks “Oh, well we’re the real intellect here.” So it’s, what do they call it, narcissistic? We only look at ourselves—that’s the death of a society, narcissism. I said here “Most of my art was made as a response, a form of communication back to the Empire, to people trying to colonise Aboriginal people. It’s a response to what is happening within Australia” and this is the bit which you’ll know and I’ll give it to you: “it’s a recent contemporary institution at a visiting exhibition of a Asian abstract art.” Now in Asia and Japan, China, Korea and all those places they were trying to study Western art and they adopted those movements like Surrealism, Minimalism and all those things. There’s a whole group of Japanese painters who took on Western abstraction. So it came into being out of the influence of Western abstract art, that movement. The Koreans may have asked in response, that they

have an Aboriginal art exhibition as an exchange in return, cause they thought “Well what are we going to have from Australia? Well we don’t want bloody second rate utter shit we want something from Australia. So Aboriginal art” and opened that bag. So that doesn’t make it Abstract art though. But the curator seemed to think that. And an even more extreme version of that, it can only be described as ignorance of the worst kind, was the drawing together of the work of Brooke Andrew and Yirrkala artist Gunybi Ganambarr in Artlink recently—they were both described as being minimalist. Another Western art movement. The article also suggests they may be seen as both post-modern, post-colonial but these categories themselves are so broad and all encompassing in Australia it’s hardly a revealing connection. Both use an abundance of white-colour in their work, but blue veined cheese and ice cream are both white and similar to touch but are completely different to taste. Does that make sense? Was that a good analogy?

HMF It is a good analogy. You couldn’t get more different tastes could you? It’s an interesting article.

DM Trying to help Western arts, Western desert arts, and Emily’s [Kngwarreye] work into Western art history is really interesting but possibly also pointless. So it’s been taken into the cathedral of Western art or more appropriately the synagogue of Western art in Australia in the post-World War II period from the 1950s and ‘60s and so on. No-one quite knew how it fitted into Western art history. Like they were struggling to find China and they said that’s classical Chinese art, this is classical Indian art, etcetera and Emily didn’t do her PhD in French Impressionism or American abstraction. In fact most of the Indigenous artists of similar background that I’ve worked with have never read a book or an article. All these things are pretty self-evident and yet we puzzle with them still. So what we do is that we try, that is collectively Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal Australians, try to work out how does Aboriginal art relate to Western art history. How does it relate to our Australian history? In Japan you can have a Japanese minimalist movement cause they were influenced by Westerners and they took on Western minimalism. They did that with surrealism and so on and there’s whole schools where you can see that. In Australia in the 1950s you have Australian abstractionist, surrealist and so on. But if we live in a world upside down perhaps this is how we should look into this as others including Aboriginal artists had proposed. Where does Western art fit into Aboriginal art history? Is it religious art? A type of pictograph? Is it an iconic palimpsest or a cultural narrative and memory? Is it site related and is it not in an acquisitive way that is. Does that make sense?

HMF Yes.

DM So Aboriginal art comes from somewhere else, not from Western art history. The development of Aboriginal art is something pretty unique. It does have a history of 30,000 years plus. Even in the visual art field it is 30,000 years of development where people were playing around with mark making, playing around with colours and creating visual art then you have the catastrophe, the coming of human beings, ah, human beings, we think they are, Europeans. People react and interact by using Western art materials. The interaction should be seen as a material thing. Is not an intellectual place it's just we're just using those materials. We're not trying to do abstract expressionism, we're not trying to create minimalism or any of these things. We're just using the materials rather than Japanese or Chinese materials.

HMF So do you think there is any intellectual interaction then?

DM I think most white Western art people would love to believe there was. I haven't really seen it myself. So I talked about all those other Japanese guys. Like Japan was influenced by what was happening and supposedly the centre of the known universe which is Western Europe. So they took on Western European legal systems, styles of dress, technology, trains, cars, whatever. So they think that's the centre of the known universe. So despite Aboriginal people being in interaction with Western societies for nearly 200 years or whatever they're not likely to see Europe as the centre of their known universe still today. Does that make sense?

People like Emily, her centre of the known universe is where she was conceived, born and lived. She didn't bust her brain trying to learn how to speak English or affect her French cooking. So that might be really smart arse writing. My experience is that she's actually trying to cope with that interaction with Western society, with white Australian society, trying to do the right thing, trying to be good mannered and trying to explain herself in ways that aren't offensive, trying to be what's really called in Western terms sophisticated, knowledgeable, so on.

People told me many things. There were anthropologists who worked with Emily. There were myths that she didn't talk very much and I knew an anthropologist who spent the whole day with Emily and a group of other women and said Emily talked to her for hours. Of course she couldn't understand her much so she didn't understand it but that's really a metaphor for the art world struggle to verbalise its appreciation of Emily's work. Where to find the words from which to recognise and understand its evident visual power which transcends boundaries of art, culture and race. So she could make 10,000 paintings but did they understand what she said? And all these people were raving about her work. They thought her work was so strong and so inventive and so intellectual without even knowing it. A few Australians can speak Emily's

language—Anmatyerre or Alhalkere. In fact when you can't even say what it is that makes her art compelling it's interesting where the communication begins and just all I understood was the very basic mark making.

Just tell me if you want to ask me some questions but I'll just follow on. So I used to sell Aboriginal art before but I wasn't really a carpet bagger. I was an Aboriginal version probably most likely a lino bagger, anyway. And so people used to talk about the Matisse of Maningrida or the Picasso of Papunya, the Rubens of Ramingining and so on. I was talking to this German curator and he said that Emily was like a black Grandma Moses and Grandma Moses is an older, white American artist, Anna Mary Robertson, who was born in Greenwich in New York in 1860. She used to do embroidery but she had no training of the arts at all and then she had arthritis and she gave it up when she was in her 70s or her late 80s, and she started to paint these really naive landscapes and things and she became a very big hit. She became the best known American artist in Europe. Her artwork was used for an advertising campaign by Drew Barry cosmetics. A lipstick gloss called Primitive Red cause she was a primitive artist, untrained in that sense. So I was just asking if she is a black Grandma Moses or not. She's not really a folk artist which is where Grandma Moses comes from, being a embroiderer, but she is a woman who jumped the barrier, the canon, to get into and make a lasting mark in the fine art world. So I use all these metaphors and smart arsed remarks. Aboriginal art sits like a cuckoo in the nest from the Western view. Perhaps it might be more correct to think of Western art as the cuckoo in the nest in the Australian context. It's a really interesting thing about Australians that we can see the value of Aboriginal art, we can see it fitting into our society, it makes Aboriginal people more connected to Australian society. The influence of Aboriginal society and the influence of Aboriginal practices—social, physical, etc—are things that we have denied as a nation and our society taking on board and influencing us as an Australian society is most probably the public moment where we do acknowledge Aboriginal presence and Aboriginal admiration. The things about Aboriginal life, about Aboriginal intellect that we actually admire and we should look at more and take on board than the Eurocentric view. Australians are waking up to the fact they're not a colony anymore. We're not Europe anymore. We most probably never were. We're a country existing on the edge of Asia and the Pacific and the quicker we swing around to adopt practices and realise where we are and change the vision, the more comfortable we'll all be and the more comfortable Aboriginal art will sit in that lexicon in a new way. Creating a new lexicon that doesn't rely so heavily on Western art history to describe it as Robinson Crusoe did to name it when he met Friday he said "I name you Friday." He didn't say "What's your name?" He said "I'll name you."

HMF I really like what you've written about changing the lexicon.

DM Just read the sign I said. It would be stupid to talk about Japanese cultural history and continually use Western terms. The best thing about living in my counter-racist way in Japan for a year and being at the National Museum of Ethnology is that you really knew you were in Japan. The museum history starts with Japan and Japanese objects fill about half the galleries. There are adjoining rooms for Korea, China, Mongolia and so on and somewhere way up the back you come to a little diorama of Europe with a little village with a little white female mannequin in clogs and the flying nun type hat with little cows and bulls around the little village. That is as far away as Europe is from Japan. As far away as it should be intellectually and socially. It's a great thing for a country and a society to have that self-confidence. Maybe one day, most probably not in my lifetime, we will see it in Australia.

HMF So on that note then what do you think would be the best way to actually create dialogue between artists or intellectual interaction as you called it?

DM It takes a real big paradigm shifts about what we are in Australia, rather than needing some radical change. We were sort of on the edge of it in many ways but then we fell back. Every generation we get very close to change and then we just fall back. We're almost in terror of what we could be "Oh no. We could be rich. We could be ourselves. We could be in control of our own identity and destiny. We could be morally forgiven. We could reach a reconciliation really if we just stop pulling back all the time. No, no."

Other people saying "No, fuck off. We don't have to be that. We can get away with being shit heads." I'm sorry, that's not a term I use very often. But being intellectually and socially dull and insipid and Australia breeds itself that way; we don't like to be seen as being intelligent or sophisticated. Somebody told me "No, no, no. When I was overseas that wasn't how people viewed me. I was an Australian," and I said "well the people that I mix with when I go overseas they think Australians are all a bunch of drunken, racist jobbos." So, "well you're obviously mixing with the wrong people," and I'd say "well they're called coloured people and Asian people they make up 90% of the world. Really. Please. Talk about the real world. That's the real world. You want to keep going to Europe well that's fine but it's not the real world." I don't want to get into Europe bashing. There's lots of very intelligent, sophisticated people in Europe and they're trying to change the world and do things differently. It's just we should be doing that and having the moral confidence or moral bravery to do it.

You are asking me "How do you get black and white people to live together in peace and harmony? How do you solve the gender

problem? How to convince Tony Abbott to let gay marriages happen?"

HMF Ideally artists are in a unique position to...

DM Well I'll give you another metaphor, a anecdotal metaphor. I quite often get asked to go to art schools to talk to PhD students or to talk about a topic and they think I can be a good raconteur. I'll be invited to go and then suddenly discover that I'm actually supposed to be their major contributing part to this discussion for the price of a dinner and a few beers afterwards. They expect me to take part and raise the robust discussion.

So at this particular place, they were talking about appropriation and I thought this is surely, this is dead. Fucking appropriation. This is a dead argument. Why in the hell are they discussing it again? Like discussing "Why don't we kill all the Jews? Oh, let's discuss it again." "No, no. We've discussed it one hundred million times." Or "why do those Catholics kill all the protestants?" Oh well. You know it's wrong and they've been written about. It's been written at length and in depth and breadth. So anyhow, that's what it was.

So one of the main senior lecturers in this school, he went out and he'd always been taught to do perspective type landscapes but suddenly he went out into the desert somewhere. They had some sort of residency set up where you go out in the edge of the desert somewhere inland and where real Australian landscape is of course. It's not here. This is not real of course. Whatever, don't even think about this place. So they were going on about "Oh he went out to this place and then he suddenly thought 'Oh, why am I doing this? I should be doing something different. This land is speaking to me and I was inspired' and he saw Rover Thomas's art work and he thought 'I should be doing landscapes like Rover Thomas.'" So he started doing all these very poor, incredibly poor versions of Rover Thomas paintings and it was a big discussion in the school and I really got pissed off and I said "Listen. We've got other fucking problems to worry about besides someone doing bad versions of Rover Thomas. Fuck, we've got real problems. We've got drugs, we've got alcoholism, we've got the Australian Army occupying Aboriginal land. We've got all our rights taken away from us and you fuckers are talking about somebody wearing a bloody Aboriginal T-shirt." Literally, intellectually that's what he's doing and I couldn't get into it. That's basically what I told them. Like "Fuck off. We've got other things to talk about." So all the students there got the shits with me and so afterwards what happens is that they all then have a discussion online. I heard about that. The woman who invited me there sent me this site and said "Well read this, there's lots of discussion." So I read it and they all had the shits with me cause I talk too much or something. Anyway I thought

about it—“Alright you don’t want to do perspective landscape. Why the fuck would you have to copy Rover Thomas? There are any number of white Australian artists who were doing non-perspective landscapes. Fred Williams, John Olsen, Sid Nolan. They’re all doing social landscapes. They’re all doing non-linear bloody landscapes. God, I shouldn’t be here teaching bloody you people, white Australian art history. That’s not my job. I’m a PhD student at this joint under them. I’m a student here. I’m not a teacher.” That’s what it felt like and it just really pissed me off. You get the point of that. He could copy anyone in a non-linear sense. Why did he have to copy Rover Thomas? And that’s appropriation, he’s appropriating the Aboriginality. He is not appropriating the non-linear or non-perspectival landscape. His appropriating the Aboriginality and that is the problem. But everyone thought he was wonderful. “Oh, no he’s wonderful. He’s been touched by Aboriginal intellect,” and that was the most important thing. But that’s in a supposedly major art school and that’s the head of their painting department. Unless he was playing dumb to create a discussion I thought “They’re not thinking very much in this place.” Does that make sense?

HMF Yes.

DM So, I don’t know, after you see that and that’s the intelligensia of Australian art, teaching Australians, how do you get that? Or like Fiona Foley said in Queensland University. She was asked as a guest lecturer and said they could name all the people on Big Brother, they could name half a dozen Native American Indian chiefs, characters, black Americans. But they didn’t know who Eddie Mabo was. Yep, they didn’t know who Eddie Mabo was. Where do you go from that?

HMF Unfortunately the education system is terrible, so people are getting to that age without any real understanding of Australian history.

DM Well they’ve got to get rid of it now. They’re going to teach world history. They’re not going to have Australian history. There’s an argument it should be part of world history—it’s more sophisticated. I’ve heard very supposedly intelligent Australian people telling me that and I said “do you think you could go through learning history in the United States without learning about the civil war?”

There’s a thing I was just reading by Emile Durkheim about what Modernism really means and he talks about where people are not in a set ethnic background anymore and there’s not a consensus view around religious beliefs or social mores anymore. Does that make sense? And so people are battling to try to construct society’s structure and what the integrity of that society is now and it’s a big

battle. So I don't know. All I know is I want to go back and construct my own reality. All I can do is construct my own reality and then if other people want to agree with part of that then that's fine.

I've been working on a big artwork that's been going on for 10 years. This is an artwork that I tried to put up as a Biennale artwork and two more artworks I tried to put up in the Biennale and all they became was argument points. What you might call pedantic argument about words.

All I try and do now is put marks in the landscape for people and that makes me happy. The Bungaree show—the idea of it was to show that there were other Aboriginal people who lived all over Sydney and not just in Redfern or La Perouse. That's why I took that on. So it means there is another site. It's in Mosman. So I wanted to develop that. So that's why I wanted to put that X history over there and then try and extend it.

Anyway, the thing I'm trying to do now is this. It's called A Song for Bennelong and it's on this wall here [Circular Quay]. This is called Bennelong Point remember?

HMF Yes.

DM So I want to put a engraving along here. It's a groove about that deep, so wide and because underneath that black coating on that wall is a yellow sandstone colour so that's why it stands out.

HMF So what's holding it up?

DM No-one will put any money into it and every Aboriginal person I know of thinks "Oh, I could do that. Oh, I could do something better," or "What's in it for me?" That's the kind of discussions. So as you come along Circular Quay you'll see it. There's the rock engravings that you see there. There are rock engravings near Bondi Beach and all along Sydney. There's huge numbers of rock engravings all over Sydney. See that's the rock face. It's actually called Bennelong Precinct and that's how they'll look on those.

HMF That will look fantastic.

DM Oh, do you think? It will look good?

HMF I think so.

DM It will look appropriate?

HMF Definitely. They'll be really nice with that sandstone showing through.

DM Yeah, so that's what I'm working on at the moment.

- HMF** Yeah, I like it. It's great.
- DM** So that's that. That's the kinds of things I'm trying to do. I just want to work on positive things. I pick things I can change or have effect with like the Aboriginal memorial.
- HMF** Okay, well I have one more question for you then. It's not really a question, it's saying "What do you think of this?" A few of the artists that I've talked to so far have said—if I ask them what they envisage for the future of relationships in the art world—a few people have said they would like to see Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art hung together under the banner of Australia. So losing that categorisation of whether it's Aboriginal or not.
- DM** Well they do that already. People do that already.
- HMF** But on a much wider scope, within the institutions and the museums.
- DM** They do have Aboriginal sections as much as they have contemporary sections and Australian historical sections. I don't know why they don't have a women's section either for that matter. They certainly have an Asian section of arts but the point is that they could hang some Aboriginal art together with other sections. There's nothing stopping that happening now it's just that questions the whole idea of categories in any curating at all. Why have colonial art sections? Why have any of that?
- One thing is this, I will say this, Aboriginal people have always been co-opted into the Australian state. So we are Australian when we're champions, when we're winning something. When it comes to things like the Intervention we're not Australians. So it challenges the very nationhood of Australia that they can send the army to occupy a town. What would happen if the Australian Army went to Marrickville and occupied Marrickville? That would almost be unheard of wouldn't it? It would be unconstitutional.
- HMF** It is.
- DM** But it's all right. They're "Abos." It doesn't matter. Well we saw it happen. Whatever it was, three or four years ago. No-one said anything. So I just don't even want to enter that discussion.
- HMF** Fair enough.
- DM** Just tell me when we become part of Australia that's fine and when people actually pay the rent. In Germany, and part of it is that they lost the war, they pay Israeli people and Jewish people money every year. They pay people that they damaged in World War II. They pay them reparations every year and it's not without a debate that they have an argument about it every so often but they pay it

and they pay millions of dollars. Here in Australia you would not even get to first base. You wouldn't even get to the starting line with that discussion. Never. You would never even think about it. Why is that? Why is that? Australia is not a poor country. We're not as rich as Germany but we're not exactly broke. It's lots of money and you just wouldn't even think about it. And yeah, that money would go to Aboriginal people. What would those Aboriginal people do with that money? They'd spend it here. They'd buy a house, they would buy a car. It's not going to be lost, it'd all be spent here. It would all be back in the system within five minutes. We don't want to go anywhere else. We live here. This is us. We live here.

So getting back to that, that's a separation of art from life. That's another attitude that will change, that art has to be part of life. Why question why we don't come together? Why we might not feel comfortable together? It's stupid. Why can't you see that that could be a problem. It could be a lot worse as we say. But why isn't it better?

So why ask us to jump into bed with anyone? Trying to get that across to people is very difficult. They say "Oh, you're very negative. How can you be so negative?" That's just the truth of the matter but people say "Oh, you're being over the top about it."

HMF Saying you're being "over the top," I think that attitude is just being completely dismissive.

DM But it's like a real take "You're being really over the top." It's not really like that at all. You just think, in my lifetime we didn't have the right to vote. So don't be telling me that I'm over the top. I remember the parents and the family all having a discussion about what it meant to have the right to vote. It's an interesting historical experience. So just remember that. We didn't have the right to drink. I certainly wouldn't have gone to university or whatever. But that's in my lifetime. In my parent's lifetime my father could have been shot. It wouldn't have mattered. No-one would have been charged. People here have a very short memory.

HMF Very short.

DM You did ask "Where would it go from here?" What I'd like to see is the Aboriginal people from down here to be on the front foot and take control of their cultural life and stop arguing over two cents. You know that thing of that rock engraving? There's a committee in Sydney, that's an Aboriginal committee, you know what their response has been? They have asked who has the copyright on those images? So they would stop that project because somehow I'd breached copyright.

HMF That doesn't sound right.

DM They're my workings of other designs. Those designs are thousands of years old. Like the copyright's lapsed in that sense. They're at least 1,000 years old if not 5,000 years old. I just think that once that work gets up it will make changes. It means every Aboriginal person can think "Wow, when I go to Circular Quay or I go to the Opera House there's an Aboriginal presence there." I'm trying to throw seeds of memorials and presences around.

HMF Well thank you so much for chatting with me.

DM Yes, I don't know if you're going to make sense out of that. So I don't agree with Aboriginal art being with non-Aboriginal art at all. I want to express my Aboriginal art expression and I don't need to collaborate with anyone else for that to happen. I don't think people understand anything about Aboriginal art yet. It's now become like a song without words and a dance without music because we don't know the music anymore.

Interview with Nana Ohnesorge, 6 November 2012

Randwick, Sydney

HMF Could we start by talking about your practice and also how you came to be in Australia and then what led you to looking at Australian history?

NO My practice really started on a more serious level in about 1987 where I really needed an outlet for my creativity because both of my kids were really small and I was very frustrated with not knowing any creative people. We didn't know anybody in Australia and to get to know creative people, that took really a long time.

It started off with some German people that we met and through them we met a group of artists. So that was kind of an encouraging social group in that regard and when my kids were little, once they were asleep I started doing collages. It all came about actually because I had just turned 30, or 31, and I was in Germany and my youngest brother, he had a really top notch camera and a dark room and everything. I wanted to have some photographs of myself, what I looked like over 30, and he shot about three films and we did some dress up stuff with some of my mum's old clothes and it was loads of fun.

Then we returned to Australia and I was waiting for those photographs and waiting and waiting and nothing happened and I think after four months or something like that I put a hook out there to see what's happening. Then my brother got back to me and he told me that the developer had gone bad and except for like three photos, all the films were ruined. So that was of course a huge disappointment for me. I ended up with three photos. So in a way I made the best out of a bad situation and I started to do these collages of myself where I used those three shots and collaged them into certain scenarios which expressed how I felt at the time. When I showed them to some of those German artists they were all very excited that, "Oh, you should show this."

So, in 1989 I participated in my first group exhibition and that was with three other artists at Bondi Pavillion Gallery. For me that was extremely exciting to have my first show. I made a huge effort and that's actually really interesting when I look back at it that not only did I do the collages, but I did a whole altar piece, like I set up a really long table. I had been given, somebody lent to me a really beautiful old mannequin from the '20s. So I dressed up this mannequin and expressed this split that I felt in me as a person between the house-wife and mother sort of part and this creative part. So I hung this figure over the table and I made all these little objects like candlesticks and I decorated the candles with particular symbols which related to the theme and I did a whole lot of little

sculptures. So already then the kind of the 3D and installation element kind of came into it.

So through this exhibition I met a woman called Tina Thompson, she was really interested in art and she curated various exhibitions at the time in kind of what you would call now pop-up art galleries. Her brother was running the Oyster Bar at Circular Quay so that's where I had my first solo show. That was actually really cool at the time because they had champagne and oysters at the opening so it was kind of classy. She did pop-up art shows in foyers of banks and a new hotel opened in Potts Point and so she organised exhibitions there and she did some regional shows with a group of artists.

So that's what I was involved with in the very early stages, and then I started doing some erotic collages and I entered one of them into the Faber Castell drawing prize, that was kind of one of the big drawing prizes at the time, and that was held at Holdsworth Gallery in Woollahra. I got selected for it and when I came to the opening, Arthur McIntyre, who was the judge, told me that I came that close to winning it, and to me that was like you know first time you enter something and I'm a total nobody, I'm a kind of self-taught artist, I didn't know anybody in the Australian art world whatsoever, and to come close to winning the prize, for me that was nothing but astonishing. That was very encouraging for me.

As a result of being in this show I got signed up with Holdsworth Gallery and I had two solo shows with them. The first solo show in particular that was a really good one, I had a review by Elvin Lyn, I think, I can't remember if it was the Australian or Herald, SBS TV came and did a little thing at the end of their Vox Populi show. Rhoda Roberts was the presenter of it. So that was really encouraging. I also got selected into the Sulman for the first time in 1994 with a really big collage tryptich which at the time was also really ground breaking to get a collage into a painting prize and it was Gareth Sansom, the Melbourne painter who selected me, so that was all very exciting.

However, in the meantime I've been in the Sulman four times and you know the expectations that might come along with being selected for a prestigious prize like that—actually never ever anything came out of it. Usually the hangs are pretty poor I find, particularly in the Sulman. I've seen a couple of better ones. At some point they had the Sulman just down the elevator at the Art Gallery and that was actually a larger space.

Then Holdsworth Gallery closed down. The director, I think she was in her late 70s or around 80 at the time and she was ready to retire. So in a way I kind of used that circumstance to think about changing my media and I was trying to teach myself to paint and that was quite an interesting thing, but I found it frustrating. I did a

series of portraits. I met the actress Kerry Walker at the time because I'd seen this film by Jim Sharman, it's after Patrick White short story, 'The Night the Prowler,' and I just loved that movie. It was very subversive and Kerry Walker was absolutely amazing, so I met her. I did a whole lot of portrait studies of her and that was all a lot of fun, but then you know if you don't have a name in the art world—you can just forget it. So I also started to do just small collages and attempted to paint them, and that was kind of a good exercise—

HMF Painting in the collage or making a collage and then painting it?

NO To make a small collage and then do a painting of the collage.

So at that point I was really ready for a change because one of the challenges with collage is of course how do you make it last, and I kind of used acrylic varnish on some of them which worked quite well, but then because it's a liquid medium, if there were just tiny little spots which weren't totally tightly glued down, it would get bubbles, and it was a challenging process. Also I got a whole lot of collages framed and of course that costs a lot of money so that was one of the reason that I thought well, you know painting is in a way a lot easier because you get a canvas and you paint it and then you don't need extra money spent on it. With painting those small collages, that was a good exercise, but ultimately I found it frustrating because it was just replicating an image. That's when I started doing some summer schools at the National Art School which I found really amazingly productive, and then in 2002 I decided to apply for full-time study because by then my kids were sort of old enough and I felt I could now fully concentrate on that.

One of my motivations for doing a full-time course was also that I'd heard that if you got a proper education in art you got a better chance of getting a residency in Paris and that was my big dream. I wanted to go to Paris to get a residency because I'd never been to Paris at that point so that was kind of my dream city. So I embarked on the course and I found it quite challenging actually to make a decision in which area I would major because I really loved photography and print making as well, but then decided to go ahead with painting because that was kind of my initial motivation to go to art school, and that just proved to be fantastic. I had Adam Cullen and Euan Macleod as my teachers in second year, and particularly Adam for me was a fantastic teacher. There were some really good people in my class that I kind of formed strong bonds with.

So in second year painting I already started to kind of refer to some of my experiences of German history, how that felt like, growing up. Like I had this one uncle who had been supervising in a girls' camp because all the young guys had to go into these kind of camps

where they got almost a military style training. It was kind of a youth group that you had to join.

HMF My Pa did a similar thing in Australia. They used to have to go off to like an army camp. I think everyone did that.

NO And girls had to do a year in a household so they were often sent to high officials of the Nazi party as cheap labour to do all the dirty work in the household. One of my uncles, he was a supervisor of one of those camps where the girls were trained. He must have been a real Nazi kind of a guy. Of course as a kid you know you're totally innocent of all these past happenings, but I can clearly remember when there were family gatherings at birthdays and so on and after the coffee the liquor came out and there were always then tensions developing between my uncle and other members of the family. I never knew what that was exactly about but I sensed that there was some real tension.

So I started dealing with this in a still life project of all things. I used old photographs incorporating them into still lives and that's how I started dealing with my experience of German history. So that was something I developed further in third year. In a way it came about just through the fact that I had good teachers, I did a lot of painting and I think if you can let your subconscious flow into your work usually something interesting can happen.

So I did a whole number of paintings that referred to my experience of German history, but also sort of dealing with German stereotypes because like if you live away from the country you grew up in, stereotyping becomes a lot more obvious. Like the names that you are called, like in Australia you get called a "Kraut." So in a way that was the start for me to really get involved with history, whereas with my collage work before I had dealt with certain historical or political events only occasionally.

I remember I did a collage of the war that started in the Balkan because I found that incredibly disturbing to have all these atrocities happening not that long after the Second World War finished, and that that was happening again on such a scale and with such brutality, that really shocked me.

So I did work which had kind of a social, political relevance at times but often the collages were also guided by the materials I found, you know, because with collage it's very much what kind of imagery you come across and how do you deal with it.

So in a way in third year painting I also realised that I was really interested in iconography, like to use the stereotypical images or images which had a really broad recognition factor within society. I found it really interesting to play with that and maybe offer a

different viewpoint or confront people with it. It was quite funny that some of my relatives in Germany, for example, I remember my brother-in-law, he was very defensive about why I had to deal with German history. He was offended by it in some way and he said, "Why do you have to dig up all this old stuff, we've got to move on," and all that. But of course it's not that easy and I think because also I was removed from Germany, I probably saw a lot of those things from a distance and therefore a bit more clearly and a bit more objectively.

After I did honours (and during honours), because I've always been interested in psychology, I delved into fairy tales and psychoanalytical interpretation of fairy tales. In a way that was also very strongly linked to my German upbringing, and that's when I also started getting back into my love of sculpture and installation. That's when I started doing some sculptures and that was a part of my honour's proposal of my final show.

At that time I'd been involved with MOP Projects for a year, so to me that was just absolutely fantastic because I kind of felt that through MOP I met so many more interesting artists than I had at the National Arts School. It was a much broader representation of what artists do and I came across amazing exhibitions and really challenging and very contemporary art practices. So for me that was really a way into the future because I had had commercial gallery representation with Holdsworth Gallery before, and I knew that commercial representation isn't all that it's cracked up to be because there's not that many commercial galleries who are really engaging on your behalf with trying to push your career or expose you to a broader audience. They give you a show, you know, and that was pretty much it. I wasn't that keen on finding commercial representation and I found the whole artist scenario a lot more exciting and offering really all the freedom that you can get as an artist to be creative, to have the motivation of shows but not to be restricted by anything. So that was a really important thing for me.

At the end of third year I did win the Paris residency as a prize at the arts school so that was like, "Yes!"

HMF That's amazing.

NO So when I'd finished honours I went to Europe for five months and I did my Paris residency. I spent a month in Berlin with my daughter who was studying there at the time and that was really fantastic to get really involved in the gallery scene there and get to see a lot of really amazing stuff, like Raymond Pettibon.

HMF How long were you there for?

NO In Paris I was two months, because I was there by myself in one of the suburbs which is near Pere-Lachaise Cemetery so it wasn't that central. So I did a lot of drawings and I was practically out every day, checking art galleries and museums and exploring the place, and that was really fantastic.

Then I had a lot of things lined up which came about partly through MOP—like the *Our Lucky Country* project in Hazelhurst which was a two year project which in the second year of the project was also connected to a residency there. I just loved working with other artists. I really enjoyed developing a programme of community engagement; that was really a lot of fun. The people in Gympie were also very supportive and very friendly and so in a way that was a really fantastic experience. Also to have work shown in a really big spacious gallery, that's a totally different experience and so I did for the second show two really large paintings and that was really, really great and rewarding.

Then I continued on. I had a show which reflected my Paris residency and I applied for a show at James Dorahy Gallery in Potts Point. I particularly chose that gallery because I felt that firstly the atmosphere in Macleay Street there has a sort of a Parisian feel about it, probably more than any other place in Sydney, and also the space itself with its art deco curved room and how the ceiling's set in. It just had this kind of historic feel and I felt that that was a really good space to have a show with that particular work. And that was a very successful show.

At the time I was also contacted by Hugo Michell who was a young guy who'd been working for five years for Tolarno Gallery in Melbourne and he was about to open his own gallery in Adelaide. One of my collectors had mentioned me to him so he checked out my website and contacted me. It was very lucky that he came to Sydney when my show was on at James Dorahy because it looked really good and I sold a lot work, so that kind of worked in my favour.

The other really positive thing about that meeting was that he was really young and really gorgeous looking, and I had no idea if he knew how old I was. We got on like a house on fire straight away, really good communication. He explained his ideas to me. He told me what kind of artists he had approached and that was a really wonderful group of artists like Janet Laurence and Lisa Roet. So to me to get picked up by a gallery with artists who'd had a big career and did really good work, that was very exciting.

So that was the first commercial gallery I went with after art school. So I did a show, my first solo show there. I did a lot of portraits of kind of iconic European figures and in a way that was a bit of a lesson for me because I felt that, for example, I had done portraits

of the poets Goethe and Schiller who are in Europe very, very well known. But the South Australian audience didn't react all too much to them, and I think just because in a way we have very little knowledge about European history in Australia.

HMF Yes, definitely.

NO It's very limited. So these people didn't mean anything to that audience and that was, I think, when I first started thinking about that at some point I got to focus on Australian subject matter. Then the year after, I think, that was when Hugo wanted to show my work at the Melbourne Art Fair. So it was all like go, go, go, do the work. I did more work which related to like global issues like overuse of land and sort of the failure of the hippy utopia, and things like that. It wasn't until after the art fair experience which I felt very challenged by. I had a hard time to really relate to a lot of the people who came through. I found that a lot of the people were very superficial, you know, there were people walking through there, they put half dots practically into every gallery space they came across, and you know didn't follow up on it, experiences like that. I know some really great people who are collecting art, but I didn't have a lot of those positive encounters at the art fair. I got quite depressed when I came back, because I thought, you know, you're looking at a career in the arts and if that's where it's leading, do I really want to be there, do I really want to participate in that?

It was a couple of months after that, that I all of a sudden realised I'd been in Australia as long as I had previously lived in Germany, and that for me was a total turning point where I thought, "Now, now, now, it's time to start focusing on Australia."

HMF How many years ago was that?

NO That was in 2010. So I'd been here for 28 years, something like that, because we came late in 82. So I started going around, there used to be a really good second hand shop here at The Spot, so I just went there and had a look through the history section and came across this book of bush rangers of Australia and that had a lot of really fantastic images in it. I thought, yeah, bush rangers you know, like if you wanted to do iconic, then that's pretty much as iconic as it gets in Australia, as in sort of the public interest, and sort of people who represent in a way the penal colony history of Australia.

I asked myself why is it, that for example Ned Kelly is such an iconic figure. From what you're reading the accounts, he must have been a kind of really nice guy, you know typically Irish, liked to drink, was quite generous to people, looked after his mates and people who he knew, but at the same time he was robbing banks and stealing horses and shooting people. So it occurred to me that maybe the

focus on the dark side in Ned Kelly was a way to distract from the real Australian history. So if you acknowledge something negative in a hero, then in a way you think, "Oh, yeah, I've done my duty with acknowledging the negative," and you don't really have to go any deeper and look at what's really been happening. In that book I noticed that every damn copper who chased the Kelly gang was there with a portrait shot and action shot and grave yard shot.

There was one photo of the Aboriginal trackers and one drawing of Aboriginal trackers but none of them were named, and I thought well, in the success of actually capturing the gang, they would have been absolutely instrumental. That neglect of acknowledgement of what those people, the contribution those people had made, that stood out to me, and that's when I started focusing away from Ned Kelly as such, but I just used Ned Kelly's image to express my frustration with the lack of representation of really any indigenous heroes in Australian iconography. That's how that all started.

I also was very aware of the fact that this was a very difficult and sensitive area to move into because a lot of damage had been done to Aboriginal people in this country from the very beginning and the representation of them in art and photography—none of it was done with any permission or respect, often quite the contrary. So I wasn't sure how to go about it. So I just used some very simple methods of just playing with colours where I did a couple of paintings where I painted Ned's face black, so that in a way expressed it without injuring anybody or stepping over any borderlines, or where I felt maybe I shouldn't be doing this.

I remember I went to a talk by Hetti Perkins at the AGNSW [Art Gallery of New South Wales], trying to get some advice on how to go about it and she just referred me to this institution in Canberra, and I thought well, do I really want to deal with an institution on that? Then I also -

HMF Did she say to talk to them to get advice or -

NO Yeah, like you know, in what way it would be okay to, for example use photographs or images of indigenous Australians, and she said, "Oh, that's a really difficult field," and she referred me to this institution where you could get specific advice. Let's say you wanted to do a portrait of a particular Aboriginal person then they would advise you if that was okay or not okay.

HMF Do you remember what the institution was called?

NO I probably got it somewhere in my notes, but I don't recall it just offhand. It was some sort of advisory board.

HMF But it makes it very difficult when you have to go through institutions.

NO You know if it's via an email or on the phone, because the other thing that I was painfully aware of, was that even though I had lived that long in Australia I practically did not know any Aboriginal people. Firstly I think, because in the Eastern suburbs you really hardly ever encountered Aboriginal people except those ones that are hanging around Taylor Square, and they are usually fairly intoxicated, and I'd seen Daniel Boyd at a few Roslyn Oxley openings, but I was really shy about it too. Like I would have loved to talk to him but I didn't know how to go about it, because you can't just walk up to someone and say, "Oh, I've never talked to an Aboriginal person. I'd really like to talk to you." I met Archie Moore because he was in a show at MOP, and he seemed like a really nice guy. I had a bit of a chat with him, and then also Reko Rennie when he had a show at MOP, I had a bit of a chat with him, but I was also really shy. I didn't know how to go about it or what kind of questions I could ask. It felt very awkward.

So in my work in the meantime I was trying to focus on historic figures which had crossed the borderline of racial divide through circumstances. So I focused on Bennelong, whose story is absolutely fascinating, and from the other side William Buckley, who went through a kind of a reverse exchange experience. I was just really amazed by the human ability to adapt into a totally different cultural setting. I thought, well if those guys could do it, it shouldn't really be all that hard to make a bit of an effort and take some steps in that direction.

It wasn't until I saw Djon Mundine at an opening about maybe four months ago, and I looked at him and I thought, "This is the man you should be talking to," because I'd seen him around but I'd never ever spoken to him. So he was really the first Indigenous person who I felt would be a really appropriate person to talk to, because when I'd seen him around I knew he had a lot of contacts across a lot of different kinds of people. He was an elder. He knew a lot about art and in particular Aboriginal art. I knew he was some sort of activist. So it really started with that and I made a lot of effort of getting in contact with him. I introduced myself to him, and then I found an email contact and I emailed him, and that took a while because he was in China at the time. Then I finally was able to arrange a meeting with him, and when I got to the meeting point he looked at me and he said, "Oh, it's you," so obviously that made me realise that there must be so many people out there who are contacting him, and that has certainly been confirmed in the meantime. He's such an incredibly busy man.

And then at that same opening when I realised I had to get to know Djon Mundine, I also totally by chance met Tony Albert whose work

I've loved for years. I had no idea who he was or what he looked like. He did the drinks at the Commercial's first opening and I just chatted with him because I thought he was really cute and really friendly. Then later on at the after party, Reko Rennie was there and I sat down next to Reko and said hello and we had a chat, and then he said to me, "Oh, Nana, do you know Tony Albert," and it was that guy I'd been chatting to before. To me that was like, "Oh, my God, you're Tony Albert, I can't believe it, I love your work." So that was also sort of just really fantastic and encouraging.

In a way sort of my gut feeling about Djon Mundine was absolutely spot on because it is through going to openings of shows that he's curated that I have met other Aboriginal artists now. Because even though I am totally amazed how friendly people receive you as a white person, like those Aboriginal artists who I've said hello to, I guess there's also sort of a certain caution and you can totally understand why that would be.

I think also I'm probably going about this whole thing in a quite naïve way because I have no previous experience, so I just kind of go with the flow, and if I meet people and I find them open and friendly, I think well, you know, like the other day I had a meeting with Djon and I met the photographer, Mervyn Bishop. He was very nice and friendly and he gave me his business card and when I googled him afterwards I realised what an amazing photographer he is. Like all these totally iconic images that he's done throughout Australia history in the last 50 years. He was also I think the first Aboriginal who was ever recruited by the Sydney Morning Herald.

So it's kind of those people, they're total trail blazers, but I'd heard his name before, but there is no public awareness of those people and their achievements. You know the photographs but you don't know who's behind them. In a way that's typical of the discrimination that's going on in that regard, that you know the names of sort of other photographers who've done famous photographs, like Trent Parke for example. They're kind of household names but somebody who's been doing that sort of work for such a long time, it's just not out there enough in the public domain.

In a way for me it's like almost—I mean jokingly I would practically call it first contact, because for me these last few months have really been about my first contact with the Aboriginal community.

I think in your conference paper you finish up with a quote by Djon Mundine where he says, "Where does the communication begin?" and that's precisely what I'm working on, on beginning the communication and just trying to be open and make an effort to go to, for example, shows of Aboriginal artists.

I went to a Boomalli opening the other night for the first time. Again I didn't know anybody there and I was actually absolutely astonished and really touched that there were a number of people who came up to me and talked to me, some of the artists in the show, for example, and I thought, "Gosh, if this was the reverse situation, like an Aboriginal person walking into MOP who nobody had ever seen, or at any other gallery for that matter, would there be people going towards them and welcoming them and interacting with them?" Not much chance of that. So I thought the spirit of generosity that you encounter is nothing sort of astonishing really.

So with my work, I'm thinking that I want to start a series of portraits of important Aboriginal people in contemporary life. I want to continue with some other work, for example the drawing I did for my recent show at Pompom called *Australian Mining*. For me that's a really big issue, because I feel there's another sort of colonisation going on again through mining companies. There's very limited consultation of Indigenous communities. There are I think a few mines where that has happened, but it's definitely a minority.

HMF Even when it does happen there's a lot of manipulation.

NO I bet.

HMF That's my opinion on it anyway.

NO So after I done the drawing, when I did the drawing I was actually thinking I would like to do a really large painting about this issue.

HMF That would be amazing.

NO So, yeah, I kind of want to further comment in my work on what's happening, really issues which have been ongoing from the time of white invasion to now, and hopefully make sort of a contribution in terms of bringing people closer together and reaching an audience, hopefully a broad audience with that kind of work.

I think one of the turning points for me too was Rachel Perkins landmark series of *First Australians*. When I watched that on SBS I found that absolutely amazing and astonishing.

HMF When did you watch it?

NO When it first came out, when it was screened, like I can't remember when it was, maybe 2009 or 2010 or something, around that time.

HMF Pretty recent. I only saw it at the end of last year for the first time. It's brilliant.

NO It's really I think the first time that you look at Australia's history since invasion from an Aboriginal perspective and so to me that's a really, really important documentation. I also bought the book and I'm just re-reading it to familiarise myself again with what's been happening. When you read some of that history you come across names of utter bastards on the British side, where you think why are there all these names and places named after those people. Those people acknowledged did really nothing good, and a whole lot of damage, and showed brutality, and there's public places and buildings and streets named after these people and you think, why?

HMF I find it really interesting how you approach Australian history—I think my generation's kind of interesting because we're one more step removed from the idea of colonial guilt, but in my experience we inherit it from our parents' generation. But we're sort of that one step further away that we question it differently, and I think that our behaviour and the feeling that we can't cross those racial divides comes from that, and also a lot from the lack of education in our primary school, high school education systems. So we don't really know a lot about Australian history and what we do know, most of it comes from the media which is always going to be terrible. So there's that inbuilt fear of the other and guilt that's been passed down through generations.

NO Inarticulated guilt most of the time.

HMF Yeah, definitely.

NO And that's where the problem is.

HMF Yes. And so I can see a very clear line as to why when it comes to working in this area in the art world there is so much tension. I wonder where it came from for you when you came to Australia, was it something that you felt from the people around you or whether it's something you picked up from your reading and research.

NO Well when I think back to that time before we came to Australia, because we didn't know anybody, and information that was available about Australia in the early 80s was practically zilch. There were books about geography, like what kind of minerals were in the ground and what kind of -

HMF So this is what you were reading before you came to Australia?

NO Yes. I read one book which had been written by a German journalist who'd lived in Sydney for a couple of years so that kind of described the city a bit. That sounded nice. I remember I read a book about the dreamtime, and I found that really, really interesting. I'd read *The Vivisector* by Patrick White a few years

earlier. In a way that provided me with the biggest glimpse of how there would be culture in Australia.

HMF What's that book?

NO *The Vivisector.*

HMF I haven't heard of it.

NO Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for literature with that. I think that was in the late 80s, and I was homeless for a few months at the time in Germany, and I stayed at someone's place and they had the book and I started reading it. So when my ex and I made the decision to migrate to Australia, that book was like a shining light for me in terms of knowing there's painters in Australia, because the main figure of the book is a painter. There were talks about art galleries and old houses, and so to me that kind of in a way made me hopeful that I might like it when I get there.

However, in regards to Aboriginal people. Once we got there, there's so many things that you have to do, to establish yourself and kind of settle in, like finding a job, finding a place to stay, all these major things. Like getting to know the place a bit, like driving around, and my interest in Aboriginal culture was just like never on the agenda somehow when we started living here. Then I got pregnant, I had the two kids within a short time. So then you got a totally different focus, your life changes dramatically.

When my youngest turned one and a half—because I had trained as a childcare teacher in Germany—I started working part-time in a long day care centre in Waverley, and I had a couple of Aboriginal kids there, but besides that I never saw any Aboriginal people. I mean even now when I'm on the bus I practically get my heart racing with excitement if every once in a blue moon you see an Aboriginal person on the bus, because it's just not happening in the Eastern suburbs.

As a migrant when you come to Australia, you kind of got given a space to stay in a migrant hostel. We came to a migrant hostel in South Coogee. So of course that was very exciting with the beach nearby and we got familiar with this beautiful coastal area and so we thought, well if we live somewhere in Sydney that's where we want to live.

So we lived for the first 12 years, no less, maybe 10 years, we rented an apartment in Bronte, or actually a couple over the years, and Bronte was a totally different suburb then than it is now. It wasn't posh, it was very mixed, a lot of working class people, very low key, you know all the Islander communities used to come in summer every Sunday, like whole clans would kind of gather in

Bronte Park. Now with all these rich bastards living in Bronte they managed to get such stringent parking conditions that nobody can come there with a clan anymore. It's all kind of deliberately keeping it, in a way, exclusive. But at the time it was beautiful and to have little kids in Bronte with the ocean pool and the park, that was just fantastic. So yeah, and with kids and with working and then my collage practice, I was flat out you know, and in a way I dealt with sort of some social issues, but the Aboriginal thing, it was like it fell into a crack and was buried and wasn't there.

HMF Because that's what it's like in Australia.

NO Yeah, because people don't talk about it, you know.

HMF That's such a strong analogy for Australia isn't it?

NO Hmm, and you know you would hear like when Yothu Yindi released the *Treaty* song, for example, that was very exciting, but that was also far removed, and in a way Redfern that was kind of a no-go zone. I remember I once took a wrong turn when I started driving, instead of going into Cleveland Street I turned left too early and I came over the bridge at Redfern Station and there were all these Aboriginal youths on the bridge and they kind of blocked the road. I thought, "Oh, my God," and I felt really kind of threatened by it, really a large amount of discomfort. Actually yesterday I walked through the block for the first time, you know. I mean that's crazy isn't it?

HMF Yeah.

NO I think because of the personal changes I've had in my life I kind of realised I have to start anew, and my counsellor told me that I should be reconnecting to the person I was before I got married. I got married when I was 23. So to reconnect to that person, that's such a long time ago. But I did manage to reconnect with that person and I realised I'd been a lot more politically engaged before I got married. I was quite a bit of a risk taker with people, like when I was told, "Oh, don't do anything with those people." I thought why the fuck not. I'm just going to do it, right? And I was lucky to get away without any damage or injury, and I certainly always had sort of a sense of adventure and tried new things.

So, in a way that has helped this whole process of me trying to connect now with the Aboriginal community, because it's a totally new thing for me, which suits my personal situation very well. It's also very exciting and it's also very challenging, and I can imagine that it's not going to be an easy road, and I'm sure I'm going to encounter some people along the way who are going to tell me to butt out of it or to keep my nose out of it.

But I think it's definitely something—I've had the feeling maybe since that *First Australians* series happened, that in a way in the last couple of years there's also been a bit of a different feeling about these issues. There are some initiatives like the centre in Redfern that opened, that reading project thing which was a follow up from a similar thing in San Francisco.

There's a few more scholarships available for Indigenous kids from the outback to get a better education. There seems to be a bit of a momentum happening and from experience and if you look at history momentums happen, but often they just fizzle out because nobody really engages in the long-term and the politicians aren't interested because it doesn't get them any votes, like the constitutional change. I was so excited a few months ago that that was on the table, we're going to get a constitutional change ,and then they just said, "Oh, well, we're just going to put it in a drawer for a few more years because we don't think the public is ready for it."

Those momentums can fizzle out too and they fizzed out before. There was a lot of really amazing activism in the late 70s and 80s by Aboriginal people. In a way that died down for a while again. Where that was really prominent, and I was practically thrilled to bits, when Julia Gillard lost her shoe in Canberra in that Aboriginal protest and Tony Abbott was attacked. I thought that's really good that—I mean they got very bad press, but I thought it's really good that people are actually really angry, you know, because they should be. So in a way my aim would be to contribute to that momentum through doing works which hopefully get some exposure, and my recent Pompom show was actually really encouraging with the Sydney Town Hall collection purchasing the two works—

HMF They purchased the two—

NO Bennelong. So I also had a meeting in Casula yesterday with the curators there and I was talking to them about the direction of my work and the idea that I'd like to do some workshops there. I watched *Living Black* on Sunday afternoon, that's quite a good show. There was a short report about this program which had been happening in Casula with Indigenous women, where they kind of have a place where they can gather and produce art together.

There's currently a small exhibition in the community gallery from that group of women and in the *Living Black* report they said that the funding had been cut. So I thought, "Oh, Jesus, that's absolutely terrible," but when I went there yesterday they mentioned that they're going to try and maintain that group through their gallery as much as they can. They're very committed and switched on people there, but I mean just the fact that yet again the people who

need it get the funding cut, which is so short sighted because if those people get stronger and more confident, surely that's going to contribute towards a better and healthier society as a whole. I'm sure they didn't only cut the women's program, they probably cut the youth programs too, and it goes on and on, and unless there is actually a chance for people to gain confidence and develop skills and their communication, that's our only hope for the future isn't it?

HMF Definitely. Talking about your show at Galerie Pompom, I thought that was a really exciting show. There are not many artists putting shows on that have a dialogue with Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal community. I can only think of a couple off the top of my head and I don't think I've seen anything that recently. The momentum that you're getting in your practice in meeting more people, to me that sounds really exciting and it seems like there is this building dialogue between some artists. But I know that you sort of feel like it's all untrodden ground, so do you think that there's any dialogue really going on in this area?

NO There is. I mean for example I think it's Tim Johnson, isn't it, the painter?

HMF Yes.

NO He's been travelling to outback Indigenous communities for a long time and it is very clearly reflected in his work because he does a lot of dot painting and has been doing for years and years.

However I found it really interesting that in the recent MCAA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia] exhibition, I think he had two large paintings, the more well-known ones with kind of a Buddha figure in there and various deities which I'm not all that keen on. However, then in another room there was a collaborative piece that he had done with an Indigenous artist and that painting was an absolute cracker. It was really, really fantastic.

So he's definitely one who's been doing that and I thought gosh, how fortunate to do a collaborative project like that where you actually work on one piece with somebody who's got this totally different view of art production, and in a way a different sensibility, because it's a more, I guess naturally built in creativity, because it's been growing for such a vast amount of time, this kind of expression through creativity.

Whereas in Western societies artistic expression was in a way a lot more specialised, you know there were only certain people, but it seems that in Aboriginal communities the sand drawings and the rock paintings and all those kinds of things, it is just a way to express your creativity often in a very ephemeral sort of way.

- HMF** Did you have any strange or negative reactions to your show at Pompom?
- NO** Not really. I think some people I know and I'm not going to name any names, they look at my new endeavour with a certain caution in their eyes or a certain concern. I think it is simply because it is not something that's generally done as much as it should be. I think also because the media reflects, I mean generally reflects on negativity much more than on positive achievements, but in particular in regards to what's happening in Aboriginal communities. I mean what do you see on TV when there's any reporting, it's kind of really, "Oh, yeah, let's bash the Aboriginals again," like "let's really make it a big story because that fits right into our stereotype." So I'm actually super excited about the fact that ABC's now showing this series, *Redfern Now* because that's exactly the kind of thing that we need, and that's what I mean when I was talking about the momentum before. I mean have we ever in Australia had a TV series about Indigenous families or Redfern?
- HMF** I don't think so, not on mainstream TV.
- NO** So that's really a very positive development. I haven't had any negative reactions to my show as such. I was quite pleased about the fact that when I gave my artist talk at Pompom there was a very lively discussion afterwards which is quite a rare thing with artists' talks. I thought that was really good that a show and an artist talking about a show actually engages people and makes them talk about it. I had a few responses to my radio interview with Michael Cathcart that was mainly positive.
- HMF** That's really great.
- NO** One thing I noticed in your interview paperwork, and I find it little bit puzzling—I mean I know where it's coming from—but it says the study is significant in developing the discourse surrounding Aboriginal art and its influence on contemporary Australian abstract art. I see where that's coming from because a lot of Aboriginal painting, because it deals with aerial views and it has that kind of abstract connotation, but I don't think that an Aboriginal artist would describe their painting as abstract, do you know what I mean?
- HMF** Yes, I do, this is essentially where the project started from—the idea that I am an abstract artist, influenced by the tradition of Western abstraction, and also by Aboriginal painting. This is something that I see in a lot of other artists' work, and I wanted to flesh that out and see what that means. So it's going to be one area of my research because, Aboriginal painting has always been really looked at through the guise of Western abstraction and that's how the Australia artworld really came to it.

- NO** Yes.
- HMF** That's been a really conflicting and problematic relationship that still persists.
- NO** Because if you look at Adam Hill for example, or at Harry Wedge, you know that's got nothing to do with abstraction, or Gordon Bennett for example. So, Gordon Bennett was one of the artists that I got really excited about because he had this kind of duality about referring to Western art history but then utilising it to kind of do quite political messages. Djon has stressed that in a few of his essays, that this whole idea of categorisation doesn't mean anything to Aboriginal artists. It's just so vastly different to how we view Western art with all its little drawers where we have to box things in.
- HMF** Yeah, so as I said, it's just one section because it's been a big part of how Aboriginal art has been perceived in the Australian artworld and then I think it will feed into this idea of categorisation and needing to get rid of that completely in order for the artists to be able to, and for their work, to have a relationship.

Were there any other comments that you had about the conference paper that you wanted to talk about? We talked a little bit about collaboration, and I know you're quite keen to collaborate with some Aboriginal artists. Can you articulate why?

- NO** Well, when I've seen footage of Aboriginal artists working in outback communities, I've been really fascinated with the fact that there seems to be a totally different concept of time, a totally different concept of knowing when a painting is finished and when it is not finished. In a way I felt what I observed was very much a very intuitive painting process, something that just comes from within.

I've collaborated once with one of my fellow students at art school and we both had strong egos so that was not an easy collaboration. However I think for me my art practice in Australia has always been about self-expression and to use a common form of communication that goes beyond languages, because I've always felt to some extent inadequate with my English. I felt that some issues I can probably best express through visual language, so from that point of view I would think that working together, collaborating with an Aboriginal artist would be a really amazing form of communication.

Interview with Glenn Barkley, 7 December 2012

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney

GB I'll just start with the *Volume One* book, alright? Because I think it's always very funny when you see someone who's read what you've written, because sometimes you just think they go out into the ether and nothing happens. I went to art school, I didn't study art history. I studied painting. So I tend to think of a lot of things through painting. And I can see how abstraction has become this sort of contested zone, in terms of the relationship in Australia between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Now it's my belief that someone like Ildiko Kovacs or Idris Murphy or Helen Eager, a whole range of people, they have to deal with Aboriginal art in some way. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you're calling Aboriginal art abstract, because I don't think it is, but I sort of think it is and it isn't. If you wanted to be really cynical, you could look at Aboriginal art as being a product purely of the market and responding to the market's aesthetics, which is abstraction, as maybe more compelling. And so just to backtrack, one of the things we wanted to do when we did the book was to make sure that there was a lot of Indigenous voices in the book, because the problem with a lot of art writing in Australia, is there's a lot of people talking about Aboriginal art, but a lot of the time, they're not Aboriginal people. And so I think you'll find that something that we're all really proud of is when you read the *Volume One* book, the first group of essays are all by Indigenous people, which was really important. And I think there's this thing of putting forward an idea and then trying to debunk the idea at the same time, which you can actually see working as you walk around the space a bit more, and trying to actually draw something out as an idea, and then sort of deny that idea at the same time.

HMF Which I think happened having those Indigenous writers at the beginning, and then also in the abstraction section in the book.

GB And Ildiko Kovacs, to me, is a really interesting artist because she has worked a lot with Indigenous people and has collaborated with Indigenous people, and I think when you look at her work, you can see all that sort of weight of European and American abstractions from there coming to bear in her work, but then you can also see that she's looked at a lot of Aboriginal art, she collects it, she has it around her, it's what she's interested in, she's worked with people. So how could she not take that on? But what is really intriguing with her, and it's one of the few—not the only instance, I think it's too simple—but it's one of the few instances where an artist working with the remote community is having an effect the other way. I just saw her last show, she had a show where she did a whole

series of collaborations with artists from a remote community near Alice Springs.

HMF Was that the show at RAFT Artspace?

GB Yeah. So there was a show at RAFT where it was three artists, it was Ildiko and then two others. Now one of the things—they collaborated on some works together, and then they had their own work. But one of the things that Ildiko showed them was working with a roller, which has a very particular sort of look and aesthetic. Now I just saw the last show of that group of Indigenous artists, and now they're all using rollers. So it's sort of like they have taken something from Ildiko, which is really good. Now I find it really bizarre when some curators then criticise Ildiko, because I think this is actually an equitable exchange.

I can't see what the problem is here. It's about painters, they're engaging in something that painters have always engaged in, discussion and showing each other ways of working, and to actually isolate Indigenous artists so they can't engage in that purely formal discussion is very limiting. So Ildiko is really fascinating, I think, but then I also look at someone like Idris Murphy and I think Idris is also looking at a lot of Indigenous art, and a particular type of Indigenous art.

Idris is—look in particular like Billy Ben and that sort of ham-fisted sort of way of painting a landscape. And I think he sort of looked at then, and then again, fused it with a whole lot of other things like Nolan and sort of brought that to bear, and then sort of comes to this way of looking at the landscape, which is quite unique. But I mean all great artists look—I mean looking is part of the way of making work, right? So you're looking at art, of course it's going to come into that. I can see both of those problems, between looking at an abstraction and not looking at it as abstraction, as both having positive and negative reactions. I can understand both of those.

HMF That's definitely the way I'm going, and how I'm approaching it when I'm writing, because there's still a lot to offer, looking at abstraction as well. A comment that has sat the best with me, so far, is I went to a talk at the Opera House when they did the "What is Aboriginal Art?" panel discussion.

GB That was Vernon and—

HMF Yeah, and Richard Bell and Rex Butler and Ian Mclean. And Ian said that both groups are working with systems of abstraction to represent different things—typically cosmological things. But I just thought that was a nice language that didn't then box either type of art into abstraction, but they're using systems of abstraction. I thought that could be a nice way to frame it.

GB And it's also the way that when you place things in a museological context, or you put something in an exhibition and you put that next to that, all those things start to build relationships, intentionally or unintentionally. With the *Almanac* show, which was the Ann Lewis show, sort of had a wall of things where we put a Neil Roberts, who was an artist from Canberra, who'd done this conceptual work, where he'd dipped a tennis ball in shoe polish and then just bounced the tennis ball off a piece of paper, next to a Timothy Cook dot painting. And you've got this purely formal relationship, but it's also both of these things are conceptually driven. Like the conceptual idea of setting up a system and then you follow that system through to its conclusion. I mean the two great art movements that have come out of the 1970s in Australia are conceptualism and Aboriginal art, and what is the connection between those two things? Because things like that happen for a reason.

HMF So what do you see as the major connections?

GB I think it's that whole idea of conceptualism primes the ground, like conceptualism strips away a lot of the artifice of modernism and then allows Aboriginal art to sort of flourish in that space. And then there's also key individual people that start to become really interested in Aboriginal art, like Tim Johnson. And I think Tim is like one of the pioneers of conceptualism, and then he becomes this central figure in Aboriginal art history as well. And then he tries to work out a way to work with both things, conceptual Aboriginal painting. And Tim is slightly different from people like Imants [Tillers], who has a completely different methodology. Imants is about appropriation, whereas Tim is about collaboration. They're two completely different things. Tim and Imants sometimes get thrown in together, but they're completely different.

HMF Appropriation is definitely something that's come up a lot, and I did a conference paper at the university, and that was what a lot of people responded to me that they wanted to talk about. I didn't actually talk about appropriation in the paper because I wasn't quite there yet, but I found it really interesting that all the discussions were about appropriation. So that still seems to be a quite a contentious area as well, and very different strong points of view coming out from everybody. Do you come across a lot of issues with appropriation and Aboriginal art?

GB I think the thing to do about those sort of things is to be honest about the difficulty of those things. It's sort of interesting, those two. Like that tension makes it interesting. So you can't just wipe it away.

HMF No, you've got to be able to talk about it.

GB And as you would've seen, listening to Richard is quite amazing, because Richard Bell just provokes people. The whole thing is about provocation. So I think sometimes he says things where it's like, I'm not even sure if he means it.

HMF Just to get a response?

GB Yeah. And then the other thing that's really important about the show here, the collection show, is the decision was made—which was actually hardly even made, really—that there was going to be no split, Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art were going to be shown together, it was never going to be broken off, like “keep that over there.”

HMF Which is still quite rare.

GB Yeah, funnily enough it is, and I can't work out why actually. The National Gallery of Australia, who I think are an amazing institution, built that huge Aboriginal art wing. I think that's such a retrograde step. I can't actually work out why you would do that. But then even things like Peter Brantley in Paris, is like a colonial model of what a museum is. I mean a real breakthrough is not to build a primitive museum—which is what it is—it's actually to put those people in Louvre. Like that is radical.

HMF Just to have an Australian Museum with no other classifications in it.

GB Yeah. But bigger institutions, that's one of the things we can do here, because it's a younger institution. It's a bit more flexible. And the other huge difference, which people may not realise, is there's no departmental segregation. There's no, “I'm a curator of contemporary art.” The senior curator, Rachel Kent, is a curator of contemporary art. Anna Davis is a curator of contemporary art. It's not like there's a department of photography or a department of Aboriginal art. Those big institutions suffer from being compartmentalised. So it's almost become like turf wars within those institutions.

HMF So when you guys are working on a show, like the hang for the *Volume One* collection, you do that as a team?

GB That process happened—I was the sort of curator of the show, then there was a group of people who would meet really regularly and I would sort of put forward ideas, and then we'd talk about them or those ideas would be challenged until we sort of came up with something we were interested in. Liz-Ann [Macgregor] was very hands-on about that. I think Liz Ann realised that, that collection floor, it's a really important moment historically, because we've never had a floor like that and we've never known the collection to

that extent before. So it sort of changes the dynamics of the museum a lot, really substantially, probably more than we thought. And so it was really hands-on with a group of people. There was a lot of discussion about it, especially with education. And Keith Munro, who's our Indigenous curator of public programs, he was on that group as well. So there was a real debate amongst us about how we might approach different ideas. But almost the first thing that was settled was this—well there were two things. We weren't going to show the Power Collection, so the Power Collection is the collection from 1968 to 1989, which is the precursor to the MCA, and the second thing was not making a distinction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, showing them together. It's something we've always done, so we will do it here as well. And in some instances, it's a bit—I think people might look at it and think, "how does that make sense?" But I think the bark painting with the Robert Owen is probably the part of the hang that is a bit unusual, in how do those two things reconcile? I still don't know how they do. Maybe it's a formal thing, but symbolically, to put those bark paintings right in the heart of the hang and right at the centre, has a lot of symbolic meaning. And the bark painting is a funny one, because sometimes, international people will come here and say, "why are they here? This is a museum of contemporary art. This isn't contemporary art." Yes, it is.

HMF But it's good to have that uneasiness as well, because that is a perfect analogy to the Australian art world and how it is. It's great.

GB And the Australian art world is, in a funny way, sort of driven by Aboriginal art. When people come here from overseas, that's what people want to see, not just the general public. Like the people getting off that boat, they want to see Aboriginal art, but curators that come from overseas, they want to see it too. So that's an important thing to think about as well, that maybe generally, people don't know about it is that you have to think about the diversity of the audience and what they might want to see. So I'm not saying that's a guiding principle, but it's also one of those things that we have to be aware of.

HMF I don't have any experience in curating, so even just thinking about what I wanted to talk to you about was a really good experience in trying to put myself in those kind of shoes and making decisions from a completely different angle, that can have a really big impact. So for instance, the way there's no classification between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art in this museum, it's so completely different to other major institutions. I think it's a huge thing.

GB It's a huge thing, but it's not a huge thing. That is the funny thing about it.

HMF It's what it should be. It just suddenly makes it seem like everything else is so backwards.

GB And it's good to see—I think the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the new director is starting to make changes about that departmentalisation of bigger museums. Like he's split the museum into international and Australian, which throws everybody in together. And that'll be interesting, to see what happens. I mean I could walk you through certain museums and I can tell you which department owns which wall. In some places, you can—certain departments have a wall within a space and that's their wall, and if someone from the other department tries to take that wall, it's like a war. And that doesn't happen here, because we don't have that departmental model. It's quite old-fashioned. And also, if you look at someone like Brook Andrew, where does he fit? What department would he fit into? Or even Richard Bell does a painting and then does a video. Now in some institutions, that would be—one department would look after the painting, and another department would look after the video. And there's an argument to say, "well really everybody should be looking at everything," or, "this is all contemporary art, we shouldn't be breaking it up into these categories." Is that useful? Do you want to go and have a look at the show?

HMF Yeah, let's do that.

I read the article you wrote on Helen Eager's new work for the MCA. That was the first thing I'd read about her work and Indigenous art.

GB Again, Helen is coming out of this sort of European/American—more of an American abstract tradition, and she started as still-life, and then started to become the space between objects and almost sort of pulling back until eventually, it turned into this abstract—there's actually quite a clear linear narrative that you can follow. I think tonally, her work has a relationship to Aboriginal art, and I think again, like someone like Ildiko, she looks at a lot of this type of work. So her partner—it does play an important part—her partner is Christopher Hodges, who owns Utopia Art Gallery in Sydney, who's been showing Aboriginal art for a really long time. So it's around all the time.

Christopher is a really bold advocate of this idea of abstraction and modernism and how Aboriginal art fits into that narrative. It's one of his great ideas that he talks about a lot. They have an amazing art collection in their house, where you actually see this played out in the way their art collection is displayed, this whole sort of idea of flipping between the two things and that being quite easy. So they've always been advocates for that. The other book that could be worth looking at is a book called *Ancestral Modern*. It came out

earlier this year, it was a show in Seattle, which is two collectors from Seattle who have collected Aboriginal art extensively and have given their collection to the Seattle Art Museum. If you can't find it anywhere, there's a copy in the library here. Christopher is quite friendly with those collectors too, and they write an introduction and say, "we had to respond to these things aesthetically—the stories are one thing, and that's interesting, but I had to respond to it physically and aesthetically before we made the decision to buy it." That is the sort of debate, which I think some people don't like that idea. It's usually people coming from more of an anthropological background.

HMF It seems to me though, that the stories—it is difficult, because I think they're important, but at the same time, they seem to take the work out of the context of contemporary art, in a way. So I don't know.

GB See Djon's [Mundine] really interesting, and Djon's a fascinating sort of figure, because Djon has said something which one of our curators here repeated back a few times. And it's like, "well that's okay, but Djon is being provocative." There was this thing about Emily Kngwarreye, and Djon sort of saying, "well Emily Kngwarreye didn't know anything" —someone compared Emily to Brice Marden, the American, and Djon said, "well she's got no clue who Brice Marden is. Like that's got nothing to do with her, it actually should be the other way, like Brice Marden looks a lot like Emily." So that's one thing. What am I trying to say? That's one way of approaching it, but then Djon sometimes goes the other way as well, with is fine, because the whole thing is contradictory. That's what makes it interesting. I mean I have a big interest in outsider art, and I'm always pulled with outsider art, because you've got this whole thing about foregrounding all the artwork with the biography. See that's what I was thinking—Djon actually gave this great talk once that I went to, where he said, "why is it when you go to museums, when you look at labels of something, like for an abstract for a Rothko, there will be no explanation. But then if you look at an Emily, you want some sort of story about what it all means." Well they're both as ambiguous as each other. If you've got a story on one, you need it on the other, or don't have a story anywhere.

I'll just show you a couple of places where I think that Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal thing is really potent. And the thing that's not happening now, that was happening when it first opened, it's slightly changed, but there was actually this interesting thing happening where nearly in every room, there was an Indigenous artist in the room. So this room was about serial imagery and conceptualism and Fiona Foley was in here. It wasn't something we did on purpose. It's sort of when we actually walked around and went, "look, there's this interesting thing that has happened." And

the other really interesting thing is Brisbane is really important with Aboriginal art, but that's Bob MacPherson. So Bob MacPherson's house, who lives and works in Brisbane and lived there his whole life, these are works of his from the 70s. He is one of the conceptual drivers of what goes on in Brisbane. Someone called Brisbane anti-intellectual-intellectualism, which is, I sort of think, is a really compelling way to describe it, because it's really quite simple but through being simple, it actually becomes incredibly complex. So this is a work of Bob's, where he's bought a packet of pencils and then he's drawn a swan on the side of the pencil. Like it's almost the simplest way of making art, but just referring back to the material itself to make it. But that actually wipes it clean again, like this is the 70s. It almost strips painting back to nothing and then you rebuild. So that's where Aboriginal art comes in, I think. So this room is—we really wanted a space that looked at appropriation, because it is such an important thing in Australia. So it's almost like we've got this key protagonist. So if you do your reading, you'll realise that there is quite a debate that starts to happen between Gordon Bennett and Imants Tillers, that Ian McLean has written about a lot. But this is a work by Imants and it's called *White Aborigines*, which is an idea that Paul Taylor, who was a writer and a publisher, he set up a magazine called *Art and Text*. Paul Taylor came up with this idea of the 'White Aborigine,' because I think in the 80s in Australia, there's this sort of push for artists to become professional and international, but looking through the way that images came back to Australia. So Imants is the sort of key person. He looks at international art, and he's obsessed with internationalism. Now what's really funny is that at the same time he's becoming known, the movement that's really becoming famous is Aboriginal art, which is inherently regional. It almost has no interest in the idea of internationalism. So Paul Taylor came up with this idea and this group of people, maybe Imants and his peers were 'White Aborigines.' This was a form of Aboriginal art but by white people, so quite a controversial idea. And that's an absolute simplistic description.

HMF Did he write that after—?

GB I'm not sure whether it was, but it was around the same time. I think Imants here, he's maybe being provocative, maybe he's being a bit naive. I think sometimes there was a bit of naivety in Imants' work in the 80's about taking Aboriginal imagery. I think it was much more accepted. I think later on, it becomes a sort of no-no, and I absolutely understand why. I agree with that thinking.

HMF I just ordered a catalogue from a show down in Canberra, *The Loaded Ground*, and it's Imants Tillers and Michael Jagamara, and it's about their relationship. It shows their work before, during collaborating, appropriating and after, and there are some essays in there by Imants Tillers where he talks about that time. I'm waiting

for it to arrive in the post, but that he says that in retrospect, he thinks it was the wrong thing to do, but out of it came a lot of truth.

GB I'm pretty sure Ian McLean wrote a series of essays about a painting of Imants' called *The Nine Shots*, and then Gordon Bennett did a painting called *The Nine Ricochets*, which is this deliberate flip on Tillers', but sort of reappropriating Tillers' appropriation. So it's a complex layering, but his was quite an attack on Tillers and then—this is what I hear, I don't know—Tillers and Bennett were talking to each other and then there was a show at Artspace which consisted of that dialogue in faxes. Now I've never seen that, I've heard of it, that they actually had this dialogue.

Ask Ian McLean about that moment, because he would know. I don't know actually exactly what happened. See it's a really fascinating thing to me, from a museological perspective. We've got a great representation of Imants and a fantastic representation of Juan Davila, who's perhaps the other key figure. But fascinating because he doesn't come from an Australian culture, he comes from outside and has an outsider's perspective. We've got a great collection of Tim Johnson's work, but like I said, I find that a bit different as I don't look at that as appropriation. I think it's a different thing, but we have a great collection of his work. But that's the only work we have of Gordon's, which was this great hole in the collection.

HMF When did you get that one?

GB Well that was given to us as well in 1993 by Doug Hall, who used to be the director of the Queensland Art Gallery. He bought this work, and look at this fantastic thing. It's fantastic work. It's a great example of Gordon's work, what sort of is happening in the picture has actually happened out there [Circular Quay], which is why it's him in the window. It's actually depicting—I mean that happened—I could show you where it happened. You can't quite see it, but it happened almost at the entry of Customs House, which is that building just there. That's why that image is there, and this small room is about Sydney when you look at that as well, so it's this whole blaze. And this room was set up to sort of reflect on Sydney and where we are, but that work is great because it's about Sydney, but it's also about a sort of reappropriation of an Indigenous artist, Daniel Boyd taking Emanuel Phillips Fox's painting, which was painted in 1902, so around the time Australia become federated states. So it's about Sydney, representation and reappropriation, but it's pointing out the window. And then when you go back, there's Boyd sitting there again. So we've actually, thankfully, just set up a new foundation for acquisitions, and the first thing we bought was a big Gordon Bennett. We tried to get it before we opened, but we just couldn't do it. We made a commitment to a really major work, we needed it in the collection. It was like a great

big hole, and it was hard to work out why that was there. When I spoke to the curators, they knew that as well. The curators who have been here, they said they understood that that was a hole and they said, “we tried to get this particular piece and we missed it, and then it just didn’t happen again.”

So this—there’s a few things to notice. The sort of motif across nearly the whole floor, there’s a motif of spinning, or working, or going in a circle. When you come in the floor, if you go that way or that way, you’re going to move in a big circle, which is sort of spinning. And then there’s that new work in the back, which is spinning as well. And here, this room, I think, not that there’s a correct or an incorrect way to look at things, but I think it works around like that. We’ve always had the intention of showing a lot of Indigenous artists in this space, alongside non-Indigenous, looking at abstraction. The other really important element is the fact that most of the artists in this room are women as well. I think it’s got something to do with the fact that in a lot of Aboriginal communities, women are making the really interesting work. Whether that’s to do with the role that they play in the community, that’s another story. It’s something you should look at to try and resolve why that is. But I think Ildiko is just such a great painter and there’s also the history that’s imbedded within it, of these two paintings. Ildiko’s works were given to us by Ann Lewis, who was a collector here in Sydney. She was a real advocate of Aboriginal art, but she was also an advocate of abstract painting. So she sort of read it on those terms as well. That painting, that painting and that painting all came from Ann’s collection.

HMF Yeah, I remember the first time I saw these works [Emily Kngwarreye, *Untitled, Body Painting Series*] in that show. I almost fell over, they’re really great.

GB So these have been on tour. So when did you see them? In *Almanac*?

HMF Yeah, in *Almanac*. And I’d just finished my undergraduate degree, where I had just started to realise that this was the field I was working in. So it was a really timely show for me.

GB That’s good. So this work—one of the other things I wanted to draw out here was this idea of gesture as well, almost like painting from the shoulder. Like it’s painting with almost the whole of your body to make the work. Of course, they have a connection to body marking, but you can’t help but look at them and think it’s someone like Tony Tuckson.

HMF I’ve come across that a lot as well in artists who are speaking about the influence, and one of the big things that’s come up has been that performative aspect of painting and the body gesture.

GB But you think of her as an elderly woman having to make those paintings and you actually realise the physicality of that is actually imbedded within those—it looks like a mark like that, but it's actually a mark like that [left to right] and a mark like that [right to left]. It's two marks. And then I just find that—I actually prefer that painting to that painting [speaking to Kovac's work]. I just think it's such a fantastic work. And I mean that embodies that whole thing about Ildiko's work. It's something that she's taken from both Tuckson and Aboriginal art. You know Tuckson's great paintings on masonite? That's got a lot to do with bark painting. That's that influence. He saw those things, he saw bark painting as both the director, but as a collector, he saw them, and so I love the way that masonite comes into play, the materiality of it. It's like you could put it around with the bark paintings. I could have that in my house and look at it all day. It's a great piece [*T.T.*, Ildiko Kovacs].

See, but this is an amazing painting. And again, another artist that we had on our list who wasn't in the collection that we'd shown, and sort of six months before we opened, someone came to us with this work as a gift. So it's a really great piece of work. It's George Tjungurrayi, but you can see this thing about gesture. It's going from that big gesture to this gesture, which seems so fine. I think the thing I find amazing about it is that this is like a conceptual system too. It's like that defines the size, then the mud paint is defined by the brush, which is defined by the arm and all those sorts of things. But you look at it, you think it's a white painting on black, but then you look really hard, you realise it's actually on red ground. So it's a black mark, then a white mark on red.

HMF Which plays with the foreground and the background. It's beautiful.

GB Look, I think my responses to this sort of work is guided by me having gone to art school.

HMF What school did you go to?

GB University of Wollongong, but I went through the painting department. So I think I actually respond to these things in a physical way, that's about the making of them, more so than I respond to the conceptual or the mythological ideas. And that again is about mark making, but he's gone from sort of the shoulder to the hand here. And then this is working with texture and colour.

And this is always going to be the difficult one [gesturing to the woven baskets], because these are utilitarian baskets which still—they've sort of been murdered by the museums. Like they're not baskets anymore, they've been turned into something else. I mean it's a fish trap, but it's sort of not a fish trap. I've been to a show with David Elliott, who curated one of the Biennale's, and we showed these but we flipped them all up the other way so that they

were sitting on their tops, like that way and they were sitting on a table. Now they looked really great, but it turned it into sort of an architectural model, and in retrospect... It was a good thing to do, because I think it still looked really good, but when it came to do this, I was adamant that these actually had to go up this way. Even though it's contrived, because they're not baskets anymore, they needed to still function. They still needed a sense of how that might function as a basket. And now, I think it'd be nice to pick up on those relationships between the things as you move through, and I think people do. Someone picked one, because that's the John Nixon's, which are here, which is like high abstraction, I would call it. And those two things – that's playing off that and that relates to that, and someone noticed it which was good, because you do it and you think, I hope that someone notices. I mean that texture is part of that texture. And then here, it moves all the way around to that Kerrie Poliness. So it's moved from that gesture, very human thing, around to this Kerrie Poliness, which is actually not painted by her at all. It's just an instruction. She had a paper and at the end of it, we had to photograph it and send her the photo. I mean she's seen it, but she wasn't a part of its making. Now the thing that I wanted to point out, which I think is really important, is that Richard Bell, in a funny way, contradicts everything else in this room. So we put that there very purposefully to actually go, "this is a great idea, but it could be wrong." Because I don't know.

HMF So do you get challenged on this at all?

GB In a funny way, that almost—if someone came in here and said, "that's not the way it should be," I'd say, "well maybe you're right, that's why that's there." I don't know. I tend to think—one of the good things I've heard—Richard Bell said in that panel discussion ["What is Aboriginal Art?"] he said, "the great thing about the MCAA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia] show is I'm not stuck in "Darki corner," which I was really happy about. So that's very good, I'm very pleased, because I think that's really important. This is important contemporary art first, that's the first thing you have to think about.

HMF I actually saw Richard, I just happened to be at the same pub as him after an opening, the day that he'd come to the official opening with the artists or whatever. So he was describing his experience of coming here for the first time.

GB What did he say?

HMF He loved it, but he basically went room by room, what he thought. It was really—.

GB Richard's a very clever guy.

- HMF** He was very impressed with the show.
- GB** That makes me really happy. But it's also important to point out the fact that there's other things about this hang which are important to me as well, such as the gender split is almost 50/50. I can tell you exactly—the baskets and the bark paintings sort of skew the count. So when you factor in the barks and the baskets, these are nearly all women. I think there's one man who's made a basket, but with the barks, it's all men. So when you count those, it's something like—let's just say it's 90 men and about 82 women. So it's just skewed it out, but if you take those things out, it's 55 men, 56 women. But to me, that is really important too. I won't say which museum, but if you go to some other art galleries, you'll find that it's 90% men, which is a disgrace. So that's really important. The other thing that's really important is to make sure that young artists—I mean like Gemma Smith, who's probably in her early 30s, is hung in the context of her peers, but also hung in context of senior artists. I think that's another thing that happens. We tend to focus on emerging or senior, whereas here, it's everybody. And we tried—you do a show like this, there's always going to be an emphasis on artists from Melbourne and Sydney. You can't—but we tried to represent as broadly as we could. So it's still the case. There's an artist from every state and territory of Australia in the show, and there's little things like that, like making sure that there's a fair representation of gallerists as well. I go to museums and I probably have a different experience to you, because I actually start counting who's representing whom, because this is actually a really broad—even down to that fine detail. So this room sort of leading into here, these are the bark paintings, but we had a couple of really great experiences where—see, this artist, Brian Blanchflower is from Western Australia. Fantastic painter. I think he's looked at a lot of Indigenous art. I think it's something that he's looked at. He's English, but he moved to Perth in the '60s or '70s, and I think his work has a sort of spiritual dimension, and it's also about maps and the night sky and astrology and those types of things. So when he came in, he came in to see the show while we were hanging and he just really responded to the context. It was one of those moments where you think, "well this is a bit tense," because you're not sure how people might react to how they're placed alongside other things. He actually went, "yeah this is great" because it felt really natural to him to be with the bark paintings.
- HMF** Did you have any artists that weren't happy where they were placed?
- GB** Not that anyone's told me. I think we've had really positive reactions from most of the artists, positive reactions from other artists looking at other artists too.

HMF There's a comment that I heard—I can't remember what context it was in, but with regards to people being upset about Aboriginal art being shown under the context of abstraction, that it was only ever non-Indigenous theorists that complained about it and that they'd never actually heard an Aboriginal artist complain about it. So I was interested, again, for a curator, has that ever happened that someone said, "well actually my work doesn't fit there."

GB I don't know. I'd like to think that Indigenous artists, if they came to see this show, would respond to it the same way that a non-Indigenous person would. I think the artists have responded positively. I'm not sure. Having worked with a lot of artists who—and this is going to sound a bit odd—have eyes for their own work a lot of the time, and if you bring them in to look at an artwork being installed in the context of other works, it's quite often things fall away and they concentrate a lot more on their own work, rather than the context that surrounds it. Definitely not all the time, and it might change. Like when you first see something, it's different from when you see it another time. I mean you could say that about anybody. If you write something and someone sends you a book where you've written something, it's no different. I'd like to think that there's a certain element in this which is about texture and feel and touch and making sure there's a relationship between things, that I think artists respond to maybe.

HMF Plus artists are usually very open-minded, happy to find a new connection as well.

GB And I mean here, I've not spoken to Peter Graham about it, but look, if I was an artist working like this and I found myself next to John Mawurndjul, who's perhaps like one of the great Australian artists, I'd be thrilled. I mean Peter is a great artist too, he's a fantastic artist, I think he makes really amazing work, and here, I like to think that connection between those two things is a good one. Peter—funnily enough, when I was writing that *Almanac* essay, I used the term post-Aboriginal art and actually, I had to take it out of there. Someone said, "well you can't use that." I said, "why can't I use it?" I knew what I meant when I said it. When this painting went up and before the gallery opened, I snuck a few people through, and someone who I really like and respect, a gallerist that I've worked with quite a bit, I said, "can you just come and check something? Just pretend you're checking something and I'll show you around." He came in and he saw that, and he works with a lot of Indigenous artists, and he said, "look, it's a post-Aboriginal painting." It's like, yeah, that's actually what I think that is. And when a lot of people looked at this, there was a big discussion about this when this came to the acquisitions committee, because people weren't familiar with them and they said, "it's using dots and stuff." It's like, well anyone can use dots. Dots are a sort of universal symbol.

HMF That was one of the things that came up in that panel discussion, the term post-Aboriginal, and it was quite contentious. So it'll be interesting to see if that starts being used, I don't know.

GB But again, the person who I'm talking about is from Brisbane, and then a magazine called *Eyeline*, which is a Brisbane magazine, came out almost when this show opened with an article about Aboriginal art, using quite freely "post-Aboriginal art." I mean that's why Brisbane is so interesting, because people are quite provocative, and quite clear thinking, not muddled theory-laden thinking. Like really clear thinking. There's something really clear about what Richard's telling you. I think it's provocative, but it's actually done really simply. That's why it works. There's other artwork which might talk about the same things, but it's so convoluted that you get lost.

See because this is Tim Johnson, and look, here is this thing, it's almost like it starts to pick up and you see dots and circles and it's appearance everywhere. And here, I just think Tim's amazing. He is maybe one of those people you should speak to as well.

HMF Yeah, he's on the list.

GB Because like I said, I consider Tim a collaborator. Tim's intentions were always about collaboration, not appropriation. I think Imants' is a really deliberate strategy, as is Tim's. Tim wanted to go and work with people, like it's that simple. If you can get him to tell you—I don't want to spoil it—but Tim had a vision that somebody told him to go to Papunya, and he's one of the few people I know who would actually follow that vision. If you were given that vision, most people would go, "that was a weird dream." Tim actually went, "I had a vision, I'm going to do it." And then he left.

HMF I am really looking forward to doing more interviews. Everybody, including yourself, have been very generous with their time and honesty. I've really enjoyed it. I was quite afraid of it before I started.

GB Yeah, because I think the people that you're talking to are very open. They're not uptight about it. I think there's an acknowledgement—I don't know if Djon would acknowledge it—but if you ask me, if someone said to me, "there's a problem with that abstract," I'd say, "yeah, of course there's a problem. Why do you think it's there?" I'm willing to accept the problems as much as I'm willing to accept why I think that's a really good thing. But I can see that maybe it's not. All great art is ambiguous. When things start being talked of in absolutes, it's over. I can't give you any answers.

This is Esme Timbery and this is a really important thing. That's why having Keith here is really great, because Keith has a lot of connections with artists from New South Wales. And I think there's been this real shift in Aboriginal artists from New South Wales being very marginal, now, and becoming much more central, and the Art Gallery [of New South Wales], in a very good gesture during the Biennale actually did a show of artists from New South Wales, which was fantastic, which probably wouldn't have happened ten years ago.

I mean Esme's a great case in point. I used to work at the University of Wollongong for the art collection and we [I] wanted to buy one of those big Harbour Bridges that she does. My boss was older. He's like 92 now, so he was probably in his 80s when we had this discussion, and he was actually a contemporary of Tony Tuckson. So he knew that whole Aboriginal story and was all for it. He could not come at that Harbour Bridge and he said, "that is just terrible and kitch. We can't have it." We had a big argument about it. These have actually gone through a big shift in 20 years. 20 years ago, there is no way these would have been in the museum or any of the art gallery contexts, and now they are and it's quite easy. They're accepted quite easily. So these came up for acquisition and it's one of those rare acquisitions where everybody agreed, like, "yeah, we should get this." These were shown in an exhibition that Djon curated of New South Wales artists, it was at Campbelltown. So it was quite an important exhibition. It was the first show in a high profile art space where it was just Indigenous artists from New South Wales. It's got a funny name. So you should look that up to. Djon commissioned these from Esme as a response to the stolen generation. So it's 200 pairs of shoes. People like it. I think the whole thing about it, it's a bit kitch, but it's okay. It doesn't matter. There's something celebratory about them and they've got this sparkle and it has this other thing about the stolen generation. Of course the power in that is—imagine a child's foot actually going into one of these. The foot would be cut to pieces. So it looks innocent, but it actually holds this other meaning. But very deliberately, she's here in the centre of the show. And as is someone like Asher Bilu, who is an artist who came to Australia in the '60s from Israel and has sort of been forgotten about. But it was important that someone like him, that he is here as well. So those things are important too. Trying to balance all these things is actually a bit tricky. But I think we've done a pretty good job.

HMF Well it seems, from what you're saying, that the biggest challenges for you working this field would be just achieving that balance and not having anything that is presented as the truth, but presenting it as—

GB Yeah, trying to be ambiguous. And we've been doing this thing about education. Like these now, if you read the wall labels, this is

probably one of those things where it does get a bit tricky. If there was to be a wall label for a piece like this, and I don't know, because there are no extended wall labels, that just tells you what things are rather than what things mean. That's what we're trying to do, telling you what they are, but don't tell you what they mean. So we write this thing, these wall labels down where there's no leading commentary. It's just a description of what's going on. If we know something like, "this came after Blake's poem," we mention that, but we actually don't tell you. It's not very extensive, it's actually just giving you clues so you can sort it out yourself. And then where something is published online or in the book or wherever, it's very clear where it's come from. So online, you might see there's a text about an artwork like this, and then if there's something I've written that's been pulled out and it's got my name it, that's to say that's what I think, but you don't have to think that. Which some people find difficult. It doesn't bother me. Some places want to give you a definite meaning about this, this, this and this, whereas I'm more like, "this is what it is, I'm not going to tell you anything else." I don't want to spoil it for people.

HMF That's always been an argument, hasn't it? That it's too elitist if you don't explain it, or something like that.

GB Yeah, because see the National Gallery of Australia—it's really interesting and it's a bit of a bind, and I understand their problem—but they've got all those beautiful Papunya boards, but with no explanation. I actually think those things need a bit of an explanation. But I was looking and those pictures need to be unlocked and you can respond to them in a purely visual way, because they look amazing, but they are so complex that to give no indication of what they might be is actually a bit unfair.

HMF It's definitely a balance. Thank you so much Glenn.

Interview with Dallas Gold, 9 March 2013

Raft Artspace, Alice Springs, Northern Territory

HMF Dallas, I would really like to hear about how you got started with RAFT Artspace.

DG The whole idea of the gallery happened when I watched Peter Adsett—who is a friend of mine—have a dialogue in paintings with Rusty Peters. Peter Adsett's a white Pakeha artist from New Zealand. He painted with Rusty. Rusty and he sat down and worked out the format and the palette. Rusty painted outside under a tree on Peter's property at Humpty Doo just outside of Darwin, he painted the first painting and then Peter had to respond to that and Rusty had to respond to that so it went to and fro for seven pairs, so seven paintings each.

HMF Over a couple of years?

DG No it happened over a couple of weeks, it was a very special and amazing thing. I got to see it happen and I was just amazed because there was stuff happening I couldn't articulate. There was a communication happening in the work and Rusty could read Peter's visual language because he's an abstract expressionist and all his iconography and research is done from where he comes from. He's also a Catholic so there's references to the stations of the cross and all sorts of other things. But the way Peter used the edge, and black and white, Rusty could read what Peter was doing which was amazing.

Rusty had a very sophisticated visual language, he's a real philosopher, and when the show was finished it was just an amazing body of work. I was racing around trying to find someone to buy it and somewhere to hang it because it was in danger of getting split up. Rusty needed money and Peter was getting accused "You're just using Aboriginal art to further your own career," there's always controversy around anything like this but the fact is that there's been a lot of collaboration and it's a real two way thing. It's been the case for a long time and any artist that's moved to the Territory, there are a lot of things that have just happened.

I tried to find a shop front or anything where I could display the work before it got split up and that's how the gallery idea started. Peter and I, we had a mission statement and it was to do with responding to Indigenous art as a movement in art and, of course, Peter's practice and sensibilities. It was also the underlying thing about this communication that happens in non figurative visual language, it was also a means to show Indigenous arts in the context of contemporary art exhibitions.

HMF What year was this?

DG That show happened in 2000 and the gallery opened early 2001. I, of course, missed out on *Two Laws, One Big Spirit*. I missed out on that show, ended up going to *24Hour Art* which was the best show they've done. The gallery idea stuck and I had, by that time, met Rusty, Paddy Bedford, Freddie Timms, Rammey Ramsey and they liked the idea of a gallery and they said "We'll paint for you." With Peter's encouragement I found a little rent free space, a friend of mine had a development that wasn't doing so well and gave me rent free space.

HMF Where was that?

DG It was down in Frances Bay which is near Dinah Beach in Darwin harbour, it's where Ian Fairweather used to live in the hull of a boat when he lived in Darwin, that's why we went with the name Raft. It was right near where Fairweather built the raft which has become part of folklore for any artist that moves to Darwin, Fairweather's fabled raft journey from Darwin to Timor, he ended up at Roti but he set out for Timor and got blown off course. Raft was a good metaphor and a good name because we'd go around celebrating the difference and also what Fairweather did in his practice was fit into what Raft was about. He's got visual language by looking at Asian Aboriginal art. So Raft slowly took off and then in 2010 Raft moved to Alice Springs.

HMF How did the move go?

DG Well it's been tough, I knew it was going to be hard but I figured it was worth a go. All sorts of things happened, the markets crashed and I still need to sell things to survive, even though I'd prefer to be a private museum, then we could have some great shows and not worry about trying to sell anything. I still really try to continue with that in mind.

HMF How has that ideology panned out for you then, in your experience?

DG It's still really important and it's still relevant, it's just difficult to do when you're not funded because I'm relying heavily on the support of art advisors [of remote Indigenous art centres], on communities and artists but they don't get what I'm trying to do and to give me enough good work to sell or good shows. It's very difficult because one you have to have a show that has integrity and reason for being and you have to have saleable work. Often the best artists are highly desirable and you're competing with everyone else for the best work so then you have to play that game and there are some ruthless people in the business. It's always been a juggle like that.

I'm still passionate about the original reason I set out, the only thing that becomes testing is the small business element to it and constantly trying to win over art advisors who might not totally get what you're trying to do, might see you as just another dealer. They do eventually, but there's such a high turnover of art advisors, usually three years, it doesn't take very long to damage any relationship that you might've set up with a previous one and then it takes them two years before they realise that you're a good gallery and then they're gone. It's that shifting sand thing all the time, can't really move on and if you could establish something long term you could have some really worthwhile shows because you need that ongoing support but everything's so rushed, I think that's the difficulty.

HMF What kind of exchanges have you seen come about since you started?

DG There's all sorts of different exchanges. Every art advisor that goes and works on a community for one; any aesthetic judgement they might make in selecting work for shows; Indigenous artists see that, that influences the way they work. We've seen it recently when Aboriginal art was booming and there was a response to the boom and people were paying for a market so there are all sorts of ways that, even without meaning to or trying to, art advisors influence the direction of artists work.

Whether it's the colours, whether it's the materials, whether it's the particular aesthetic because every change in the art advisor the work would change, so you can't say they didn't have an influence and some would be more interventionist than others, so it's a two way thing.

Some Indigenous artists encourage people to help them, especially old people, if they can't reach over a canvas they say "Can you do this for me," there's this collaboration thing and the way Aboriginal artists work on communities that have a tradition of paint, say at Yirrkala is that if there's a whole section of—it's not called rarrk in Yirrkala it's called miny'tji it's a cross hatching and it symbolises water and different types of water (it is also sacred clan design)—rather than an old person sit down and do all that they might subcontract that out to some younger person, younger family member and that's how they learn to paint. It's a collaborative process. Of course they are the owner of the knowledge and they will not let anyone do anything that has any secret sacred stuff but certain aspects of the process of painting would be done by other people and it's totally kosher. But then there's this sole authorship thing and that's happened right throughout European culture too.

In the height of the boom when there was a bit of faking going on, wherever there's money there's always corruption, there was this

thing about everything had to be sole authorship. There's also exploration of, first of all the show that Peter did *Two Laws* was a conversation, that hasn't happened again, we've not seen that again. That happened in 2000, it's now 2013, it's thirteen years later and no one else has done that, but that was a totally equal thing where Rusty and Peter sat down together and said "This is what we're going to do."

They talked about it for two or three years first and then they did it, a lot of other times Aboriginal art has influenced everyone in Australia in a certain way and some, like Ildiko Kovacs around the corner there, she sees Indigenous artists as her peers and she is totally in awe of the work. It's not the design or the secret sacred element to it, it's that conviction in a work and it's the nuance that's made when there is no interruption in that conduit.

Aboriginal artists they just sit down and they paint, there's no hesitation, there's no fear, and it's that confidence in the marks that really excite. If you're a painter and into the nuance of paint you see it in someone else's work and that's like "Wow," people who are in tune to that really respond and that's what she gets from the work.

She's gone out to a few communities, the first time was at Fitzroy Crossing and more or less she was just making cups of tea and talking to artists during the day and then she made a body of work at night time because she was so inspired but everyone wanted to read into it, "You've collaborated with the artists," really it's not, she's responded to their work.

The next show that I had was Ninuku Arts which has gone out to Pitjantjatjara and Kalka, she's been there giving a workshop on paint and she's been invited to work with some artists. That process is incredibly fraught but in this situation it was like a meeting by the river, it happened and she was invited and the works were beautiful, the Aboriginal artist found something that Ildiko could paint because to them every painting has a story. There are some stories that are open that you or I can include because they're not sensitive as far as the law issues and it's an ongoing story that you could include and that's the ground they found that Ildiko could be part of.

That was a show but then other people wanted to criticise that, and because it could potentially be a fraud issue, other art centres didn't like the idea and took it upon themselves to alert the Indigenous Elders of their community to say that this white person has come in they're doing, whatever. It usually comes from the white person before it comes from the Aboriginal person, of course those things have to be negotiated and that community was the Pitjantjatjara community.

The Pitjantjatjara have only just started painting story paintings, they still haven't totally worked out what they can release, so it's a sensitive issue and some people are stronger sticklers for the law than others. There's always an element of law in everything but some see the negative side, it's just a new process that can be fraught.

Often the trouble comes from other vested interests when you get down to it so it's a very fraught area. When someone emails me, an artist, and says "We'd love to do something with indigenous artists, what can you do, what are you offering?" because they read that in my website too. It's something that has to be a little more organic than that, something you can't decide you're going to do and do it, it's something that if you went out and worked on a community and there was an opportunity presented you'd have to make sure it's not something you're not projecting on to someone else.

The accusation is that you come in as a privileged artist and you're more powerful in the relationship and you're a copy-cat. The way that artists on communities work is totally different, not all because there's some younger artists that work in a more contemporary way, but the older artists and their images are informed by knowledge of country and that's hooked up with a whole lot of other protocols. Potentially it's fraught but in saying that it can happen too, but I can't make it happen as a gallery and I'm a venue for that if it happens and elements come together that's good, I'm happy to explore that.

HMF [Referring to the exhibition being hung, Tobias Richardson] How long was he there?

DG Forty six days, the show is called 46 Days In Ethiopia, the first few days obviously he was looking around at the museums and stuff but as we go in there's all sorts of images. Tobias, he was an artist in Sydney doing quite alright then he just got jack of the scene. He did his teaching degree and went out to Utopia and worked as a teacher, he never stopped making work but he just didn't show it. He made work while he was in Utopia influenced just by stuff that was lying around, old gaming boards and cards or whatever.

Then he went to and made work in Maningrida, he very strongly comes from his tradition but he's been very influenced also in responding to Indigenous art in his own way. If you lived in Darwin for a while you'd get a sense of how often it does happen, not just with visual art but with music big time and it just happens, it just can't help but happen, whether it's documented or not it happens all the time. As soon as it gets into the public forum that's a really academic question, sure all those things have to be taken into consideration when you're dealing with another culture that you're

not exploiting them and of course there is that potential but given that, why not, there's a tradition of it.

HMF Especially in my generation we completely grew up with Aboriginal imagery as part of our visual culture.

DG I'm a baby boomer but I grew up with television so that's an influence and now we've got other forms of media but we live in this country and the traditional artists of this country have this incredible visual language that developed over the millennium. Some of the imagery, even from say Yirrkala, some of this stuff here in this pile, they've maybe deleted one element so it can be seen but they're still very strong in the law. This visual language was developed, it's so loaded, there's so many layers of meaning, it's not something that leant itself easily to the Western aesthetic but when you talk to someone who knows something about that work, if you're sensitive to responding to work you know there's something in it, you know enough, but there is a lot in it, there's layers and layers of meaning and that was developed over a long period of time.

That can't help but influence us on a level, we all started out as hunters and gatherers at one stage and we all had highly tuned visual language and now we have a different visual language. Now I believe there is something there in the subconscious that there are certain things that you respond to, you don't know why you respond to those things. You can't articulate why something makes you want to cry or there's some works that almost make you vomit or why it gives you goosebumps, there is something that operates in the work.

Like the Papunya Tula boards there, we see them as paintings but they are things that operate, they're like triggers for initiation into that knowledge system that might trigger a whole lot of knowledge. It's only that someone has been through a certain initiation process and they're privy to it, so that sort of stuff we normally wouldn't see outside of ceremony but we're sticking it on gallery walls. Some of the paintings from old people have been informed by that sort of knowledge system that's been developed over thousands of years, we don't have a language for that, but we certainly know that we respond to it.

That's what I'm interested in, growing up in suburban Sydney but near the bush and then come across engraving sites and getting goose bumps and "What is it?" Then walking on places and knowing that someone was probably sitting in that spot, thousands of people over thousands of generations were there and you'd sensed that "What is that?" Then when we went to Kakadu then you can see it in contemporary painting too, there is that, the power of art. I've also seen it not just in this art but I can see the other

forms of painting even abstract expressionism or whatever can have a similar power.

If I could have shows that people remember or even if one person does and they report and then you look back and say "Wow that's a great thing," that's what I'm passionate about. It doesn't really matter what genre of work, so long as it's good work. We live in this country and Indigenous people, they're the first Australians and we have to come to terms with who we are in this country.

Indigenous people are marginalised and live in poverty the majority of them, and die from silly preventable causes and have all sorts of issues to do with the marginalised people, but they certainly know who they are. When it comes to their art and culture some, the stolen generation had an issue, but then we're seeing a whole lot of urban Indigenous artists, that's coming to its own, it's always been good but it hasn't been fashionable but urban indigenous art is getting stronger too.

As far as art goes it's very exciting but also with working out who we are as a people in this country, we have to come to terms with that. I can only do it by showing the art.

HMF Everything you're saying makes a lot of sense to me, I really like the way that you're phrasing it.

DG Whether you can do that in an exhibition program, then over the years you look back and say "There were certain elements there." There is certainly a lot of shows to go, but the trick is how do you do it and how do you survive and do it? I need a patron just to support the gallery, because if you have that and you can just go out and do trips, you respond quicker to what's going on in remote communities. I'd love to show some urban and contemporary as well, but if you can just go and respond to what's going on you could respond quicker than the lumbering institutions then you'd see some amazing stuff.

There are so many shows that aren't being done, there are so many shows that haven't been taken overseas. I don't think anyone has curated a fabulous show of Indigenous work, there has been some great shows but there's some great ones to have. Mostly in Europe and the States they still see Indigenous art as tribal art or in a very ethnographic way.

HMF Any questions I could've asked you you've probably already answered them and I just wanted to hear what your experience has been with those interests.

DG That's pretty general, I can't think right now but there are specific things and I suppose being from Sydney and moving to Darwin and

then meeting a whole lot of a different people. I was a caterer and I met pretty much everyone right throughout the whole cross section of the community, everyone from the Supreme Court Judge to the Chief Minister to artists, to people who live long-grass to Aboriginal people.

I felt like when I first moved to Darwin it was incredibly refreshing because it was so claustrophobic all that stuff that you learnt, you knew it was bullshit, you knew there was something amiss but when you realise how rich the stuff that you didn't know, how amazing it is, it was so refreshing, you feel like a little kid because you don't have any confidence.

I was in Darwin for a few weeks and I went out and spent a couple of weeks at Ramingining that was the first community that I'd ever spent any time on that, those were the days. There was some really powerful amazing artists still alive in '92: David Malangi, George Milpurrurru and Paddy Dhathangu and all these old law-men, were painting these amazing barks but they were just incredible characters. George Milpurrurru—it was said that he could sing up storms and I would believe it because when you meet him, it's like "My God."

HMF I had a really fascinating experience recently, I'm at Sydney Uni and the Union has their own art collection, it's a bit of a strange art collection but every year they hire two people to look after it and curate a show with the collection. Last year there were two old Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) graduates who had that job and they decided they would invite some post graduate students from SCA to respond to a work in the collection. I was given the George Milpurrurru bark painting.

DG It would take that sort of intense scrutiny before you realise what's going on in his work. I visited his outstation and George Milpurrurru, he lived in half a school building that was totally open on one side and he lived right in the Arnhem Swamp.

He could hunt crocodiles, crocodiles were part of his thing, but he could hunt them. Where he took his kids fishing and stuff they used to wade through chest deep water where crocodiles were and he'd hunt crocodiles by going out in a little bark canoe, and he'd have a spear and a toggle and then he'd just trace the bubbles and he'd put a spear in the crocodile and then twist it so that it only has the barb and then he'd just let the crocodile tire itself out.

Then he'd go to shore and he'd just pull it in and he might pull in a four or five metre crocodile and then he would just bash it to death with a club. Then he would drag it back to his outstation with the Toyota and some of them were so big. One of them was so big he had to go down this little hill and the crocodile went flying past him

and jack knifed the car, it was so big it just spun the Toyota totally around.

He'd hunt them just with simple things. I was out there with the print maker Theo Tremblay and Theo wanted to get a photograph of a crocodile so George said "Here, come and I'll get you a photograph of a crocodile." He did that, he pulled the crocodile in from the shore and it's this huge thing and Theo just wanted to climb a tree because it was such a scary thing because he had this enormous dinosaur at the end of a rope that was flicking around like crazy. He says "Hurry up get a photo," because he wasn't going to kill it, he wanted to let it go, so he leaned over and after he got a photo and took the barb out so the crocodile went back.

Around the outstation there were skulls of crocodiles this big and teeth, littering all around his outstation. He was just an amazing guy. There was that link that went back and when I went back there I just thought it was amazing to meet a guy like that. He had a parrot that he talked to and told jokes and the parrot told him jokes, there was a whole different world. He made very beautiful, very strong paintings.

Interview with Hannah Kothe, 20 March 2013

Alice Springs, Northern Territory

HMF Hannah, you've been working for Papunya Tula, but you were saying you spent a fair bit of time in different communities before you came here to the gallery [Alice Springs]?

HK It was two communities—Papunya Tula, although it started in Papunya in the 70's, in the 80's it actually moved out to the communities of Kintore and Kiwirrkura—the Pintupi homeland communities. Those people had been brought away from their homelands through missions and brought into Papunya. Then in the 80's they decided to go back home and so the communities were set up. So it's people's homelands and they're the Pintupi artists. The company was started by a number of language groups, but Pintupi was the strongest language group and so they shifted back out to Kintore and Kiwirrkura and the company went with them—the majority of the shareholders. There are still two artists who paint at Papunya so we drive through there and stop and see them. Papunya actually has it's own arts centre now—Papunya Tjupi. You drive from Papunya another 250 kms west and you get to Kintore and then 170 km further west over the NT border into WA you get into Kiwirrkura. There are a lot of relationships between the communities, although they are actually quite distinctive people. It's usually that people's dreaming sites are either closer to one community or another and that's how they ended up where they did. Kintore is quite a bit bigger, there's about 300 people at Kintore, although the last census that there is 500, but it's about 300. And then Kiwirrkura is about 100 people.

So I was working in the studio—we have a studio at each community. And I was working there as well as the field offices. I was there for 6 months and we'd travel between the two. I was mainly in Kintore. There are about 130 artists on our books, but we probably have about 50 to paint regularly. And so yeah, I was with the artists there, living in the community, living in the house attached to the arts centre and working with those artists on a daily basis. So that was really interesting.

HMF How did you come to be there?

HK Papunya Tula advertised for a job, they called it a Remote Art Worker and said there would be an interesting group of people that worked out there. There were four of us until I changed jobs to move here. I'm from Sydney. I worked for the University art collection in Sydney University and I wrote my honours thesis in history on the Western Desert, or partly on the Western Desert. I'd studied Aboriginal studies and Indigenous studies and then worked

at the University for a couple of years and then I decided to actually go travelling around Australia.

The job description says that you need certain skills in the arts, but it's really about building relationships with people and being able to deal with you know, quite confronting situations and respond to people.

HMF That was definitely the impression I got in the brief time I spent in Warmun.

HK The way we did it was when I was a field worker I would spend 3 weeks out bush and come back for a weekend. I got three days off in town, but it takes two days driving. And then you would come back to Alice Springs. We have open-ended contracts and people last about two years. Two years is seen as a good amount of time. There are people who have been there for 5 in the past. Two years is kind of "you've done your time," because it's pretty tough. And the living environment—there's a four-bedroom house and we all live together—so there's no escape from your work. And the thing that I found really interesting and challenging about being out there, particularly in relation to the arts and how it works, or the way the community relates to the arts centre—is that we're known by your skin name and not by your first name. People don't know your first name. They could, it's just the way they relate to you. And so you have no identity outside of the centre. You don't have a name, that's your personal name. It's a name that every eighth woman has. So it's not a sense of identity as a person with a life outside the community/job so that's kind of interesting.

And because our gallery management is here, but all the art workers work out there, you've got to work quite independently because you can't just call the town up. It means we have to make a lot of decisions about money. To the point of how much the artists are paid per canvas. Because they're paid up front, most artists are paid when the canvas is sold, but we pay upfront. So we decide, within a pricing structure, what the work is worth. And that amount can be topped up later if we've undervalued it, but not reduced.

HMF When they give you the finished product?

HK When they finish the canvas. We supply the materials, they finish the painting. We record the story. And then we pay them for their work. At that time the work is finished. And then it comes to town with us. At most art centres the gallery and the studio are one and there's not a different gallery. Here, the art works are brought in every 3 weeks so the artists don't see their works around. So the way we kind of try and retain an image bank for the artist is we have photos of every work they've done before and old catalogues

and stuff. So when we talk to them about which story they want to paint, we look at works they've done in the past and what's worked and what hasn't. You know, their family story and the link they have to family and that's how we start most often. We often show them old photos.

HMF So when you've talked about what's worked and what hasn't is that from a public point of view about what sells and what doesn't?

HK Yes. At the end of the day our job is to be the link between that studio space there and the market. There has to be a sales idea in mind. But it's not a directive kind of dialogue. It's about showing images of what's worked and how they can maybe focus on one element. The works are often to depict a story—there might have five women doing one story, but they each focus on a different representation or a different element of that story. So it might be the tools used or it might be the sand hills that are around that area. And often with particular artists it's about looking at their parent's works; especially those original painters and their sons, because they usually have rights over their father's stories. You know the women started painting in the 1990's, the women often paint their husband's stories—

HMF So the woman are allowed to paint their husband's stories?

HK Usually. If it's been passed on. The other week I was with somebody who was painting and he's not that well, and he's sitting with his wife and she said you know, when this old man passes away I'm going to paint his stories and he said 'yeah, yeah,' but it's the sense of when he passes away then she has the rights to paint those stories. And it's almost two different stories but that representation, there is the sense of "so and so's painted it like that." That was their way. That was their own sort of style. Because there is a real difference. When I first went out on my trial, we started in the gallery and I'd seen all the works in the gallery. Then I spent a week out there. When I came back the contrast between seeing the works when I didn't know anybody and then coming back to the space after I'd met the artists, they were immediately animated for me, but also personalised. Now I can by sight pick anybody's work. You realise how distinctive they are, that without knowing the people or knowing the specifics, it's hard to really isolate them.

HMF Are you an artist?

HK No, I'm not an artist. I studied art/history and Indigenous studies so I worked as a curator.

HMF Where did you work as a curator?

HK At the university. I worked for the university art collection and also the student union art collection through Verge. And I've also done a few other freelance jobs here and there for other galleries.

HMF And what was your honours paper on?

HK It was on the reception of Aboriginal Art in London. And I spent a bit of time at my mum's in London so that was part of the link. So it was looking at particularly the idea of the artist as an individual creative agent which kind of developed out of the idea of an artist having a solo show, and some of the first solo shows of Aboriginal artists were in London. And yeah, that concept of sort of collective versus individual and how the idea of a solo show developed or changed the idea of Aboriginal art. So the paper was looking at different exhibitions as case studies for that reception.

HMF Moving Aboriginal Art into the contemporary art world?

HK Yes. And it was, yeah, I suppose that's it. One of the exhibition case studies I did, was Clifford Possum and he was obviously one of the first painters here. Yeah, but he wasn't the first to have solo show of the Peninsula artists, he was the second, but his was the major show and he was sort of the first to carve an individual name for himself.

HMF So how is Aboriginal art perceived in London?

HK It's changing. It's changed obviously over time. I was looking at earlier exhibitions, obviously you know the age-old notions of the exotic and the other came into play and the ideas of the mysterious. And a lot about the notion of the noble savage. And ideas to do with it being a mysterious thing, that there was a story behind which the western viewer couldn't understand. And I think that's got a lot to do with the way we talk about the artwork. We can explain to a certain extent what the work means. But also you have to look at notes because you can't immediately view work necessarily and know what it means. It's not a map, we might know from memory that artist paints five works and usually they have some element in it that will probably represent a certain place, but you can get it wrong so we refer to the notes because at the time when the works completed we record the story and the artist tells us. It is done in certain format—we ask certain questions so there's a format to the way it's written out. But they tell us as much or as little as they want about the story. And usually they've told the story hundreds of times before, but we go through a process of asking them questions so the story's attached to the painting and we all don't start working in shorthand. Because it's really easy to just go "oh, we all know what that is," and then information gets lost. So we all go through the process of asking. And often the more times you ask, the more information they give you. And you think you might

understand the story and then next day they are telling you all the parts of the story, which you didn't get in the first glimpse of it, so it kind of evolves in the way it is told.

HMF How do you find that process of taking the stories?

HK It's interesting. It's attached to the money, which changes it slightly, has an impact on it. It's slightly a formal process. It's away from everyone else, because sometimes they don't want to necessarily talk about the story or often the money—they don't want that to become public about how much money they are getting because then there is agitation and stuff involved in that. So it's a formal thing and we sit down with them and talk about the work and talk about the site. Then there's the negotiation about how much they will be paid for it and that sort of does in some way, consume the process. Yeah, we do go through a process of speaking about the work, and it's really interesting when they show you on the map. It's a sign of respect to actually inquire and they will tell you what they can. There are a lot of the stories—the men's stories where the men will just tell you the name of the place, they will say men's story. So you don't know anything beyond the fact of its vague location. And they wouldn't tell that to a male art worker either. They're not initiated. They wouldn't talk about that in front of their wives. So it depends on how much you can have access to and they want to talk about.

HMF Do you think the stories make a difference to the sales?

HK It's interesting. Some people come in and almost don't want to hear it. Because I will offer information about the artist and the story and you can usually tell, you know, within the first little bit whether that's their interest or whether they want to see it purely aesthetically. Some people are immediately grabbed by the work and then want to hear about the background. Some people are immediately grabbed by the work and then, not really interested in the background. Or people want to hear a story and that will draw them to the work. I think it depends on the purpose of the buyer. A lot of people will come in and say I have a blue couch and it's an interior design decision to a certain extent. And other people are particularly here and they want souvenirs or they want something that reminds them of a place. Yeah, it really depends. And you know sometimes they will chose three works and you will tell them oh, that's a men's story. And they say they won't buy that one or they want to buy one for their husband. I guess people want to feel an attachment to it. Maybe there's a level of respect in that—buying a men's story for a man. But it's not a hard and fast rule. You can usually read from the buyer or from the person walking in off the street what their interest is and how much detail do you go into. Often you get people asking, "but what does that exactly mean?" They want a literal reading and they see it as signs and symbols

that we should be able to read as a map, usually it's that the artist paints a rock hole site and usually depicts the hair string skirts that get painted at that site. And another women might depict the bush tucker you collect at that place or the tools you make the skirt with. Or the sand hills that surround the place. Or it maybe more literal in the sense, it may be symbols of women sitting down around the campfire. But so many of the male artists paint concentric circles as waterholes. That's a really strong male design and in certain ways they are maps—but not literal ones. There's not a perfection in them. If they get them wrong you will misread how to get to that place. It's not seen in that way obviously.

HMF I wonder do the artists think that it's a necessary part of the work, to have the story accompany it?

HK Yeah, for sure. Because that's what they're painting and they can't paint somebody else's, so it's not arbitrary. That's their place and they paint it. I don't know if it's been thought through, that there needs to be a piece of paper attached to it, but they understand the process of—that's the story and we're recording that story. There is definitely the understanding with the production of the work that the story needs to be told. Different arts centres obviously operate differently and their pricing structure and payment systems are different. Because our system is—the works are pre-purchased from the artist essentially. It means to a certain extent that side is out of their hands. And their job is done and they can start thinking about the next canvas. And maybe they might remember that old canvas. And some artists get incredible joy especially some of the older artists, to see some of their older paintings and they say, "oh that's that place." The paintings are a reminder to them of that place. Especially some of the older artists who were brought up bush and in their lifetime moved into community and don't get to go back out that often because of their health or whatever. Yeah, it's a really special thing to see photos of their country to be able to go back on the bush trip and to see old paintings and reminders of painting that place.

HMF How far are we from—?

HK We're 530 kilometres from Kintore. It's just right near the WA border. So it's pretty much the furthest community within the Alice Springs region. And from here Kiwirrkura is 750 kms. That's the most remote community in Australia. It's almost the midpoint between Port Headland and Alice Springs.

HMF And do many people go through those communities at all?

HK In the winter, you might get maybe 1 a week if you're lucky. Maybe a travelling party.

- HMF** Do you have galleries there at all?
- HK** No.
- HMF** So if you want to see the work you have to come into Alice Springs?
- HK** We can show you what people are painting at the moment or what's been painted in the last three weeks, then each load gets taken in. We encourage people to come here. And most people come through Alice Springs anyway. It just gets too messy when we have painting out there and sales, it would be impossible.
- HMF** It's definitely interesting to hear about how the art centres operate differently.
- HK** Papunya Tula was the first arts centre so in a lot of ways it's shaped how the other arts centres do it. But then also in most ways it's been the most successful. It's the only one without government funding in Australia so it's pretty unique in that we're not incumbent, the artists and the board of directors and the management are not incumbent to anybody. Except for their shareholders who are either the original painters or descendants of the original painters. Artists can be brought in and can become a shareholder if the board permits that, but the ownership or the control can't be transferred to anybody else. You have to be a painter and be living and painting in the Western Desert or a descendant of one of those painters to own shares. Because there's no government funding we can kind of do our own thing and at the same time not spend time acquitting grants. The arts centre supports a lot of the community activities and is seen as a place that people go to in the time when there's Sorry business, when there's business time and when there's men's initiation. Papunya Tula recently purchased a bus for the community. At Christmas the best kids at the school, the most high achieving kids, would each get a bike which Papunya Tula purchases for them and that's the board making the decision. And the Renal Dialysis centre at Kintore was fundraised by us as well as the swimming pool, so it's seen as an important place in the community. So there is a certain social work aspect, particularly with the older artists. Some of them are incontinent or not completely there mentally. So they're picked up and brought in. So if they need to go to the toilet we help them. Help them eat if they need to. And often family comes in to help with that stuff as well, but if we need to help out we do. And then there is also a lot of people who come in everyday and sit down and have a chat. They might not be painters or they might not be painters regularly, but they come and bring their mail. They ask us to help them read their mail and help them with their internet banking or use the telephone. The telephone is the community hotline. You know, people outside of the painters.

There is a sense that the company needs to focus on its core business so we can't get too distracted by helping people read their mail, but you know. And because unlike government supported arts centres, we don't have the luxury of producing extensive amounts of things that aren't saleable. It's a commercial business. In a lot of the communities, the women's centres operate as recreation centres for the old people who might paint a bit. People kind of sometimes think because we have this community base and it is community owned that anybody can paint. It's a fun place for people to come and paint and it's not necessarily about that. But it's about a commercial business which supports community by being successful. It has to be a business.

HMF So how do you narrow that down? Do you have people coming in wanting to sell their work to you that you don't want to buy?

HK We only buy Papunya Tula canvas and we know it's a Papunya Tula canvas by the materials they use. So we give people the canvas and we only buy back what we've given to them. People do paint privately sometimes. They buy a canvas themselves or private dealers give them a canvas and then they paint separately for them, but we won't buy that canvas and they know we won't buy that. And they're free to paint privately. It's not very helpful for their career often in that it undermines sales on our end, but that's their choice. I guess the main job is to facilitate the production of great canvas, but within that is the sense that we have to control supply and demand. So the artists can't be overproducing. There can't be a 100 works or a 1000 works coming in a month and we're only selling a 100. We have to balance out. So it's about matching what we can sell with what's been produced. But it means therefore there is a roster for who paints on what days and people go on rotation. Some artists are so successful they can paint as much as they want. But for other artists there needs to be a system in place so there's not too many of their works coming and not being able to be sold. And normally artists control that system themselves, because they're not receiving payment until it's finished and they don't want to be painting unproductively or not receiving payment. It's not worth their while to come in and paint every day if they've only sold one in the last year. So they'll just slow down. But yes, because we are pre-paying that becomes our job rather than a self-regulating thing.

HMF Do you have many new artists coming in?

HK There's not as many as we'd like, but there are some people particularly, children of current artists. That's quite common.

HMF How do they become involved?

HK People express an interest to paint. Most people over 50 have had a go at some point in the past and when the art market was booming there wasn't a need to control supply and demand because there was so much demand. But now we're dropping out so when new artists in this climate express an interest to paint and talk to us about it, about what stories they want to paint and why they want to paint, then we usually sort of say, "do you want to draw something?" We provide pens and paper and ask them to show us the kind of things they want to paint. And then they usually do that for a little while and then we say okay we think you can have a small canvas. And then it's a conversation about how successful the canvas was in the end.

You know white fella artists, they go to arts school. They have 4 years or whatever it is of art school and there's not that out there. So arts school is sitting down with your parents and watching them paint or body painting, like ceremonial stuff or talking with us about their work. So that's the conversation we're trying to have. Because you think of mainstream artists, the way they think about their work and the way they approach it, it's really very different.

There's not a sense that you can borrow from others in the same way. Appropriation is not something which is appropriate.

HMF Do the artists have any kind of stylistic influence on each other or do they stick to the way that they—

HK I think it develops over time. Sometimes you show artists pictures of their early work and they laugh because they think that's so silly and so rough and so coy and so bad, no good. And yeah, they're developing. They just refine their own skills. What was the question exactly?

HMF Do they have much influence on each other?

HK Yeah, yeah. Really in the families, that's the strongest influence. But then you see McKinty, that painting there in the window—when we're talking with her daughter about painting we ask, "do you want to paint like your mother?" "Oh, no, no, I can't do that. That's her way." There's a sense that even though they're painting the same site, but it has to be her way. Those two sisters paint, they both put the tracks and the bird that's at their site in the image. That's something they both do, but it's quite distinctive in the way they represent other elements in it. Even to the point that artists have a particular dotting style and you pick their works by the dotting style. The artists' hand is so noticeable, but artists use different size sticks and different mediums also. Things developed over time.

A lot of these artists have been painting a long time. The women have been painting since '96. Even artist's works change a lot as

they get older. You can really see it when you look at examples of younger artists and then when they're older you see they usually become looser and rougher and less concerned with precision. Which is sometimes a great thing, it becomes more gestural and expressive.

HMF Do you think that's just a confidence thing?

HK Yeah, I think to certain extent it is. Confidence and kind of not caring so much. It's almost a release, a let go, to not be as concerned with—And sometimes it's hard to express that to the artist, that what you're actually wanting them is to try a little bit less. Maybe it doesn't need to be so concerned with precision. Some artists, the older artists, that's their trademark, these perfect beautiful strokes and marks. But it doesn't necessarily work for everybody.

HMF So some of the older ladies when they get a lot more loose and gestural, is it still very specific to them what they're painting?

HK Yeah, for sure. It's the same story, different way. Often if you really watch someone's career you can see where they're shedding the detail. Not expressing as much, literally, so it might be not including the hair string skirts and the pura and the Nala Nala and they're just refining and what they're focusing on is just the hair string skirts or certain elements on that. It just whittles down to what the key message or the key reminder or key element of that place is.

HMF Having come from the city and then through the arts centre and then into the gallery here, how does it all fit in with the contemporary art world for you?

HK The reason I came up this way was because I got to the point where I could only read and study and pour through people's catalogues, but I felt you can only do that so much and you reach a wall. So that was my motivation. And so now, knowing the artists and knowing the places and having gone to the dreaming sites that they're painting about, the works have obviously become a lot more personal, more meaningful in that I understand another layer of the stories. And so, but now I understand more of the content, but also the whole context of it. It really informs the way I see the works, and I can't see them the same way now. But it has also shown how much knowledge is missing in working in a gallery in a city—the works are talked about on a surface level. You know how sometimes in a sales sense that's all people expect, because they don't know how much more they can access. I really have a sense of how privileged I have been to have met some of those old people and go to their places and go hunting with them.

HMF I believe Aboriginal painting functions in the contemporary art world, but in Sydney, it is still viewed separately. You don't see paintings like this in artist-run-spaces or anything like that.

HK I think that comes down to art school. Like there's no art school and white fellas are expected to work for ages without being paid. And also the idea of this individual thing which is, the individual artist who pursues their own career, and you do that by involving yourself with art shows and exhibiting widely. Whereas, you know, it's something which can definitely happen, but at this point, particularly with Pintupi people it requires a facilitator. It's not something that people are independently going to go to Sydney and with a canvas under their arm and say I'm going to show you I'm an artist. It's such a cultural shift. Does that fit in, is that interesting?

HMF It's all very interesting. And I really appreciate your time.

Interview with Tim Johnson, 16 May 2013

Redfern, Sydney

HMF What was it that first attracted you to Aboriginal painting?

TJ Probably just that I was exposed to them at home. My dad had a few. He used to collect bark paintings. Then he bought a couple of Papunya paintings in the mid-'70s, or '77. I think I liked them straight away. I didn't understand them completely, but I realised how different they were from what white artists were doing. They were doing something extra. Then I saw some shows—because of being exposed to them, I started to look for them as well. I went to exhibitions in The Rocks at an Aboriginal arts and crafts gallery there. That's where they first started showing Papunya paintings. I immediately liked them. Then next with Vivien, who was my wife at the time, we drove to Alice Springs and we bought a couple of paintings there as well. A little Tim Leura and old Mick—no, Tim Leura and Johnny Warangkula. Then after that, I started collecting.

That was before I went to Papunya. So I was collecting them and didn't have that many, but was still looking for them. I found they were sitting in art galleries—more like not touristy shops, but not quite—there were shops that were exhibiting Aboriginal art that weren't just for the tourists. I used to find them here and there. So I started to collect them. Then I was thinking it would be great to meet the artists. But also, at that time, I was exposed to a bit of writing about them as well. There were a few articles about Papunya Tula—and the fact that the Australia Council was supporting it.

So I did decide to go out to Papunya. The story there is I had a dream. I think it was Tim Leura in the dream because he was standing next to a bridge at the river. Then he took me over the bridge to this other land on the other side of the bridge that was much more beautiful and perfect. It was kind of a pristine landscape. So I bought a ticket to Alice Springs and actually hopped off the bus in town and went straight to the Papunya Tula office. There were about three or four older Aboriginal artists standing around and sitting around. They were Tim Leura and Johnny Warangkula and Billy Stockman. So I met the people I had come to see straight away.

HMF How old were you?

TJ That was in 1980. So I was about 40 or something. Thirty-something. I was born in '47. But they were like incredibly friendly. They were saying what do you want? But when I found out who they all were, and they realised that I knew about their art, they immediately took to me. They sent for a guy called Kaapa who was one of the other Papunya artists. I think he was the chairman

of the Papunya company. Not running it, but just a chairman on the Aboriginal side. He came and they started asking me to help them. They kept talking about Canberra. They were going to do a ground painting in Canberra and it had fallen through. It was going to be at the National Gallery, I think. It hadn't happened and they wanted me to organise that for them. But they wanted more. They talked about their company and how they weren't really going anywhere with it. So could I help them, basically. They wanted me to go to Papunya as well. Then Andrew Crocker, who was running the Papunya company, turned up. He'd just come back from Papunya. He was quite pleased that I was there, as well. Because he'd just started in the job and had to try and make the company work. Because the Australia Council didn't want to fund it anymore. They wanted it to become independent, self-sufficient business. So Andrew was surprised that I knew a lot about it because I'd been studying and looking for paintings. He asked me to come back and go to Papunya as well. So when those things happened, I did.

HMF How long did you stay there the first time?

TJ The first visit to Papunya, Vivien came with me. We went for about a week or so. I'm not sure if we went to Kintore because, I think, Kintore was just starting around that time. I just remembered those people, one of the older artists or the original painters, showing me a letter from the Queen saying—because they'd written to the Queen saying they wanted their land back. Something along those lines. They wanted to be able to live on their land again. She'd written back saying "good luck, maybe you can, maybe you'll be able to." It was around that time that it was starting to happen. Maybe someone helped them. But they started the outstation there and then moved back to Kintore and then further west and out to—each person moved to their own land, I think.

But I was just interested in art, mainly. And I used to buy paintings. Because I felt, at the time, that was the best thing I could do because that's what they were aiming for, at that time. Trying to establish a market and become—I don't think they thought it was to become part of the Australian art scene, or contemporary art scene because they didn't really have enough knowledge of that. I think it was that, during the '70s, they had been painting with different art advisors. Those art advisors had made them aware of contemporary art and they were always very enthusiastic about what they were doing. But in a way, it hadn't opened any doors for them. They were still pretty much marginalised. They weren't in contemporary shows.

That was somewhere where I could help because I was already into them myself. I knew the curators and people. So I did do some promotional work when I got back, which was contacting people

and saying “do you realise what’s happening in central Australia? There’s an amazing art movement that’s contemporary. It’s art. So why isn’t it being collected and put into shows?” I put a bit of pressure on people. It worked. Although they would probably say “oh, we found it, we discovered it ourselves and Tim might have just been a catalyst or someone helping.” But I did things—I’d ring up James Mollison, who was the director of the National Gallery. He had an argument. What happened was we were arguing and he hung up on me. Then about two weeks later, I got a phone call back from Wally Caruana who was also in the National Gallery, saying James Mollison thinks you’re right now. He’s going to start collecting it. It wasn’t just me. He’d actually come to see some paintings a little bit after that. But I’d just said “why aren’t you buying them?”

HMF You planted the seed.

TJ Yeah. What we were seeing was a lot of the really good ones going to a few astute American collectors, who were buying masterpieces for hundreds of dollars. And me and Vivien had the idea that they should really be here. That they shouldn’t just be going overseas and being forgotten. But it’s all turned out a bit different from that. Selling overseas has actually become important to the artists now. Some of those collectors are very aware of what they’ve got and have lent it back to important shows. And curated it and studied it themselves. So the internationalisation of Papunya Tula art turned out to be a really good thing, rather than a bad thing. But at the time, it did feel like the culture was just going away and would never be seen again. It really belonged to the people who were doing it. In a way, we thought it should almost just be staying within the Northern Territory so that the descendants of the people who did could have access to it. But all that changed as well. I’m not sure they really wanted it necessarily. They were more westernised. Each generation was more westernised. It’s all available in books now, anyway.

So the way it turned out, with the success of Papunya Tula art movement, I think was a really good thing and was really important in Australian art. It was a bit like the trailblazer for the rest of Aboriginal community. So lots of other art movements started in central Australia. It had quite an impact on Koori art as well. Aboriginal artists living in the city were amazed by it too, and influenced by it. They hadn’t really seen much of it until it became part of contemporary art. It was still a little bit awkward relationship between the artists who were tribal and the contemporary art scene. Because they’re pretty sensitive to—if they’ve been misunderstood or to people not really realising what Aboriginal art is. That it has to be approached on its own terms. And the only way to really understand that is to actually talk to the artists, or at least talk to people who have talked to them and find

out what they're doing. What they think they're doing. What the paintings mean to them. That's the only way to really get into the narrative part of it. What you might call seeing the transcendental—like the way it can transcend normal physical reality. Or at least it's about that. It's about a spiritual belief system.

HMF So the artists that you talked to—they didn't feel comfortable being represented in the contemporary art scene?

TJ I think there's—it's not always a perfect situation. That's also true for any artist, in that they often, they'll end up hating curators or hating critics for example. People who don't understand their work. They wanted to be part of it. They want their work to reach a bigger audience. Part of their motive was not just to be able to have a job. A lot of them really were unemployed and sitting around. They had their culture. They had their social life. But they didn't really have jobs that they were happy about. So they thought—ah, making art was a really exciting way to establish yourself a bit. Like to build up a life or a social thing.

HMF So it's more about being in the contemporary context but still being approached, not just from a Western perspective, but from trying to understand where it's come from?

TJ Yep. So they were aware of that. That their paintings came from a deeper culture and were part of it, but at the same time were sanitised. Almost secularised enough so that other people could see them. They were aware of what was exciting or good and bad, but they didn't have much knowledge of western art. So I think they were very happy about any kind of success and trips to the city and contact with the white people, and some benefits came back to the community. But I don't know. I just figure that it maybe wasn't really what they wanted.

My example is—so Michael Nelson is an example of that in that he got quite a long way into the Western art world, contemporary art world. People coming from England wanting to film Michael Nelson. I was in Papunya once and Michael Leunig turned up with a film crew to film Michael Nelson. They said they'd written lots of letters but that Michael hadn't answered any of them, so they decided to come anyway. Michael was sitting with me, talking to me and he said "what'll I do? I don't want to do that. I just want to sit here and talk to you, but these people have come and they're telling me they want me to go out to my own site and film me talking about my culture. So I have to do it. It's for them and for my culture." But they kind of forced themselves on him a little bit. But that was the only way they had of doing it.

Then Michael made more contact with the people like Fireworks Gallery in Brisbane and started doing work that was influenced by the white art and then started looking at his own paintings in a different way. Doing details and trying different techniques and so on. But what he used to say to me was, really, if I'm making a choice, I'm choosing my own culture. I'm not going to be part of your culture. I'll back away from it and it's—his idea was there was too much humbug. His words. It was too difficult to negotiate. I totally sympathise because it's true for everybody in the art world. If you're a good young artist, you can just get used by the gallery system. If you're successful, your self-creativity gets damaged a bit by that. That's just my feeling. That it's hazardous anyway. So they're right about that. But they had their culture to fall back on. The success in the white art world meant a bit of being ostracised by your own people who regard you as becoming a white man.

Mike always was very psychic for me. As a person. Like very much in contact. A lot of people had the same experience with him and a lot of Aboriginal artists. A lot of people who have been out there and written about it always think of it as a special relationship. That they established a great contact and great friendships. Everyone who's been there seems to think that. That's just to do with the people themselves. They give so much when you're there that you come away thinking that these people really like me, they really care about me.

So that part of it is great—knowing that white people can learn a lot from, by respecting and being friends with, Aboriginal people.

HMF You were saying before that when you were first struck by Aboriginal painting, that you could see it was more than what white people were doing. What do you think that sense was? What did you feel was the 'something extra'?

TJ Yeah. Well my position was—I'd been through things like Minimalism, Pop Art, Neo-Expressionism. At the beginning of the '70s, performance art and conceptual art and painting had gone through the field. So it was a bit like everything had deconstructed to some extent. Artists weren't using paint. They weren't using representation. They were doing processes and looking at things and being political and social. So it seemed really exciting that there were so many new possibilities for art and that was fulfilled by things like video cameras and computers making it possible to make more interesting work.

Painting itself was still something I tried to hang onto. Because I love painting and I'd been painting since I was little. I wanted to be an artist. That was the thing that I believed in. But I stopped doing it to do conceptual work. Then when I was thinking "are there ways to keep painting without, for example, just painting on a

sculpture or painting nothing.” Like the method was the medium itself. That there’s something else you can do, because I was a person who was interested in imagery.

Poetry in words and rock music and Bob Dylan and the idea that you could create something that people could really understand and think about. That charms them. Then when I saw Papunya paintings and Aboriginal art in general, although I’d sort of not been that interested in bark painting. I just found it too obscure and it didn’t affect me the same way that paintings on a canvas did.

The paintings on canvas were like abstract but at the same time, they had a story to them. They were incredibly painted. Beautifully painted. Like there were things happening in the paintings with the dots and the designs and the aerial perspective that really, I hadn’t seen in Western art. A bit like Fred Williams and John Olsen. I tried to look at the landscape from above but they didn’t have a belief system like the Aboriginal artists had that was behind the paintings. So I really thought they were completely new. They were just something new.

If the artists could keep doing it, then they could reach a wider audience and it would affect everybody—change the way people saw painting. Because it was a bit like we had to be abstract or somehow physical with the painting process. Like Jackson Pollock. You couldn’t—there wasn’t really much you could do in painting that hadn’t been done before. Which was another idea people had. Like Imants Tillers—the idea that they were quoting. That there’s not really anything new you can do because everything’s been done. So you can just take pictures of other people’s work and put it together in your own way.

Suddenly here was a type of painting that you couldn’t do that to. It was actually sacred. It was even secret. Its full meaning was even secret sometimes. Then when you start looking into it, you find it’s even more complicated. The people, like Aboriginal curators, like Djon Mundine, who think unless you’re an Aboriginal person, maybe even of that tribal group, you can never understand it fully. It’s out of reach. But I didn’t feel that. I felt like I did understand it. It wasn’t beyond my comprehension. It was something I could understand. That it was connected to ancestors and it was sacred because it—not necessarily secret, but sacred because it interacted with the environment. It was a two dimensional form of language that was like a design. It was like something that changed what was happening. So when Johnny Warangkula sort of told me “it looks like it’s going to rain, I’d better do something about it, and send the rain away for a while.” And he goes and breaks a branch off a tree and I’ll do some singing and stuff. Tells me he’s a water man and that’s his job. At the time, I believed it. I see it and I believe it.

I'm a bit more cynical about it now because I think you can get delusions of grandeur. You can think you can do something just because it happens at the right time for you. But still, the Aboriginal culture seemed to say that by interacting with nature through the ancestral spirits or ancestral beings, you can modify things. You can change it in your favour or you can teach and make happen what you want to happen. That belief system is behind the paintings. The paintings were believed to be part of it. There were lots of stories I heard about how paintings were regarded as important. They would act in the world. Like, for example, Kaapa was supposed to have broken into Billy Marshall's stonekeep, who was an early teacher at Papunya. Into his house and stolen a couple of paintings because he needed them because they were magic and they would do something for him.

And Pansy Napangardi, who's another painter, she swapped dancing boards for art materials. She told me they were mucky lover boards and they were affecting my love life and what happened to me. Lots of stories like that where people actually believed the paintings had some power to change things. I had an Yuta Yuta painting in my storeroom. I collected about 400 Papunya paintings in the end. One of them is an early Yuta Yuta board that had on the back 'This painting should not be seen' or something like that. I didn't know when I bought it that it had that on the back. Anyway, I had it wrapped up in this room when people were looking at my paintings to borrow some for a show at the Asia Society in New York. We got that painting out and it was hot. It was actually hot to touch. I unwrapped it and showed them. And the painting was hot. It's like you couldn't explain it. Accept it that it was a secret painting that was supposed to be dangerous and not looked at. So there were little things like that that made me think it's all true. That they do have some power and they do interact. Like we bought a bush potato dreaming. This might not be true, but a bush potato plant starts growing in the garden.

HMF Wow. So then what sort of possibility did you feel for going back to painting at that point?

TJ Well I felt, when I saw these paintings, I could learn from them. That there was things in them that you could use without being disrespectful to the artists. Like the layering. The dots. The aerial view. The mapping aspect. You could never use the fact that they were religious objects. But they weren't religious objects in the same sense as a sacred boards that might be hidden at sites. They were meant for sale and they'd left out the secret bits. The important bits that might be ceremonial, for example. In fact, they were quite complicated in that they were often the picture of a ground painting that was used at a ceremony with additions in a contemporary sense, by the artist himself. They were able to do the same thing to their own culture.

So I felt the paintings were totally innovative in a western sense. The discussion at the time was about whether they're modernist or post-modernist. Because post-modernism was just coming. I just used to say "well, they're not modernist. They're doing something else. They go beyond it." At that time, because post-modernism wasn't around, they weren't really categorised as post-modernist. I think they're still not really. I think they're just regarded as unique. There was a guy who came to see me. He wrote an article in an art magazine in the early '80s saying they were modernist, I think, and caused a bit of controversy. That's how clever the Aboriginal artists were because they were doing modernism with this 40,000 year old tradition. But it did sort of ignore that they were much more than that.

HMF One of the ways that your paintings have been described, your more recent work, is as conceptual painting or post-conceptual painting. Do you see it that way?

TJ I do, yeah. I used to describe it like that. In the '80s, I called it conceptual painting. Because I like the conceptual art a lot. I like the whole sort of opening up of making practices so that you could have an idea and make art about an idea rather than just having a tradition that you had to belong to or a convention. Conceptual art, after the '70s, became a bit unpopular. People used to knock it, especially some of the critics like John McDonald. He would criticise things because they were conceptual. He still does. If an artist can speak clearly about their work, he seems to think that's like a bad thing. That the art shouldn't be literal. It's meant to be something that's a bit beyond what you can talk about. That's just my impression of what his view is. There's a bit of that around and so conceptual art wasn't that popular.

My paintings started up after my conceptual art. So, to me, it was very conceptual. In conceptual art, it was like opening a door and suddenly there are all these ideas and all these things you can do and different ways of doing them. You could just write the idea down and make the artwork the piece of paper or the instruction. Or you could use a camera and you could photograph performances or something that was there and see it in a certain way and make that into the artwork. Photography then went on to become quite acceptable as an art form. As fine art rather than as photography itself.

You could use text and now, after a few years, you could make it with any material that you want. You could just nominate something even. Say my house is an artwork and have an exhibition of it. You can do anything. But painting was a bit like becoming obsolete. Everybody thought painting was finished. The idea that art itself was kind of becoming obsolete. It hasn't happened yet. In fact, the sort of society we've got has meant that

art has actually become a quite important commodity as well. It's important for teaching and carrying on ideas and influencing the way people see things. It's even important on a person level, just for developing your own creativity. For example, it's part of education.

But it seemed like painting was dying but instead, I sort of went back to it—to my conceptual work, with paint as the medium. So I saw it as very conceptual. I kind of cling to that and have ever since. Although it's not really apparent anymore that it's conceptual. Because post-modernism, in a sense, was all conceptual. It was like quoting and the criticism of post-modernism was that it was a bit shallow. That by taking something from someone else, you were missing the point. But the post-modernist artist was bringing things together and producing a more artificial type of art that was more interesting and more spectacular and more cerebral. So when post-modernism came along in the '80s, I sort of thought I'd probably be part of it. And my conceptual paintings from the '70s now turn into something that's part of an acceptable style. For some reason, that ran on into the '90s.

Then, I think, after that, because I was still doing it and had made a bit of a name for myself, it didn't matter what sort of style I was using, it was just like my way of painting, my style. I had enough people that liked it to be able to keep doing it. I didn't drop something and do something else. What I've done with my ideas in my art career is adding things up. Every time something new came along, I just added it to what I had. I really love playing music and writing songs and things. So I do that. Then for a few years, I tried putting it in my shows as well. I tried selling my CDs. I added to my practice. In my painting process, as I learned about Buddhism around the same time as I was interested in Aboriginal art. So I put them both in and brought them together. Then when other things came, like collaboration and Asian art—I was looking at a lot of different Asian art traditions—I added them too. So I ended up with a kind of art style that no-one else was really doing. It was like a little bit hit and miss, but it did sort of work. Because I did it for a long time, it got more interesting, probably.

HMF What has the response been to the cultural imagery in your work, from writers and critics?

TJ Yeah. I've had a bit of a rough ride, in a sense, from people writing about my work and not always understanding it. I thought eventually some of the problem might be they think I'm copying Aboriginal designs, when I'm doing collaborations. They might not have realised that Michael Nelson did the design, not me. But also it was territorial from Koori artists who criticised me, saying it wasn't my culture so I had no right to be interacting with it. Fiona Foley did that in an interview. Someone, it may be Brenda, I'm not sure.

But anyway, a few people did criticise me and say I was just using Aboriginal art. I talked to Fiona about it. I said “how can you say that? I was out at Papunya with these elders who are really powerful people, in a sense, in that they make a big impact on you and they see themselves as being masters of the universe in a way. Or at least in their own tribal or cultural group. And they told me to do it. They said “paint this. We’re giving you a painting because we like you and we think that you’re helping us and we’re going to give you a design to paint.” That’s their way of giving me something that they felt was appropriate. Then an Aboriginal person in the city said “Tim’s stealing their culture.” I told her that’s not what’s happening. They gave it to me. If I turn it down and don’t paint it, that’s a bit rude. But maybe that’s what I have to do. Then she said “oh don’t worry, it’s just politics.” Which kind of is a bit odd. It’s just political to attack the white artist for political reasons and not look at the real picture.

HMF Have you seen the latest copy of *Broadsheet*? There are some new articles in it on appropriation. One of them is by Ian McLean and he wrote that perhaps some white artists are copping shit for political issues when they’re not doing anything necessarily wrong. That because we can’t solve the political issues, then that gets directed at some of the artists.

TJ Yeah. Like Jonathan – what’s his other name? He’s an Aboriginal artist.

HMF Jonathan Jones?

TJ Yeah, Jonathan Jones. When I was in the last Biennale he said something a little bit similar. That people should be looking at it again in a new light. It’s not necessarily wrong to be interacting with Aboriginal people, to be doing cultural exchange. That people have been over-reacting to it a bit.

HMF Has there been a sort of change in that perspective? Have you found that?

TJ Ah yeah, I have. It’s lightened up. You know, basically, more people have done it so it’s more acceptable. Lots of people are doing it and not even getting any attention for it, even though they’re doing very interesting things. It’s not so revolutionary anymore.

HMF Part of the reason they did these articles in *Broadsheet* was because of attacks on Lucas Grogan. A lot of people are working with Aboriginal artists or appropriating Aboriginal painting. But all of this fire has been aimed at him and no-one else, so again he’s sort of taking a political fall.

TJ What’s his name?

- HMF** Lucas Grogan.
- TJ** I don't know his work.
- HMF** He was originally from Sydney. He's being represented in Melbourne. A few artists recently walked away from the gallery because they took him on. So there was a media blow up about it because he has appropriated some sort of design principles from bark painting and shields.
- TJ** Like Margaret Preston. It's got a tradition.
- HMF** Yeah. But it's sort of interesting because I thought that there was a bit of a turnaround in that. But then it's kind of fired up again.
- TJ** Yeah. Well I thought I was on the right side, not the wrong side. Because they told me you can do dots. They said "you can paint dots, but when you do dots, tell people that you're not doing designs. Because you can't do designs. They belong to us and they're kind of copyright." But it's difficult for me because I was given designs as well. So I stopped doing them because people didn't understand that I'd actually been asked to paint them.
- HMF** Yeah, I don't think people talk to the artist enough. They draw too many of their own conclusions.
- TJ** If I sit down and start painting this design that Kaapa gave me, I think people would be a bit shocked. Because they would feel I was just copying an Aboriginal design. But he told me—he said "it's your design now too. We are able to allow you to paint it for us."
- But I don't want to. So I don't.
- HMF** With all the experience that you've had then, and being a part of that debate, do you think artists now should still be trying to work with Aboriginal artists?
- TJ** I do. Yeah, I do. Yeah, I think there's a right way and a wrong way. The obvious way is to ask. Imants Tillers is a good example of that. In the beginning, he didn't ask. And he did this painting called *The Nine Shots*. I think he got Michael Nelson out of an advertisement for a show and I think it was done with a Baselitz painting or something, got fused with it. I didn't think much of it. I didn't think it was very successful, the way he did it, approached Aboriginal art. It's just fused with a German neo-expressionist painting. What is that supposed to mean? Then I was there when Michael had the catalogue and we were looking through it. And Imants came up and we found Imants' painting. We showed Michael and he was "oh, what's that? Looks like a bit of my painting." And Imants was going "ah, is it okay? Is it all right that I did that?" And Michael sort of thought about it and he said "it is okay because I understand what

you're trying to do. You're trying to kind of bring these two cultures together. You're trying to look at what we did and compare it with what you do. But you should've asked first if you could do it. And secondly, don't do it again without asking." His attitude was fairly clear that it was okay. But it hadn't been done the right way and he wanted to do it in the future, he should do it the right way. Then later he did. Later he did ask Michael and he did some fantastic paintings with him. Have you seen any of them?

HMF Only in a catalogue.

TJ There's one huge one. There's a picture of Michael sitting on it in the Fireworks Gallery.

HMF I'm going to go up there in September. So hopefully I get to see it.

TJ Yeah, you might. But you can find it on the internet. It's this beautiful big yellow and red one. He always asks Michael to paint the same design, I think. Michael is quite amenable to that sort of interaction. We typically recognise that the artists were both being creative and if he did something, then that opened up the possibilities for the other person. He gave me a design to paint and I don't paint it because it just feels like it's not really mine. But after Imants' done it, then Michael gave me the design and said "you can paint this snake dreaming."

HMF So what kind of impact do you think that Aboriginal art has had on Australian painters?

TJ Probably a lot. It's always something they respect, I think, and look up to. It is like, maybe a cubist study, how Picasso or Braque had the African masks, and started to collect them. Then he started to paint them, basically. And that opened up a doorway for him. The same is true for Aboriginal art, I think. But it wasn't really widespread because most of the Australian artists were looking at European art. But that was already influenced by African art anyway.

So then with Margaret Preston and then Tony Tuckson—there's this sort of idea that yeah, you can be influenced by it. You can take on board some of the ideas. Like the colours, earth colours or like the process of making marks. But I don't think someone like Franz Kline or Robert Motherwell—American abstract expressionists. They wouldn't have known anything about Aboriginal art and they've got the same brush strokes as Tony Tuckson. So it's a little bit over—like people use the connection a little bit to sort of make the work—to justify it or make it more interesting. It's interesting because it's influenced by Aboriginal art.

I've found, in my case, overseas people would often come to see me because of the Aboriginal influence. They say "we would expect contemporary Australian artists to be considering Aboriginal art as well as something that might influence them because it's in their culture." I think I share that view a little bit. That I think you can't turn your back on it. Like the '60s colour field painters basically didn't want to have anything to do with it. They wouldn't be influenced by it and it wasn't until the '70s and the '80s and post-modernism that people started to include a bit of acknowledgement of Aboriginal art.

I just felt with the dots, having painted dots for so many years, that the Aboriginal connection is important. For example, Aboriginal people, when they see you painting, even if it's a Buddha in a Tibetan style landscape, if it's got dots on it, they say, "ahh it's Aboriginal." Like they regard that as a sort of Aboriginal idea, to paint dots. There is some respect in it. That you're doing it, it shows some respect for Aboriginal culture. Even though an art critic might turn around and say you're just using it. Aboriginal people might see this as acknowledging something and including a reference to it in his work.

So I just used rock music as an example, where it was influenced by the blues. The blues was black music from Afro-Americans in slavery. It came out of slavery and their suffering was expressed with their music. That music was a fusion of American folk music and African rhythms. Then that, to quote Muddy Waters, the blues had a baby and the baby was rock and roll. So it's like, it doesn't mean I can't play rock and roll because it's come from the blues which is black music. Does it mean that white people can't play black music? That was the idea in the beginning, in the '60s. White people just don't have the same soul or the same spirit. But then you get black musicians coming along and saying "he is my brother. He can do it. He plays the blues like a black man" or something. So I've thought if that's what's happened in world music, in a sense, like rock music is an international art. An international music style and it came from black music.

Maybe the same could happen with Aboriginal art in Australia? Maybe it will eventually influence everybody because it has something unique and it's—it tries to do more than just—it's more than just a picture of something. It's the essence of something. Like it's what they believe their painting is, I think the spirits, actually, among other things, apart from the landscape and the—because the designs, the actual designs were supposed to be sacred and dangerous. So how could that be when they're just two-dimensional markings on the ground or on a stone? And in a way, they could be because spirits don't have form. Spirits are two-dimensional. So why shouldn't the design represent a spirit? Or be that spirit? Dick Kimber, one of the locals who got involved with

Papunya, said the Tjurungas are like your soul. They're like the soul. So they're very, very sacred. But Buddhism tells me that is okay, that's true but one day it might not be true. Things might change.

HMF So what do you see as the major tensions that are surrounding Aboriginal art and non-Indigenous art at the moment? We've talked about that sort of unease in which a lot of Aboriginal art fits into the contemporary art scene and appropriation as well. Is there anything else?

TJ I'm not sure how to answer that because what I've noticed happened then was Aboriginal art was kind of everywhere. Like communities all over Australia started making it. And even Aboriginal people in country towns who might have had almost no heritage in terms of designs or even language could then adopt a kind of Aboriginality using dots and designs that might have come from another group. So it's more dangerous for one Aboriginal person to use another Aboriginal person's design than it is for a white person to use it. When I say dangerous, that's because of the background to that is people would be executed for painting someone else's design. If they painted someone else's design without permission. I think a lot of that's changed now. I think they just had to loosen it up and change the law a bit so it wasn't so strict because of living in a western world.

I think it's so complicated because there's been some advantages of being an Aboriginal artist. The sort of Richard Bell approach is to make something out of it. And it becomes marketable, in a sense. At least in terms of publicity. He's interesting because his painting originally was a bit aesthetically irritating or something. Because it was anti-painting. It was like house paints and it was abstract and it was a bit gaudy and over the top. But there was a message there that was strong. Then over the years, a lot of politicising and just making trouble almost, by stirring up what the convention or what people might be thinking or not thinking. You can't help thinking it's all the same idea except for—it's Fiona Foley. It's political. It's like taking an extreme stance that you don't really believe in just to get attention and bring up an issue.

I used to be nervous in Brisbane when I had shows at the Bellas Gallery and Milani Gallery. They used to come to every show. Every opening. I always thought he was maybe checking on me. So I'd always have to say "is it okay, have I done the wrong thing or not?" He didn't worry. He just said "no, it's fine. We think it's great." There was no animosity or anything. So it wasn't like he was angry with white people for doing the wrong thing. It was more like he was just waving his own flag and saying "you should be aware of these issues and they're important." Whereas Gordon Bennett, he felt wronged. And he felt that by being Aboriginal, he

was victimised and discriminated against and that he still encountered racism in his life and he'd make it hard about it—pointing it out and saying it's wrong. And also trying to point out that he thought Imants Tillers was appropriating Aboriginal art in the wrong way. And Margaret Preston was trivialising it or something.

I don't know if that's really politics. I think it's sort of interesting but it's like preaching to the converted. Anyone who's going to get that message already knows it. The people who aren't going to get it are going to be racist anyway. It's a question of whether you can really be political in your art, whether you can actually make an important statement that might change people. It's sort of hard to believe, I think. But I still like his work a lot. And the tensions were coming a bit from Aboriginal people, Aboriginal artists saying they were being mistreated or misunderstood. But a lot of that dropped away because Aboriginal art got privileged a little bit. It was always in the national shows and Aboriginal art became really popular and it had a huge market and everything. Communities all across Australia were doing it.

I'm probably not really up on that enough to comment properly about it.

HMF I just really want to know what artists are feeling personally, working in this field. Because, I guess, that was my starting point, when I was first influenced by an Aboriginal painting and someone would ask me that, I would sort of say "well, is that okay?" I felt like it was a bit of a taboo even to talk about it. Definitely, since then, it's talked about a lot more. Even just in the last two years there are constant articles being published about that, that weren't, three, four years ago. Which is great. But I'm just interested in getting more perspectives from artists.

TJ Yeah. It's still popular. It's amazing. I didn't even know it was an issue except I got involved in it in the '80s. Even people close to it used to criticise me.

Have a look at this one. The one in the Biennale, in the last Sydney Biennale with Michael. It was only the design, he gave me the design. Yeah, he painted it for me. He said "have you got a canvas I can use?" I did, I gave him a canvas and he painted the design on it. Then there's one of them in my retrospective show I had. That's a small one I've got there. He painted the design and then he said "Tim, I'm giving you this design to paint whenever you want." Of course, people didn't like it. They thought I was just stealing it.

But it was a pretty strong painting, I think. It's kind of interesting that the directors of the Biennale picked it out.

When I wanted to paint about the experience of being at Papunya and going to central Australia—I think that probably is what would happen to anybody that goes there. If they're a painter, they'd feel "oh, it would be nice to try and paint this experience." So I did that and that led to putting ideas from their painting into my painting. Then links to the dots and so on. And stories and things.

Interview with Michael Eather, 28 August 2013

FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

HMF I thought we could start by talking about your practice.

ME My practice? Okay. I'll try and just go through some chronological things... So okay, as a practitioner, I graduated from the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, in 1983. Then I pretty much straight away went travelling around Australia, to the Northern Territory. It was pretty much soon after that—having lived in the Territory and Queensland, which included Brisbane and Maningrida—I started getting new ideas of working with Aboriginal artists, putting up shows of their work and then, later on I guess, working together. So the time period here where it was most active, was 1987, '88 and '89.

Over that period I was curating an exhibition called *Balance 1990*. That was a show principally about black, white and in between. So urban Aboriginal art, as it was coined then, tribal Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art. That was a focus on the 1980s and it was opening at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1990. That was a bit of a watershed exhibition. It was a big show and an important show and a complex show. It was politically and symbolically important, the way that we went about it. I think that it certainly opened up some ideas and gave some templates for working collaboratively with Aboriginal people. In this sense, it was like work-shopping and administering through a range of issues. Obviously, there's social issues. How you just get to talk with and be with Aboriginal people. Obviously, for part of it operating by myself and then, later on wearing a temporary Queensland Art Gallery hat. I don't know if that scared some people off or made it easier. I think what I'm trying to say is that putting together a complex project, you sort of learn how you can work collaboratively. And some of the associations ran foul. Most of them didn't and they were celebrated and strong bonds and friendships and business partnerships were made out of it all and careers were launched. Particularly, I'd say, some of the urban Aboriginal artists did really well out of it.

But I think the main thing, like I said, was it gave you a template how you might work together. I'd had a few exhibitions in the '80s of my own work. I figured, after I'd finished that show, I'd just go back to being an artist. And I tried actually. But the phones kept ringing. It was good in a way, because there were a lot of opportunities opening up and some of them I was able to pass on to people that I knew. Within six months, I'd started a consultancy with Aboriginal artists. I was working with Marshall Bell and Richard Bell and Laurie Nilsen, just to name a few of those. Because they were all involved in the *Balance* show. We were work-shopping how we could continue opportunities for Brisbane and Queensland. So we sort of went back to—we were national, and

then we went back to more local and regional and rural and what we could do in the here and now. I was showing my own work with, I think, Bellas Gallery, then. I'd had a couple of shows and I was continuing to show. He was very supportive. I think he stated at the time how lots of similar artists had a lot of empathy towards that sort of strain. There was Tim Johnson and Gordon Bennett who were in the *Balance* show anyway, to name a few. I'm just sort of going off the top of my head here. But there were others.

So I guess the idea of showing my work as a practising artist and sort of jumping out of that and curating and then jumping out of that and coordinating collaborative projects made it really easy for me to take on more of those sort of threads. I guess I should say at the heart of that, from 1985 through 1991, I had three daughters, Noni, Alice and Grace. Their mother was Aboriginal, so I was navigating and balancing the whole young parenthood thing, and my kids were Aboriginal. So I was inextricably tied to the culture, and motivated to be creating something of substance. It wasn't academic for me. I think that that's very important to note. It sort of sometimes hard to say it isn't academic. The only way it can't be academic is by proof of how you go about things. So you can have all the best ideas in the world, but I think it's important, particularly now in hindsight—because we're looking at 25 years or more—that you can sort of comment how intrinsically motivated you were because I had young children who were balancing two cultures. So I felt, as an artist, it was a very common sense thing to do. To make art and work on projects that were parallel to that. A lot of people knew that. Some people didn't. You know, if you're working on national projects and you're talking to artists on the phone, as you were in those days—there was no email, and sending faxes and hard copy letters—people didn't necessarily know why you were putting projects together. Or that you—well, were you Aboriginal? Or...

HMF So they were a bit wary?

ME Yes. Well, I think I was just sort of saying that it's not something you put out on a by-line of your projects. This project is for my children. What I'm saying is that's what was motivating me. You don't really articulate that at the time. You're just doing projects because you want to do projects. You know, it makes sense. I was an artist and I was interested in these themes. I think they were very topical and I had the energy to do them. Some of them were really good and some of them weren't as successful. Some of them didn't come off.

I did lots of collaborative projects. I mean, after *Balance*, one of the collaborative projects that I co-curated was, I conceived the idea called *Commitments*. That was actually pitching black and white artists and requesting them to do works together. Some of them

were really nice. Nick Tsoutas worked on that show. So he probably will remember that dearly. So I took that concept to Nick and he work-shopped it into a broader spectrum. That's actually when we pitted Gordon Bennett and Imants Tillers to work together. That was quite topical at the time. So that was launched in about '92. That toured through '92/'93.

So we were out of the '80s, into the '90s. During those early '90s years, the consultancy that I started actually morphed into a studio based *Campfire Group*. That morphed into *FireWorks Gallery*. So we were a studio based operation that had kind of an office end and a studio end to it. It was actually my house. And lots of great things happened. It overflowed into some bigger spaces where we rented the gallery and studio space and do special projects. There was lots of collaborative elements there. One artist that I haven't mentioned who goes right back to the '80s, through this period, was Lin Onus. He was incredibly important too because he was a bit older than me. He had a lot of seniority as a great artist. An urban based artist. But also his networking within the Australia Council, with the Aboriginal Arts Board, other committees, management agencies was quite good. So he brought in a lot of rigour there that a lot of artists up this way got out of it. We actually did a lot of collaborative work together, our own little fun times in the studio, as well as, I guess, putting our business hats on and trying to work up projects to help the wider artist communities. We were both sort of fairly driven, I suppose. We met in Maningrida, funnily enough. He was from Victoria and I was originally from Tasmania. So we were both way out of our zone. That was in 1987. So there was a good ten years, well, he died in '96, so we had a good nine years of mucking around together.

The artists that I mentioned before—Richard and Marshall Bell, Laurie Nilsen; later on, Joanne Currie; there are others, other non-Indigenous artists, artists from overseas—from the heart of *Campfire Group* projects. In the 90s, that took over as the main thrust. Collaboration was something that we were doing almost every day. I think everyone got so used to sort of sitting around, having a coffee in the morning and talking up projects and then going off and doing stuff, then having some overlap, that collaboration was happening before we even knew it. I think it's important to know that we'd all been through some initiation together, in terms of projects, both locally and through *Balance* at the Queensland Art Gallery. I think that created some bonding. Everyone knew each other. So it wasn't like you just ring each other up and "can I come over and talk to you. I want to do this project with you" and then expect the next week that you're swapping art images with each other. It wasn't that quick. It was quite a natural, at times things happened slowly and sometimes

they happened quickly. We just sort of tried to make opportunities happen.

We were very 'smell of an oily rag' group. We weren't funded. We weren't financial. We just sort of used what resources we could put our hands on. We applied for a few grants in local, state and Australia Council to do some projects. We were successful with some. That obviously gives you a little bit of a thread to keep working. We even did an international project in Finland and Holland in '93. We did some artist in residency projects through that. Some of the artists were able to travel overseas and represent the wider Aboriginal voice and take art, do art over there and speak at conferences. So I think you're building up that professional regime within your ranks. Some of us were more suited to other things. I got lumbered with a lot of the administrative work because I was probably—I could—

HMF You're good at it.

ME Well I don't think I was, really.

HMF <laughs> You must have been.

ME Well here I am, bloody surrounded—up to my fricken neck in paperwork. I don't think I am very good at it, to be honest. They didn't teach me any of that at art school. But I didn't want Richard Bell doing the paperwork, let me tell you that. He would've sold the company. He was quite funny. He was very provocative. Still is. He just loves it. He loved the idea of breaking into the art world—coming out of *Balance*, and the rest, as they say, is history. But in terms of administration, he is quite good. He actually wrote his own business plan and, for the last 20 years, has been following it out. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. And good luck to him. So other artists were a bit more laconic. You know, Laurie Nilsen's still here. We represent Laurie's work now. He's in a big show down at MCA, *String Theory*.

HMF I just saw it before I came up.

ME And obviously, the proppaNOW Unit has reformed after *Campfire* had, I guess, about a ten year run. Where it was sort of ...

HMF Active?

ME Yeah. And then *FireWorks* just took over. *FireWorks* grew out of those formulas and those models that I've just spoken about briefly. It still follows, I guess, that idea that we always have non-Aboriginal art alongside Aboriginal art. A lot of it's urban. A lot of it's from remote areas. We mix it up and it just sort of fluctuates like that. But running a gallery is a big commitment. Everyone sort of, after a

while, followed their own careers. Which is normal. *ProppaNOW*, a few years later, grew out of that. Also *New Flames*, which was a foundation that we did, that we auspiced that for about five or six years. It flared again a couple of years ago. But that was a studio residency and mentoring program for Indigenous artists. So there was all these offshoots that came out of that early – late '80s, early '90s networking.

Collaboration was at the heart of it. It was really about open-handed sharing, and recognising what other people were. So you've got to listen to what people think and then observe what they do, and not just say "because you're Aboriginal, you obviously know about this and your art work might be about that." That wasn't the case. It was really about artists' suitability and artists getting excited and about potentially asking another artist could they help them because they're working on a project. Some of it was quite spontaneous. There was a lot of information sharing in the studio. Just artists giving each other a hand. Some of those didn't actually get called collaborations, but – do you know what I mean? Like artists would just help someone finish an exhibition because they were in a bind.

HMF Yeah, I do. I've experienced that working in shared studios in the university you develop those kind of relationships. Because you're always making things together and bouncing ideas off and helping when you can.

ME Yeah. I think that there was a healthy respect and an excitement. There's things that you wouldn't bother sharing with people because it's a bit esoteric or something. Others—you couldn't help but offer something—and Richard for example, he would humbug everyone until he got the advice that he wanted. He would hunt whatever information or imagery down. He was forever the hunter. And his work was so issue driven, it was impossible not to reflect on it. Whereas some artists were much more intimate in their way of making art. Some of them were just beautiful painters. You know what I mean? They were trying to arrive at some sort of abstraction.

And you couldn't dismiss that. One shouldn't dismiss all that. So you've got minimalists like Joanne Currie, who was just sort of meditating on the Maranoa River, the idea of water and maybe her shield designs and she drifted into ideas about alcohol abuse which became more issue driven. Then you had Laurie, who was doing quite animated and graphic work. His barbed wire emus and his two dimensional work was quite graphic because he trained in graphics. When we needed graphics or posters made for a show, Laurie would be the first person who would step in and do something. Marshall Bell had some really interesting imagery and was researching his area at the time. People like Marshall and Michael

Aird, who was working at the museum, were really interested in technology and research. Going in and researching designs from archives, that were relevant. Joanne Currie did the same thing.

Because you're getting advice. You're getting professional advice. You're getting professional advice from people like Lin Onus. Even Michael Nelson Jagamara, who'd come over intermittently from the desert, would sit down and talk to these city Aboriginal artists and just share ideas. Say "that's a really good colour combination." Or "that looks fantastic." Or "how do you do that?" and "while I'm here, I'm going to buy some different materials. I'm going to take them back home with me," and that actually brought the whole subject of Michael Nelson, for one instance, saying I prefer to come back and work in Brisbane. He said, "I'll still do my paintings at home in Papunya, but I want to come here once or twice or more a year." And he still has. He produces work over here because it's the sort of work he can do here, he can't do at home. So that's evolved.

HMF Is that because of the sort of critical relationships he had here?

ME Yes it was built on all those relationships. And feeling comfortable. And just coming over is like a working holiday. He actually enjoys coming over and he usually stays, you know, five days, a week. He might come back a few months later and revisit what he started but didn't finish or do a completely new work or attend an opening. Sign one of his books. Complete a print project. You know, lots of interesting things are always here. He would be plugged into the art scene from this end so that people would go and meet him and he would meet people who were interested in his work, so he actually got to hear, regularly, how his work was being thought of. That's incredibly important for artists. So they're not working in isolation. That they actually know where their work is fitting in to a wider industry. Even if they don't understand some of it, at least they can eyeball some of it. They're a witness to it. They can walk around their show at an opening, whether it's at our gallery here or something at one of the state galleries or Institute of Modern Art or something. So they can see different audiences and how his work is presented in this context. I think that builds your professional quals.

Yeah, so where were we? In the '90s still, I guess. Moving through them. Yeah, we did some public art projects. Mostly they were actually done not through any government agency. We worked directly with some of our corporate clients and industry to complete collaborative projects for things like hotel foyers. One that we did for the Motorama car was a massive, massive collaboration with about 120 running metres of painted vinyl, a combination of digital and painted imagery. This is sort of right at the time where digital imagery was hitting anew in 2000. It's probably a little bit more commonplace now. Like the vinyls that

they were making big billboards or truck sides with. We were creating digital prints and then, once they were printed out, we would paint over the top of them, then send them back to the big print rolls and they would put a clear coat over them. Then we would fit them into interiors and exteriors. So it was having a lot of fun and experimenting and using all our skills. And using what technology was around. That gives you new ideas, anyway, as artists. And sculpture installations in these areas. So yeah, they were quite exciting, some of those big collaborations.

Then we did actually get public art commissions. A number of those were completed in local and regional areas, where the artists were doing fronts of buildings and, as you do, you get to work with industry because you've got to work with bricks or concrete or glass or tiles or metals. You have to sort of take your ideas into another area. So the collaborative thing was sort of in our DNA. I think it still is. Commercially, it's funny, because not many people really get their head around collaborative works. The most celebrated collaborations would have to be Michael Nelson and Imants Tillers. So I can give you some literature on all this as you go. A lot of that is really well documented in a project that we put together last year called *The Loaded Ground*.

So that takes us right back to the '80s, through a lot of this period. A lot of the essays and that. I think there's a lot of room for discussion there, you know, how that happens. But we're very proud of that. I'm on the phone to Michael and Imants still all the time and they're really—they're good mates. They're always cooking up new ideas. They're working with something now. So it's just a very natural thing. But that collaboration, the process has been going now for what? Twelve, 13 years. Yet, you know, that juncture at the Sydney Biennale was 1986. So we're coming up to 30 years. What are we?

HMF Nearly 27.

ME Twenty-seven years ago. So that's a slow burner.

HMF Yeah. I thought that was a brilliant catalogue and the essays in it are important.

ME Yeah, because they really nailed some big issues. You know, after you digest that... Some of the works are great. Some of the works are just sort of like, okay, I can see where he's painted that and he's painted that bit. They're not as sort of like riveting. But some of the major works that they've done are actually crackers. They're national pictures, do you know what I mean? I think that's where you get really excited. So you can have all the ideas in the world, but if you don't pull off a good work, well then it sort of remains academic, like you were saying. There's nothing wrong with that.

You've got to try. Like I said, I know that some of the works that we've done together in collaboration or in collaborative spirit, they've just sort of been ho-hum. Some of them are interesting. Some of the aren't. Some of them have been fantastic. Like real game changers.

So in the last five—in terms of collaboration, in the here and now—as you can see, I probably weaved my own practice weaved in and out of that. I guess I have to pick up some administrative skills along the way because I became more and more the coordinator, the curator and the art dealer.

HMF Are you still working right now?

ME Yes. Yeah. I've had some shows and I've got another show coming up soon. So I show in Brisbane with Heiser. In Sydney with Maunsell Wickes and Hobart. Different commissions. I still do a lot of work with the fibreglass stingray installations that you can see there. They're just sort of been an ongoing thread. They're sort of, I guess, my little magic carpet ride through all this treacherous landscape that I've just outlined for you.

HMF So when you started working on the idea for *Balance*, is that the same starting point for your work? Your stingrays and paintings? Is it the same kind of ideas that you were working through with those works?

ME I did a couple of shows in '85/'86 in Brisbane and my first show after art school. They also, typically, harnessed my first 12 months of being in the Territory, living in an Aboriginal community. I did some installations and performances at MoCA then, in '87. A lot of the work had more to do with Tasmania, coming out of Tasmania, than it did with coming out of the Northern Territory. So Brisbane, I was quite conscious, was a halfway house. I always saw it as that. I rented the woolsheds down here as a studio. But I would lock it up and just go back up to Maningrida for three, four months at a time. So I was literally living between. I was transient. But Brisbane was a really convenient location for me. I didn't know anyone, which is great. Because I just sort of slip in and out of Brisbane. Then I just started doing these shows and got involved with the local art scene. They sort of asked, who is this guy? This guy with the hat? Who's this guy with the hat and the brown kids? What's with the stingray?

Yeah, so the stingray came about directly from living on the beaches in the Territory and hunting stingrays. So I was merging the Tasmanian imagery and then the recent imagery of the Territory. But I was continually being immersed in the Territory and the balance idea came out—like I said, out of an awareness that

I was a white artist. I'd met Lin Onus, an urban based artist. Here we were in tribal country. I just sort of liked the mix.

HMF So it's something about being a white artist but working in, or making work in..?

ME Who's influencing who?

HMF ... the Northern Territory. Yeah, okay.

ME That was the big question. The shared influences was the by-line. It was about who was influencing who? Who's stealing from who? It became how do you share? How do you influence? My premise, I guess, was that all artists are influenced. So it was really about how you get influenced and what you do with it. How you propel it through. The protocols then, are about—if you want to talk—because everyone would say, “how do you?” Everyone just saw all this fantastic Aboriginal art coming through art magazines and here and there. They see it and go far out, that's fantastic. Gee, I'd like to use some of that. Not that they were saying that, but I'm sure some people were. Graphic designers, I'm sure, would be. Architects would be.

HMF Well they did do that.

ME They did, yeah. Then they go “oh no, you can't just use it. You've got to go through...” Oh? Who do I talk to? There was no one number you could ring up. It was different then. So negotiation had to be a little bit more rigorous and had to be more in the flesh. It was about giving something back as well. Let's not forget that. It wasn't just about taking. It was about sharing. It was about what can I put on the table? So they were the sort of conversational issues around the time in the '80s and '90s, when we were talking about this stuff. It was about trust. Not immediately, but after some time, I guess, with some artists at least, I earned their trust.

A lot of non-Indigenous artists who wanted to be involved and get closer, the Aboriginal people weren't that interested in them. So you had to get the right fit. There was nothing there to do except some dreamy, kind of oh we're all sitting down together...

HMF As with any collaboration, I guess, there's got to be a fit there. A mutual admiration and a mutual respect.

ME And there's some of the most unlikely pairings actually, in some of these projects. So in answer to your question, no, my own thread for my own work was just really my own individual imagery that I was mucking around with while I was by myself. That continues to happen and that's still what I muck around with today. But I guess my materials change.

HMF Right. So that imagery that—where does that mainly come from for you? Just those experiences of where you were living?

ME Yeah. I mean, I've written—I wrote a lot back in the 80s, as you do when you're trying to define yourself in a bigger picture. Well, where does my art fit in the world? But yeah, my work comes from living and just from—you know, your visual diaries and your imagination and, I guess, often there's a little bit of a surrealist sort of combo of mucking around with combinations of images. I was fascinated, as you would be, for a short period, about how you blend in the Aboriginal with your own. But it soon became quite obvious that your own work is your own work. Any attempt to blend Aboriginal into your own work is best left to collaboration. Which is probably one of the reasons why I did collaborate. Because I have Aboriginal content in the story that I was trying to tell. So that's where I sort of found it as a quantifiable and justifiable element.

HMF So what do you then see – you were talking about some of the conversations were around the making work in the '80s, early '90s and stuff. What do you think they are now? In this context.

ME Laurie would pick up a phone and say “Mickey, I've got this idea.” That's how it starts. Often, it'll be he just wants to bounce off the idea like an artist bounces off an artist. I think that's what happened. Sometimes you say “this might be something we do together” or not. So it's very laissez-faire. With the Tillers and Jagamara collaborations, they're a little bit more ordered because of the distance. You know, Tillers lives in Cooma, Jagamara is at Papunya. But I guess we brokered them from up here. Because Michael Nelson rings me up probably every day, every second day, so I can just keep filling him in with updates from Tillers and vice versa. Michael gives me immediate feedback on what he's thinking, what he wants to do, when he wants to do it. So that works quite nicely. So that's really how it happens. I mean, it's pretty casual.

Joanne Currie – gave her a hand getting some background designs through digital printing that she could paint over the last couple of years. So we were able to do that. But that was very much just taking photographs of her three dimensional work; and her providing a range of her Indigenous language as text; and then throwing it on the computer and mucking around with some combinations; and then printing out some fairly experimental kind of designs; then putting them digitally on canvas and her painting over them. So it was really straightforward, but it was quite relaxed because she knew that we'd been doing this sort of stuff for a long time. Do you know what I mean? So it's like she saw the stingray production over the years and actually had a go at carving her own shields out of timber and foam and having them cast into moulds. So I guess it's about artists being exposed to different

ways. It's an 'oh shit, I could use that.' So these weren't collaborative works, but there was a collaborative element into the very nature of their process. And the confidence of being able to resolve it.

HMF That's fantastic. One of the things I find really interesting is that it seems to be quite a different scene in Brisbane to Sydney.

ME Always has been. Yeah.

HMF But perhaps nationally as well.

ME I guess my experiences have largely been in Brisbane and, to some extent, in Sydney, knowing what goes on down there. Then, to another extent, I guess through Lin Onus, what was happening around Melbourne. Less so in other places, in terms of the metropolitan cities. Of course, you hear and see examples of other collaborative works. Some of them have been really interesting. The Asia Pacific Triennial, too, it brought in a lot of the Asian and Pacific and Australian kind of combos of collaboration. So we've seen a lot of dynamism come through here. But I think our stuff was on the ground in the '80s and '90s was really quite timely. I know that the curatorials at the APT [Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art] developed in the '90s, pay tribute to the *Balance* show because we set up the curatorium because we needed a curatorium to get through the complexities of cultural issues from a wide variety—it's not just one Aboriginal group and one white group here.

HMF The curatorium consisted of people from all over Australia?

ME From community and spokespeople. Some people didn't have as much experience at curating, but they knew protocols and they knew what was the best thing to do in order to get this particular part of a project through this particular complexity.

HMF Okay. So do you think, as a result of having that show *Balance* and then the *Campfire Group* resulting, that Brisbane is ahead in terms of its relationships between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art?

ME I don't know. We were sort of sometimes pitted against *Boomali* at the time, who actually boycotted the *Balance* show. *Boomali* are an Aboriginal only group. We have *proppaNOW* now, who are Aboriginal only. I don't have any issue with that. It's just that I wasn't Aboriginal and nor were a couple of other non-Aboriginal artists that kept hanging around the table. No one had a problem with it. We weren't trying to design or copy someone. That was just the football team that we had at the time. That was the side that got on the park. But it definitely did have a different way of bounding around the art circles. Look, to me personally, the most

intriguing Aboriginal shows are the ones where it's not all Aboriginal art in it. I still get excited about walking in to exhibitions where curators are forced to pitch Aboriginal work next to other contemporary work. The Aboriginal only shows are for—Aboriginal curators and artists will argue til they're blue in the face that that's what they want to do. That's fine. I'm not trying to take that ground away, that hard fought ground away. But the Aboriginal only shows are not where I want to be. That's just me. You know what I mean? I find, for a lot of onlookers, they're fascinating. But there's probably another audience who like it when you pitch black and white together. It gets bristly.

HMF Yeah. And it speaks, I guess, more to our experience of being in Australia.

ME Correct.

But mind you, there's some Aboriginal artists who don't want to be in Aboriginal shows too. I mean, they're quite well documented too. Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett being two of them. And they've been derided, at times, for taking that stance. I understand that completely. So what we're saying is there's not one homogenous thought bubble out there.

HMF Yeah. That's one of the things that keeps coming up in my research, in that it seems like the core of Australian painting is that in-between space and the intersections between.

ME Look, I think so. I mean, I think the grey area is always the most interesting area. Everyone knows what the grey area is. It's so hard to be simplistic and black and white. When you are, you feel really confident because you're simple and strong. Black and white. It's black and white. But it's so hard to obtain and sustain that moment. I don't think there's anything wrong with any sort of being. But Australia, to me, what it says is Australia is still a very malleable place. It's still trying to define itself culturally and nationally, as a national kind of image. We always have been. We were fighting—if you go back through the periods of modernism in Australian art, they were always rallying against something. To come up with something that was uniquely about that time and that place. We're still like that. You know, the issues that we walked through in *Balance*, in the '80s, a lot of them are still live. They're still there. They're just with different names and faces.

The only thing is that Aboriginal art now is in a lot better place. There's so much more—God, there was only a handful of books that you could pick up when we were doing those shows on Aboriginal art. There was no research. There was a lot of research being undertaken, but it wasn't out. A lot of it was anthropological. Some of the anthropologists had artist bents, which were really useful.

That wonderful essay *Bad Aboriginal Art* being probably a very notable one. Very brave thing. And people were scared to say things like “I don’t like that Aboriginal art” because we were sensitive towards so many other issues that had nothing to do with the artwork. But that the artwork was bringing them in. Because that’s what the artwork does. Look Aboriginal artists have had a great run, like I said, the research is there. It’s a lot better now.

So if you’re a young Indigenous artist, not only can you go to art school now and actually be navigated through a whole lot of cultural issues and maybe hurdles, where you couldn’t in the ‘80s. There’s a host of galleries that are waiting to show young Indigenous artists because they’re young Indigenous artists. That won’t happen forever. But it’s happening—has happened recently and it’s happening now. You know, it’s sort of like the sun will set in Australia on that and other issues will rise. I believe. But Aboriginal art—what a massive contribution it’s made. Is that still going?

HMF Yes.

ME It’s made a massive contribution then. When I was I was doing those shows, everyone was waiting for the bubble to burst in the early ‘90s. Then, in the early 2000s. I mean, the bubble has burst, I think. It’s reforming.

HMF I find it interesting being a part of my generation. Because I was born in 1987, so I’ve grown up with Aboriginal imagery and Aboriginal art everywhere, being a huge part of Australian visual culture.

ME Isn’t that great?

HMF Yeah, it’s fantastic.

ME We didn’t. We didn’t grow up with much history, let alone oral history, of what happened to Aboriginal people, from an Aboriginal perspective. We had it from a very much watered down perspective. Look, that toughens you up in some areas. We’re just a different generation.

HMF I find it interesting as well, that in that sense, that artists and especially painters today are working with that imagery, whether they’re choosing it or not.

ME Yeah, subliminally coming in through them about the patterning and the design elements that a lot of Aboriginal artists use are now commonplace.

HMF Yes.

ME Correct. And the protocols are now much more understood. Whereas copyright issues in the '80s were really prickly.

HMF Yeah. So we've benefited, I guess, from a lot of artists having had a hard time, and a few blow-ups around it, I guess, around appropriation and copyright.

ME Look, I think that there's incredible goodwill, particularly in the creative industries and the artworld. The overflow of the artworld in the other creative areas: Music and theatre, literature, etc. There's incredibly goodwill towards Indigenous artists. Everyone recognises the international calibre of Indigenous art and design and story. That's why I don't see that it should be an Aboriginal only world. Not because I want to break into it and rob it. It's because I see it as a wonderful Indigenous plant that should be growing everywhere amongst other natives and other shrubs and maybe a few introduced species there as well. Because that's Australia. I understand that you can't run before you walk and a lot of Aboriginal people need to have that ownership of their domains so that they're fully in control of it before it's just pilfered, you know, it's run riot. I understand that too. But I'm not saying they're mutually exclusive. But they're the issues for me. Here. A generation later. Reflecting back.

HMF Yeah, it's really amazing what you guys have done.

ME Yeah, it was good fun.

HMF Then to me, it is a really different scenario to Sydney.

ME Yeah, always was. Probably always will be. They're different towns. We're a smaller—it's always politics. Always will be. Personalities. The other thing too is, if people really want to do something, you'll get tested. If you hang around, people listen to you and put up with you. You've got to persevere. If you want to get some traction in an Aboriginal conversation, you just hang around and don't take it personally.

HMF The other thing I just wanted to bring up with you—a comment that Rex Butler has made a few times that Australian art is being increasingly read through Aboriginal art and, thinking back on the history of Australian art, through Aboriginal art. I just wondered if you had any comments on it?

ME Look, if you have any notion of an international perspective on Australia, and I guess I've had some examples where I've taken Aboriginal shows overseas to Europe. In '93 and 2001 and 2004. When you're in another country, it's amazing what sort of filtering systems other people look through. There's no doubt that people from another country find Aboriginal art very interesting, unique,

sometimes they're obsessively interested in it. Whereas you won't find that with non-Indigenous art. Bar maybe a small handful of artists in very particular places. You know, like that are very Anglo. Like London. Or parts of Europe or parts of the UK where they might understand the work of Boyd and Whiteley, Fred Williams. Do you know what I mean? But it's such a smaller thread than what Aboriginal art has been able to do in a short amount of time. What is that? What is that gaze? I don't know. They see something. They continue to see something. That's continuing to drive the Aboriginal art market. So it's important that—it comes back to that thing about Aboriginal only projects. There's a whole *raison d'être* why there needs to be Aboriginal only projects. I guess, when I've said that, I just contradicted myself. But it's not the only way that it should be seen. You know what I mean? If you want to be pricking the future, I think you've got to mix the Aboriginal and white art up. I think if you want to be kind of mining the past, well there's probably a lot of room for Aboriginal people to be doing their Aboriginal shows and they'll probably do quite well out of it, for a time.

HMF That is quite apparent in the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia]. In Sydney.

ME They do Aboriginal only shows?

HMF No. They mix it up a lot. Especially Glenn Barkley. I know that's a particular interest of his. Is that reflected in GoMA [Queensland Gallery of Modern Art]? Do they put Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art side by side?

ME Well, they've just got a big survey, which is from their collection. That's an Aboriginal only show. But I think it was very much about that because they haven't actually mined their archives in that way. So they can't do everything in one show. But Aboriginal has been mixed up quite successfully and, I think, going back to *Balance*—that was terrific template. Like I said, you know, it surprised us all how successful it was. So simple an idea. It's just hard pulling it off, I guess.

HMF I do find it interesting that like you said, we're still dealing with the same issues, even though the context has changed slightly. Because they're the same issues that Australia is still dealing with.

Interview with Richard Bell, 30 August 2013

South Bank, Brisbane

HMF So Richard, I saw your show at Artspace, *Imagining Victory*, and I very much enjoyed it, but also I really loved the concept and what you were talking about in your artist talk about imagining a different future or a better Australia, through art and through painting. And particularly I think you were talking about the *Dinner Party* work, but is that sort of—

RB Well I've done a re-edit of that.

HMF Yeah, I dropped in yesterday and saw the re-edit. I like it.

RB Yeah. I added on a new scene, but it looks like an add-on, so I'm going to get it cut back into the discussion at the dinner party, when the President says, "We're going to give everybody a million dollars." I'll get my daughter to cut in there, "A million dollars my arse," so just to show that there's a diversity of opinion in Aboriginal society, just as there is, you know, like in every other society. There's this homogeneity attached to Aboriginal life and culture, like we can be as different as a Serbian is to a Mongolian as to a Peruvian. It's that diverse. And all the solutions are sort of singular solutions, you know, the thing with the Aboriginal new republic, the People's Republic of Australia, that's a continuation of that ideal. Australia is as diverse now as Europe. The concept of a one size fits all treaty is just nonsense. They didn't do that in the United States. They had treaties with lots of different independent nations and they're still recognised today.

HMF So when you were speaking in Sydney, you said you realised that that point, that edit that you had there, that it didn't have as much of your ideas in it as Gary's [Foley].

RB Yeah, yeah. That's what I'm talking about, diversity.

HMF So that's what you really wanted to get more in it.

RB Yeah. You know, I wanted to get my voice in there. See, like me and Foley are friends, we're very close ideologically, but we have differences and I wanted them to be shown. Like, we've had that difference in the other two videos, you know, knowing that these white people would behave in a particular way and having to bother him, and then in the second one, he chases me for going to parties with rich white folks. So there's always been issues where we diverged. I wanted to show that and how I did it was that I created the position of Prime Minister and had the Prime Minister played by a woman, so it had some kind of gender balance to it sort of thing, and imagining the role of the President, you know, like it's

a republic but where the Prime Minister still holds the power, the President is merely a figurehead.

HMF And what about the new paintings? I was having a look at those yesterday.

RB Oh yeah.

HMF Oh great title by the way [The Suppository of all Wisdom]. I was laughing when I saw that.

So the stuff you've been working on this year, the paintings?

RB Yeah, oh well, I started on those paintings last year, in February last year, and in the meantime I was doing a lot of other stuff so it took, oh gee, almost 18 months to put together, and we sort of did quite a bit of experimentation, like I changed the focus. Had the focal point being on a target, since about 2006 I think, and I changed this abstract, you know, that abstract that's a cross section of the human brain.

HMF Right.

RB It looks like it's some kind of tree. I've got an image of it.

HMF Is that on the *Omega* one?

RB Yeah, there's a target and the abstract of the brain actually. See here, there's a target. There's a target going through there.

HMF Yep.

RB And then over here, see that abstract there?

HMF Oh okay, so that's a brain.

RB Yeah, across. See the target there?

HMF So why did you change to that?

RB Oh, because I like it and I started working, you know, like making that the focus and making it go over the text, making the text more difficult to read. Before it was—

HMF The text was the forefront.

RB Plus you can see where this sort of makes you look further into it. Being such an organic shape, it's pleasing for the eye. Abstract shapes from nature are always pleasing to the eye. That's one of the things that I started in this last 18 months or so.

HMF I think it does have that effect too that you have to look further into the painting, rather than looking at the text—

RB Rather than it being just presented to you.

Well the thing is, you know, like if we see text we're more than obliged to read it, we're compelled to read it. We see something we'll read it. The longer you're in front of it the less chance you have of not reading it. That's a given. I just like the way that it works with the text, how it pushes the text behind. I was just mucking around, hang on, bugger it, I'm going to put the text behind it. I'm still learning things from the painting and still on a journey with paint and with combinations of colour. There's combinations of colours in there that I haven't used before. I had to rush to finish them, and I required some assistants. Got them painted the way that I wanted to and then other times I just let them do what they wanted to. I just gave them a rough outline and then let them, because they saw how organic the process was in making these works.

HMF Do you have it set out before you start, roughly?

RB Roughly, yes. I get the basic composition right and then I start allocating with the colours.

HMF Do you that by drawing or digitally?

RB No.

HMF Just in your mind.

RB In my mind. So that's probably the hardest part is allocating the blocks of colour, and then allocating the colours to go over the top of those, having a look at them in relation to each other and then looking to the balance of the painting. So it's all organic and it's just how I think it feels, you know, looking at it.

HMF The install is great with the video as well.

RB Oh yeah, yeah. Josh thought about that. Once I finished the work I just let go. I don't give a fuck. If they want to hang the painting upside down, they can hang the painting upside down. That doesn't reflect badly on me at all. That reflects on them. So I just let it go. I've got enough problems, you know, putting work together, doing research and shit.

HMF Yeah. And I like the text on that one. What does that say? "In the end there will be painting."

RB Yes.

- HMF** And so, what do you mean with that one?
- RB** Oh well, it's apocalyptic, and also, I'm having a go at the way the artworld just favours one genre above the other. When I first entered the fine artworld, photography was really big and I said to people, "Why is everybody fussing over photography?" I said, "Anybody can do that shit." And they didn't believe me and they said, "Well, how come you aren't doing it then?" So I did some. I think I proved that anybody can do it.
- HMF** You proved your point.
- RB** I got a photographer friend of mine, got him to come over to a mate's place and I knew he'd bring his camera with him, so I brought a couple of slabs and we sat around drinking, telling lies and bullshit, and then I said, "Hey, I need you to take some photos of me. I've got his idea for a work." I said, "Come on, let's muck around." So I took my shirt off and got this beautiful tweed coat or some bloody thing. I'm wearing it and I've got no shirt on underneath it. I take my falsies out, you know, give a snarl at the camera, and it worked great. That was the image that we chose for it and then I just added these labels to it and made up two nursery rhymes—you know, the old tinker tailor, soldier, sailor?
- HMF** Yeah.
- RB** I changed that to drinker, tailor, sold ya—you know, as in sold you—sold ya, failure, and then—butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker—I had butcher, baker, troublemaker. And that originally started out as being seven photographs, but when that was exhibited in the Sydney Biennale in 1992, when I got it back, one of the works was missing, the label drinker and one of the photographs was missing. Apparently there was an artist who would volunteer and he always stole work.
- HMF** You're kidding.
- RB** So he's got his collection of works that he's stolen from the art gallery. So what I did with that work then was I just left it vacant. I said, "Fuck them." I just moved a photo down and left the troublemaker vacant, then when I was in a show in Vienna and I had that work there and they suggested a mirror, so I thought, gee, that's a great idea. I'll put a mirror there.
- HMF** Yeah. That works well. But obviously you don't feel that way about painting though.
- RB** Painting's no better than photography, no better than sculpture, no better than video. They're all equally valid. In fact, I think that

craft, you know, like all the different areas of craft is art and should be acknowledged as such as being equal of everything.

HMF Do you think painting still gets prioritised?

RB Yes, of course it does. Painting was massive when I was in New York. They were crying like bitches about not being able to sell their work and that people were buying paintings too. One of my Facebook statuses was, painting rocks you jealous motherfuckers.

HMF I can remember when I had just finished undergraduate studies, there was no painting around in Sydney, all there was was performance and sound—

RB They're like fucking sheep.

There's no fucking painting. Well see like in Artspace, they hardly ever have paintings there. One of the things I wanted was to show paintings and the videos.

HMF What do you think the relationship is between the paintings and the videos?

RB Well me, you know, like that's the common thread. The paintings are autobiographical really. They're like me, they're big, they're bold, they're brash, colourful. The videos are less so I think. The way I like putting videos together is very different to the way that I paint.

HMF Yeah, well the videos are sort of more about everyone aren't they?

RB Yeah, well they're looking at broader issues. I layer them differently. I don't present a narrative, you know, the narrative has to be constructed, whereas in the paintings the narrative is fairly blatant, and I bury other stuff in there that you have to look for. So it's kind of a different thing. A narrative is buried in the videos. And they're open to multiple interpretation as well. I don't try to tell people what is what, you know, because everybody sees things differently anyway. Those paintings in the show, I had a lot more time on all but the last one.

HMF Which is the last one?

RB The, "In the end there will be painting."

RB I was supposed to do that for the Moscow Biennale. I think it's probably better that it didn't go. I made a video instead, so that took up more of my time. I didn't think that I was going to make the video, so I'm going to be showing the video instead of that painting. So I think it's a pretty fair result.

HMF What's the video?

RB The Trilogy.

HMF Oh okay, you're showing those three.

RB Eventually, like I don't know if I've got enough time to do it before I get there, but I'd like to get my daughter to sort of narrate things. Take a look at racism as a disease. That's what Albert Einstein thought of it, as a disease. So I look at that story through the eyes of a psychoanalyst. I saw it as a psychosis.

HMF Great. So why do you paint?

RB Because I've gotten good at it.

I enjoy it. And I use acrylics, you know, because I like the immediacy that acrylic gives you.

HMF So you like to be able to work quickly?

RB Yeah, well part of my tactics for making work is that I'll be able to make works quickly, but look like they've taken ages.

HMF Which they do.

RB That last one, we did it in one week.

HMF There's a lot of layers there isn't there?

RB Yeah, yeah. Like it's a really complex work and I had an idea of what I wanted it to look like and once I laid that out, then I had to do all the colour, work out what I was doing and what I was going to do with it, and then doing the lines and circles and that, that's the mechanical part. That's where I get assistance to do that, and also lay down the colours. I always mark out how the blocks are and then allocate the colours for the blocks and that. I had to do some other stuff and that so I got to be able to look at the thing and I was able to see whether things were working, if the colour combinations were working and if they didn't I could change them. Things like that. It was pretty good. It's like directing a film, so that was pretty interesting. But I didn't like him to have all the fun though. I really like this. It gets mechanical.

HMF Yeah, and it's just as conceptual to me anyway, as anything else.

RB My painting practice, you know, is as conceptual as any conceptual artist, nothing matters other than the message. I like to deliver the message succinctly and precisely.

So then like I said, the curator takes over. Once I'm finished with it, that's it. I don't care. They can hang it next to some fucker I hate or whatever, or inappropriately. I don't care. If they want to put it next to some timid little piece of shit, then go ahead you know.

HMF I can't imagine it would be easy to put any work next to your paintings.

RB Yeah, well they're greedy motherfuckers aren't they? Attention seeking. Look at me, look at me. Oh they're constructed to do that. There's a science attached, like three and four colour combinations are irresistible to the human eye. You look at it in the same way that you see movement in a jungle, you know, you look. That could be danger. It's a similar sort of response when you see three and four colour combinations. An example of that is the colours of the flags of the nations of the world. Most of them are three and four colours. But what they've found also is that if you embed messages in those combinations, you bypass the conscious and go directly to the subconscious. They use it in advertising and that sort of thing, so I use it in my paintings.

HMF It's fascinating.

RB It's good fun. Like I really love colour, but I also like black and white. I find if I do some black and white stuff, sharpens me up, like you know, monochromatic stuff sometimes, just do those. Doesn't happen so much these days because I'm making films.

HMF That's good. It's really good to hear about some new works.

RB *Foley versus The Springboks*. That was a work that I did with, the drawing came from Emory Douglas.

HMF That's the one that was down at Artspace?

RB Artspace, yeah. Emory Douglas, the Minister for Culture from the Black Panther Party, he did the drawing for that. That's pretty important at that time, because they were protesting against the Springbok tour in 1971 and the anti-apartheid movement made contact with the Aboriginal people and they wanted Aboriginal people to go up the front, and they said, "No, fuck off. You're always wanting to put blacks up the front of you in your marches and that sort of thing, but when we have our marches, none of you turn up." So they did a deal and from that moment on, lots of white people turned up at Aboriginal protests and it was the first time it had happened, so it was really significant. That deal marked a change in the attitudes among the Australian people.

HMF And when was that, sorry?

RB That was 1971. The way Foley tells the story, is that all the young black fellas they'd been protesting sort of non-stop and that sort of thing and they wanted to get away, just recharge their batteries. One of their white friends paid for these hotel rooms out at Bondi, so they're shackled up there and this is leading up to the Springboks playing in Sydney, and the Springboks hit town and they were looking for a quiet space too, because of protests and they got a hotel in Bondi as well, across the road from the black fellas. So that came from a photograph that Foley had taken in the car park across the road from this hotel, and what happened there was in this exchange between the anti-apartheid supporters and the black fellas, there was two former Wallabies who had played against South Africa on the previous Australian tour of South Africa, and they were horrified when the captain of the Springboks came in and said, "This jersey will never be worn by a black man." So what two of those guys did was that they gave their jerseys to these Aboriginal guys to wear and when they were protesting across the road, they saw these two guys with Springboks jerseys on and they called the police and said he must have stolen these jerseys, and the former Wallabies had to go down to the police station.

HMF And say they'd given them to them.

RB Yeah. Pretty interesting, isn't it?

HMF Yeah. I didn't know about that at all.

RB No. And that's why I put that work in with the Peter Norman one, you know, when the black guys did black power salute at the '68 Olympics. So I had the two.

HMF That's good. One more question for you then.

RB Yeah, what's that?

HMF I went along to that panel discussion at the Opera House two years ago, *What is Aboriginal art?* And Rex [Butler] was saying that two of your paintings, *Aboriginal art it's a white thing* and *Australian Art, it's an Aboriginal thing*, are pretty much the core of Australian art at the moment, the kind of thing that we're working on, thinking about.

RB Yeah. At first glance they look to be diametrically opposed, but when you look at the actual situation, even without the emergence of urban artists, Europeans when they think of Australian art, they think of Aboriginal art, they think of desert painting, bark painting. But now, because a lot of Aboriginal art is from—well most declare that they're Aboriginal artists and that they make Aboriginal art, whereas I declare I'm an Aboriginal artist and I don't make Aboriginal art. The interest from the Europeans in Australian art is

almost exclusively Aboriginal. They're not interested in the white practitioners. They're interested in the Aboriginal, whether they be from the remote areas or the cities.

So those two statements, while they seem outrageous—

HMF They're entirely true.

RB I can support both of them, yeah.

HMF Yeah. But I guess what I find interesting about Australian art is that strange conundrum.

RB Yeah, like I don't think that the *Angry Penguins* are significant. You know. But that's not to say that there are not world class practitioners here, and that there hasn't been. My experience going overseas is that the best practitioners from every country are pretty much on a par, like there's not that much difference. It's only just small degrees of difference, you know. It's like almost every other endeavour. Australia's equally good at fascism as any other country, like football and sport, there's not that much difference between the World Cup of football, you know. Nobody gets beat 100 nil or something like that, you know. Four nil, five nil is a thrashing. That's what I got from that. Like it's just a numbers game really. I don't know, because I know four-fifths of fuck all about art.

HMF That's how I feel.

RB Yeah, well there's so much to know, just in painting alone. I've only sort of scratched the surface as far as painting goes.

HMF And the stuff that you know really just comes from what you've made, what you've learnt from making paintings, for me anyway.

RB Yeah, well probably half of what I know for sure came from what I learnt from doing it. But you know, I didn't go to art college. I was taught the basics by Aboriginal people making tourist art. I've got good hand-eye co-ordination, good colour sense. That helps. And well, once I found out that you could actually make art about what's going on around you, I thought fuck, this is great. I've got fuckin heaps of material.

More than half of my research was a lived experience. Delve into my memory. Been really lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I'll always do painting. What else can you do when you get real old?

HMF There will always be painting.

RB I just had to make lots and lots of work to even get good at it. And I look at it now. At the time I thought they were fantastic, you know. All they were were just promises of something better. I was incredibly lucky, a lot of you know, early support. Then I stopped making for about seven years, and then I got back into it in the nineties. I got good attention and Artspace, bought something in the first 12 months. The Queensland Art Gallery bought in the first nine months, and then about 18 months later I won the National Aboriginal Art award. Really lucky. And I knew about marketing and that sort of thing, did that performance with the t-shirt thing. What happened there was they paid me to go with the essay that I wrote, and well, I painted it to win the National Aboriginal Art award, like Aboriginal art have story with the paintings. My painting had a 4,800 word story and they hated it, what's her name, Susan McCulloch. She hated the idea. Said, "Oh it's all right. It's all right for you to have the equivalent of a nursery rhyme. That's all you're allowed to get," but you can't get an analysis of what the fuck is going on. Meanwhile I'd published something on Gary Foley's website, and they published a book. I think it's been translated into three or four different languages now.

HMF Great. And it's in the MCAA [Museum of Contemporary Art Australia], the new MCAA *Volume One*—

RB Oh right, yeah. That's right. I remember that. They paid me \$1,500 for that. I said, you know, like you know, there's three diagrams there. And I said, "You know how a picture paints a thousand words? Well, there's 3,000 words right there."

HMF This is true.

RB And they wouldn't pay me. I said, "Fuck it. You'd do it for a white man." They didn't. But yeah, they concentrated on the t-shirt and they didn't take any notice of my acceptance speech.

HMF Didn't take any notice of it?

RB I said important things. I spoke about the division between the remote and the urban. There's an artificial one been made essentially by the industry that caters for Aboriginal art.

HMF The market.

RB Because they still hold the anthropological view that a real Aboriginal is one from 1950s standing resting one leg on his knee holding a fucking spear. There's no more savages. Aboriginal people have adapted and adopted and evolved in the 21st century. The modern day version is authentic, because everyone's driving cars, everybody's hunting with rifles, everybody's fishing with

motor boats and shit. That's more than romantic. It's foolish to even think that's such a possibility.

Interview with Rex Butler, 30 August 2013

School of English, Media Studies and Art History, University of Queensland,
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RBu Do you want me to talk about the things I've done recently that you may not know about yet?

HMF That would be great.

RBu Well, last year I was involved in a catalogue essay for the show called *Loaded Ground*, which was, well it certainly had some interesting people writing for it. It had Ian [McLean] and it had Vivien Johnson and it excerpted an old text by Howard Morphy. Anyway, that's something I did and more recently there was a big symposium at the National Gallery of Australia last year on abstract expressionism because they were rehanging their quite impressive abstract expressionist collection and they had some Americans out here, so I pondered what to write about. It had really to be about abstract expressionism, but I started off with an anecdote of Rover Thomas seeing the Mark Rothko painting at the National Gallery of Australia and famously saying, "That bugger's doing what I am," or words to that effect. Most people think it's amusing that he kind of got it wrong, but I took it seriously to suggest I think there's a really interesting thing that is happening there.

Eric Michaels wrote this great book on Aboriginal art [*Bad Aboriginal Art*], and there's a very interesting phrase in one of the essays where he talks about Aboriginal art—it's "meaningful without meaning" to white people. It seems filled with meaning, but no one can say what it is—unless you've been initiated—and I ran with this thought as a way of understanding abstract expressionist art, because a lot of the abstract expressionist artists in America were, I think, making this kind of huge grandiose art about the sublime, but it didn't represent itself in the art, and so the art as they spoke about was full of meaning but no one could say what the meaning was. I wanted to suggest that in some ways it was like Aboriginal art, and perhaps even they're both "abstract" in a way, and that's maybe what abstract art is, meaningful without meaning.

At the beginning of the paper, therefore, you had this Aboriginal guy looking at white abstraction going, "I'm into that" or "it speaks to me" or "it's like mine", and at the end of the paper, I didn't say this but I'm going to in the published version, there's another fantastic example of something similar. What you really need to complete the case would be an abstract expressionist artist seeing Aboriginal art and saying "I like it." When did this happen? It's true, it did happen. The great sculptor David Smith, who's an abstract expressionist sculptor, did a very interesting series of

works based on Australia of all places, and it was pointed out to me by Daniel Thomas, that in fact that work is very influenced by Aboriginal art. So, in other words, you get this fantastic parallel, there's a black artist looking at white art and there's a white artist looking at black art and both of them notice this affinity. I've got to write it up and I'll send it to you.

The other thing I wrote, if you look out there it's really interesting. I've pondered this. I have a beautiful view of the flags [pointing through the office window], and I've written a couple of essays starting off with those flags and you'll notice that what's really interesting is that the Australian flag is higher than all the others and it's as though the Torres Strait and Aboriginal flags are kind of like constituencies within the wider notion of Australia because there's the Queensland flag, which is on the sort of same lower level as them. I've written these essays pondering the political meaning of putting the Aboriginal flag under the overall rubric of Australia and what would happen if they were on the same level? So another thing I guess I've done, just sort of what I've been up to, there's a very interesting American artist, a guy called Dave Bailey, who recently, and I guess it's provocative but I have no problem with it, took Harold Thomas' famous Aboriginal flag and cut it up, collaged it and turned it into sails. It's a complicated kind of thing.

I've written about the project briefly in Artforum—the interesting thing is a conceptual artist called Dave Bailey came to Brisbane and he did this collaboration with a prominent Aboriginal activist called Sam Watson—who's a very interesting guy, he's written this famous underrated novel, some people believe it's one of the great Australian novels, he's still alive—and so what they did, and they've done it twice now, is one day on the weekend several years ago they got the ferries that go up and down the river, during their usual trips, to stop and pause in front of various significant historical Aboriginal landmarks in Brisbane, like the famous Boundary Street. In West End in Brisbane there's a thing called Boundary Street, and the reason why it's called Boundary Street is that before the Second World War Aborigines weren't allowed to cross that line after dark, i.e., get into the city. It was a boundary that went all the way up the river.

So the ferry paused where Boundary Street meets the river. The passengers wouldn't have known exactly what was the meaning of this, but on the banks of the river Sam Watson had got a group of Aboriginal, I suppose, actors to dress up as "primitive Aborigines" with spears and stand at these various points. So this performance went on for several hours of the ferry public transport of Brisbane, and they obviously had to get the government involved and the ferry drivers, but they were happy to do it and they've done it twice. I've written about it and it's very interesting. Anyway, so

the same artist, this American conceptual artist, a bit like Sam Durant who did that thing about the black panthers for the Sydney Biennale, he's into sailing so he likes water—that's the ferries—he then did these series of sails with the permission of Harold Thomas, cutting up the Aboriginal flag. So they're just some of the things that I've pondered of late. I'm still quite interested in the topic of Aboriginal art, I suppose.

HMF Well, I'm also very interested in what you have to say about Australian art and UnAustralian art.

RBu Sure. Well really the impetus, the idea, really it was a long time ago. Two things: one, I'd just written an essay about Richard Bell and he's got these kind of famous aphorisms: "Aboriginal art it's a white thing" and "Australian art is an Aboriginal thing," so I just had that flying around my head, and the other thing I re-read was *White Aborigines* by Ian McLean, and both in a way make the point that before Australian identity could be formed a certain image of Aborigines had to be constructed. I mean Aborigines need to be part of Australia, but it must be a certain image of what Aborigines are, that's really the point of *White Aborigines*: that for the construction of Australia there needs to be a certain white construction of Aborigines. You can't leave them out, but they've got their place. So I began to ponder, when you think about Richard's work, sort of disarticulating the relationship between white and black in Australia and thinking like this flag thing, which wasn't in my mind at the time but sort of, what would happen if Aborigines, as in say Ian McLean's model, were not part of Australia or within Australia, but what if they were sort of equal to whites or separate from them.

If you took say Aboriginal sovereignty seriously, what would that start to do to the notion of Australia? And I think it's true: in some ways Aboriginal art is not Australian art. It's not about "I am Australian," it's about "I belong to a certain tribe or a language group." So it's not about an Aboriginal person being Australian, which is really interesting because Aborigines are the proof that there is an Australia in McLean's, book, but actually look at the art, it's not about being Australian. Certainly, people have tried but failed to write histories of Australian art in which Aboriginal art is part of that wider history. Like Andrew Sayers' book [*Australian Art*], it starts off with Aboriginal art at the beginning, but it can't put them together. So if you say you can't put the two different kinds of art that are made in this country together, Australian art is not the name for what happens in this country.

And once you start to tinker around with this idea you say the real way of thinking about Aboriginal art being possible in Australia is not to have an Australian art but to think of it as this other kind of art which doesn't have a national identity to it, and so you sort of flip the mirror the other way around. In other words, to have an

Australian art paradoxically you need to include, but in a way also exclude, Aboriginal art. It just doesn't fit, and then you start to ponder all of the other necessary exclusions to construct Australian art. If you look at the various Australian art books on these shelves, they all do this. If you look at Robert Hughes' book there [The Art of Australia], he says, "Look I'm not going to consider certain kinds of people who just visited here briefly and then left, they're not Australian," but why the hell not?

Even in Andrew Sayers' book, he's saying "I can't consider all the art made by Australians overseas", but why not? Because just like the rise of contemporary Aboriginal art, those kinds of expatriate artists are if anything more prominent than other kinds of artists today. Like Ricky Swallow, he's now the model for Australian art. So definitely the inspirational thing was in fact how to account for Aboriginal art, and the thought that the category of Australianness necessarily does away with the truth of Aboriginal art, which is that it's not Australian. If you say it's Australian, you don't get the art, and I was already thinking there's people like Emily and the sort of slightly forced reading of her as an abstract artist. Her art is also not Australian. If anything, it's Aboriginal and universal at the same time, but it's not Australian.

I mean it comes from a very specific place, like a tribe of people or a particular painting practice, but it's also very universal. It looks like anyone's abstract art and people around will get it and it speaks to me as just a white person who looks at abstract art. Again, that kind of art is simply not Australian. It's smaller than Australia and bigger than Australia, but it's not Australian. It's like global and local. So that was a kind of inspiration to think about Australian art. Definitely Aboriginal art was the fact on the ground that you had to rethink the theory from because here we were having an art in Australia that wasn't Australian. It was two other things; it was very worldly and it was very local, and perhaps I was even thinking about the idea of Aboriginal art being in effect contemporary just like other kinds of art and that's really the idea Ian's absolutely gone with in that contemporary art anthology [How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art]. Again, there's not much about Australia in there, it's about the fact that it's like art from all around the world and it's to be explained by the sort of forces that shape art everywhere in the world.

They're not particularly Australian forces that make Aboriginal art, they're things that happen to cultures everywhere, and in some ways Richard's aphorisms are very interesting for thinking that, because if you think about "Australian art is an Aboriginal thing," what the hell does that mean? That means that you have to explain Australian art from the wider, more general category of Aboriginality, which is a very interesting thing to do. In other

words, thinking seriously about Aboriginal art makes you rethink the notion of Australian art. So that was the theory and then you have to sort of historically instantiate this supposition, I mean write that other history and find out all the facts and the other artists, but the driving impulse was to write, like all histories, a history of the present, and the history of the present is a history in which Aboriginal art is made in Australia. It's the dominant art made in Australia, but it isn't Australian art, which is a very odd thing to think, but nevertheless true.

HMF Yeah, but is that based on the idea that Australian art has to be concerned with Australian identity?

RBu Yeah, well it has been, and if you think about when the period of Australian art was—let's say from 1889 with the 9 by 5 show, but probably more particularly with the historical canonisation of the Impressionists, which probably happened from the 1920s onwards when people started to write histories of Australian art, and it ran until about the 1960s when it kind of ended and couldn't be done anymore. I'll give you two very interesting examples. William Moore is a real cosmopolitan art critic. He was a Melbournian, did a lot of art criticism up in Brisbane and he was very knowledgeable about and knew you had to be aware of all the Australian expatriates working in France at the time, the '20s, right?

There's a very interesting show at the NGV called Australian Impressionists in France, which I think is a show inspired by some of these ideas. There was a huge pack of Australians doing art over there, and now finally it's coming back and we're having to think about them as Australian. So William Moore was a guy writing in the '20s for *The Courier* and he was very aware of all his artist friends overseas, so he used to write these columns in which Brisbane didn't always feature. Again, the other interesting thing about un-Australian histories of art is that in the Australian histories the only two cities that count are Melbourne and Sydney, and it's like this endless battle between these two cities. It's abstraction in Sydney and the Antipodeans in Melbourne. But that again is just not true. All the other cities were doing things and they start to look quite interesting.

So in fact in the '20s the best art critic in Australia by miles was Moore, and he wrote the first history of Australian art called *The Story of Australian Art* in 1934. It was a very diffuse thing, it wasn't that nationalist and it had quite a lot of international things in it. Famously, Bernard Smith had this dream in *The Boy Adeodatus* about killing William Moore, this is much later in his career but it's a dream that he had as a young man, to become the next Australian art critic. And he did this theoretically because he wrote *Place, Taste and Tradition*, then *Australian Painting*, and they're very Australianist and they're about the logic of making Australian art. But to do that to a large extent he had to exclude what he knew to

be happening overseas with Australians. He has something to say on John Peter Russell, but not much, and Smith knew about all these overseas activities, but he didn't really talk about them, so once you headed off overseas you just vanish from his histories. The really interesting thing is that by the time you get to the second and third editions of *Australian Painting*—it's a great book, you know it is a great book because it's got for instance that famous chapter on the Impressionists called 'Genesis', like the beginning of the world for Australia, and it ends in 1960 famously, as you probably know, with an reproduction of 'The Antipodean Manifesto' by Smith himself. So it's quoting the Manifesto as though it's evidence for Smith's case, but it's in fact his own evidence. It is a great book, but it's become so successful that no one else has written a book on Australian art that does not follow its general outlines.

The first chapter in the updated edition of *Australian Painting* treats art from '60 to '70, and it just doesn't make any sense because suddenly it's internationalist and abstract art because that's what's happening in the '60s, whereas the first edition ended with a rejection of abstraction with 'The Antipodean Manifesto'. So it's a real mongrel book after that, but it's already telling you that the time for writing that Australianist history was over by 1962 when he wrote the book. The possibility of writing this pure Australian art history was just no longer possible. So it's a really funny book, and then Bernard has to get Terry to update it with postmodernism in the '80s, which is again completely antinationalist in some ways. So the book has a fascinating publication history because the moment of Australian art history was probably from about 1920 to 1960, a mere 40 years of our history when this was the dominant mode, and that's when all these kind of grand heroic artists that are still hanging on, like John Olsen and Blackman and fucking Arthur Boyd. They live on as like the great Australian artists, but they're such a long time ago and in fact it was just a moment and no young person, except I mean, you know, kind of interesting throwbacks like Ben Quilty and Shaun Gladwell, makes Australian art or art about the notion of being Australian.

Of course, it's very popular art because it's nostalgic. If you think about Ben, and I've written semi-critical things about him and not because I dislike him, he's a lovely guy, but when he does Jimmy Barnes and Captain Cook and soldiers he's trying to capture Australianness as a certain kind of maleness. That's an incredibly nostalgic project really and fucking kangaroos and Holden cars and rosella birds and things, and no one ever really questions his art. I mean it's really interesting, if you were a tough-minded young art critic, it would be very challenging to write something critical of Ben. It is very interesting that he's done all that and then he goes off and does the Afghanistan war in a very non-critical way. I'm not

mocking, but you see it's quite an interesting continuum in fact. Like it is part of the sort of ANZAC-y myth-y thing that he's kind of an updater of. It's kind of fascinating. I'm not anti war or anti the army, but it is a fascinating project in that sense. It is undoubtedly very nationalist.

If you write about the Australian army in any way, it's a nationalist project. It's like the Australian army, that's the embodiment of Australia. Of any country, really. He does it and it's a very interesting continuum in his work. He is one of the very few artists who is still making art about the Australian character and trying to capture it, but not many people are. Think about Hany Armanious, an Egyptian guy making Surrealist art about noses and stuff for the Venice Biennale. Or Simryn Gill is a Singaporean born woman making art about Asianness, well in fact about Australia belonging to Asia, which is very interesting. So the national/antinational debate in some ways goes on, but very few people... I mean Ben Quilty seems more and more like a sort of throwback to a previous era in some ways. I'm not knocking him, he's quite a strong artist, but if you thought about it for a moment you'd have to admit that the histories that have been written of Australian art are not the histories of our present. I do think the true lever to open up this other history is Aboriginal art, that's the thing that makes you have to rewrite the history.

HMF With the art that's being made now, which has a lot of more global references or Australia belonging to Asia or anything Indigenous, can't that speak to Australian identity now also?

RBu Yeah, of course, sure. Well that's right and yeah you do get this paradox that un-Australianness is Australian, which is like the acknowledgement that the belonging of Australia in the region is truly what Australia is. You're right.

HMF So is it a way of talking about that distinct change then?

RBu Well. it is. It's like a history of the present. The other obvious paradox, every time you do some of the un-Australian history in front of colleagues or whatever, the obvious objection is "But who's interested in this but Australians?" and I say "Yeah, obviously that's true." You're right, but I don't think... people are trying to write this global art history, but you can't just write an anodyne universal world art history that's from nowhere. You have to start in a place and what you discover is that you pull at the threads and the whole carpet reveals itself, but if you start nowhere it's bland, and I think personally one of the flaws maybe of Terry Smith's books on contemporariness is that they just start with this global picture and they're not interestingly specific enough. Whereas you're right, I'm very aware of the self-contradiction of writing an un-Australian history of Australian art or an un-Australian art history, whatever, but it's true, you need both because part of the project is to rethink

what Australia is, as well as in a way doing away with the notion of Australia.

Another thing I've just been working on with my colleague A.D.S. Donaldson, I think it's going to come out in *Broadsheet*, is ten examples of Australian-Asian interaction throughout the 20th century. There are at least ten moments you could find, and there'd be plenty more, where you could think about Australians in Asia or that Asia is Australian, or Australians in Britain doing Asian stuff. There's a really interesting guy called Mortimer Menpes, who's coming back. Now that the net's being widened and people aren't just into Boyd and Tucker, etc, people are really starting to look at other artists, such as Mortimer Menpes—fantastic etcher, right, and he used to travel round the world with lots of artists and do scenes, and they were famous books, and when people didn't have photos people bought them and he was very well-known. He was in Japan and Oscar Wilde wrote this essay called 'The Decay of Lying', where he talks about the fictionality of Japanese people, a very famous thing. Anyway, it's one of his profound meditations on life resembling art, and he was inspired by the way that Mortimer Menpes was drawing Japanese people like Europeans, so he's admittedly Orientalist. But nevertheless he was an important Orientalist in Britain along with James McNeil Whistler. Menpes was the other major Orientalist. So there's an Australian who's doing Asian art in Britain and one of the great introducers of Asianness into Britain, and there are other fantastic examples.

So there have been Australians in Asia, there have been Asian things in Australia and there have been Australians in Britain doing Asian things. So there's this very long history of Australian- let's say Asian interaction to it. Think about Fairweather, he's an amazing artist. He's like Aboriginal, Asian and Cubist or something and he's really the precursor to the contemporary artist. If you're talking about people with those worldly influences, beat that. The guy is totally into Aboriginal art, totally into Asian art, spent a lot of time in Asia, spent a lot of time in the north of Australia and then was trained in Cubism and he fuses these things. And you would say of Fairweather you can't really tell whether it's Asian art, Aboriginal art or Western art. If you look at it properly you just can't decide. So people talk about this fusion of influences; no one could beat him. Or you said this kind of postmodern worldly influence, well he's a precursor and he did this very famous volume for UQ Press in the early 1960s called *The Drunken Buddha*. He trained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the 20s, he came back after First World War, and while he was training there he studied oriental languages at this well-known School of Oriental and African Studies, which was a very important institution for learning languages because Britain was about colonising and you needed to help people speak languages.

So he learnt Mandarin and he spent years in various Asian countries by himself, incredibly lonely life and there's probably something slightly wrong with him but anyway, and he picked up all these languages. So when he was this hermit up here on Bribie Island he translated this famous volume of Chinese poetry called *The Drunken Buddha*, and did this brilliant series of accompanying illustrations. It's now a very rare and valuable book. That's pretty amazing. Back in the '60s when you think about all the anti-Asian hysteria after the war and all that kind of stuff, you had this guy who was like an Asian scholar artist in Australia, who was in fact Scottish, that's who he really was. He's beaten Simryn Gill or Kate Beynon to the punch of producing this combined European/Asian art. But he's a great Australian artist too so that's kind of odd... Anyway.

So that's a great example by the way of someone with a world view getting into Aboriginal art. He's a brilliant user of Aboriginal art, I think, all those totemic heads and stuff. They're very influenced by Arnhem Land art at the time and a complete cosmopolitan artist. He just took things from everywhere and fused them to his own style, completely unapologetically. I mean for him, I think, and I think completely correctly, taking from Aboriginal art is the same as learning an Asian language. He didn't see that as a European he was prevented from doing either of those two things and I think he's completely right on that matter. I mean that's obviously one of the things that will be raised in your thesis, the lack of fear, at least from the side of European artists, of using Aboriginal art today. The argument that just no one cares anymore. Ian wrote a very nice thing I think in *Broadsheet* about that guy, the white guy who was thrown out of the art gallery for "stealing Aboriginal paintings" early last year or something.

HMF Is that Grogan?

RBu Yeah, I think so. I mean probably really you'd have to consider a defence of him. He would be a very interesting guy as well as Richard Bell. I mean Richard can be quite illogical in some ways, I think, so can Vernon. Depends what mood you get them in, sometimes they go no you shouldn't do it, but really Richard should be OK with that, I think logically. If he's going to say Aboriginal art is a white thing, well go with that thought, but it depends what mood you get Richard in, I think. But it would be really interesting to ask him that question.

HMF We did talk about it a little bit, but in a lot of the stuff that I have read, he usually says...

RBu Yeah, you can't do it.

HMF Well no...

- RBu** Oh you can? Okay.
- HMF** I've read a lot of things that are saying it's inevitable, taking from other cultures...
- RBu** Good. Well, it's a bit difficult. There was this event down at the Opera House with Richard, Vernon, Ian and me and on a big occasion like that it's very difficult for a white person to be contestatory, but there were a lot of things toward the end that they were saying that I...well Ian and I were speaking I think at cross purposes with Richard, but anyway that's the way it is. I suppose on paper one is more brave. Yeah, and I think Richard can be a bit populist sometimes. Of course, it's incredibly easy to say that you shouldn't do it because it's owned by Aboriginal people, but I don't see that as the deep logic of Richard's art, I just don't see that. I think it's doing something else and quite interestingly. So I don't know how logically given his art that he could be saying this guy [Grogan] can't do the same. Not that I thought they were particularly interesting pieces, but I don't see why people should be leaving art galleries over them.
- HMF** Yeah, I was quite shocked when I read about it, like it seemed quite out of place.
- RBu** Yeah.
- HMF** Maybe if it had happened 20 years ago it would've made more sense.
- RBu** But even Talking about Abstraction, that early show by Felicity Fenner, that was fairly unapologetic about white artists using Aboriginal art from my memory.
- HMF** It was.
- RBu** And that's a long time ago, and that would've been the time when someone like Vivien Johnson was doing her stuff on copyright, which isn't quite the same thing though it was seen a bit as the same thing, but people literally commercially exploiting Aboriginal art, she did a show about that and people like Fiona Foley were very critical about using Aboriginal art. Then you had the Gordon Bennett's The Nine Ricochets, which again Ian's written about. But that all seems in the past now.
- HMF** Yeah, well it seems very interesting to me that we still are having a lot of the same discussions though.
- RBu** Yeah, well I genuinely feel we have moved on. Far be it for me to be able to say that, but I felt that incident seemed kind of retro in a way. If you had to point at something that really changed things, I would say it was the Emily [Kngwarreye] phenomenon where at

the time very enigmatically—obviously many other artists have in fact done the same thing, I guess, but she just brought it to people who weren't experts in Aboriginal art's attention—we had an Aboriginal person who just seemed to be making abstract art and it seemed to level the whole playing field in a way. So even the reverse should be quite possible, that a white person could do Aboriginal art, whatever the hell that might mean. I guess that would have to be debated. But Felicity's show was well before that Emily one, which was like mid '90s, even late '90s I think that famous show up here was, which I think is probably quite a decisive show. I don't know how many excerpts it gets in Ian's book, but I think it is a very important moment.

HMF Yeah, I think it was about 97.

RBu Probably. I mean her art has probably lost its absolute centrality, but for a few years it was the test case for people writing about Aboriginal art, everyone was writing about it. But you know, for art critics, art historians, not maybe anthropologists, I think it forced people to change a lot, and I think that was the moment when the barriers kind of came down between the two cultures to a large extent.

HMF So what do you think are the big things between the artists now then? If we've moved on from appropriation and those kind of conversations, what do you think it is now?

RBu Well, I'm only going to tell you from my own partial point of view. I think one of the questions will be something like the end of the style of Aboriginal art. I think that's certainly interesting to ponder, and that is, like most art movements, what would it mean to say that it's come to a kind of end as a style, this sort of innovative style and effectively its formal innovations have exhausted themselves and in some ways maybe even the intellectual issues have been largely put on the table. This is not at all critical of Ian's book, but it would be very interesting to see it as a kind of epitaph to something, the end of something, sort of finishing with it. I don't mean that badly, just factually. I've read the book, I skimmed, it and funnily enough it's got a great introduction but the pieces that are reproduced, there's only a certain number of positions that people can come to on Aboriginal art, I think. It's kind of funny. I'm accusing myself of something, but that I think is a really interesting issue—the end of Aboriginal art.

People like Nicolas Rothwell, I guess, is someone you'd want to speak to. He's a terrific arts writer; I mean, really, he's fantastic. He doesn't write from that perspective at all, but maybe that's because he's not an art historian, he's sort of like a chronicler and I'm not being critical, just because he's too in the field in a sense, but in a way he is much more informed than I am, he can keep on

discovering things that seem to be very exciting to him and maybe this is just biographical. I'm not as engaged with it as I was, but I mean I've pondered this question of the end of Aboriginal art as an art movement, and I think that's actually an interesting thing to say rather than a depressing or even racist thing to say, and that is that the generation of people who could make that kind of art is coming to an end and that's a very interesting thought perhaps. I know that some of the famous artists are handing their practice onto their children. I think George Tjungurrayi's son does some stuff in the style of George. But even George, he's interestingly generic already.

I mean, thinking about the Loaded Ground catalogue, I think Michael Nelson's work is pretty bad now. He did his great dot paintings, very important, then he did those terrible abstract expressionist things, which are dreadful, and I think there was a lot of commercial pressure on him to make those things, and then he's gone back to make these dot paintings, but what is interesting to me is the dot paintings are like second degree dot paintings, like quotes of himself, even the paint, and yet everything is different. I think he's redone a version of the Five Dreamings painting. He's a really interesting example because I think there you've got this kind of second degree Aboriginal art by a really authentic Aboriginal artist who can no longer exactly do Aboriginal art any more, and maybe it's just nostalgia on my part but I don't... well maybe I shouldn't say that. I think it's more interesting intellectually to just sort of ask the question. His second way of doing it isn't a continuation, it's had this sort of interregnum and it's like the Rolling Stones covering themselves.

HMF Yep, and the question makes sense to me. From my very brief experience in Warmun, it doesn't really seem like there are going to be a lot of new generations of artists making art that way.

RBu I agree.

HMF But they are setting up new media centres.

RBu Yeah, well that's right, I agree, and that's the new thing obviously.

HMF And they're making...

RBu And Eric Michaels was talking about that stuff. That's right, I totally agree. And Eric Michaels was onto that fact, he was talking about the new media back in the '70s. Jesus, and he's a very good writer about art.

HMF So then if the Aboriginal art movement as such is over or ends...

RBu At least as painting, yeah.

HMF As painting, what would that look like for the relationships between the art, and Aboriginal and non- Indigenous artists?

RBu Yeah, well that's a very good question. If I said to you that the thesis of *White Aborigines* is that for white Australians to be Australians there needs to be Aborigines—what happens when there aren't Aborigines any more culturally? Then there can't be Australians, and that was really the un-Australian thing in a way, right? Aborigines aren't simply constructed as Aborigines, but Aborigines are the guarantors of an Australian identity, like the sort of shit you put on Qantas planes but Aborigines aren't doing that. If they aren't somehow "Aboriginal" and aren't of the land or something any more, then white Australians can't be Australians. So I would absolutely agree that with the dissolution of the identity of Aborigines, the dissolution of Australians happens too and I think that's what's happened where we're both just global citizens now, and I think that's true and I think Emily is kind of like that, she's like a global abstract artist. So looking at her I can't feel particularly Australian. I think that was what was happening. So you're right, I mean it sounds racist that there aren't Aborigines anymore but it's equally true there aren't Australians anymore if you can say that in a way. I think that's kind of true, i.e. there isn't an Australian who has an Australian identity any more, as something discernible and different.

HMF I find this really interesting, I've been spending a bit of time with a history professor in Sydney, he has done a lot of work on rewriting Australian history for schools, and we usually end up discussing generational differences. And he says "Well look at you, you're not Australian."

RBu Yes that's right, that's true, you don't identify as Australian except perhaps when you watch sport or something, but apart from that no, right? Yes, totally.

HMF So that's something that I'm thinking about.

RBu I think that is true. If you're going to write the history of the present, which is how did we get to where we are now, you're not looking at Australians who identify with being Australians, you're looking at all those Australians who didn't think of themselves particularly as Australian or could be Australian and something else.

HMF Yeah, but I wonder whether that's partly just a language thing. For me, I am Australian and what I am looking at I consider...

RBu Well there's a paradox there, you live here and you're interested in the question and no one else is interested in the question and the question is an Australian question. I'll give you an example. There's

a great portrait by Rupert Bunny, an expatriate artist who lived in Paris; he was quite successful in Paris. He ran a painting school and showed in various Salons. He was as successful as most French artists, even if you like as Monet. So all this stuff about provincialism was just bullshit. Anyway, there's a very famous portrait he did of Dame Nellie Melba, an internationally famous Australian. She was like the Lady Gaga of her generation, like a famous singer, when singing was sexy and you had to look glamorous and you were like a pop star and you did light operetta.

So she was like a pop culture figure and there's this great portrait of her, a woman who goes all around the world singing and the portrait is called "Madame Nellie Melba", and Nellie Melba is so famous, I'm sure you know, that the very famous French chef Escoffier, who wrote one of the great French cookbooks, at the Savoy Hotel in London made this dessert in honour of her called Peach Melba, that's how famous she was internationally. So she was like a cosmopolitan woman. So it was like a very cosmopolitan man Bunny painting a cosmopolitan woman. It's like a self portrait, in a sense. Now the question is in a way: what do they have in common? They're two Australian expatriates. So they were Australian but also un-Australian at the same time. It's a very interesting portrait in that way, and Melba for her part, talking about how you can be Australian and worldly at the same time, she made a lot of money, she was like a pop star and she used to sponsor, she liked art, and so she used to sponsor, both publically and also privately, Australian artists to study overseas, she used to fund them. There was a scholarship you could win and she also used to just give money to artists, to let them come overseas and stay.

So the paradox is she's identifying as Australian but she's wanting Australians to study overseas. She doesn't have any problem about Australians having to stay in Australia to be Australian, that's not the case for her. She could live overseas but still feel Australian, and not even return to Australia because she's just too big, except on tours. So there's someone who could completely reconcile being Australian and being global. People were just doing it and you can find a lot of that. Like when Australians went to Paris they often gravitated to art schools run by Australians or New Zealanders. So they were overseas but they still felt Australian, didn't feel you had to make a choice to answer your question, you know, you can be Australian but really not that Australian at the same time. That's not a new phenomenon.

HMF Yeah, because that is what I've grown up understanding Australians to be, already encompassing that global feel and all the conflict.

RBu Yeah, one doesn't preclude the other. But you're certainly not Australian in any kind of national sense; you don't believe there's

something particular about being Australian, I guess. I mean you don't talk about your fucking national character or the landscape or the light and that crap; it just doesn't make any sense does it? We're not stoic particularly, we don't live under this particular light, which is the same in South Africa and many other places, the landscape hasn't a real impact on us, we're not in the desert, we live in the city. So all the ways people tried to think about what it was to be Australian just don't weigh on us at all, but it doesn't mean we're not Australian. We're just not Australian as cut off and isolated, and I don't think we even lament being Australian anymore which people wanted to make us feel with the provincialism problem. I think the truth is there never really was a provincialism problem, Australians were always out in the world doing stuff.

The provincialism problem was formed around Australian-American relations right? We were provincial in a famous article by Terry Smith. Let's have a look at this great photo, I found it in the Smithsonian. Yeah, that's interesting. Grand Central Station New York which is like the centre of the world, if you look on the ceiling the famous mural is in fact by an Australian, a guy called Charles Basing, who won a competition. So you could say in the middle of New York that was probably the biggest public commission back in the 1930s painted by an Australian. So every time some Australian art historian in the '60s went to New York and said "Fuck, we're been left out," he should've looked up here and seen this in the centre of things. It's a moment memorialised in the kids' film Madagascar, where the giraffe gets whacked over the head in Grand Central Station while trying to escape and looks up and sees stars. Basing's painting is so well known that Dreamworks or whoever can make a joke about it. Now here's a great photo. It's Richard Haley Lever, an Australian guy presenting "Mayflower" to President Calvin Coolidge in the Rose Garden at the White House. That's an Australian artist giving the American president a picture of his boat. So we were at the centre of power. The idea that we never played a part in the centre of American power is just sort of incorrect in a way. There are Australian artists at the absolute heart of American power.

Anyway, if you do the research you can find all these Australians and New Zealanders out actually in the world. Frances Hodgkins, not such a good artist but a very famous art teacher who is a New Zealand woman, get this, was the first woman to work in an art school in Paris. How about that? So what about all the French woman? No, actually it was a New Zealander who first cracked it for women in Paris. Interesting. She ended up running her own art school. She's a very famous modern art teacher. Not such a good artist, although she's huge in New Zealand of course, but that's pretty interesting. If you were a feminist art historian you'd go

“That’s a great story.” What would you say, New Zealand beats France in art right there. A New Zealand woman beats all the other French women to the pole position to be the first woman to be admitted to teaching a male-dominated art system. That’s kind of weird if you think about that for a second.

Strangely, when people wrote these histories of feminism in the ‘60s and ‘70s, with women quite interestingly revising the histories, the one thing they largely never revised was taking into account all of the expatriate women. Well, they did a bit but they didn’t really, they still often had the same prejudice that you had to do it here to count as a female artist in Australia. So they didn’t track down all the endless numbers of expatriates and that’s increasingly happening. A lot of women now, because actually it was mostly women who headed off overseas because obviously they were prejudiced against here and it was less masculinist in Paris, and if you were a lesbian that was a good place to live. If you were a woman artist you had to be unmarried and quite wealthy in a way. I mean, if you were married you ended up being a wife. So a lot of lesbian women artists went to Paris in the teens and 20s, Australian ones too.

But now of late, now that lots of Australian art historians are looking overseas, they’re seeing all these women out there who weren’t interested in making gum trees and cattle, headed off overseas because they were women and women were very prejudiced against by the conservative art establishment, the Australianists, the Lindsays and stuff. Anyway, so they saw opportunities overseas and so a lot of women headed off overseas and people are now starting to write their histories. So there have been a couple of waves of feminist art scholarship; one discovering the women here who had been written out and the next one is all the expatriate women.

There’s a woman called Catherine Speck who does quite interesting work. Another guy you should talk about with Aboriginal art is a younger guy, very smart guy called Darren Jorgensen at the University of Western Australia, and he’s trying to write a not a spiritual history of Australia, it’s more like an esoteric history of Australian art. He’s discovering this kind of thread that runs even through the Impressionists, like spirits in fields, like the Sydney Long paintings. But there’s this whole thread of like crazy sort of mystical art in Australia and he’s trying to write this history of that. It’s interesting.

HMF That would be really interesting.

RBu Yeah, but why? Because he’s also inspired by Aboriginal art. He’s a young guy, well not that young anymore but I went to Perth many years ago, Ian McLean flew me over, and I just happened to attend

one of Ian's honours classes or something and this young guy was speaking, on Erich von Däniken and Aboriginal art. He's was sci-fi, really into sci-fi as a young boy and he writes about Aboriginal art as though it's science fiction. So it's quite interesting. His name is Darren Jorgensen, very interesting guy. Look him up.

HMF Yeah I will. I love science fiction.

RBu He's another interesting thinker about Aboriginal art. I guess he was trained by Ian at Western Australia. So he's another guy you want to talk to because he'd give you another peculiar take on all this stuff. He writes quite a lot. If you flick through some Eyeline magazines or Broadsheet, you'd find his name. Anyway, I don't know, is that...?

HMF Yeah that was really great, thank you.

RBu That's alright. I guess if you could track everything I wrote down that would be much more detailed and elaborated and historically factual.

HMF Yeah, but this has definitely been good for just getting a better understanding of where you're coming from, I think.

RBu Well, it's just sort of what inspired me to do it, I suppose. It'll be very interesting to think whether there's something new to say about Aboriginal art, be interesting to see what you come up with. I think some of the most interesting things in the last 20 years about "Australian art" have been about Aboriginal art, obviously.

HMF Yeah, but I've definitely been focusing more on that space in-between.

RBu Sure, well that's where all the action is.

Interview with e.k.1—Katie Williams & Emma Hicks, 12 December 2012

Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney

HMF Let's have a chat about your work in the landscape show, *Out of Site*. We had a very collaborative approach to facilitating this exhibition, and a lot of discussion surrounding it, so I would like to hear some of your thoughts on landscape now. With both the e.k.1 work and your work, Emma.

We'll start with e.k.1.

EH That work was called *Here Elsewhere*.

KW *Here Elsewhere*. So we should probably describe it, the physicality of it first, in Mikala Dwyer fashion. It's two LCD screens mounted on stainless steel frames sitting apart from each other and a stack of...

EH 300 GSM.

KW ...300 GSM cards at about, what was the dimension?

EH I think it's 12 by 13cm. It's actually not a perfect square.

KW Cards stacked about 2,000 high.

EH Yep.

KW With text from *Waiting for Godot*...

EH Stage directions.

KW Stage directions from *Waiting for Godot*—black on one side with the words 'Waiting for Godot, a play by Samuel Beckett, e.k.1'; and then on the other side in white with black text...

EH Stage directions.

KW ...stage directions. So is there any other physicality? The two screens that are playing... On one screen there are my feet walking barefoot in red earth at Uluru.

EH And on the other screen is me with snow boots on in Banff (The Banff Centre) trekking up a mountain.

KW Yep. So two lots of walking footage. That's the physicality of the work.

HMF So with the video footage you shot footage in Banff first?

- KW** I was in Banff on residency a month before Emma was in Banff on residency.
- HMF** And when was that?
- KW** November and December last year (2012). So I was there for a month doing a residency and every day walking down from the Banff Art Centre to Banff, the village, walking through the snow which took about 20 minutes, and I'd film it each day. Then Emma and I would have a Skype conversation and I'd show her the footage and talk about it. No, I didn't show you footage I just talked about footage.
- EH** No, you didn't show me any footage. We just talked about it.
- KW** Talked about the footage that had been shot on my mobile phone. Then Emma went to Banff, Jan/Feb. So two months actually, two months after.
- EH** This year (2013). And then I tried to I guess, re-enact what I thought you had shot on the same mountain, but I hadn't seen your footage then I don't think.
- HMF** And why did you film it in the first place?
- KW** Because the landscape in Banff was extraordinarily overwhelming. You couldn't actually get a grasp of what you were experiencing. You felt like you were looking at a postcard and I couldn't seem to ground myself in the landscape. I think it was like about minus 20 when I was there and I felt like an alien in an alien landscape and the only way I could ground myself was videoing, which is not something that I normally do. And somehow that walking every day back and forwards to the village seemed like a way of actually trying to—and yeah, I was videoing it. So it was mediated as well. So that was kind of...
- EH** There was comfort in the repetition I think.
- KW** There was comfort in the repetition.
- EH** When you're in a weird unfamiliar setting you try and do like, menial tasks I guess, so like making a cup of tea is comforting because you're like, "I'm going to get the kettle now." It's like really systematic which is comforting. Or like putting the TV on even though you don't want to watch the TV just to feel like there's something, there's something else...
- KW** And something normal. We talked about that a lot.
- EH** Something normal because...

- KW** Everything felt so abnormal that the TV became a real normal and the walking became a real way of kind of...
- EH** Like a meditation.
- KW** Like a meditation.
- EH** Like, to try and find yourself in the situation.
- KW** In the situation.
- EH** Trying to get some kind of stability.
- KW** And I think also that very close up shot of the feet—I shot down with the camera to my feet because every time I looked up there were just these mountains that I just couldn't get my head around. They were just so enormous they couldn't be real to me. So my feet could be real in the snow walking, repeating. It seemed somehow grounding, I suppose, is the best way to describe it.
- EH** It's weird also because I'm not used to walking in the snow. That's the first time I've been to the snow so you kind of feel like you have to look at the ground constantly. But then they're telling you that you can't keep looking at the ground constantly because there's like, elk and whatever and you could like, smash into—you were supposed to be aware of everything but, because the ground's so unstable you're kind of freaking out the whole time that you're going to stack it down this mountain. So you're really conscious that...
- KW** Yeah, you are. Because the path that we both walked down to the village, there's powder snow for days and days and then the temperature goes up a bit and it turns to ice so you go from walking in this sort of squishy 'creak, creak,' to suddenly this sheet ice thing where you're trying to navigate—with your shopping and everything. So even that's really...
- EH** And it's down past a cemetery too, that walk. It's like you go past this old cemetery and then down into the town. And the town doesn't feel real either.
- KW** And the town's not real, yeah.
- EH** So the town's like, tourist town so it just feels, I don't know, there's just no real about it.
- KW** There's no real there. There's no real at all.
- EH** Well, the mountains are real but they feel like hyper-real or something because it's like a postcard. It's crazy.

KW And everything in the town is souvenirs of those mountains so they're all fakes. So you've got all these fake mountains, fake postcards, it's all fake. It all feels...

EH Yeah, so even the people that live there are living in like, it would be like living in Darling Harbour or something. You can't get a handle on what that place is, I guess.

KW Very much so.

HMF And is that why you repeated the walking footage thing?

EH Yeah. I think that's part of it, it was trying to, trying to find something I guess.

HMF Well then there's that extra connection—to Kate, through the repetition of her actions.

EH Yeah, there was that...

HMF Where she's been before.

EH ...too because we actually wanted to go on the residency together.

KW Together...

EH And she applied for two and I applied for one, and we didn't think either of us were going to get them and then she got the other one and not the one that I got. So it was kind of weird.

KW But I think there's also that thing of collaboration that we talk about a lot where one follows, for a particular period of time, one follows in the other's footsteps. We laugh about that like, I do something and then you follow and then it flips around again and you do something and I follow. So I think that is almost like a metaphor for collaboration.

HMF Yeah, yeah, that's interesting.

EH So like, the *Junk Thought* work we did like, you went on the spin bike first and then I went on the spin bike second so there's this like...

KW Repeating of the same action. Over again.

EH Yeah, very much so.

KW And then the next footage is the Alice Springs footage and you haven't been to Alice Springs yet so now you have to go to Alice Springs.

EH Re-enact in Alice Springs.

KW Because yet again that's a repeat of the same sort of situation where I went up with Distanciation. and we did the residency up there and I got heat stroke and got dropped off at the backpackers place because I was unable to continue on the tour. And that was yet again that feeling of, actually ramped up even more from Banff which I didn't think was possible because I was a bit disoriented. The next day after I'd been dropped off I realised that I kind of missed Uluru and everything so I found this little hill, this circular hill that I walked up repetitively to look over at Uluru that I'd missed because I'd had heat stroke. So there was that repeating footsteps again. And the difference there was that rather than minus 30 it was plus 45 and rather than being in snow boots you were in bare feet, or I was in bare, I chose to be in bare feet because I felt that I needed to feel the land but yet again I felt completely distanced from that landscape. Like, it's Australia, I should know this landscape, I should be part of this as much as my home but I felt completely like a foreigner and I couldn't quite, couldn't get over the redness of the earth, like the whiteness of the snow, so it was like the antithesis of the snow but the same in a way.

EH So both extremes, so like heat...

KW Both extremes.

EH ...heat and cold.

KW Yeah. But heat in the land, the heat in the land up there compared to the freeze in the land over there was just extraordinary back to back in those two experiences. It was really strange. But yeah, the same sort of feeling. And Uluru is like that as well, it was all touristy and you know...

EH The town there...

KW The town there was the same thing as the Banff town.

EH Yeah, towns that have been built for tourism.

KW For tourism, yeah. Yeah. So now you have to go do that.

KW But I think the work will expand, we were talking before about maybe going to New York next year and walking through New York and looking at how differently you navigate that as well. So I think this work will end up being multiple screens of walking, of the two of us walking in different places and how that works. I don't know, maybe it won't. Don't want to pre-empt what it's going to be.

EH It's weird though because we're trying to feel authentic about something by walking, or trying to feel a sense of ourselves but it was totally fake because it's mediated through the phone.

KW So most of the time I wasn't even really experiencing what it is I was doing because, I'm just looking at it through a screen. So I'm not really present in the moment anyway. And then it's also being in contact by Skype constantly and on the phone, trying to be there with each other but it's just, it's not, but we're not. Yep, it's about that as well.

HMF So I know you had trouble bringing this work together.

KW Ah hmm, we did.

HMF Why?

KW Because we didn't, it's not the way that we...

EH It's that feelings thing that we always talk about, right?

KW Yeah. I mean I think this work's really emotion charged and I think both of us stepped away from that.

EH How do you show a feeling and what does it mean to show a feeling? Or why would you show a feeling. It's kind of not, it's always coded I guess and also the footage is so, to us at the time it seemed so simple that it was like, well it's really charged for us but I don't know...

KW And we kept saying how does that...

EH How does that translate.

KW Translate.

EH Yeah, to everybody else.

KW Yeah. Because I mean, both of those footages were footages. But there's an interesting thing in that though too because the second footage, the reliving of the footage is not the same thing.

EH Well that feels, to me that feels, once we put them side by side the snow footage feels like re-enactment. It feels slightly fake...

KW Fake.

EH ...or something compared to the—but then the, there's something weird for the desert footage as well.

KW Yeah. Oh, the desert footage looks obscene as well, those white feet on that red land looks I think like weird porn or something. It just looks wrong. It does.

EH It does not.

KW It does, it's like really white, really white feet against this red red earth. It feels like I'm committing some sort of crime. Not when I was there doing it, it felt completely different. I think putting them on the display stands as well is really important because that adds to that fakeness, that...

EH Well, the authenticity is questioned.

KW Well they become display pieces which kind of links into the fact that it was filmed on the mobile phone as well which is, has become a display device.

EH Well, we kind of talk about this a bit with like, the sincerity in our work. Like, we start off really super sincere like, we're really like, this is full on conviction. And then it always ends up getting slightly absurd or slightly, I don't know.

KW Skewed, yeah.

EH It goes somewhere else. But we feel really sincere in the beginning about it like, we're really kind of, so I don't know.

KW Yeah, so it comes from a place of sincerity but somehow warps and becomes...

EH I don't know. I don't know if absurd. It's not, it's not, yeah. It's like kind of I guess.

KW It is absurd I guess. Slightly absurd.

EH Which I guess part of the reason why we chose Godot too.

KW Absolutely.

HMF Yeah. So that was the next part. How did Godot get in there?

EH We've been obsessed with that for a while and I don't know why. I think we started talking about it because we've been collaborating for a long time but there's not a lot of physical work in the collaboration.

So we have these like, really long conversations and then we discuss 10 artworks that may never happen. It is almost like discussing them is enough; or perhaps, I don't know, they just get shelved for later.

KW Well we don't even necessarily think about them as artworks a lot of the time. We think about them as problems in a conversation and we're like, "well how does that work? How does that fit together?" But it doesn't mean that there necessarily has to be anything at the end of it.

EH Well a lot of the time there's nothing so, and it kind of, I guess we started talking and thinking about that because we're also going to people, 'Yeah, we collaborate heaps,' and everyone's like...

KW What have you done?

EH Heaps of stuff.

KW But we actually don't have anything like...

EH ...it's just, I don't know. I guess it's phantom, a lot of it's phantom.

KW But that's, and that's where *Waiting for Godot*, comes in because you're waiting for Godot that never, he never comes. He's coming tomorrow, but he didn't come today. And also reading the lines from that...

EH Stage directions.

KW "Nothing to be done. (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*). (*She reflects*) (*irritably*) (*hurt, cold*) (*admiringly*) (*without gesture*) (*decisively*) (*pause*) (*cheerfully*) (*angrily*) (*angrily*) (*angrily pointing*) (*stopping*) (*she buttons her fly*) (*musingly*), "The last moment," (*she meditates*) (*she takes off her hat and peers inside. She puts it on again. She searches for the word with emphasis. She takes her hat off again and peers inside, examining her foot. She reflects*). I mean, it just seemed a perfect metaphor for what we were talking about before walking... or not.

EH Well, the walking never gets anywhere. So the feet are kind of up in the sky, they just keep going. They don't actually achieve any...

KW And where are they going anyway?

EH Yeah. I don't know. So, and also just that reference to pointing in the text too, we just found that kind of interesting because it's like, pointing to something but it's not really offering you what it's pointing to. It doesn't, none of it's really solving the problem for you. It's not, there's no concreteness...

KW But there is. No, but there is, but there is. That's why I'm saying there is and there's not because there's definitely a reference but then there's nothing to hang onto at the end of it.

EH So everything's pointing to everything else but it's not giving you that end.

KW I think it never gives you consistency which was kind of what the work started with, wanting some sort of grounding, some sort of something to hang onto and yet you never got it.

HMF So then putting that work in the context of a group show on landscape did anything come out of that in your thinking?

EH How did we, yeah, I'm just trying to think. Because we had a long journey with thinking about landscape for this particular show. And we kind of started with this and then sort of went on other...

KW Shied away from it.

EH Yeah. We thought okay, we'll do something with this footage and the more we discussed the footage the more we were kind of like this is not...

KW We couldn't...

EH We just couldn't figure out the problem. Like we just, we couldn't, it wasn't going where we wanted it to go.

KW And so we discussed several works.

EH Yeah. We were talking a lot of about framing.

KW Framing. Heaps about framing.

EH And I guess I was coming at it cinematically and then you were sort of coming at it from a more sculptural...

EH ...sense which happens a lot with us too. I tend to discuss things in filming terms.

KW And I discuss things in physical terms most of the time.

EH And it kind of mashes somewhere in the middle.

KW I think it was really interesting in the context of the way the other works were speaking because I think there was kind of emptiness or a lacking or unresolvedness about a lot of the other work as well. Your work specifically was talking about framing and yet it was unframed, or was framed at the same time. You know, there was your mind completing the frame but then there was an unfinishedness as well.

EH Yeah, it felt like, maybe with the exception of the weave.

KW Yeah, but I was just thinking about the weave...

EH I need to think about that a bit more, but a lot of the work, it wasn't giving you all the answers or something.

KW The colours were certainly...

- EH** ...tone, there was a tone to all the work I think. There was something unified in it beyond just the landscape kind of emotion. There was something happening that..
- KW** Yeah, but I don't think in that way that you would expect with a landscape show. I felt there was something that was quite unexpected about it like, nowhere did you see a picture of a painting of a landscape. You got a feeling of landscape. I suppose ours was probably the most literal because there was landscape in it.
- EH** Well maybe not. Well maybe Julie Andrews but then that was on the ground. Yeah, that was, that was doing off things as well I suppose.
- KW** But there was something running through all of the works but it was totally not what you'd expect for a landscape show. It was this other thing that came out of trying to navigate a landscape, you know, and it was...
- EH** All of it was trying to be in a landscape maybe.
- KW** I felt like there was... an element of psychological torment.
- EH** Yeah.
- KW** Yeah.
- EH** Even just thinking about our catalogue and the relationship to that show in London and all those comments about like, being Australians and saying, "What does that mean to anybody?" And us not having some kind of concrete sense of identity, or no one acknowledges that we maybe do. Those kind of problems I think were a little bit in all of those works. I guess that's what you mean by the psychological...
- HMF** Certainly I felt in the lead up to the show, we all felt as though, I don't know if unresolved is the right word, but we felt like there was a problem.
- KW** Ah hmm.
- EH** Yeah.
- HMF** And so maybe the show ended up just showing all of these problems and all of these questions.
- EH** Yeah, it was, I mean, you say it was landscape, it kind of feels, I don't know.
- KW** It just feels really...

- HMF** It's already a problem.
- EH** Yeah, it feels really, really loaded and so, and you and I have never really thought about using that word in terms of anything that we're doing. I think we shied away from the landscape idea. We were like- I think that was part of our problem in trying to work out where we were coming from. It was like well, what is...
- KW** What is landscape?
- EH** What is landscape?
- HMF** What is landscape?
- EH** What is landscape? What does that mean? What is that? And also, anyway, I think I started going bonkers and I started talking about land as like a quantity of space and landscape as like a quality of space.
- KW** But also what does it mean in the context of Australia and also as an artist that works, you know, that we're working around the world. The funny thing about that particular *Here Elsewhere* work is I don't think you feel any more, the red sand footage doesn't make me feel any more Australian than the Banff footage. We were foreign in all the places. So maybe we, well I don't have a landscape I feel at home in. I don't take my identity from the landscape anymore and maybe that's a contemporary problem. We're city dwellers now so what is our landscape?
- HMF** Suburbia.
- KW** Suburbia. Yeah.
- EH** Well it is suburbia.
- HMF** The majority of Australians live in suburbia.
- KW** Suburbia. So maybe our landscape's with mansions and with manicured slightly-English gardens.
- HMF** But then we still, I mean, especially the artists, we still drift to this other part of Australia.
- EH** Yeah. We seem to kind of think of landscaping like photographic or filming or straight kind of painting, you know what I mean. Like when you say landscape, I don't think about being in the landscape. I get an image of a landscape.
- HMF** Like a landscape painting?
- EH** Right, or a photo of a landscape, or...

- HMF** So we live in the city, and when we think landscape we picture a painting.
- KW** Well, if I think Australian landscape...
- EH** Because that's the idealised landscape.
- KW** And it's also that European thing of that, the landscape, like an Albert Namatjira landscape with the gum tree front on centre.
- EH** Well that's part of the thing with that Julie Andrews thing, doing the sound of music thing—they were selling Thredbo packages for Australia through referencing...
- HMF** Julie Andrews.
- EH** ...the hills being alive like, in the Sound of Music. So it was like we wanted to take that iconic mountain and make it ours. Like our mountains aren't good enough or something. Like, we don't have our own, we have to relate it to that mountain that she spins on because that makes it more awesome or whatever.
- KW** Yeah, but it is, I think that European tradition thing is really important in relation to that show because it's that front on oil painting of a, like a television screen painting, or something, it's flat, you're not in it, you're always viewing it, you're always back from it viewing it.
- HMF** So you think that the work that we were making was more of an attempt to be in it?
- KW** Yes.
- EH** To move through something.
- KW** To move through a landscape and experience a landscape—so with our work there's something about us trying to move into the landscape through our feet, through our grounding of our actual physical body touching the landscape. And that didn't, I don't think that worked. I don't think either of us felt grounded...
- EH** No.
- KW** ...through touching the landscape. But it was an attempt to do that. And I suppose in a way too that mobile phone footage thing has become our way of experiencing things now too. You know, everybody takes photos of the landscape, or wherever they are...
- EH** Which is removing you again.

KW ...and then you're experiencing virtually through people's posts of where they are, their landscape that they're in. I'm just thinking of your photos that you just posted from up in Kakadu and I'm sort of virtually experiencing your experience up there of Kakadu. I haven't been to Kakadu but I'm experiencing through your snapshots.

EH It's funny, somebody said to me, I can't remember who it was. Somebody said to me the other day, "oh, such-and-such is at the beach again like, no fair," like, all these people taking all these photos of all these awesome places they're going and you're like, sitting in front of this computer and...

KW ...computer and experiencing it through that. And I think that's what these are very much display screens of virtual experience, or of experiences.

KW There you go, that's the work Hayley.

HMF Yeah, that's good, thanks.

EH I mean, I don't know, it's hard.

HMF It's good, because it is hard and I think we went into the show with a...

EH Big problem.

KW ...a lot of questions and problems but then once we didn't solve any of those, I don't know, I kind of feel like I came out the other side thinking that that's what's important right now, just the fact that we're engaging with those problems.

KW Because I don't think there's a solution.

EH I don't think there's a solution.

KW And I don't think that would be very interesting anyway. I think the most interesting thing about that show was all of us grappling with these problems at this particular time and place. Because we're in a time of enormous change in the way that we view things and do things. All those problems came out in the show, I think, which is interesting.

EH Yeah, that's true.

HMF I think it was an important show.

EH Yeah, I think so too. Yeah, I mean, we wrestled with it heaps.

KW Oh, yeah. And that work only came together in the last couple of weeks because we kept shying away from it, kept going “mmm yeah but, mmm, but it doesn’t feel right. How does that translate, we can’t translate so what is that,” it just becomes this fake thing again. That’s what landscape is, it’s this—so we wrestled and then in the end we’re like, no actually, wrestling with it’s probably the most interesting thing. This work should be in there because we’re wrestling with it. And we just made it more of a problem than it already was.

HMF That’s okay. Now we can talk about your work Emma.

EH Yeah. Yeah, that work [*The hills are aliiiiive*, 2013] is strange. I guess I started doing that work, it was a while ago, when I first looked at it. And it started because I read an article written by this guy whinging about having to re-enact that spinning on the mountain top thing with his four daughters or something. They were obsessed with the film and he had to go out and re-enact it with them. I always hated the Sound of Music. I’ve actually never seen the whole film. I don’t, I just can’t do it. It’s weird. I thought it was because of the random kind of outbursts of singing that I couldn’t deal with it. But I loved Mary Poppins when I was a child. But it’s not just that. There’s something else. Maybe it’s the Nazi implications when I was a kid bothered me. I don’t know, whatever it was. The kids, I don’t know. I used to always hate it. And so I wanted to do something with it but I didn’t know how to approach it and the more I was thinking about that film the more I was thinking about how weird it is that it’s like, a tourist attraction thing, how many people go over there. You can go on Julie Andrews tours. And then there’s Thredbo ads selling Australian holiday packages based on Julie Andrews. It’s just such a bizarre thing to me. So I wanted to do something with it. I guess it’s the idea of Julie Andrews being so imbedded within that landscape. It’s such an iconic cinematic kind of moment: that first camera sweep and then coming down and suddenly she’s spinning and breaking in to song or whatever. I wanted to work with that and because I was thinking about how embedded she is in the landscape and how weird it is that all these tours happen and everything else. I data-moshed the footage so that she would really be embedded within the landscape. So I ripped apart the digital code in the file so that she would seep into the landscape, in and out of the landscape and would be directly affecting that landscape as well.

HMF So when she moves, the landscape...

EH The landscape starts seeping into her. And the sound like, I never did any sound for that footage for a few reasons. One was I just feel like the sound is already in there. That music is so frigging well known and iconic and ‘the hills are alive,’ is just so prevalent that it’s just in there. I didn’t want to replace it with anything else. I

couldn't replace it with anything else. So I just wanted it gone completely from it so that you could just experience that rippling and that wave effect I guess of the footage. Does that make sense?

HMF Yeah. I think it's interesting what you're saying about the icon of Julie Andrews in that landscape, and then thinking about putting on a landscape show in Australia, and at the same time as the landscape show in London... Anything to do with landscape in Australia has been very iconic. So then it's interesting to put that video in to that dialogue I think.

EH Yeah, I know what you're saying. Rather than choosing some kind of iconic Australia film scene or something choosing...

HMF Yes.

EH I'd already started working on that work before the show, it just was never finished. And it kind of made sense to me to put that in especially with that kind of advertising thing with that Thredbo stuff. And when I think of iconic cinema landscapes yeah, sadly Sound of Music is one of them. And then probably like the whole trove of like, Westerns. But in terms of long standing Australian iconic landscape cinematic scenes I don't recall any.

HMF So what about in the context of the show?

EH Well, I suppose in the context of the show like, when we were all first talking about the show I was thinking it's the most literal representation of the landscape. Well it's figurative, right. I guess it's just more figurative than anything else. I mean, I suppose we've got the feet but the feet feel really disembodied. So I think that's kind of a different thing. I don't think Julie Andrews feels disembodied. I think she just feels completely embedded in that landscape. So it's almost the opposite of what we were doing with other work in a way. She's totally in the landscape, feeling that landscape, changing that landscape.

HMF She's almost like a glitch.

EH Well yeah, she is a bit of a glitch. So, and the decision to put her on the floor too, I think...

HMF How do you feel about that now?

EH Yeah good. I mean, I think that's what had to happen in the context of that show. Just in terms of the shifting the framing of that. Because originally I'd always seen that work as a really large projection. But that's the obvious, that's kind of feeding into what you would expect for it like, to give you that awe inspiring "oh wow, I'm twirling on the mountains" thing. That kind of fits into the original convention of the film anyway. So putting it on the floor

kind of shifts that, just shifts the frame a little bit I guess. And it worked, I think it worked a lot better in the context of the all the other works in the show, being on the floor. It also becomes a bit like a ripple or a like, it feels a bit like a puddle at times as well.

KW And they work. Like, we talked about how children were actually physically trying to dive into the work, that was really amazing. So they felt very physically high. Have you talked about that disintegration? It was kind of what we were talking about also, that problem of the digital as well and that disintegrating, morphing, changing, that came into it too. I think ramping up those colours really...

EH It's funny because in my mind I'd always remembered those scenes as being really, really bright.

HMF Bright?

EH But when I went and looked at the original footage it's actually not that bright. But I remember it, and I think that's from the advertising of the film, like the DVD covers and all that stuff. I think the colours were really ramped, right.

HMF Yeah, I think so.

EH But the actual 16 mil footage is actually quite toned back, especially that initial helicopter zoom. And the, yeah, I ramped it up to ridiculous so it's like crazy green.

HMF Well how bright is it in Austria? Is the light is not as bright there as it is here?

KW No, no. It's much more subdued. But it's funny that we all remember it like that from the film.

EH Yeah, I remember it that way and when I found the original footage again I was actually kind of disappointed that it wasn't as ramped how I remembered it so I ramped it to the max trying to kind of get at that I guess.

HMF You've given her Australian lighting.

EH Yeah, maybe well, make it more Australian.

HMF Ok great, let's wrap it up there. Thanks Emma. Thanks Kate.

Interview with Mark Shorter, 16 April 2014

Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney

HMF I want to talk to you about *Landscape Too*, and your work in the show. Do you think that your work fits in with the idea of the show?

MS That's a good question. Can you explain the idea of the show to me again?

HMF Yeah. [Laughs]

MS Just in a nutshell. It doesn't have to be perfect.

HMF It was to look at what an idea of landscape is in various contemporary artists work. So what people are doing now with landscape—to begin with we were working with people who were mainly in Sydney and then we had a show at Articulate. So for this one we wanted to bring in people from outside of Sydney to kind of expand that conversation a bit more.

MS Yeah. I felt it fit in, but I felt that, you know, the premise was fairly open.

HMF It was.

MS And so anything that deals with the landscape I suppose can fit in with it. So I suppose I thought it would be interesting to see what it would look like within the context of the show. I don't know, I guess to be frank I didn't feel it fit in with everything. Like so I found, for instance, the work on the far wall...

HMF e.k.1—Emma Hicks and Katie Williams.

MS Yeah, that's right. Yeah, so for instance, the work on the far wall I found I didn't understand ... the rationale. And I found it odd. Like the way it was sort of dealing with the image of the landscape and I guess the doubling of the poster with the screen I found a little bit, I don't know, deceptive or something. I wasn't sure what was sort of going on between the two. And so, for me, while there might have been like a similarity in terms of ... well obviously it was a landscape, I kind of felt that it could have been, you know, the same as if, you know, we were all doing paintings about eggs or something. Like so I kind of felt with work like that I wasn't as sure. But I thought it was interesting. For instance, I thought that there could have been some interesting connections, with the etching. There was some interesting kind of sensibilities coming through with the etching and, you know, certainly some other works in the show. But I wasn't sure if I fit in. But I wasn't worried about that because I thought it would be interesting to see what it was anyway if it didn't fit in. But on the level of approach to the landscape, I

didn't think it fit in with some of the works because ... I don't know. So, for instance, I kind of feel I prefer work to be a bit more direct than the one on the back wall. I found it a little bit – I don't know what the word is – a bit ambivalent. And that's why I sort of asked you to explain it to me because - not to test it, but more just to sort of hear your rationale again because I just wanted to see whether that matched with when I looked at all the works in the show. Does that make sense?

HMF It does.

MS I suppose to answer it directly, yes in that it sort of was exploring mythologies that underpin the landscape, but I didn't see anyone else, for instance, necessarily attending to it as directly as I was, which was fine. But then in the sense of landscape, I then saw some work that I thought probably wouldn't relate at all. And then there was work that I could see it could bring a different kind of perception of what the landscape could be. So if that was the intention of the show, then yeah I suppose it fit in.

HMF It's funny that you mention the etching because that was the first one that stood out for a few people as not fitting in the show.

MS Why—because it's an etching?

HMF Yeah, because it's a bit more of a traditional approach I guess.

MS Yeah, see I don't distinguish between that. I kind of think ...

HMF Well even Ron McBurnie, when I asked him to be in the show, he said to me I think that the collaborative works—he was in those collaborative drawings that went up to the ceiling—would fit, but he didn't think his etchings would fit.

MS Why—because it's an etching?

HMF He said that they're not new ways of looking at landscape. And I said to him well that's why ...

MS Well neither are any of them, none of the works in the show you would say were completely new.

HMF Yeah. I said that's why I wanted his work in it as well because it's just as valid an investigation.

MS Mmm.

HMF And also I found it challenging to put things in the show that might not immediately fit with the rationale.

MS Mmm.

- HMF** So I like that you really liked that work.
- MS** Yeah. I don't base things just on their formal qualities. I'm sort of more interested in ... the reason I thought that work was quite interesting was because I felt that there was a strong kind of observance of the space. So, you know, obviously he's a printmaker and there's this sort of, constant reiteration, but also beyond that, within the process of drawing and making it, I felt that there was like a very considered observation process going on that kind of reflected his place in the landscape. So for that, I quite liked it. And I didn't think it was like done in a very didactic way, whereas I suppose the ... I only say the work on the back wall because it was so big.
- HMF** Yeah.
- MS** I think if it wasn't ... and just because it was just so kind of brazen in the way it sort of did what it was trying to do. I don't know if I agree with it so I suppose that's why. I mean I guess thematically you could see how it could fit in. But I wasn't sure. Do you think the works all fit in in the show?
- HMF** They do for me because, like you said, the premise was very wide and we aimed for different approaches.
- MS** So what would you do now that you've done such a broad premise? How would you think about it with that? Because I guess with the advantage of broad premises, you can kind of see connections you might not have seen if you'd narrowed it down too early.
- Would you narrow it down now?
- HMF** Yes. But I'm not sure how. I'm still figuring that out.
- MS** Yeah. Maybe this is all part of that process.
- HMF** Yeah, maybe. So what, in particular, with the etching then ...were the connections that you saw to your work?
- MS** I don't know if I'd be so bold as to assume. I didn't necessarily think there was like a direct connection, so I guess I'm saying just, in the formal approach, I appreciated the considered attempt at kind of thinking about the landscape and place within it. But I mean connections, I don't know. Probably not anything I can think of straight up because I suppose mine were kind of awkward fictions of something, you know. Whereas his were—I can't remember the title of the work, and actually, the work I really liked, strangely, was the original one that was put up and then you changed it.
- HMF** [Laughs]

MS But that's alright. I didn't mind the other one because I thought they were consistent. They weren't dissimilar. But yeah I liked the first one, the composition and also just the kind of the shapes and the shadows and those qualities. I think there was a passing through the shrubbery or something going on in the first one.

HMF There were two men carrying some large tree offcuts or something.

MS I think that's what I particularly liked, I suppose the passage through the landscape I think is an interesting kind of quality to consider. Yeah. Because, you know, both works are considering that, but only on a very general level. I mean, like I was saying, mine were sort of thinking about certain myths of inversions that occupy the space, whereas I don't know if that's really going on in his by carrying the tree through. It's more just... kind of very similar to some kind of representation. I know it's not that literal, but it can be read broader than just two guys carrying a log through a forest.

HMF Definately. Coming back to your work, you made those videos in Broken Hill?

MS Yep.

HMF And what were the myths that you were ...

MS There weren't like specific myths. It was just more like exploring a myth of inversion. So the idea that the space, at least from a European perspective, had been configured and framed through myths and languages of inversion, that I guess I was curious to kind of, to start implementing elements that might draw out some of those things. I mean there's obvious ones that have always evaded the cultural landscape in Australia like, the Black Swan and the idea even that in the southern hemisphere the water turns in the reverse of the northern hemisphere. They're really sort of confirmations of these inversions. I guess I wanted to not necessarily make a literal comparison, but rather just sort of take it as a premise to start thinking about, how might my body exist within the landscape; how might it respond to the landscape with that kind of knowledge, that kind of history as part of the body? So the body as a kind of a conduit or as an implement to allow a variety of—not a variety—allow, I suppose, these histories to come into play in the present. That's why, you know, the body is in, I suppose, those various situations to think about what those strange European sentiments might mean now. Yeah, something like that.

HMF That's very interesting.

MS Fish moving, you know, on the head of a man moving through landscape or, you know, looking into the earth as opposed to out of

it; breathing—so considering or whatever it might be. It could be anything. Simple gestures, but with complexity that comes through the action, is one way of thinking. But also based on a poetics of inversion that predates the action.

HMF And what's the symbology of the fish for you?

MS I don't know if there's any kind of singular symbolic value to the fish, obviously the fish has a kind of a sexual symbol, but that's usually when it's full of fish because it's got like the shape of a vagina. But for me I guess the fish head was more like a ... to be honest, I don't really know if it's meant to have any fixed symbol, but I was thinking about an old sea story. I don't know if it still exists because I'm not a seafarer, but there's a story that whenever European ships crossed the Equator, the captain would dunk his head in the water as I guess a—again like this is sort of poetics of inversion being kind of implemented into a culture of naval culture. And so I kind of thought that bringing that fish, could kind of be a response to that inversion in a general sort of way. I don't know, I also wanted to have an element of the sea or, the of space of the sea. So, for me, the fish sort of symbolised the all-encompassing qualities and the impossibility of rationalising and encompassing the entire kind of image of what the body of the ocean can be. And so it points to that kind of unfathomable concept. I mean, it can't be completely thought through because it's too big, it's a sublime kind of experience. So I kind of saw the fish as emblematic of touching on some of those ideas as well. But I guess in a general sense, my initial thing was to be inspired by that dunking of the head, the inversion of the captain, the authority figure, into the water to kind of create a balance.

HMF It's really an interesting story.

MS Yeah. It's kind of cool, isn't it? But it's not meant to be literal. I'll agree with that. It's an allegory of the symbolic function of it. So what it could mean for considering, you know, the space of culture and the space of culture in the southern hemisphere and the antipodes in Australia.

HMF Yeah, that's really interesting. It made me think of David Malouf. Have you read any of his writing?

MS Yeah, I'm reading this one at the moment actually, which is weird. I've just started reading it. I picked it off the shelf and I can't remember the title.

HMF Is it one of his novels?

MS I'll just find out. It will take me two seconds to tell you what it is. Hang on. Yeah, it is, yeah. Have you read stuff that's not his novels?

- HMF** Yeah, he gave Boyer Lectures in ...
- MS** Oh he did a Boyer Lecture, did he?
- HMF** It's brilliant. It's called *A Spirit of Play*. I think you would enjoy it. I've gotten a lot out of it. He wrote an interesting—and contentious—thing about when the Europeans came to Australia for the first time bringing the knowledge of the continent as an island and that it could never have been seen that way before. And he talks about the Europeans and the first European Australians as a sea dreaming people and he goes into a little detail on that.
- MS** So he's saying that when it was first kind of visited, it was not conceived of as an island?
- HMF** Yeah.
- MS** Yeah, it was conceived of as a southern land, but when it was colonised, I reckon there would have been kind of a certain sense of thinking it was potentially an island I think.
- HMF** Yeah, by the Europeans, but he was saying before that, the Aborigines wouldn't have had this perception of the entire island as it existed because they'd never sailed around it the way the Europeans did.
- MS** I disagree with that.
- HMF** It's an interesting ... I don't know if I agree with it either.
- MS** Just because it couldn't have been circumnavigated doesn't mean it couldn't have been thought of as an island or as a like whatever you want to call ... like however you want to define an island. I guess if it's just like a question of language, then, yeah he's right because maybe there wasn't the word for island. But if it's to consider it as a unified sort of land space of some kind, then I think yeah there probably was like an understanding of it being kind of a singular entity. That just a multi-faceted singular answer, but who knows.
- HMF** From what I have learnt, the first Australians seem to have a very, very good understanding of the entire ...
- MS** Yeah, that's what I thought, and, you know, when the waters came in and made the continent smaller, I'm sure that would have stayed within their history and made people think very closely about where the limits of that space was. So I find that kind of almost a little bit silly.
- HMF** It was an idea that didn't seem to fit.

- MS** Like I think you can make assumptions about Europe and that's why I was wondering. You can make assumptions about European approaches and cultures because obviously there is a wealth of knowledge there that you can draw on. One being of that kind of culture to a certain degree and also being able to navigate the various literature that exists around it. But to make assumptions of another culture that obviously does not exist as it did then, for whatever reason, and to make those sort of assumptions ... I don't see why you'd bother. It's more indicative of maybe potentially an ignorance on his side than it is of anything ... like the only interesting thing about it is that he said it, not that it's true.
- HMF** I think some of the things he did follow on with about the relationship between the Europeans and the sea and then coming up against their misunderstanding of the land here was interesting.
- MS** Yeah. I mean if you're interested in that, you might be interested in looking at a guy called Bill Gammage because he writes about the idea that the entire continent—this is why I don't really necessarily agree with Malouf's statement—is that the entire continent was actually completely, or arguably, manmade. Like it was managed in a way, but just not with property titles and fences, but rather with a system of fire burning that extended across the whole country. So when Europeans arrived here, they saw what they perceived to be an untouched wilderness, but actually the entire areas they were looking at were touched by man and actually, in a sense, farmed but just farmed with fire. So, you know, they'd come and see these hills with these sort of passages of trees running down them with the grass fairly short and the shrubs kind of organised and they just thought that was, you know, how it looked. But, in fact, it was regularly burned, and burned in a really sophisticated way, to keep it functional because those trees were there to catch kangaroos and so forth. And if you actually look at early John Glover paintings or colonial paintings and compare them to the actual landscape now it's quite astonishing because the landscape looks completely different to when it was first viewed. So if you want to see what it looks like untouched, it now looks like ... well even that's not untouched, but it's totally grown over and mismanaged.
- HMF** Yeah. See Malouf writes about that as well. I wonder whether I've misread his stuff on the island or whether he's just saying that it's a view from the sea or something. Some kind of concept of it.
- MS** I don't agree with that either in that because there'd been trade between Indonesia and Indigenous peoples of the north, well they know since the 1600s, but it could have gone back much further. And so obviously you'd get a sense of your place through that kind of visitation and I actually think there were reciprocal kind of exchanges. I think there was indigenous words used in Indonesian language.

HMF Yes, and vice-versa.

MS Yeah. So I mean we can speculate, but it'd be worth revisiting because certainly the understanding of the continent by Indigenous peoples would have been different to Europeans.

HMF Yeah.

MS But whether it's framed as island or what he means by 'island' is something worth pursuing. So it's in the Boyer Lecture, is it?

HMF Yes.

MS I'll have a look.

MS Have you listened to the Marcia Langton ones?

HMF Not the whole series.

MS Yeah, they're good. She's quite a contentious sort of personality.

HMF She is.

MS She talks about the idea that conservationists are sort of placing their own kind of embedded racism on the landscape by thinking they know what's best for the landscape as opposed to Indigenous communities that have been managing the landscape for centuries. She then connects to ideas that there could be a relationship between mining companies to mine the land in a way that was within indigenous land practices that go back further. So there's that kind of gap there because there's this presumption that, you know, white conservationists know more about how to manage the land than ... but then, you know, it's such an oversimplified argument because it's hardly just two distinct groups. But at the core of her point is a good point which is knowledge of the land is being denied by the fact that there's been so much lost with the lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge. So obviously it's a point that can be made. And maybe there's more nuance to it that a lecture can't, you know, get out.

HMF Yeah. So I'm interested to know whether—because you mentioned that these works were like sketches for you—I'm interested to know whether the process of putting them in the show, and in that context, has helped develop your ideas or changed the work or anything like that.

MS No, I don't think it's changed the work. I made them sketches because I didn't want them to be thought of as complete. So there could be like an idea that it was an ongoing process or testing out this sort of wealth of imagery in the context of the landscape. So they're sketches just because I didn't want it to seem like it was a

fixed end. Because I kind of didn't want them to be read as discrete. I wanted them to be read as something that could be ongoing and doesn't end and so that's why, to be honest, they could be sketches to the end.

Putting it together for the show though certainly was good because it was good to actually see them and start to think about how they relate. So for instance, seeing the work and having the problems with the technology and then seeing them kind of overlap, was a good way start thinking about how they could work in terms of a tapestry of imageries and so, just that idea that, you know, if the two images could overlap and be seen together, and then also be seen as discreet, then that I think is an interesting kind of development to sort of understanding how further projects in that arena might work together.

HMF Great.

MS So I mean, yeah, the project was also conceived, and I always wanted to show those two pieces together, so it wasn't like it came together as a consequence of the show, but rather just sort of thinking about how those projects and further projects could exist.

HMF Were you thinking of making those works when you went to Broken Hill?

MS Yes, but not necessarily in Broken Hill exclusively. It wasn't about the particularities of the site to that extent. I actually didn't want to make the focus, you know, 'the Centre,' because I think sometimes the Centre is over kind of exposed, especially in terms of Westerners going in there and kind of thinking of it as, in a general sense, an answer to aesthetic problems. But I guess likewise I couldn't resist the kind of, the mythology, of the Centre in that regard either in the sense that I was curious to go out there and sort of ... and I didn't get all the way into the Centre, I was still on the periphery technically, but I suppose it's all relative.

HMF It has the iconic look of ...

MS It has an iconic quality to it, but that's because red dirt has that kind of quality. But there's red dirt to be found all over the place like just up north and not in the centre, so in that sense I kind of like the idea of doing something with red dirt not in the centre, so that it's not so much returning to that iconic kind of thing.

HMF I guess it makes sense when you're thinking about those kind of underlying mythologies of Australia to be using that iconography.

MS I don't think so, because it's almost part of the problems that just revert to that because, technically speaking, if you go way back who

knows what the space was imagined or cohered to be. I mean, you know, that kind of yellow dirt, desert, dry, arid kind of imagery, I think it almost oversimplifies a far more complex idea of the space. So I mean I obviously went there and did it with that so there's a contradiction there. But, as I said, that's also why it could be thought of as sketches. I don't want it to kind of be read just in terms of those things. Although I will be going back there. I made a few enquiries to do some different residencies in different areas, but to be honest, it was probably, you know, it was always specifically in the context of also moving beyond that. I mean, I wanted to do a work that circumnavigated the coastline, but I just haven't worked out the best way to kind of attempt it. It'll probably take a long time as well. So it was never... although that's obviously a very much direct response to an idea of going through a centre. It's almost about the centre by not doing it. But this is the thing—if something is a sketch, then it can be ongoing and it can bring potentially more to an iconic interpretation than first glance. But, you know, I wouldn't want to make it all about red rocks and cutaways and whatever.

HMF What about suburbia, the urban areas?

MS Yeah. There's no reason why those areas can't be interpreted in the same way, especially if you're going on a method that's talking about what would it mean to kind of consider the space in a time continuum beyond its white colonisation, you know. 2000 years – well, yeah, why couldn't whatever is sitting right now be interpreted through that. I think you'd also get an interesting kind of response through that. Maybe what we're doing now is that. It's just that we haven't created or authenticated an aesthetic response to it, but what we're doing now is that. You know, merely speaking or talking about it.

HMF Yes. I agree.

MS I don't think any kind of area is off-bounds. But I mean I suppose in that respect, I have been working on a work—but I don't think it'll get up—but it's not going to be called antipodes or anything like that, but the idea is to do an inverted monument in the city. And so the idea is to invert Centrepoin. So right outside Centrepoin is to just dig a hole and it's the equivalent of Centrepoin, but downwards. That's tying into similar things, but here. And to be honest, if you think about works as sketches, then maybe they don't connect literally, but maybe they can all come together and then be configured in a way that can bring a new perspective on the works. And I'm quite a big fan of doing that so that it's not just read in terms of its time or its simple form qualities. Working this way, it could potentially engage with ideas in one's practice across all sorts of areas.

HMF Yeah, I agree. And I really like what you're thinking about in terms of inversion.

MS Yeah. I don't think it's specific to Australia though. I just think that it's interesting to apply a poetic sort of inversion, or kind of think about the grotesque or the place where ideas and things get messy and don't have clear outcomes, you know, but have an identity. So, you know, it's not just so messy that you can't see it as mess maybe. So a poetics of inversion I suppose is a nice way of putting it. There's other ways that it can be articulated certainly.

HMF I think that's really interesting. It gives us a lot to think about.

MS Yeah, put that in your paper. Write that up.

HMF I might.

MS You just might.

Interview with Jonathan McBurnie, 14 June 2014

Redfern, Sydney

HMF The tables have turned.

JM [Laughs]

HMF Can you start by telling me a bit about your practice?

JM Okay. I guess the way I'd like to—if I had a choice—present my work, it would be that I don't feel I have one particular style, I guess is what I'm trying to say. I feel like the way I work or have been working in the last few years is a constant kind of reconfiguration of a lot of different imagery and a lot of different influences, and in the end having no style becomes my style, if that makes sense.

HMF It does.

JM So often I get categorised, usually in some sort of pop art idiom, which is fine because obviously there is a lot of popular culture at work in my studio practice, but I'm often very fast to point out to people that that's not all there is to my work. In fact I think it's just - I don't consider the popular culture side of my work any bigger than, say, the part of my work that comes from art history or the part of my work that comes from literature or something like that. I view it quite equally to more traditional forms, so I guess if there's something I would want to put up front and had the option of saying, it's that I don't actually think of it as purely a meditation on popular culture, although that is one of the things that it does seek to comment upon and play with.

HMF Good answer.

JM [Laughs]

HMF And what about your research at the moment, your PhD—what are you looking at?

JM I'm really focusing upon the ways and the reasons in which we draw, in our sort of post-digital culture. So why do we still draw? Why do we still have the compulsion to draw in an age where we don't actually need to draw anymore? We can do it in arguably easier means and methods: digitally we can draw on tablets; we can use AutoCAD; we can use 3ds Max; we can use all of this; we can use Illustrator; we can use all of these programs to replace the traditional—particularly commercial, traditionally commercial—aspects of drawing. So if you look out in the world now compared to 50 years ago there is very little drawing still used in the commercial world. So that's an interesting thing in itself because most of the people that draw today are artists.

The area in which drawing thrives today, is the visual arts basically. A little bit of illustration and design, but predominantly today it's the visual arts, and if anything it's become in my opinion it's become, even more important exactly because of that. It's become more important because it is still a way for us to respond to the world that is quite accessible, and it's quite affordable, in a world where particularly the pursuit of making art, it's getting very, very expensive to do properly these days, and drawing offers us a way of entering into that world without too much resistance, either financial resistance or just equipment or whatever. So there's that, and then there's the idea that drawing has been sort of freed by this change of guard in the commercial sense, so now that drawing has lost a lot of its commercial associations because people don't use it so much anymore for illustration or animation, it has sort of recovered an authenticity—or maybe not an authenticity but a... status that it hadn't had in quite some time. I think drawing lost a lot of its status as a pedagogical tool and a learning tool and a thinking tool in modernism and particularly post-modernism. Whereas I think a lot of the modernists and post-modernists, while there was drawing going on it was sort of a different kind of drawing; it was drawing as a very performative practice rather than a inquisitive kind of thinking as you go practice, as in drawing has a wonderful ability to allow us to think and work at the same time, even though it is very different from what we traditionally think of as the way the mind works. So that's a very long-winded way of explaining [laughs] what I'm talking about, but in a nutshell it's an investigation into why we still draw in the post-digital age, and the way I'm really explaining that is through ideas of eroticism and materialism and base materialism, but primarily eroticism.

HMF Great. That sounds really interesting.

JM I hope it's interesting.

HMF It's definitely something that painters talk about a lot in terms of thinking through painting.

JM Well there's definitely a lot of overlap. I think, with drawing and other media like painting and sculpture, particularly historically, a lot of master painters and sculptors were also master draftsmen, because that was the way you learnt. I'm sure you know that if you were an apprentice you would learn how to draw from your master before you would ever even touch a chisel or a printing press or a paintbrush; you would learn the fundamentals of design and thought and philosophies through drawing, and then you would move on to those things. So I think that's a part of why drawing took so long to gain a sort of a status in the art world in a way; it was always regarded as a preparatory process, and it was that but there were a lot of artists that really, really couldn't emphasise enough the joy that they got from drawing. I'm fairly certain that, if

you went back in time and asked certain people, a lot of them would tell you “oh I’d rather be drawing than making prints” or whatever they were doing. I suspect Dürer may have been one of those people; I suspect Rubens may have been one of those people, but of course I’m talking about time travel, [laughs] which is a bit silly. But yeah, so I think painters definitely understand that idea of thinking through their ideas while doing it. I mean, most artists—I think—have sort of an inkling of that, perhaps not when it gets into more... specifically... conceptual type work; I think it changes a little bit in that way perhaps. Not with everyone, of course - I’m speaking generally—but I think when a work becomes less about the work itself and more about the idea, that process of thinking really changes and that’s not necessarily the same way that someone might think about drawing or painting or something like that.

HMF Yeah. That’s interesting. So the thing I mainly wanted to talk to you about today is to do with your work in the *Landscape Too* exhibition, which we held earlier this year, and the starting point to that exhibition—which is quite broad, but I’m going to put it to you anyway and see what you come up with—was what is it we are responding to when we consider landscape?

JM I’ve been very interested in landscape for a couple of years now which actually sparked from undergrad for me. I didn’t do much about it at the time, but my interest in it did get sparked in undergrad when, I believe it was at a critique—I did painting as one of my majors—and we had a critique and somebody had done these quite technically stunning little landscape paintings, from life, and they were quite beautiful. One of the other students had a bit of a go at her work; not for her work itself, but because she was working in landscape, and this student was making a point of how boring landscape is and how done it is, and how over it is, and how... I think there was a big knee-jerk reaction, like a colonial knee-jerk reaction to colonial art in this student. Anyway, I found that a really dismissive thing to say.

HMF What year was this, roughly?

JM Oh... would have been 2005 or 2006 I think, second year or third year. And that just really got me thinking about it because I didn’t think of landscape in that way. I think I’ve always just had an interest in landscape without even realising it, just through particular people’s work. My father obviously had always had some sort of an element of landscape in his work. I think he’s been investigating that more and more over the last 10 years—I think—than previously, in a more kind of... pure, I’ll say, in sort of its pure form. Maybe not pure, maybe traditional; he’s been looking at it in a very traditional form in the last 10 years, and really getting into that idea of getting out there and drawing or painting what you see.

There's a really beautiful tradition of landscape drawing, landscape painting, en plein air. That whole idea is quite a beautiful and interesting tradition, but even before that there was often an element of landscape in his work, particularly for me; there was a sort of a climate and a temperature in some of the works where you would recognise these places or these houses or this or that. There was a real resonance with an image of Queensland and North Queensland—it's a very particular thing—and it's not very easy to make an image and conjure all of these associations, including temperature and heat. You can feel the breeze and you can smell the smells at that time of day. I don't know quite how to explain that any better, but that was one part of it.

I think another part of it for me is actually coming back from the popular culture stuff. I re-watched *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* recently, a cartoon I was absolutely obsessed with as a child, and I was really struck by not only the sort of... robust sexuality of the whole thing—it's quite weird and pervy and fantastic—[laughter] but on top of that the landscape of the background paintings and the landscapes in the show, because it's set in a sort of fantastic world that is a different planet than earth, you find out eventually, but it's a sort of fantastical version, not quite futuristic but at the same time it's not quite medieval; it's sort of a combination, but the landscapes are very weird and they're painted with all of these purples and pinks. It's a very weird looking world, but quite believable. There's all these strange vegetables growing out of the ground and rocky outcrops everywhere and the skies are always this weird sort of purple colour. I think on some level that had a bit of an influence too, and then growing up and getting more interested in not only comics and animation but art, discovering people like Sidney Nolan that really give the Australian landscape a particular flavour. He's not somebody that tries for realism or any such thing, but he still completely nails what that looks like and what that feels like, and that's a really interesting idea for me. That leads on to all sorts of things, it is a few different things converging for me, I think.

HMF So you're really interested in the ability to capture the feeling or the experience of the landscape.

JM Yeah. Yeah. I think that's just as important as painting the tree, or that river was there so let's make sure that river looks like the river that we saw. It's less about that for me, and more about charting a particular feeling. There is something really quite magical about being there and drawing or painting what you see, but if you're not feeling it that's a different thing again. I suppose it's like the difference between a... I think of an impressionist, say one of the impressionist hay stacks—those famous beautiful hay stacks—you get so much feeling and atmosphere from those, they're so beautifully painted, you know the Monet hay stacks... but then

you'll be at the tourist shop nearby and they'll be selling calendars of photographs of sort of re-enactments of the hay stacks—so someone's gone around France and photographed hay stacks, in more or less the same place as they were painted—and they're beautiful, you still get a bit of a sense of colour and a bit of a sense of light and everything, but it's nowhere near the same sort of intimacy of experience that you get looking at the actual paintings. It's a very, very different feeling. It's sort of difficult to explain, but I think there is a pretty significant difference between... a landscape as an exercise and a landscape as an artwork and an experience.

HMF I agree. So then, can you tell me a bit about the work that you made for the *Landscape Too* show, *Precipice*?

JM The *Precipice* works are an ongoing series that I've been working on for about four or five years now—maybe six even—which actually is the first series, as I was saying before, I had that disagreement with the classmate, and it didn't happen right away after that, but I think this is the outcome of that thinking that started then, which is what started the *Precipice* works. They began as... fantastical landscapes, I believe of Antarctica actually, to begin with - purely Antarctica - and there's been an element of Antarctica that I've tried to keep ever since, but it really began with the idea of drawing these Arctic and Antarctic sort of landscapes, and what would happen to those as you draw them, particularly just in black and white. Something happens, there's an abstraction that happens, where you don't know whether they're rock or ice or sand or... you sort of lose a definition about that, and in losing that it really alters the way you experience the work. So that was the starting point and I was using a lot of photo references.

The work from the *Landscape Too* show is sort of from the second lot of thinking which grew out of that, which I started to investigate maybe two years ago—which was the idea that landscape is actually a very political thing, especially in our country, and quite a sacred thing, and I wanted to sort of find a way of still investigating landscape but without...

I had this sort of feeling like I wanted to remove myself from some sort of colonial perspective. The only way I felt I could do that was by not making the work about Australia as such, so... I started making a collage of... I'd mash different places together; I'd get images from, say, the Gobi Desert and Antarctica and the Australian outback and Yellowstone in the States, or something like that, and I'd start reconfiguring all of these different places and putting them together because I felt that in creating a sort of fantastic place, you're still talking about colonialism and Australia, but you're engaging with it in a different way. So for me it changed from... being, I guess, colonial - or not being able to help being colonial or being cast in that light - to maybe being a more critical observer of

what was happening, and... it was about that time I was reading Robert Hughes' book *The Fatal Shore*, which is a really fantastic history of colonial Australia, and I was also reading a lot of Bernard Smith's work. He wrote a lot about the South Pacific area, and the idea of *Terra Australis*, which is a concept that really ended up informing a lot of these works. You've probably covered it—*Terra Australis* was like the conceptual Australia before colonials had necessarily charted it. They knew it was here, they had vague sort-of maps from the Dutch, they'd known it was here for quite a long time, although not everyone believed it, and this concept slowly formed and got more and more believable and rigid in the public consciousness over probably 200-300 years. I'm very interested in that idea of what they thought was here before they actually knew for sure. There were a lot of fantastic creatures and strange humanoid kind of monsters that [laughs] they thought were here, which are pretty... there's some fantastic old drawings of those. And you know, they were half right: I mean, there were some really—for European eyes—really whacked out creatures. I'm sure they wouldn't have believed somebody if they'd told them about a platypus or an echidna or something if they went back home. That was a pretty fantastical idea. So that really informed these works as well.

There's a sort of funny discomfort, I think, in the works, of being the descendent of these European people that came and took over. There's a discomfort in that for me. Even though it was a long time ago, it's still not that long ago really, in historical terms it's sort of a blink of an eye. So there's that discomfort, but it's also a discomfort of actually really being very, very interested in it, and for me as a European descendent, as well as third generation artist in my family, possibly even fourth. That is a pretty important part of my own sort of heritage and my own family's story. So there's that tension as well between, say, political correctness and a sort of desire for settling that idea or settling that difficulty, but also a tension within my own family in that... my grandmother painted landscapes—she was a farmer's wife, and so she essentially was painting landscapes on appropriated land or stolen land, but it's still a part of our traditions, just as a family—forget all the European stuff—so there's that awkwardness and that sort of discomfort, I think, which is interesting, and that's something I'm trying to engender in these works.

HMF So would you say, then, that when you're constructing your own landscapes through collage, and using other and fantastical elements from other countries, that that is your way of working through these colonial ideas with that reference to the way Australia was originally imagined and constructed?

JM Yeah. Yeah, there's an imagined world and a constructed world that goes on, and also there's still a little bit of that that stems from

Antarctica, I think, the early works that were Antarctic landscapes. I think because Antarctica doesn't have an indigenous people or groups of indigenous peoples, it's still political, particularly in the context of oil, and now in the context of global warming. I think Antarctica will become a really important part of history in the next 100 years, more so than it's ever been. But there's no people that are from there, and for me that alters it a lot. It changes it to a sort of almost a safe place to discuss landscape without feeling like I'm taking away from or subverting something that is sacred to somebody else, if that makes sense. A lot of this sort of looking for a new idea or a different way to discuss landscape is just trying to come to terms with what it means as an important thing to me, but also what it means to others, and not wanting to abandon it altogether, and maybe come up with something that gets us somewhere [laughs], that gets us somewhere that we haven't been before or.... I don't know, I don't know the answer but that's the whole point I guess.

HMF Yeah. And is that what you meant when you spoke of, specifically in your interview with your father in the *Landscape Too* booklet, the idea of re-mythologising the landscape in Australia?

JM Yeah, absolutely. That kind of came out of what I saw as—particularly in my generation—I saw a bit of a deliberate dissociation from landscape. I think it was partly out of ignorance of how interesting the landscape conversation can actually be, and also partly out of a sort of cultural cringe and wanting to distance ourselves away from political unrest. I think my generation in general is very hesitant to get involved with politics; that's a very big generalisation because there are those of us that are very passionate about these things.

HMF I suspect that a lot of that is an inherited...

JM Sure.

HMF ... From previous generations, which I think suffered from an immense amount of colonial guilt, and there was a lot of political rhetoric surrounding that at that time.

JM Yeah, absolutely.

HMF I can remember a lot of the political rhetoric, even though I was still quite young, coming from the Howard government, and so I think there was a reaction to avoid those subjects, because there was so much guilt and tension surrounding them.

JM Yeah. We had those sort of strange things, like... the celebration of the Commonwealth. What's that even called?

HMF The Bicentenary?

JM The Bicentenary [laughs]. Things like that were a very strange idea for me. It's been discussed a lot in my own time. Growing up, Howard was a little bit later for me, and he had a lot of... personally I found the late '80s and early '90s really exciting politically, because it seemed like... I think, for me anyway, Hawke and Keating really made it seem like we were on the edge of really great things, and we just had to reach out and grab them, particularly with things like the Mabo legislation. I remember not quite understanding what that was all about and my parents explained it to me, because they were very happy when that happened. Mabo was a sort of a community hero, actually, in Townsville. He didn't grow up in Townsville but he did live there for many, many years and had an ongoing association with the university there where my parents lived, so that was a very exciting thing.

For a couple of years it seemed like we were definitely going to have a new flag and, you know, distance ourselves with the monarchy and change that relationship. Even today, I'm... not anti the Queen, I don't have a problem with her as such, I actually find her quite a fascinating figure, but I really believe that in order to actually—if we're being legitimate about reconciliation, or conciliation actually—I think reconciliation maybe is a bad term in the first place because it implies that we've conciled, which I don't think we have. So let's say if we're going to concile all of these problems historically, the absolute first thing that has to happen—well the second thing, after apologising, which fortunately has been done, which I think was an important step, but still just a step. It's absolutely crucial that we get rid of [laughs]... we change our flag so that it doesn't have the symbology of the people that basically took over. That's a pretty crucial thing for me. It just seems a bit like... without changing these things, and there's many, many of these things, but without changing them it's just lip service and it doesn't really mean all that much, and it's just a bit infuriating as to how slow these things happen. What was the question again [laughs]?

HMF I can't remember, but I agree in that I think it's very difficult to imagine what could happen next or what needs to happen next without taking those major symbolic steps, because then you can actually start to think about what Australia could be if we attempted to move on from...

JM We were talking about my generation distancing themselves from colonialism, and yeah, I really felt like that sort of self-conscious distancing actually began quite earnestly in the Howard era, because suddenly... Howard was in and he's quite the monarchist. There was a real change in attitude when the Howard government began their reign, and the referendum about Australia remaining a part of the monarchy, or a part of the Commonwealth, was so

awkwardly worded that the odds of any kind of actual intellectual decision being made by the Australian people was just nil. For me this is when the distancing really started to happen and there was this... resistance to apology and a resistance to... I guess owning up, not to what we did but it's undeniable that our forebears did do these things, and I acknowledge that that's a very grey area. Actually there were colonists that were really, really cool people and really progressive people, and there were colonists that were very inherently racist and scared and awful to the Aboriginal people. But we can't really deny that, I mean it's so well documented, it's not that long ago. So I noticed a big collective putting of heads in the sand in my generation, and that was quite upsetting. I think it's a really good thing to discuss these things and have a bit of a dialogue about it. There's not going to be any kind of conciliation or reconciliation unless these things are being acknowledged; it just doesn't happen like that, people don't just suddenly forget things that have been done to their family or to them personally. That's just how we work. So I think we need to be a bit more clever about the way we're actually moving forward on these issues, if we're going to move forward on them at all. I wouldn't hold my breath right now in the current political climate, but it would be nice.

HMF Yes, indeed. I wanted to ask you as well, you recently travelled to France to do a drawing residency, and I was wondering whether this travel and that experience of returning back to Australia, has affected the way you have been thinking about landscape?

JM It definitely has, particularly in the way I was explaining before about the way my father works with landscape. It was a very, very special thing to be able to see him at work every day for a month, and see the way he would approach it, which was a very kind of pure, very classical way of approaching the landscape, in that you're in the landscape, you're a part of it, you're seeing and feeling and drawing and all of these things are happening at once, and he was very disciplined about it. I was a bit more flight of fancy: I would sort of do this and that, I'd go into the studio, work late into the night... whereas he was up bright and early every morning, and he'd draw until about 10:00 or 11:00 and then break for lunch, and then he'd do another couple of hours in the afternoon and then the evening was his reading time, or we'd cook dinner or have a glass of wine, and then I'd go back into the studio when he went to bed [laughs]. We kind of had these inverse activities like that, different timetables. I really like working at night whereas he loves being up in that first part of the day when you've got that lovely fresh feeling, whereas I feel like a zombie. But that was a very special thing to see that and to just watch him working and watch his methods, and it goes hand in hand with what I was saying about drawing and landscaping... a tradition for us as well, and seeing my grandfather

and my father working in that tradition. It is a really pretty special thing to see. Also, in France it's a very different set of politics in France with the landscape. There's, if anything, a pride in that idea there, because when you get out into the country it is especially beautiful. There's sort of an inverse beauty to Australia in a way. I think the Australian landscape is stunning, but it's stunning in its harshness as well; there's a sort of real edge to a lot of the landscape in this country. Even the light has a very hard edge to it, very white light, whereas in France in September when we were there, you'd notice all this light, almost pink or purple or something, or blue. It's very different. You really notice these things coming out, too, at the end of the day and at the beginning of the day. It's a very different sunset there than here. Just seeing those things, it's quite an experience when you get so used to working a particular way with this particular set of variables, and then you experience this whole other kind of set. One thing I did there was I got back into watercolour, which I hadn't really played with since I was a child. I've been really enjoying that, and it seems a very appropriate place to sort of get into it. So I brought that back as well, so I guess I brought back a greater understanding of landscape in general and why it's important. Maybe I couldn't quite articulate it before that, but it was a very important trip.

HMF And you talk about it now as though it has a lot to do with your family history.

JM Yeah. I mean, that's not the only reason but yeah, there's a comfort there in seeing my father working and making these stunning works, absolutely stunning, and then making a nice connection again with my grandmother—his mother—who I always sort of regarded as being quite different than him. There's a nice poetry in that sort of idea that these things are passed down or transferred somehow. And she passed away not long after that—about two months after we both got back—so yeah, these things sort of reverberate a little bit when you think of them in that light. I like the idea that maybe there's a little bit of her in me in that way. It's a nice thing.

HMF Very much so. Okay, I have another question for you. Despite our conservative politics at the moment, you could say we have come quite a way—and I think in large part to the Aboriginal art movement—in terms of our cross-cultural understanding in Australia, and also our understanding of the land. There's a lot of talk now about this discourse of country that we're slowly learning a bit about, in contrast to the way that traditionally the western approach to the landscape. So would you say that our conceptualisation of landscape in Australia is characterised by the relationship between the Aboriginal and non-indigenous understandings of the land?

JM Yeah, I think that's a really good point. Particularly here in Australia, I think our thinking of landscape and country has to be tempered with the indigenous art, indigenous landscape paradigm, because there's just no escaping it. You can't, in your right mind, even think about engaging with landscape in this country, I don't think, without considering—at least to some extent—what that actually means. You could view it as a big monkey on the back, but I don't think of it that way. I think, actually, if anything it has helped us as artists really get into landscape and figure it out and sort of explain why it is really important. I think we have a unique perspective compared to some other countries—not all, but some certainly—in that we do have this quite rich culture here, a rich indigenous culture, that has traditions that span back countless centuries, and they've bled down—as traditions do—into art and this sort of funny Western idea we have about art and galleries and paintings and all of that. So if you think about it you've got this... oh let's be modest and say a few thousand years [laughs], a few millennia, of tradition... and when I say tradition I'm talking about hundreds of traditions of hundreds of different nations within this giant land mass we have, and it's all bled down and it's all kind of now filling canvasses and filling galleries. If you think about it in those terms that's a very, very, very rich flow of cultural heritage that we almost can't quite comprehend because it's so many nations and so many centuries and millennia in the making. So that's a pretty exciting thing for me. It's like if you looked at the way the word has developed or text or handwriting or something like that; it has a sort of history that comes down through the ages and it ends up at this point where we are now and it changes by merit of us being aware of that and considering what's going on and where it came from. So it's an exciting thing, and I don't think we can help but to be influenced on that, even if it's in a negative way, even if it's in some sort of way that completely cripples your sense of national... I don't know, a sense of national pride or identity or something. I think that's all well and good, but it definitely affects everything, particularly in terms of landscape. I don't know if we've kind of figured it out yet either, because there's such diversity in there, and then now in addition to that diversity there are some hacks, and there are some geniuses, and there are some different takes on it; there are people that are of not only indigenous descent but other cultures as well, and they're tempered by those other cultures, and we've got people that have grown up with a completely different set of experiences in cities or towns. Yeah, it's such a complex and diverse area. It's not such an easy thing to just put a finger on and explain away; it's quite complex.

HMF It is. This is why it's so interesting. So would you say, then, that in your practice you're interested in thinking through what it means to be making work in Australia? You're consciously thinking about your Australian context as an artist?

JM Yeah, I do, and that's really in relation to landscape though. There's no other way for me in which it comes out so clearly as in landscape. I don't think about it so much when I'm making work, figurative work, or little scenes or sort of melodrama filming, comic-y stuff. It's the landscape that brings it out.

HMF But this is a part of your practice that you're compelled to continually investigate.

JM Oh yeah, absolutely. It's definitely become one of my favourite parts to follow. Actually people really respond to it too, perhaps even more so than other things. I suspect there's something universal in there that we all actually—no matter which sort of culture we belong to—I think there's a universal note in landscape that we all connect to or harmonise to. I suspect it's like language or dance or music. We all have them, and once you find a way, a connecting point or a way through it there's a universal connection too. I suspect art—and particularly landscape—is one of these things. It's just a matter of figuring out where that connection point is, or just merely trying it on as a connection, giving it a go and seeing what happens... Sounds a little bit hippie, but I can't think of a better way to describe that idea.

HMF We might wrap it up there.

JM [Laughs] Good time to wrap it up [laughter].

HMF Thanks Jonathan.

Appendix B: Exhibition material

Out of Site

OUT OF SITE Roomsheet

here/elsewhere

ek1
300gsm paper stack, 2x chrome frame, 2x LCD screen,
2 channel digital video - looped

**Yes yes, we're magicians.
But let us persevere in what we have resolved,
before we forget.
Come on give me your foot. The other, higher!
Try and walk. Well?**

"Waiting for Godot" Samuel Beckett.

Footage shot on mobile phone by Emma Hicks February, 2013 (Banff, Canada),
Katie Williams, February, 2013 (Alice Springs, Australia).

ek1. is a collaborative team made up of Emma Hicks and Katie Williams. Their
work explores embodied tactics, and modes of expression that reveal in
between spaces. *here/elsewhere* looks specifically at performance,
reenactment, framing, and questions of authenticity.

29:58

Distanciation. 2013

Single channel video projection, 30 minute duration; acrylic house paint on
canvas [from *Untitled (Installation at Watch This Space)* March 2013]

The work of *Distanciation*. has travelled from an exhibition at Watch This Space
in Alice Springs. The references to the sky through video and painting were a
way of abstractly mapping experience, representing the relationship between
the topographic and landscape presentation of painting that connoted
local painterly traditions.

HELP! 4 Artists visiting Alice
would love suggestions on
how to spend time. Email
distanciation@yahoo.com or
visit Watch This Space gal-
lery during March. 4 / 9
George Crescent Wed - Fri
12pm - 5pm Sat 12pm-2pm.

OUT OF SITE

In and out of site

The idea of landscape is an enigmatic one in Australian culture, integral to how we engage with our mode of being in the world. The ideological significance of the landscape in Australia's highly urbanised culture and sparsely inhabited continent is striking. Artists continue to grapple with ideas of landscape—a place where nature and culture contend and combine in our history. A conceptual investigation of landscape was the starting point for this exhibition, with the artists drawing on embodied experience in a particular place and time, and considering the displaced presentation of this experience into the gallery space. Conversations around the work continue to consider the significance of the landscape to an experience of being in and out of Australia. These conversations have been highlighted by the current 'Australia' survey exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London, based on landscape as inextricable from ideas of Australian art, culture and identity. The parochial reviews since the opening add another layer to the ideas considered in this show, allowing us to see in from outside, across the gulf between Australia and the so-called 'mother country'. One thing these reviews do is they allow us to imaginatively place ourselves outside of Australia. Then again on return, we are struck by its physicality, the landscape representing an idea of place; constantly redefining difference, distance and identity.

The artists have provided a text or image to accompany their work in the exhibition.

Hayley Megan French

¹ Jeff Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), Pg 19.

² Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2002), Pg.2.

freefall
 Hayley Megan French, 2013
 Acrylic on canvas, 2.3x1.4m

Hayley Megan French's practice explores the way different conceptions of space—cultural, geographical and physical—are communicated in contemporary painting. Shifting between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, her work is concerned with the edges of painting as they define our perception of a space or a landscape.

Neon Kunststoff
 Carla Liesch, 2013
 Perspex, mitre clamps, acrylic paint

Neon Kunststoff presents itself as a porthole, suggesting it could lead one onto possible or imagined worlds, but instead reintroducing the gallery space. Light plays inside the perspex panels and highlights its edges, framing a liminal space, implicating the corporeal in its scale. The transparent panels are self reflective, simultaneously framing the other works in the gallery.

The work then, suggests more of an alteration in the sense of space than the physical space itself.

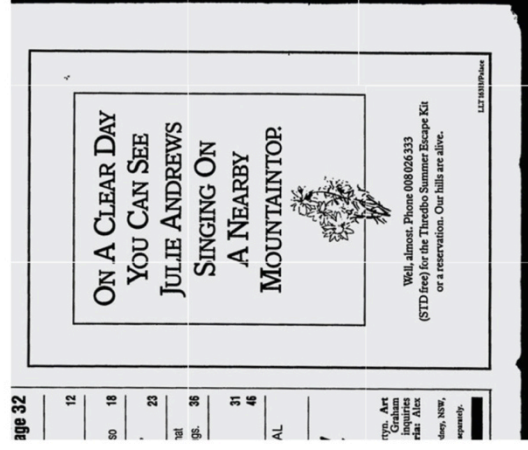
So far away
 Emma Wise, 2013
 Graphite, photographs, sound



OUT OF SITE

Roomsheet

The hills are alive
 Emma Hicks, 2013
 single channel video projection - 12mins looped



Architectural Weave
 Richard Kean, 2013
 Pine, Acrylic

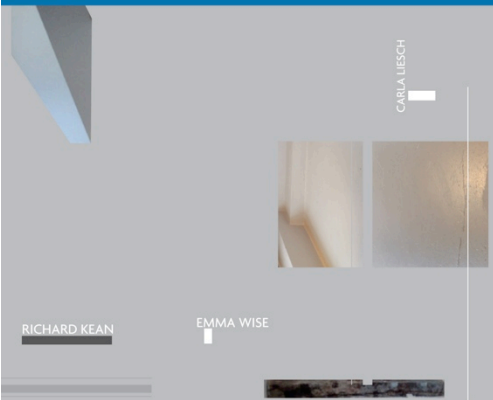
Image source: The Age Jan 29, 1988

The weave is known as the crux of the fence and therefore the wall, the basic form of human built architectural interior/exterior property. *Architectural Weave* is a structure woven from wood. It is attached and rendered seamlessly to the gallery wall. The weave is here homogenised by the architecture of the wall through white paint, while retaining its form as a weave. In the context of this show it seems to reflect ideas of colonialism and gender where the weave phases between spaces and values, coloured by its Australian context, while ultimately being at once homogenous and other to the governing architecture that is the wall.

By the end of the show the tendency to include one work per artist has become an embarrassment.

but they have no context. Being Australian is not enough. What use is this to anyone?

We are continually reminded that Australia at the Royal Academy of Arts is a show about the landscape. In reality it is a kind of visual buffet of Australian art history by a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't theme.



RICHARD KEAN

EMMA WISE

CARLA LIESCH



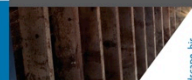
Whether or not Australians care that British greys aren't taking kindly to the exhibition was questioned by the BBC's former Australian correspondent Nick Bryant, who tweeted on Monday: "Interesting cultural moment for Australia: will UK trading of art exhibition be met by spans of cringe or collective shrug of Adam Davidson. The Guardian, 22 September 2013

I am not interested in what might constitute a new sort of Australian artistic identity because I don't think it's possible. The fertility of Australia as a product of successive, unending waves of human migration, as well as part of a global dialogue.

Whatever artists have to say about these issues is reduced to a few one-off gestures. I want to see something tougher and more prickly, art with more bite.

If the show ends on an incomplete note, it is because its art, like the country it represents, is still in the process of being made.

SITE



The guy on the motorbike cruises down the blacktop into the red landscape, his arms outstretched. The camera follows the rider, artist Shaun Gladwell, as he pedals through the desert. The camera pans to the right, showing a white Aboriginal bark sculpture in the foreground. The white bark sculpture is a Christ-like, perilous pose, lost all of Australia's sacred Aboriginal landscape?

Artwork by Shaun Gladwell, 2012

No, it all seems to be there. The horses. The cattle. The dust. The rugged Aussie lower. The Aborigine standing on one leg in a loin cloth. The beer. The roos. About the only thing missing is a bike named Bruce.

Artwork by Shaun Gladwell, 2012

DISTANGIATION

SE

OUT

HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH

FKI

- Emma Wise
- Katie Williams
- Carla Liesch
- Richard Kean
- Emma Hicks
- Hayley Megan French

Distinction.

Rooms are given titles such as 'Sovereign and Politics' or 'Blindness'.

some vital connection between these terms.

11th October
27th October

OUT

By the end of the show the tendency to include one work per artist has become an embarrassment. When I attended an early preview one of the London critics asked: "Surely you've got better artists back in Australia?"

Party time in London, John McDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 September 2011

We are continually reminded that Australia at the Royal Academy of Arts is a show about the landscape. In reality it is a kind of visual buffet of Australian art history in which important landscape artists are poorly represented, and others misrepresented by a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't theme.

Party time in London, John McDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 September 2011

I am not interested in what might constitute some sort of Australian artistic identity, because I doubt there is one. The fertility of Australian art is a product of successive, unending waves of human migration, as well as part of a global dialogue.

OF

By the end of the show the tendency to include one work per artist has become an embarrassment. When I attended an early preview one of the London critics asked: "Surely you've got better artists back in Australia?"

Party time in London, John McDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 September 2011

but they have no context. Being Australian is not enough. What use is this to anyone?

Adrian Searle, The Guardian, 17 September 2011

EMMA WISE

HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH

EMMA WISE

EMMA

ARLA LIESCH

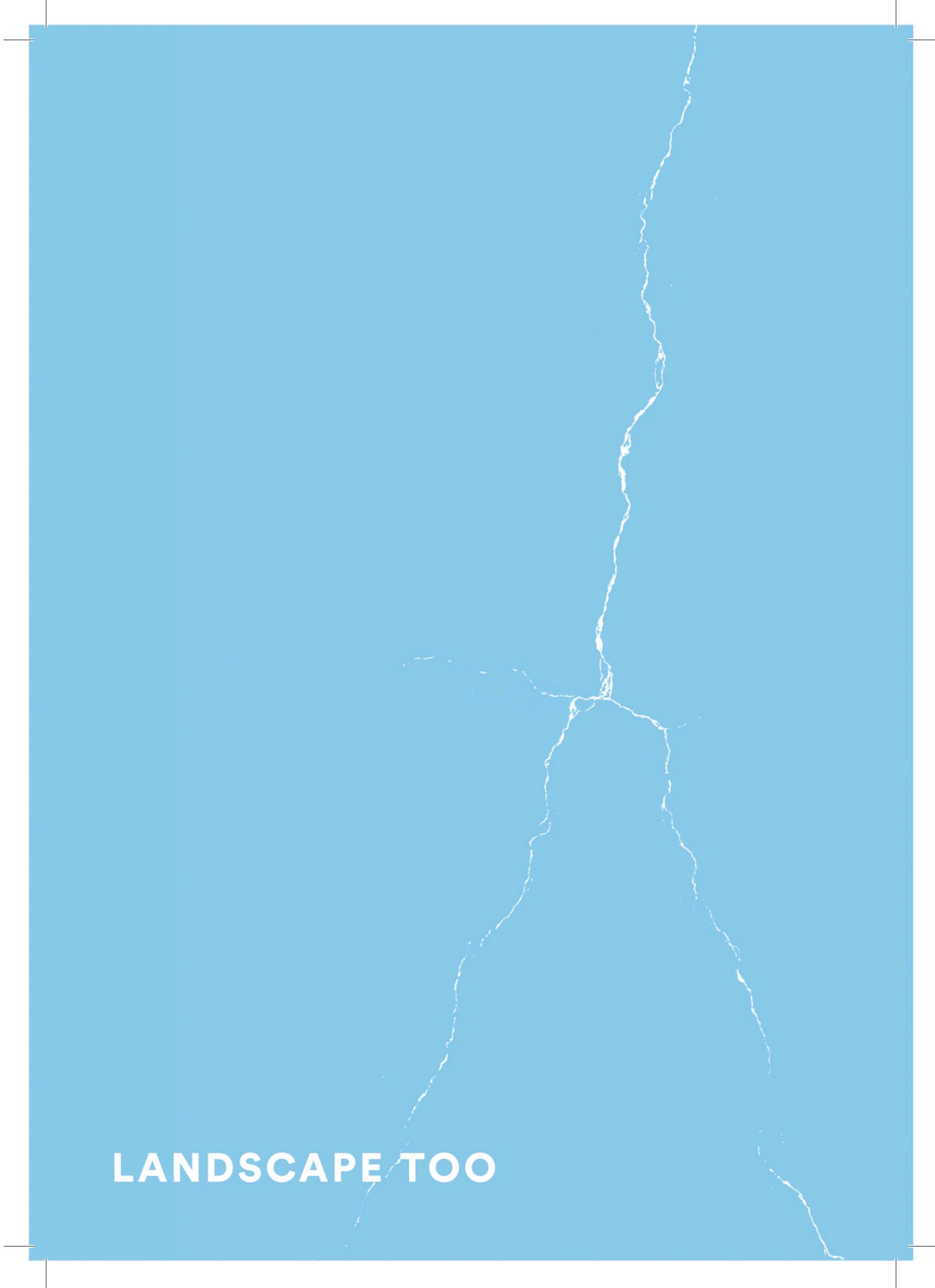
HICKS

RICHARD KEAN

EMMA WISE

DISTANCATION

Landscape Too



—
LANDSCAPE TOO
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Designed by Daryl Prondoso

LANDSCAPE TOO

LANDSCAPE TOO

A MOP Project

Curated by Carla Liesch and Hayley Megan French

This booklet has been compiled to accompany the exhibition Landscape Too, a MOP Project hosted by AirSpace Projects in Marrickville, 3-19 April 2014.

—

Contributors

Carla Liesch and Hayley Megan French
Alice Buscombe
Richard Kean
Jonathan McBurnie and Ron McBurnie
ek.1 (Emma Hicks and Katie Williams)
Kate Beckingham
Saskia Beudel
Gemma Messih
Chris Williams
Ally Bisshop
Luke Strevens

—

Artists

Alice Buscombe
Catherine Parker
Chris Williams
ek.1 (Emma Hicks and Katie Williams)
Hayley Megan French
Jonathan McBurnie
Kate Beckingham
Mark Shorter
Ron McBurnie
Stephen Spurrier

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Introduction

Landscape Too brings together artists and writers from Alice Springs, Sydney, Toowoomba and Townsville to consider the idea of landscape, as it pertains to an experience of being in Australia. Location in land, location and dislocation in the landscape of Australia is a continuing source of contention, urgency and discovery for contemporary artists. The idea of landscape is hence one that calls forth both doubt and wonder, particularly working in the unsettled intercultural ground of Australia. It prompts the question; what is it we are responding to when we consider landscape?

Landscape Too follows on from the exhibition *Out of Site* held at Articulate Project Space in 2013. The artists in *Out of Site*—Carla Liesch, Distanciation., e.k.t., Emma Hicks, Emma Wise, Hayley Megan French and Richard Kean—were closely linked through collaboration, ARI committees and shared experiences of Australian landscape. The dialogue surrounding the conception and exhibition of the work became a significant aspect of the artists' engagement with these ideas. It is out of this exhibition then that *Landscape Too* was conceived as a project with two outcomes, an exhibition and a collection of texts, offering an opportunity to record more of the ideas and conversations surrounding the project. The artists and writers in *Landscape Too* live and work in different parts of Australia, enriching this discussion through many different approaches and experiences. The submissions in this booklet serve to offer a contextual frame to the idea of landscape.

The idea of the frame has been an important element in our relationship with landscape. Without a sense of boundary, comprehensive space is often bewildering and threatening. However, once we place ourselves within a space, a landscape is framed by our own subjectivity. Rather than a gilded rectangle framing an image these texts seek to find cultural, emotional or embodied frames for our understanding of landscape. The landscape and the frame both continue to exist here through a collection of essays, poems, conversations and speculative writing.

The artists and writers in this project acknowledge the problems with landscape, heavily laden with historical definition and complex social and cultural relations. There is a tension in many of the works and texts, a questioning of our relationship to a particular experience of landscape and how this could be represented in an artwork or text.

The problem with landscape is thus that landscape represents to us, not only our relationship with place, but also the problematic nature of that relationship—a relationship that contains within it involvement and separation, agency and spectacle, self and other. It is in and through landscape, in its many forms, that our relationship with place is articulated and represented, and the problematic character of that relationship made evident.¹

The Australian landscape is also reflective of what Australian writer and researcher Ross Gibson refers to as the narrative construction of Australia²—and inherent in this, our relation to that narrative and our role in its continued construction. The very idea of Australia was recently on display in the National Library of Australia's exhibition *Mapping Our World; Terra Incognita to Australia*.

Our very existence was envisaged, and then refined over centuries to allow for new ideas and discoveries.³

We are reminded in the National Library's exhibition that the idea of a great southern landmass—to balance those of the known world in the north—emerged from the human imagination long before the Europeans discovered Australia. The role of imagination in the narrative construction of Australia has always been integral and is reflected in the speculative blurring of the real and unreal that has characterised an Australian understanding of landscape.

The first text in this booklet, *Sojourn in the Labyrinth* by Richard Kean introduces imagery of mapping and time, "I step from the boat to the shore. The waves lap at my feet and there I see that the map is forever being redrawn, a line infinitely divisible." Kean then reminds us that the act of mapping is an act of ownership over the land—a narrative that is written and rewritten over and over.

The potential to re-map and re-mythologise the land through the landscape tradition in Australian art is an idea taken up by Jonathan McBurnie in his conversation with Ron McBurnie. Discussing their different approaches to drawing the Australian landscape, this conversation highlights not only notions of colonial and post-colonial Australian art that trouble this field, but also questions how to continue working in light of this complex history. Jonathan McBurnie finishes with the provocative question—Is this simply a cultural cringe associated with self-imposed political correctness and

willingness to avoid anything remotely colonial sounding? One method it seems artists and writers in this project use to address this discomfort—indeed Jonathan McBurnie uses in his work—is the blurring of the real and the unreal as a way of negotiating the necessity and impossibility of the idea of landscape.

This is evident in the text from ek.1 (Emma Hicks and Katie Williams) *Make it real (one more time)* which blurs the real with the unreal. The text begins with the real, drawing lines from their filming notes and outtakes, then weaving through quotes from scripts of Australian horror films—Picnic at Hanging Rock and Dead Calm. There is a slippage between a matrix of ideas as the words of their source material and an almost stream-of-consciousness record of their experience are intermingled, leaving it for the reader to make it real, again, through their imagination.

In the conversation with Kate Beckingham, *Landscape as Elsewhere*, the artist discusses her practice of manipulating images of landscape to place the viewer in a space where what is real, and what is not, is not easily defined. Moving away from the perceived limitation of the photographic frame—one which inherently separates the viewer from the image—Beckingham is becoming more interested in creating an overall experience for the viewer, drawn from her own embodied experience and memory. Working from her home in Sydney, Beckingham sees the natural landscape as being elsewhere from the space of the urban landscape. The natural landscape, then, already holds a sense of imagination and memory that a new constructed reality can be projected into.

There is a similar sentiment in the excerpt from Saskia Beudel's book *A Country in Mind: Memoir with Landscape. Continuum of landscapes* speaks of an experience of driving through the heterogenous desert landscape of Walungurru in the Northern Territory, and the impossibility of recording the complexities of this environment in an image. Instead, Beudel documents this space through the memories it recalls for her. The landscape that is constructed for the reader then, is unbound by space and time.

There is a desire in many of these texts to translate or recreate an immersive experience of landscape for the reader. Alice Buscombe's short poems seem to recall a single moment of being in a landscape—a written snapshot noting sounds and the slippage of her footing. Buscombe's poems, interspersed throughout the booklet, have a calming rhythm that draw us back into landscape through the natural rhythms of the landscape itself and then our movement within it.

Gemma Messih also draws from an experience in-landscape in her excerpt from *The distance between us*—a poetic response to the Icelandic landscape during, and after, returning from a residency in 2012. Messih speaks as both the subject and space; the subject is not separated from its environment, it is consumed by it. The distance between is at once vast, and non-existent. There is a sense of the sublime in this slippage between the subject and nature, and we are left grasping to contemplate such forces beyond ourselves.

The idea of being in-landscape is also considered by Chris Williams in his essay *Analogue Landscape and Digital Ecologies*. Williams speaks of the ‘inhabiting effect’ of ecology, rather than the possible ‘distancing effect’ of landscape. For Williams, it is in the indelible relation of organisms and their environment that we can frame a more meaningful participation in landscape. From this perspective, Williams questions how the qualities of a given landscape, physical and metaphysical, might be heard; and further, how might a landscape then sound? There follows a beautiful interplay between the song of an image and the image of a song—a cyclical relationship which is explored through the sound work created by Williams for the video *Sometimes there’s two*, included in the exhibition.

Similarly to Williams, Ally Bisshop works both in and out of Australia, spending her time moving between Sydney and Berlin. As Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas has suggested, the place and meaning of landscape is often brought into salience through journey and return.⁴ Hence we often find the movement back to Australia, or back home, significant to our perspective on landscape. Bisshop’s *A Conversation in Four Acts* considers different perceptions of light—a recurring obsession in the experience and representation of landscape in Australia—and our reciprocal relationship to the rhythms of the sun.

The artists and writers in this project have been asked to respond to experiences of a landscape that we all continue to shape and move in. What ensues is a conversation between the works, the artists, and the texts, an engagement with different embodied experiences and imaginings of what landscape means in Australia today. The final text by Luke Strevens, *Welcome to Australia, now in HD*, considers the place of Australia and our place in it, in relation to the common and often more romanticised image and politic of Australia’s mythological landscape. Strevens offers examples of contemporary Australian cinema such as *Snowtown*, *The Boys* and *Romper Stomper* as more accurate

representations of a landscape that a majority of Australians experience on a day-to-day basis. *Landscape Too* then, is less about the construction of an image or what lies within a frame and the colonial subtext of this gesture, and more of an exposition of why it is vital to continue engaging with these ideas. As Ross Gibson observes, the place of Australia—encompassing a nation, a dream, and a time— is one that we can imagine ourselves in relation to.¹ The texts and works in *Landscape Too*, hence come from a desire to understand the place we inhabit both physically and imaginatively.

We all carry about with us both horizontal and vertical perspectives on the spaces that mean something to us. In a sense, we are all navigators.⁶

Endnotes

- 1 Jeff Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," in *The Place of Landscape*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011).
- 2 Ross Gibson, *South of The West; Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).
- 3 Martin Woods Susannah Helman, "Terra Incognita to Australia," in *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia* (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2013).
- 4 Malpas, "Place and the Problem of Landscape."
- 5 Gibson, *South of The West; Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*.
- 6 Peter Sutton, "We are all navigators," in *Mapping Our World: Terra Incognita to Australia* (Canberra, ACT: National Library of Australia, 2013).

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Carla Liesch is a Sydney-based artist undertaking a Masters of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts. Hayley Megan French is a Sydney-based artist and PhD candidate at Sydney College of the Arts. Carla and Hayley have been collaborating since 2011.

after three days
the body feels heavy
continue walking

-
Alice Buscombe

7

Sojourn in the Labyrinth

Human being seems inherently labyrinthine. Experience is quantified by words. Words quantify things. The desire to quantify, to throw a homogenising glowing white sheet over everything, making the perhaps unknowable mysteries illuminated and known, is the grand project of humanity (but who really knows?). Einstein invented a theory of relativity. It was calculated that everything should be relative to the velocity of light, the speed of that illuminating substance. Time robbed of its independence. Time and space and space/time robbed of its independence. Relativity is wrong. The apple fell. We took a bite. We were kicked out. Newton used math to tell of a similar experience. Now an Apple can tell you anything. But like anything since our self-consciousness, it is just another brick in the wall of the labyrinth. Another cipher. Another image. Another filter coloured by desire. Another other.

These days, human being sits upon its pyramid. With the help of its big toe and thumb, propping itself above the oceanic silence of the All, it pulls up root and rock and tries to improve them. It sits, in its head, above Nature. Human being is still like an animal. But it is not. Instead of urinating on a tree, which it will sometimes do on the drunken way home, it would rather place a stone, or a fence, or some ink, to manage the ins and outs of its bid for territory. As if it could really own anything. As if the lines of its map really can divide the indivisible. As if black and white can really mean anything. But we can always play pretend. After all, what's the difference? Everything is *All* anyway, including the labyrinth.

I step from the boat to the shore. The waves lap at my feet and there I see that the map is forever being redrawn, a line infinitely divisible. How can you contend with that, with such playful infinity? What is the point in trying to own such a thing? Who would dare? The Japanese farmer, Masanobu Fukuoka, describes this attitude to knowledge as discriminating. The arrogance of human being keeps breathing in itself, never exhaling, never dying. Presuming always that it knows better than...always indulging in its self-importance, its make-believe.

The sky above the land; the sea below the sky; always are things being described, related *too...*till death do we part, our art as a fart in the wind. I sink, therefore I am.

Richard Kean is a Sydney-based artist (in such contexts)

Conversation with Ron McBurnie

By Jonathan McBurnie

Jonathan McBurnie: In the last few years, you have been making en Plein-air drawings in many different places. What brought this on? Was this a conscious decision made in order to get away from the studio environment, or a way to make work while abroad?

Ron McBurnie: There were a couple of factors involved, the first related to the amount of time I was stuck in the studio working on the large landscape etchings. When I began the outdoor work I enjoyed getting outside as well as allowing myself the opportunity to complete a work in a couple of days rather than a month. I also enjoyed the company of others and being outdoors again after quite an absence from it. It became a very enjoyable thing to do. The last factor that led to my working outdoors was working with Euan Macleod, who had been working en Plein-air for some years before. It's something we did when he came up to Townsville or when I went down to visit in Sydney.

JM: Thinking of that afternoon I joined you and Robert Preston for some Plein-air drawing recently, and of you and Euan going out and finding places to draw, does company change the experience for you?

RM: In some ways the company has an effect on the way I work and the experience itself. Euan tends to work really quickly and there is an energy and immediacy in the way he works. He usually completes three to five works to my one so I always feel compelled to work faster in his company. Bob Preston and I work at a similar pace so there is no pressing rush to finish a work in one session. The last work we did in a raintree park in Townsville took us 8 different visits to complete.

JM: How have the drawings you made in the European countryside differed from the Australian drawings?

RM: The first of the recent major drawings I made in Europe were in 2009 while on a residency in Southern France. Before that time I was using a more painterly approach to en Plein-air, however as I was not able to carry too many materials, I brought

fountain pens and a little acrylic paint plus a box of watercolours (which I had not used for ages). These drawings were, for me, the beginning of a different approach to drawing, a little more like what I was doing in etching where the use of line is carried from the needle to the fountain pen in drawing. I also began to use sepia and dark brown inks to hopefully give the drawings a classical feel. Black seemed to be a little too harsh for the landscape I was working on in Alayrac.

I am not really sure if the drawings differ a lot from Europe to Australia. That's for others to decide. I usually just try to choose a subject or landscape that I can do something with and am able to enjoy looking at for a long time. I am always hoping that the landscape area I choose to work from will give up its secrets to me so that they will come through in the drawing. In the large *Oberon Tree*—a drawing made from a study of a tree in Oberon New South Wales—I was making a conscious reference to the prints of 17th Century Dutch and Flemish artists. I respond to work from certain periods in European art history. I feel part of it. I collect it. I feel quite comfortable making reference to it in my work.

JM: Do you see your drawings as an extension of your landscape-oriented etchings, specifically the Romantic Series etchings?

RM: I think the drawings are an extension of the landscape etchings but they are a little more related to the reality of what I am looking at. They are really studies of particular places and wouldn't exist without being in a place and responding to it. I have not as yet taken them to the next level as I do in the etchings which are often a distillation of several images and studies. The etchings usually pay specific homage to particular historical artists and their work in the imagery as well as through the specific mark making, whereas most of the drawings have a slightly more spontaneous approach.

JM: In terms of the Australian landscape, and considering the notions of colonial and post-colonial Australian art, do you see yourself as a part of the landscapes you draw and etch, or as an outsider looking in?

RM: I definitely see myself as part of the landscape rather than someone outside of it; but I also think that to draw landscape one needs to sit a little outside of it so that it can be abstracted enough to be transferred onto the paper. I definitely feel a sense of

place in some areas I go to and draw frequently. This feeling may not be the same as those described to me by my indigenous friends but I certainly have several important places in the landscape which I keep going back to visit or to draw.

Although I do feel very connected with the landscape I work in, I see my own work as well as my ancestry, as being firmly rooted in a European tradition, Scottish and English. I am proud of it. I am aware of the current interest in the Asia Pacific region but I keep being drawn back to a white European tradition which I continually draw my inspiration from. I know this is probably not a fashionable position but I am comfortable with this and over the years have learned a lot about it.

JM: That is interesting—I think of what first got me really thinking hard about landscape, which was a comment this guy made back in third year painting about how boring landscapes are, and I just thought ‘this guy must be crazy’, and it really made me want to make some really out there, ‘me’ landscapes. It took a while to get that going properly, but I really enjoy that feeling of contributing to a tradition that is particularly interesting here in Australia. People see it all as this uncool ‘colonial’ thing, but in a way it is bigger than that—yes, the colonials made landscapes, but the Aborigines have been making landscapes in many forms for eons. I think every culture has a relationship with the land they come from. For example, some of the colonials brought this very English, pastoral sensibility to the Australian landscape and it came out all weird and neither here-nor-there.

Are there any artists that didn’t quite get the whole landscape thing right that have had an influence on you? I always enjoyed the weird Bosch approach to landscape. Gary Panter’s *Dal Tokyo* comic strips and Russell Crotty spring to mind as well...

RM: I might have to think on this question for longer and pick a few of my favourites out. I agree with what you have said about the importance of landscape. If you lived in cities all your life I can see it would not be very important. There is definitely a strong landscape tradition in this country. It’s all around us if we just take time to look at it a little.

Apart from the Influence of Fred Williams and Lloyd Rees from Australia there are a number of artists for whom I have great admiration in regard to their landscapes. These are Samuel Palmer—mainly the early drawings and paintings as well as his etchings—Edward Calvert, the paintings of Adam Elsheimer, etchings of Hendrik Goudt and the engravings of Hendrik Goltzius, and Agedius Sadler. Presently I am looking at the watercolour landscapes of English artist Edward Burra. This guy was such a strange but interesting painter, as were others of the same period like Carel Weight whose landscapes were a little more urban and contained those almost falling figures. Edward Burra is someone I would like to learn more about. I like the paired down minimal quality of many of his pure landscape works.

JM: What kind of spiritual connotations does the Australian landscape have for you personally, if any?

RM: There are certain places I sometimes go to where I can say, "I am at peace in this place. I could die here." Those places are very spiritual for me. I also think that the Australian landscape has a certain sense of loneliness, isolation and toughness because of its size. That sense of isolation and vastness is for me quite spiritual and exciting. Maybe these are more romantic notions in my mind.

JM: One notion I have been interested in is the idea that through the process of colonisation, the vast unknown, *Terra Australis*, was reduced to a smaller Australia, no longer hypothetical but known. Through this process, the land was measured, surveyed, mapped, and quantified, and thus lost its mythical aspects to colonials, and this doesn't even cover the implications on Aboriginal culture, which is a whole other enquiry. For me, part of the appeal of making landscapes of Australia specifically, is the idea of re-mythologising the land. Does this idea appeal to you?

RM: I don't so much see what I do as re-mythologising the land as re-mythologising the landscapes I make from the land. Blake did this by presenting his own mythology about England. I think the land is what it is. I think that as you say about *Terra Australis* [being] reduced to a smaller Australia on paper, in maps, in books; I am in agreement.

But when we are going out into the landscape and seeing it and drawing it and walking through some of its remote and vast parts, it is quite a different experience to breaking it up conceptually.

Those of us who live in the suburbs or in cities live in measured and mapped environments. I agree that we have transferred these elements of many parts of the landscape but I still believe that many parts are open, untamed, unmapped, wild. These aspects are what interest me about the landscape itself. When I am drawing it though, I am trying to understand it, make it mine, fit it into my own structures, my own ways, create myths from it, fit it into my tradition. But it doesn't need me, and exists of itself.

JM: That's a really nice idea that appeals to me as well: that the land, the country, will still be here long after us, and will continue to grow and change. Who or what was it that got you first thinking about landscape in terms of artistic practice, if you can put your finger on it?

RM: Landscape has always been in my work from the very beginning. My mum painted several landscapes of one of the farms we lived on. I lived on farms from the age of 5. I worked on the land making fences, feeding animals, milking cows, finding cattle and bringing them home so I saw a fair bit of the land. My Dad also sold school buses so we would travel to different parts of the country with these show buses to show them to prospective clients. I saw a lot of country that way and still travel by car quite a lot and really enjoy the places I drive through. I began to make drawings of old trees when I was at high school. In regard to landscape as part of my artistic practice, I think it's always been part of my work. Many of the first paintings I did at college were all about living and working on the farm. Landscape has always been there but often inhabited by figures.

Whether figures inhabit the spaces I draw or not doesn't alter the fact that I am conscious of the different types of landscape I am making or drawing ideas from. Even in the *Rakes Progress* or the early suburban etchings I am looking at my own environment or places I have visited. The en plein air works are just extensions of these early works, often devoid of figures because there are no people in the places we paint or draw.

JM: It is often remarked that the European landscape tradition is in trouble, an unfashionable reminder of Australia's colonial period. Is this simply a cultural cringe associated with self-imposed political correctness and willingness to avoid anything remotely colonial-sounding? Exhibitions like *Landscape Too* will hopefully enable a more robust examination of these ideas.

*Jonathan McBurnie is a Sydney-based submerging artist and PhD candidate at Sydney College of the Arts.
Ron McBurnie is a North Queensland artist based in Townsville.*

Make it real (one more time)

It mostly looked like things I had seen before an image of the dock.
The water. The sky before a storm. Birds screeching louder and louder.
Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place here. You know
objects don't just fall from the sky. What is it called when you remember
something, like a bolt of lightning right between the eyes? Must be
something magnetic. We are magnets for mosquitos right now. The one
on my neck keeps going back for more. Every second turns to minute
to an hour. I can feel the wind picking up. My sleeve is moving. I think
my hand is twitching, I am not even sure anymore. The camera doesn't
blink. Behind me an umbrella flies off and hits the cameraman. He lets
out a yelp. Go find the balance, steady, concentrate. Focus, Breathe in,
Breathe out, Left right, Up, down. This is great, you've got real fish in
there. Move back on your line. Send me a picture. Wide awake. Dead
quiet. What day is this? Feels like Thursday. One of those days with an
R in it. Life can hinge on the smallest thing. Do you read me? Look at
the face from, like, behind. From the back see what's holding it up. The
camera's rolling. Forget the vibe. Lose that. Drop the veil.

ek.1 is Sydney-based collaborative duo Emma Hicks and Katie Louise Williams.

Landscape as Elsewhere

Kate Beckingham

A conversation in two parts. Part one: Email

Carla Liesch: What is it you are responding to when you address landscape in your practice?

Kate Beckingham: I use the landscape in my practice as a starting point for manipulation. I see empty landscapes as a type of base camp—the hard work hasn't even begun yet. My time spent photographing or collecting within a landscape is a real, bodily experience that then leads, or maybe not, in to my core investigation: exploring the tensions that can exist between the real and unreal.

CL: You have alluded to me previously that you do not think about your work specifically in relation to landscape. Could you expand on that?

KB: Maybe I used to approach the landscape in my work more explicitly, but now I see it as more of a balance point as the spaces around my work shift between the real and unreal. That the work has its genesis in landscape is just one element in this ongoing shifting. The elements I draw from my initial time within natural landscapes are generally pretty distant from the realisation of the work. Usually it will be a thought I had while walking or something about the way a rock sits. There is never a direct line from what I see in my real time spent in the landscape and what then appears in the constructed space of the work.

CL: So is the site you use as a starting point the 'real' that you then project the 'unreal' into? How do you construct the unreal?

The time spent in landscape is another thing. Maybe more like a memory that then feeds the creation of both real and unreal elements in the final work.

When I talk about the unreal I am talking directly to work that is created digitally using digital images or images taken from the Internet. They do not exist until I activate them through making the work.

Hayley Megan French: Thinking about the real and unreal, as artists working in Australia, is the landscape we inhabit physically the same as the landscape we inhabit imaginatively?

KB: I think I definitely inhabit landscape imaginatively because I'm always either thinking about leaving the city and entering the landscape or remembering past trips—either as a source for art-making or just general day-dreaming. The time that I am actually within landscape pales in comparison to time spent elsewhere. It's interesting though, how I don't consider the urban landscape that surrounds me on a daily basis in the same way I consider the natural landscape. The landscape, then, is something that exists 'elsewhere' or imaginatively.

HMF: Having recently completed a residency in Iceland, has the experience of being out of Australia affected the way you see or work with landscape in Australia?

KB: I think so, but not in really obvious ways. The Icelandic landscape is SO different from the Australian landscape that I paid close attention to everything while I was there: the smells, the sounds, the difference in light from the sun. And there was always this weird feeling of being simultaneously up high (like, literally on top of the world) and also being very low and being dwarfed by these epic rocks and mountains. Whereas before, when I would seek out landscapes in Australia, I would only really look at them in a visual way. That sounds weird but I would only consider them visually as something to be photographed and not really concentrate on background noise or scents or anything. I think this is now reflected in my work. Since I have been to Iceland, my practice is continuing to shift away from a purely photographic base and has started to become about creating an overall experience.



An example of a place where the artist has experienced struggle (2013)



Part two: In conversation

HMF: Kate, you mentioned that you realised in the past that you have viewed Australian landscape quite photographically, as an image. Do you have any ideas as to what might have caused that separation, between you and the particular landscape you are working with?

KB: It's only because I used to work purely with photography. I would go on drives specifically to seek out landscapes to photograph.

HMF: So what changed in Iceland then?

KB: It was knowing that I was only there for a short amount of time. Realising that it was so different, I had to try to take it all in. So I started to pay more attention to the sound and the general feeling and experience rather than view the space around me as something to be photographed. But also when I was in Iceland, everything was so beautiful, and so big. Eventually after a couple of times going out specifically to work, I realised my usual method was not working and I would not be able to replicate the grandness and the sublime nature of Iceland. So I became much more focused on what I was doing, what I was hearing and seeing and looking at, but without any real intention of 'a work', or using the actual photograph. Bringing it back to Australia, it's different again because I take the Australian landscape for granted. I can always just get in the car and go. If I don't get what I am after I can always return. Whereas when I was in Iceland there was a sense of immediacy. I knew I was only there for a short amount of time and had travelled so far with a lot of anticipation. That is what shifted. And maybe I have brought that back now into my practice by moving even further away from the photographic.

HMF: Just into your practice or also into your experience of landscape in Australia?

KB: I wouldn't say I have been in the landscape in Australia since coming back. I don't count Sydney. Landscape is elsewhere in Australia, for me.

HMF: I really like that statement. Landscape is elsewhere.

KB: It's something you plan to go to. I am going to get some nature. I am going away. I'm going. It's not, I'm in it. I don't feel like I am in landscape in Sydney, in my daily life. So between getting back from Iceland and now, I wouldn't say I have interacted with the Australian landscape. Landscape is like this other place, for me, in Australia. It is definitely somewhere I go to work, not to experience.

HMF: And that for you is to do with nature, because you want to have some kind of experience or connection to nature?

KB: Yes, because even in previous work—and now shifting away from photo exclusively—the work is still about experience, it is still about trying to create a new experience for the viewer or trying to recreate an experience that I have had. Because of this elsewhere-ness of landscape, it is a nice starting point. I can find places with no people quite easily, so it is like a blank canvas I can project my intentions onto and get a bounce back for the work. So in the end it is either, this is what I did in a landscape and this is your experience in the gallery; or using the blankness of the natural landscape to create an experience in the here and now, in the gallery, for the viewer. So that's why I seek out landscape, because of the emptiness it allows.

HMF: I also wanted to mention that I like that connection you made between landscape and day-dreaming.

KB: Yeah again it's that whole 'elsewhere' feeling. It's something that I plan to go to, or remember going to. People speak of the urban landscape, but for me, it has already been projected onto, and filled. When you go into the natural landscape, it is fresh. Saying the natural landscape can be manipulated sounds potentially problematic, but I think for my work—which is also about perception and time, and being within space—to leave one place and go elsewhere, even in that action there is enough to work with, something has already happened.

HMF: But you often make the work in retrospect.

KB: Yes definitely.

HMF: So there's also the movement back.

KB: Yes, in taking what has happened in my act of going out to make work and then coming back to make the work, there is a difference there.

CL: At the end of your Masters of Fine Art you were working with constructing imagined spaces. Has your work then developed to include more real spaces in the final product, rather than concentrating on the imagined space?

KB: Yes, I'm more interested in exploring the space between the unreal and imagined, and the real. I think it is a more interesting space for me now, to try and place the viewer within a site where things aren't easily defined, or there is a sort of element of delayed understanding. It allows the audience to shift their bodies as well, they move around the work, not immediately understanding what parts are 'real' and what parts I have constructed (or imagined). But, what really interests me is that, while the audience is moving between states, they are doing so in the space of the gallery, in real time. What the work is about is no longer as important to me as what happens around it. Thinking of the work I made for Alaska Projects, what was most important was the time spent between the two images.

CL: Could you explain that work?

KB: The Alaska work was called *An infinite number of paths between two points*. The work showed two photographs mounted behind a thick acrylic, placed on shelves. The works were facing away from each other so that while you could see elements of both, you could not see both images simultaneously. One work showed a digitally created mass, and the other image showed a sculptural form that was replicating that virtual mass. So the idea was that the viewer would have this moment of consideration: which one is real, which one is not real? They recognise that the works are a pair, they are definitely aesthetically similar but there are elements of the real and unreal in both. Ultimately then, the work happened as the viewer shifted between the two.

During my masters, I was much more concerned with what was happening within an image-space, within the constructed frame. Now I'm more interested in what happens around the work, when you are viewing it.

Kate Beckingham completed her Masters of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts in 2012 and recently undertook a residency in Iceland.

'Continuum of landscapes'

Extract from Saskia Beudel, *A Country in Mind: Memoir with Landscape*, UWA Publishing, Crawley, 2013, pp. 307–310.

In Walungurru a couple of mornings later the new slab at the base of the fuel pump was dense with graffiti that had been etched into concrete when it was still wet. As the storekeeper filled our tank, Alan commented on how rapidly the graffiti had appeared. 'The little bastards, they can't leave anything alone,' the storekeeper replied, refastening the padlock on the metal cage enclosing the pump. In the background an old woman crossed a bare piece of ground between the store and a row of houses, trailed by numerous dogs. The dogs erupted into a snarl of fighting and high-pitched yelps. The man went across with a tired unhurried gait, thin and hunched bonily at the shoulders, throwing stones to break up the dogs. 'Okay,' he said, leading us into the store in the same tired way.

Then we set off for the second time. Not far out of Walungurru lay a rusted wheelless vehicle by the side of the road, its tailgate angled partially onto the road, which the track had grown around in a curved deviation. I asked Alan to pull over so I could take a photo of the abandoned car. There was something about it that appealed to me, I'd been noticing it as we passed to and fro. It was a Toyota troopy with a buckled roof, rusted into camouflage patterns of oxides, pale blues and greens, no windows, one door twisted off, and upholstery stripped back to metal frameworks. I was reminded of a piece of video art I'd seen at Documenta in Kassel, Germany, in the early nineties. Made by a German artist whose name I can't recall, it used set destination points as a way to record a particular location. From inside a car, the camera was pointed up a suburban street, presumably by the artist, to settle on the farthest point in the distance that it was possible to reach by road. The journey to this point was recorded from inside the car as it travelled. Once the end of the street was reached, a new vista was selected, which the car then journeyed toward, and so on. Any material recorded was thus, to some extent at least, predetermined. As I watched, the banal views of urban and suburban streets with their parked cars, driveways, rooftops and treetops, slowly began to take on intrigue and resonance. Glimpses were afforded, in passing, of almost motionless streetscapes, devoid of people, that all seemed permeated by German wintry

greys and solid-brick browns. The whole thing began accumulating a sombre and elegiac air. The car was cruising the streets, so the views were translated at cruising pace, and lopped by the frame of the car door window, or the point where this window joins the front windscreen. The views were thus doubly or triply framed, by the camera, and by the viewing apertures of the car. It was the year that Jeff Koons's *Puppy* was displayed outside the main exhibition building, and other exhibits included a number of industrial-scale installations. But these unobtrusive streetscapes, made slightly tremulous because shot through a layer of glass, lingered unexpectedly with me over the years.

Much of my experience of the Sandy Blight Junction Road was similarly at cruising speed dictated by the state of the track – how eroded, how difficult to detect, how deep the sand, how rocky or steep, how close shrub thickets pressed against the car's sides. Here at the northernmost reach of the Sandy Blight Junction Road, next to the derelict Toyota, I decided to photograph every abandoned vehicle we passed along the way. The vehicles would become reference points to trigger the taking of an image. This was partly a response to how difficult desert landscapes are to photograph. Neither the scale nor the wealth of geological, topographical, or ecological detail readily lends itself to the picture frames provided by the camera. Author Jonathan Raban refers to an American landscape that similarly evades the camera – the prairies of eastern Montana. His camera is inept in the wide-open spaces that lack conventional framing devices, and he complains of the 'congenital tunnel vision' of the camera lens, quipping that his photos always end up looking like 'a hundred perfectly exposed snapshots of a badly maintained golf course'.¹ The country we were travelling had plenty of potential framing devices. Instead, it was the very heterogeneous character of the place that meant my photos never seemed to do justice to their complexity. Just as I began to get a sense of one swathe of landscape, it would abruptly alter – its soil, form, and vegetation. ...

When we think deserts, we readily bring to mind open stretches of almost undifferentiated space. But it is a desert of complexity that I mostly think back on – a desert of micro-topographies and entanglements of detail. At first I thought it was my own lack of familiarity with this landscape that made it difficult to grasp. But when I began to read arid zone ecology I realised I was grappling with what arid zone ecologists recognise as some of the defining characteristics of the uniqueness of Australian deserts, as compared to other well-studied deserts of the world – their very unpredictability, both spatially and temporally.

Endnotes

¹ Jonathan Raban, *Badland: an American Romance*, Picador, London, 1996, pp. 60–62.

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Saskia Beudel is a novelist, essayist, and non-fiction writer who first trained as a visual artist. Saskia is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Sydney, based at Sydney College of the Arts.

sun beating
chasing shade
rocks underfoot
scrape and squeak

—
Alice Buscombe

27

V

Everything is bigger and deeper than you know and realise.

Everything is okay.

I can feel you deeply and I think that you can feel me too.

I feel a great and devastating sense of loss when I look at you. Somewhere between my collarbone and the centre of my chest I feel something alive and warm, swelling. It feels as though it is trying to climb up through my throat and out of my mouth. In these few unconscious moments my mind asks how and why, then, as I become aware of my body's reaction I blame my eyes for overwhelming me. Ever since I was young this nervously warm feeling has overtaken my body whenever I stare at certain things. I wonder if this psychological turned physical feeling made its way into the world would it cascade out in clear language or would it stumble through a series of grunts?

I have been watching you for so long, attempting to remember and make sense of every movement, trying to piece together those that are missing in between. It's likely that you have no idea that I have been here for so long. I look at you, I put myself around you; you change me, the way I relate to people and myself, but you remain the same, largely unmoved by my presence. I like to think that we are together but I have come to realise that you don't need me like I need you.

I am not the only one, the only one trying to connect with you, the only one trying to feel you.

You keep putting up walls – keeping us at a distance. The walls you erect change daily. Sometimes they are silent and calm; other times they are violent and cause bodies to relocate. I can feel your power. Your unpredictable nature excites me as much as it scares me.

Messih, *The distance between us*, 2013

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Gemma Messih is an emerging artist based in Sydney. Messih holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (First Class Honours) from The College of Fine Arts, UNSW (2013).

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Analogue Landscapes and Digital Ecologies

Landscape is a paradox for me. The word 'landscape' always betrays more than it defines. I don't think we consider, and therefore do not talk of something as 'landscape' until it has already become more than just landscape. It is not, until it is more than it is. The act of naming becomes part of an act of exaltation. Landscape, is landscape already once transformed; transformed by human imaginative interrogation, or emotional investment, and so any discussion is at once a discussion of the thing before the word, (the physical?) and everything which makes the word inadequate (the metaphysical?).

This means that every landscape is both imaginative and physical, not one or the other, or one without the other. We cannot speak of 'loci' without the 'genius loci,' because to speak of Place is to bring life to the Spirit of Place. Any self-abnegating approach to the contemplation of landscape must partially destroy that which it attempts to discover. There is, literally and metaphorically, no landscape in which 'we' are not indelibly present.

And so we are forced from a perspective on landscape to a broader idea of an 'ecological perspective.' Ecology can acknowledge that the viewed is incomplete without the viewer for it concerns itself with organisms in relation to their environment(s), taking seriously the contribution of both. Rather than the possible 'distancing effect' of landscape, we could speak of the 'inhabiting effect' of ecology. It puts landscape into a helpful framework for discussing our meaningful participation 'in landscape.'

I have recently had two powerful, if different, experiences which I understand 'ecologically'. I have returned to Australia after a long period away and moved - near beach and bushland - to the central coast. I am also learning to program sound, creating work within the max/msp/jitter environment. In both cases I have been confronted with new landscapes: physical and metaphysical.

Musically, there are two powerful discoveries I have come to in exploring programming. The first is it allows me to be both bound to and unbounded by the theory of sound; to refigure my sonic thinking from first principles in a very practical way. In some senses programming can be quite abstract for me, though ironically it makes the properties of sound far less abstract. Further, while the principles of sound ground the programming,

the realities of sound as we know and can experience it in the analogue world are removed. If you can imagine a sonic behaviour you can turn it in to a real sound, even if it doesn't - shouldn't - exist in the 'real world.' More tantalising still, it doesn't even need to be a sonic behaviour. In the digital world we play directly with is and os, like atoms, and the components of a program have infinite possibilities for appropriation and re-appropriation. There is something almost evolutionary in the way that the parts of programs may move from one program to another across disciplines. New species emerge in different environments, bound by their phylogeny, but distinguished by their form and function.

In this environment imagination literally builds physical entities from scratch, and out of, as good as nothing. My trepidation about the inadequacy of the word landscape has no traction here. The blur between what is real and what is not dissolves, or becomes an arbitrary and uncomfortable imposition. The separation of physical and metaphysical is so close that it becomes negligible as the two intermingle.

Once you have built something which is not 'real', it is returned to the 'real world.' In the case of working to image, deciding what an image might 'mean' in sound is an exciting task, particularly because the sound comes to 'mean', in image too. While the sound might be conceived separately, and may be controlled or restricted by different aspects of the image, they both make and unmake one another in the moment of performance, with no hint of this separation and hierarchy.

The other discovery has been the power of understanding sound and music as 'behaviours' rather than fixed sonic events. In composing with pen and paper (the 'analogue' way), I am, ideally, attempting to create definite and immutable sounds whose form can be reproduced within a tolerable range of variation from performance to performance. 'Form' is a classical compositional principle. Implicit in this classical idea, however, is fixed form, and while there are ways to avoid this, it is a strong paradigm, which has less practical necessity and historic imperative in a digital ecology. Form can be considered something much deeper, more structural, and need not be a superficial identifier as it has often been.

In writing a program for sound, I develop some sort of algorithmic idea, then I 'watch, with my ears' how it behaves when I leave it alone. I refine the behaviour of the algorithm according to what I hear, and what I don't. In one sense I have complete control, but in a much more satisfying way I am also at the mercy of this imaginary landscape of my own invention. I imagine standing in a small secluded part of a beach to the south of where I live. The headlands create a very particular acoustic there, which deliberately or not is exploited by different choruses of cicadas, sounding in waves - how apt - in the summer months. Slightly moving your head will reconfigure the performance, and focusing your attention on different parts of this ecstatic cacophony will change the song being sung. There are also two songs. The first is the song itself, and the other is the image of that song, distorted and enhanced by the space it inhabits.

I have long felt that listening can meaningfully be a much broader and deeper activity than seems intuitive, and as a musician it certainly is for me. While it might seem obvious that first and foremost we are seeing a landscape, I am invariably more interested in listening to it. I don't mean this exactly as I do in the previous example, where the cicada song is literally the environmental sound, but rather in how the qualities of a given landscape, physical and metaphysical, might be heard. I have also already suggested that we don't really ever know landscape in the uncomplicated way implied by just seeing or just listening. We are more deeply invested in it than any approach which limits itself to sensory perception, or constrains sensory perception to the purely real and physical.

The question 'how might a landscape sound' might not seem very odd, but 'what music does the movement of the planets make' begins to seem more esoteric so some, and yet different discussions of 'The Harmony of the Spheres' have recurred since Ancient Greece, through Medieval Europe and Sufic Mysticism to name but two traditions. Of course scientific rationalism has changed the purpose of the question, but also offered new ways of answering it.

The Harmony of the Spheres is a cosmological approach to listening, and while this might seem a difficult stance to propose in the here and now, if the earth has a song, our landscapes must have songs too and there is now, more than ever, an environmental imperative to consider how we might, or if we choose to listen, transcribe and invent them. If landscape attempts impossibly to remove us from what it presents, then an ecology, even a digital ecology, might be a new way of re-inventing our analogue landscapes.

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Chris Williams is a composer from Australia who recently completed a Master's of Music at the University of Oxford. He is currently working both in the UK and Australia, though he finds the light and sound more exciting in Australia (not to mention the mangoes).

Act one: Conversation with a blind man.

1. Tell me about the light.

2. What light?
I mean, what type of light? There are many.

Pause

Shall I tell you about the light on a surface, for instance?

Well, *that* light says more to me about the object it is reflecting than the nature of the light itself.

Pause

1. But, the object has its own nature, regardless of the presence or absence of light.

2. Well, in this case, the light defines this object.

1. Yes, but only to those who can see.

Pause

1. Tell me about the other light.
The one I can feel.

2. Ah.
That light is the Sun.

Act Two: Conversation with a scientist.

1. Is the sun truly a circle?

Pause

2. A circle, did you say?

1. Yes. Or is it just my vision that is circular?

Pause

2. But a circle, as defined, only exists on one plane.
A circle is singular, flattened.
The sun is not flat.

Are you asking whether or not it is a true sphere?

1. No, I'm asking whether the sun is truly a circle.
I can't see it as a sphere. I can't look at it long enough to notice any depth shadows.

Pause

2. No, it's not a circle.

Pause

1. Is it a sphere, then?

2. No, it's a Yellow Dwarf.

Act Three: Conversation with a lepidopterist.

1. Hello.

2. Hello.

1. The Golden Sun Moth is a medium-sized, day-flying moth.

Pause

I have one in this specimen jar.

Examines jar

2. Day-flying?

You mean diurnal, of course.

1. Oh. Are you a scientist as well?

2. Yes, didn't you read the last Act?

Pause

1. Well, chronotypes, circadian rhythms, they're all quite interesting, really.
Shows how we are all slave to the sun, in the end.

Pause

2. Can I have another look at your moth?

Act Four (Final): Conversation with a stranger.

1. Excuse me, please.
You're standing in my sun.

2. Your sun?
Ha! The sun belongs to us all.

1. The sun belongs to nobody.
We belong to it.

Pause

I'd still like it if you moved out of the way.

2. Moves

Is that better?

1. Not really.
Now you're standing on my shadow.

2. Oh, now you're just being difficult.
Besides, you could have more than one shadow.

1. Well, that all depends on the time of day, and the angle of light.
Right now, I have one.

Pause

And you're still standing on it.

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Ally Bisshop is an artist and researcher who splits her time between Berlin and Sydney, and is currently completing a PhD through the College of Fine Arts, Sydney.

Welcome to Australia, now in HD

Australia - we have a continent all to ourselves, an incredibly rare attribute to any nation state. It can be a strange and alien place to visitors but for its twenty four million or so many inhabitants, we still call Australia home. Ironically and perhaps very "Unaustralian" - a term typical of the jingoistic nature of political discourse here - the current government that is so very *Australian* would allow the very airline that affects such warmth and nationalism, to falter and sink. We are a country that is increasingly Corporational and cut-throat whilst still singing the positives of mateship and egalitarianism. We also travel far more overseas than travel in "our own backyard". This perhaps has more to do with the fact that I spoke of initially, not only is the whole continent the same country but it feels as though we are very very far from the rest of the world. So when it comes to viewing our own country - a unique and almost impossibly beautiful place - like sport, we do it most often from the safety and security of our own lounge rooms.

The Western European tradition of categorisation, order, reason and progress can easily be categorised by that most pernicious yet ubiquitous vehicle for viewing the Australian landscape, The Television Screen. We know Australia is a land of sweeping plains, a place where brumbies roam the mountains and camels swelter in the deserts, but how many of us have actually been to the Kimberley, or Alice Springs or Kakadu? We love our country and its stories and myths, but sadly more often than not, they are just that, myths. *The Man from Snowy River*, *Mad Max*, and Baz Luhrmann's ridiculously extravagant exercise *Australia* continue to reinforce the romantic idea we have about ourselves through the language of landscape, via the screen whether it's the TV screen or at the cinema. Shaun Gladwell of course, as well as Ben Quilty and others continue to perpetuate the classic Australian rebel male archetype such as Mad Max, in Shaun's case by film, and in Quilty's case most recently via "The most honourable Anzac", even though it is an increasingly outdated, unrealistic and simply romanticised version of ourselves. Perhaps that's why it is so powerful. Every culture has a Warrior Myth.

Landscape has several meanings of course, in the Fine Arts context, of which most of us are well versed, when you hear the term “landscape” one immediately thinks of a rectangular frame, often golden, holding within it an expansive, sublime image of nature, in all its wondrous tranquility or magnificent truculence. But the term landscape can also be used to describe “landscaping”, or to “landscape” ones backyard with trees and shrubs and making a once unruly piece of nature into a nicely maintained and *ordered* expanse. This is the landscape most Australians (especially it seems Sydneysiders) really think about when they hear the word landscape, an idea that has gained even more traction with shows such as *The Block* and so on.

Perhaps then the finest exemplars of the Australian landscape are our cinematographers - who can forget the surreal and sublime *Picnic at Hanging Rock* seducing the viewer with the vastness and dreamy nature of the Australian bush or conversely the exceeding normality of the Australian landscape in darker tropes such as *Snowtown* and *The Boys*; that show the suburban, coastal and semi rural landscape that most of us actually experience day to day. Last but not least, the final scenes of *Romper Stomper*, an arresting end to a chilling film, but one of Australia’s best – It shows the dark and torn sand cliffs of Point Addis, Victoria in all their malevolent beauty, and the choppy and stormy sea that almost any Australian would have experienced. Even at opposite ends of the continent we can still experience the very same landscape.

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Luke Strevens is a Sydney-based artist who recently completed his Master of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.

hot rock ledge
an edge against
the sky

*Alice Buscombe is a visual artist from Melbourne and has been living
and working in the Northern Territory for the past four years.*

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Appendix C: Work presented for examination

See Where it Drifts, 27th February 2015
Sydney College of the Arts Galleries







Landscape Cut-out 2, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 1.5m x 1.5m



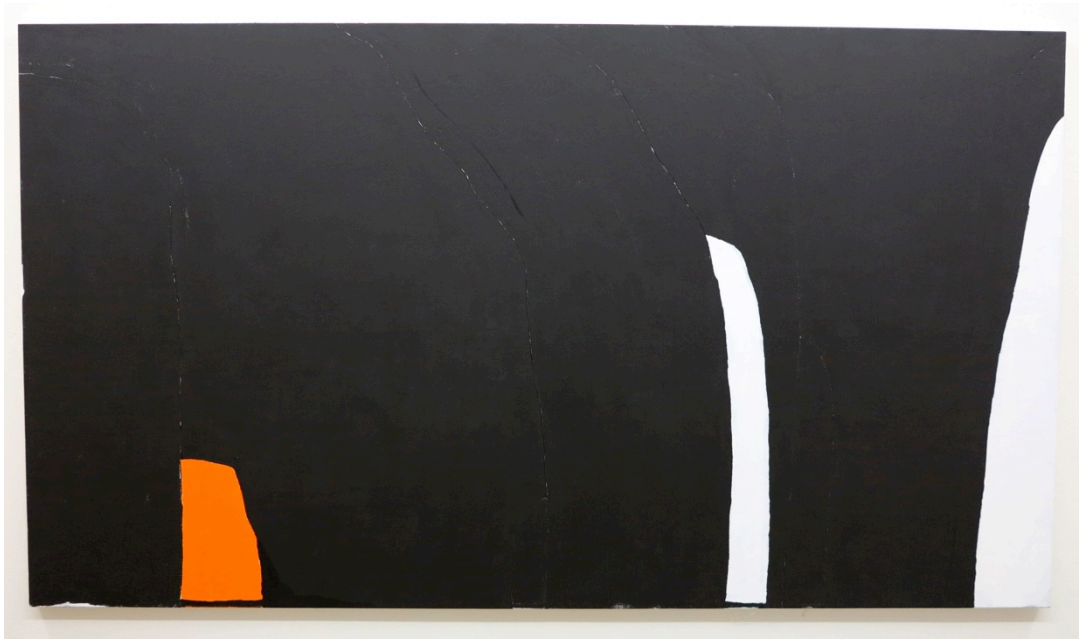
Landscape Cut-out 3, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 1.5m x 1.5m



Landscape Cut-out, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 1.5m x 1.5m



Landscape, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 1m x 1m



Another echo, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 1.5m x 2.7m