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Tracey Moffatt

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## Changing Images: An Interview With Tracey Moffatt

### Abstract

Tracey Moffatt is one of Australia's most exciting young experimental film makers. She made her debut with *Nice Coloured Girls* which won the prize for the Most Innovative Film at the 1988 Festival of Australian Film and Video, Frames. She also won the Frames Best New Australian Video Award with a five minute Aboriginal and Islander dance video called *Watch Out*. Tracey Moffatt believes that black women have either been overlooked or misrepresented in films made by white people. Her aim is to change this image, she is determined to show that there are strong black women, survivors. Not only does she want to change the images. She wants to present the new images in a different way. 'I really wanted to avoid the clichés and didacticism of earlier films about my people. The last thing I wanted was the usual groans, "Here we go again, another predictable documentary about Aborigines"'. She has achieved both aims in her film *Nice Coloured Girls* where three young Aboriginal girls go out in the Cross, find a Captain (Sugar Daddy) and roll him.

# Changing Images

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH TRACEY MOFFATT

### INTRODUCTION

Tracey Moffatt is one of Australia's most exciting young experimental film makers. She made her debut with *Nice Coloured Girls* which won the prize for the Most Innovative Film at the 1988 Festival of Australian Film and Video, *Frames*. She also won the *Frames* Best New Australian Video Award with a five minute Aboriginal and Islander dance video called *Watch Out*. Tracey Moffatt believes that black women have either been overlooked or misrepresented in films made by white people. Her aim is to change this image, she is determined to show that there are strong black women, survivors. Not only does she want to change the images. She wants to present the new images in a different way. 'I really wanted to avoid the clichés and didacticism of earlier films about my people. The last thing I wanted was the usual groans, "Here we go again, another predictable documentary about Aborigines"'. She has achieved both aims in her film *Nice Coloured Girls* where three young Aboriginal girls go out in the Cross, find a Captain (Sugar Daddy) and roll him.

The film however is not just a simple reversal of Aboriginal women's roles from victims to survivors. Using experimental film techniques the film relates the life of these modern urban Aboriginal women to the lives of the Aboriginal women living in Australia at the time of the white invasion. Tracey Moffatt's concerns go beyond this Australian issue to the broader issue of male/female white/black relationships. *Nice Coloured Girls* is a very important work of art when considering the whole issue of Imperialism, Capitalism, Patriarchy and Racism.

Apart from being an independent film and video maker she is also a photographer. Her work is represented in many places including the Australian National Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria. Her latest series of photographs *Some Lads* was featured in the NADOC 86 exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander Photographers. This series like *Nice Coloured Girls*

is a reaction to traditional images of Aborigines by white Australians. Tracey Moffatt says.

The concept behind this series of studio portraits of black male dancers came about in reaction to images of black Australian people I was continually seeing presented around me by photographers in books, magazines and galleries. These images tended to always fit into the realist documentary mode usually reserved for the 'ethnographic subject'.

Such examples of this style of representation of indigenous groups exist in all European-colonised countries e.g. North America, Brazil, etc. This 'record them now before they die out' mentality has never been exclusive to Australia.

*Some Lads* takes the utmost example of such a preoccupation – being the mid-nineteenth century scientific studio studies of Aborigines by the early pioneer photographers – but changes the intentions. Here I use a studio situation, the lighting flat, and a similar blank backdrop. The voyeuristic quality remains, heralding the use of the black frame (edge of negative), the window-like frame within the frame. Here I encourage my subjects to enjoy the staring camera (in contrast to the uncomfortable glaring in the earlier century photographs), to intentionally pose and show off. In an attempt to dispense with the seriousness and preciousness, it captures a lyricism and rarely assigned bold sensuality.

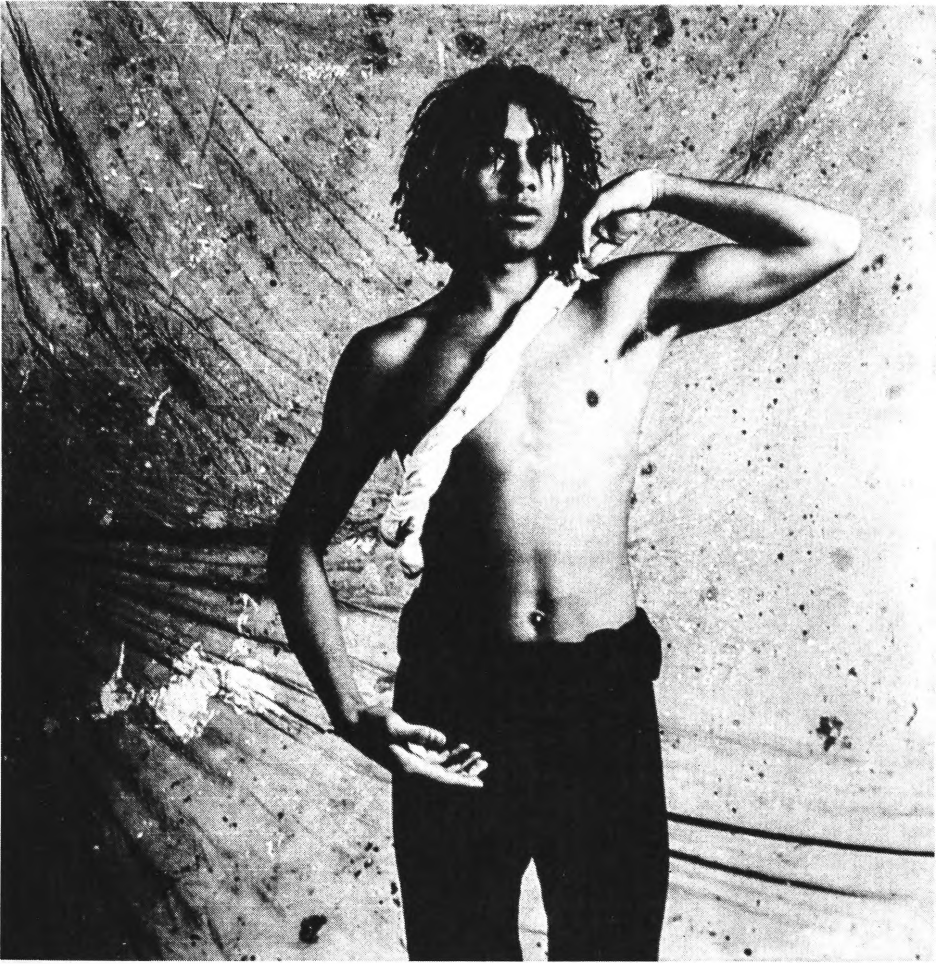
This interview took place at Tracy Moffatt's Sydney home on August 3rd, 1988.

Anna Rutherford

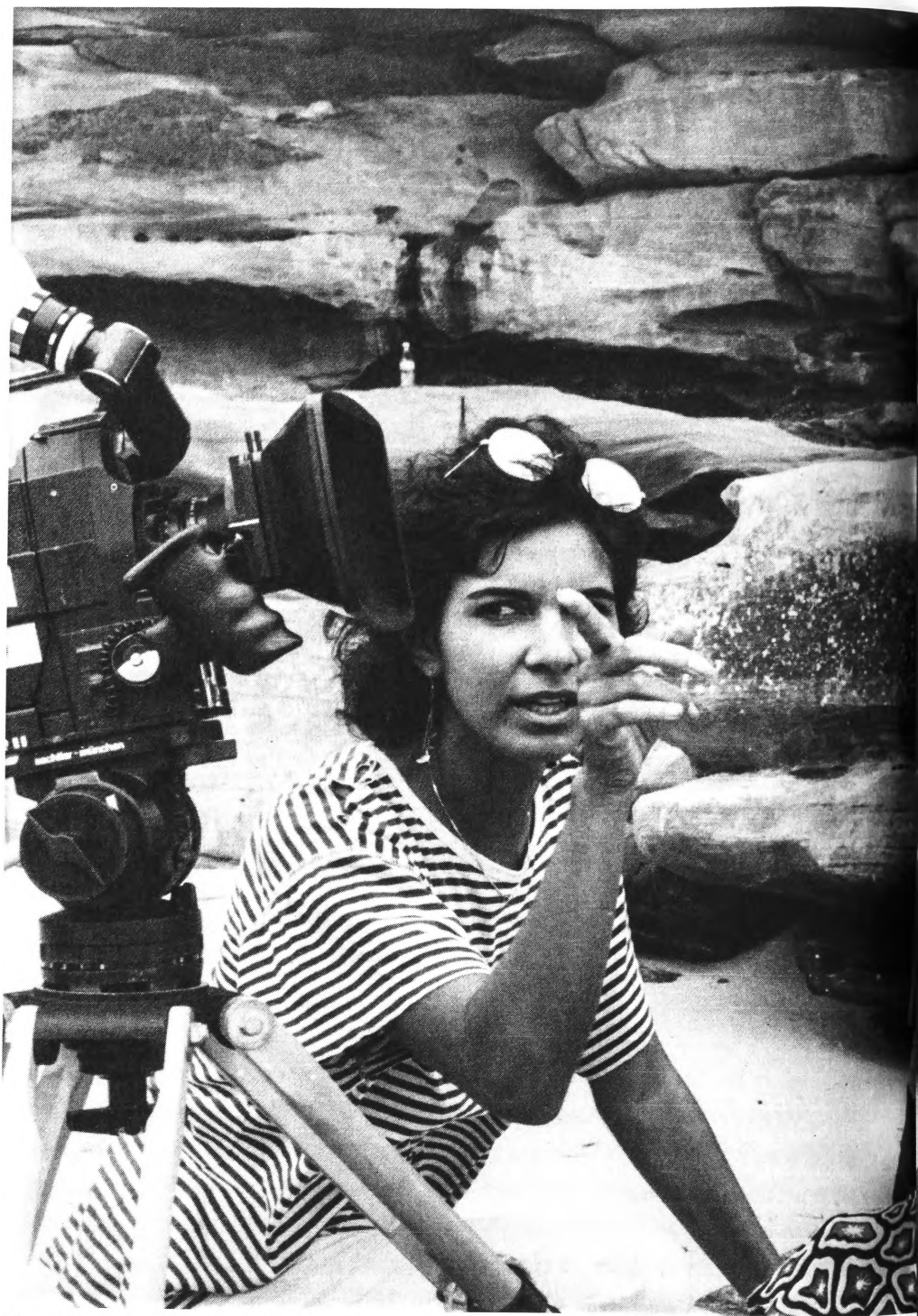
## INTERVIEW

*Hanif Kureishi, the director of My Beautiful Laundrette, received a lot of criticism from the Pakistani community in England because he portrayed a certain section of that community not only as out and cut capitalists ('fat cats' as Salman Rushdie called them) but as racists as well. You must have suffered a similar reaction from certain members of the Aboriginal community who objected to your portrayal of Aboriginal women in Nice Coloured Girls.*

Yes. I'm an Aboriginal film maker and from certain members of the Aboriginal scene you are pressured into always having to present a positive view of Aboriginal life which I find really annoying. It's very one-sided. I'm interested in saying things about black Australia but I'm interested in saying them in a different way filmically. The film, *The Fringedwellers* is a very Hollywood version of Aboriginal life. There's an attempt to show Aboriginals as human beings with human emotions which is all very nice but it was just a very glossy view I thought, which annoyed a lot of Aboriginal people. For example there was no mention of Land Rights throughout the film. That



Photograph from 'Some Lads' series.  
Australian National Gallery, Canberra.



Shooting on location, *Nice Coloured Girls*



Tracy Moffatt and actress Rosemary Meagher.

doesn't mean that I think that just because you're making a film about Aboriginal people you have to talk about Land Rights but Bruce Beresford, the white director, was wanting to make a film about contemporary Aboriginal society. He hadn't been in Australia for ten years, then came back thinking he could make a film about Black Australia not realising that a lot has changed in ten years. Blacks have become more political. That is one criticism I have of his film.

My film, *Nice Coloured Girls*, concerns three Aboriginal girls who go out in the night in Kings Cross, Sydney, pick up a 'Captain' which is an Aboriginal term for a sugar daddy, have a good night and in the end roll him which is a very real thing, it happens. I used to do it, I used to do it with my sisters. I have been criticized by older Aboriginal women for presenting Aboriginal women like that. But I say to them, 'We're not little angels'. Look at the reactions of the Italian community to *The Godfather* when it was first released. And now fifteen years later no one blinks an eyelid. I think it will be the same with my film. In five years time people will wonder what all the fuss was about.

*Do you think there is a big gap between your generation and the older generation?*

Yes, but I think I'm yet another generation. I'm not the generation that set up the tent embassy in 1972 and fought the Land Rights battle. I didn't set up the Medical Services, I didn't set up the Legal Services. I've always known there is a legal service and a medical service; I'm of the generation who have benefitted from the work of Kath Walker and so many others like her. We're a different generation, a generation that feels comfortable in talking about Aboriginal society whether it be through film or writing or art.

*Can you say something about your background?*

I came from Brisbane. My people grew up on an Aboriginal mission outside of Brisbane called Cherbourg. I was fostered out to a white family along with my brother and two sisters. It wasn't however the situation that happened to so many Aboriginal mothers having their children taken away from them. It wasn't like that. It wasn't against my mother's will. My mother knew my foster mother. We grew up with this white family but still had a lot to do



with our black relatives; thank God for that. So I have a lot of black relations and a lot of white relations. I went to art school and studied film when I was nineteen. Afterwards I went to Europe and travelled around - that's when I went to Denmark back in 1979. So I come from an art school background, not a film background, I studied film but not in a formal way.

In 1982 I moved to Sydney and became involved in the independent film making scene here which has been very supportive of Aboriginal people as far as film goes. Lots of films came out in the seventies that were produced by left wing independent white film makers here in Sydney, like *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, *Lousy Little Sixpence*, *Wrong Side of the Road*. Very important films and very good films but I didn't feel the need to copy that style of film even though I was influenced by it. I didn't feel I had to set out to make films about the struggle for Land Rights, mining on Aboriginal land, issues dealing with racism which people automatically think that that's what you're going to do because you're a black film maker.

I'm really interested in experimental film making. I know a lot of Aboriginal people would think that that was being esoteric and not dealing with the really important things, like the appalling health problems of so many in the Aboriginal community, or deaths in custody, that sort of thing. And I do work in that area as well. I have been invited to go to Perth in November in order to make a film for some Aboriginal women. It is going to be about some Western Australian Aboriginal women who want to talk about deaths in custody. I'm willing to do that sort of film but I don't think it needs to be done in a straightforward documentary way so I'll be doing something different for them, for instance like the video you just saw (*Watch Out*). The other women who worked on that series produced five minute pieces about Australian women using archival footage to talk about the history of Australian women. But I thought a lot could be said in another way. There's just a dance sequence intercut with family photographs of the girl who choreographed the piece and who appears in the video as the lead dancer. Statements need to be made, but what I'm trying to do is say them in a more interesting way. I don't believe in having to talk down to Aboriginal people. I don't want to make my films simplistic, assuming that people can't understand them unless they are simple. Take the writing of Colin Johnson for instance. He writes for any audience. He is not choosing his audience

and neither am I. I think it is very patronising to assume that people are not going to understand your work.

*Apart from being a film maker you are also a photographer.*

Yes. In between films I work as a freelance photographer. I do a lot of work with the Aboriginal Island Dance Theatre who have recently toured in Germany. It's the only Aboriginal Black Dance School in Australia. The school teaches traditional Aboriginal dance, they have traditional tutors who come down from the North as well as Islander people. You have to be Aboriginal or Islander to get into the school. They also teach jazz ballet, Afro-jazz, tap dance.

*You've just done a video on AIDS.*

Yes. I was asked by the Aboriginal Medical Service to put together something that Aboriginal people would find interesting to watch, not a straight health video style sort of thing. And so I made *Spread the Word*. We don't go into the history of AIDS or what it is, it is about how to not get it which is the most important thing. It has done very well and I think it is going to be screened on Channel Four in London. There was a conference on AIDS recently over there and all the Australians brought over their commercials and the only thing they were interested in looking at over there was this film we had produced for the Aboriginal community. Not only urban based Aboriginals but also Aboriginal communities living in traditional situations in Arnhem Land have liked it and related to it so I think I have been able to cater for most Aboriginal people. It was important to make this film for Aboriginal people because they are sick of looking at white people. We were giving out the same information – use condoms, don't share needles if you do use drugs – but it was brown people saying it and therefore I think you are going to get Aboriginal people's attention. We also used Aboriginal humour in the video to get the message across, little 'in' jokes and Aboriginal English which is different to English English or white Australian English.

*Do you think that the films you have made and plan on making will have an impact on the white community as well as the Aboriginal community.*

Yes, I think so. *Nice Coloured Girls* has been screened in many festivals around the world. I have been invited to the Edinburgh Film Festival because they are having a retrospective of Australian independent film making and I have been invited to give a talk along with two of Australia's top film theorists. I think my work is receiving attention and awards not just because it is dealing with Aborigines or because I am an Aborigine but because I am experimenting with different film forms which is what I want to do. *Nice Coloured Girls* has been in a lot of festivals. I went to Italy with it last year and it has recently been on in New York in a showing of films run by the Collective for Living Cinema under the title 'Sexism, Colonialism, Misinterpretation: A Corrective Films Service', a series of films all made by women and which aimed to look at patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism from an oppositional perspective.

*In what ways would you describe your work as experimental?*

First of all because it is challenging previous styles of representation of Aborigines in film. It's not going for the straight documentary or realist drama. Films that usually deal with black people, both drama and documentary are always realist in their attempt and I'm not concerned with capturing reality, I'm concerned with creating it myself. And that way the film has a very artificial look about it, in the use of sets and installation and that sort of thing. I like to avoid on location shooting. I like the control of the studio rather than taking the camera out. I'm not concerned with verisimilitude, with the camera seeing everything and being there. In saying this I'm not putting down previous films made by white film makers about Aborigines, for example those very good documentaries that I mentioned earlier and also the work of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies which is into ethnographic film making and which is very useful. But I don't think I need to work in that sort of style.

*Do you see a better future for Aboriginal people in Australia?*

As far as film making and people becoming involved in the arts I'm very positive about that. The Land Rights situation has become better but we've

got these liberal<sup>1</sup> governments back in again and they're going to be changing things.

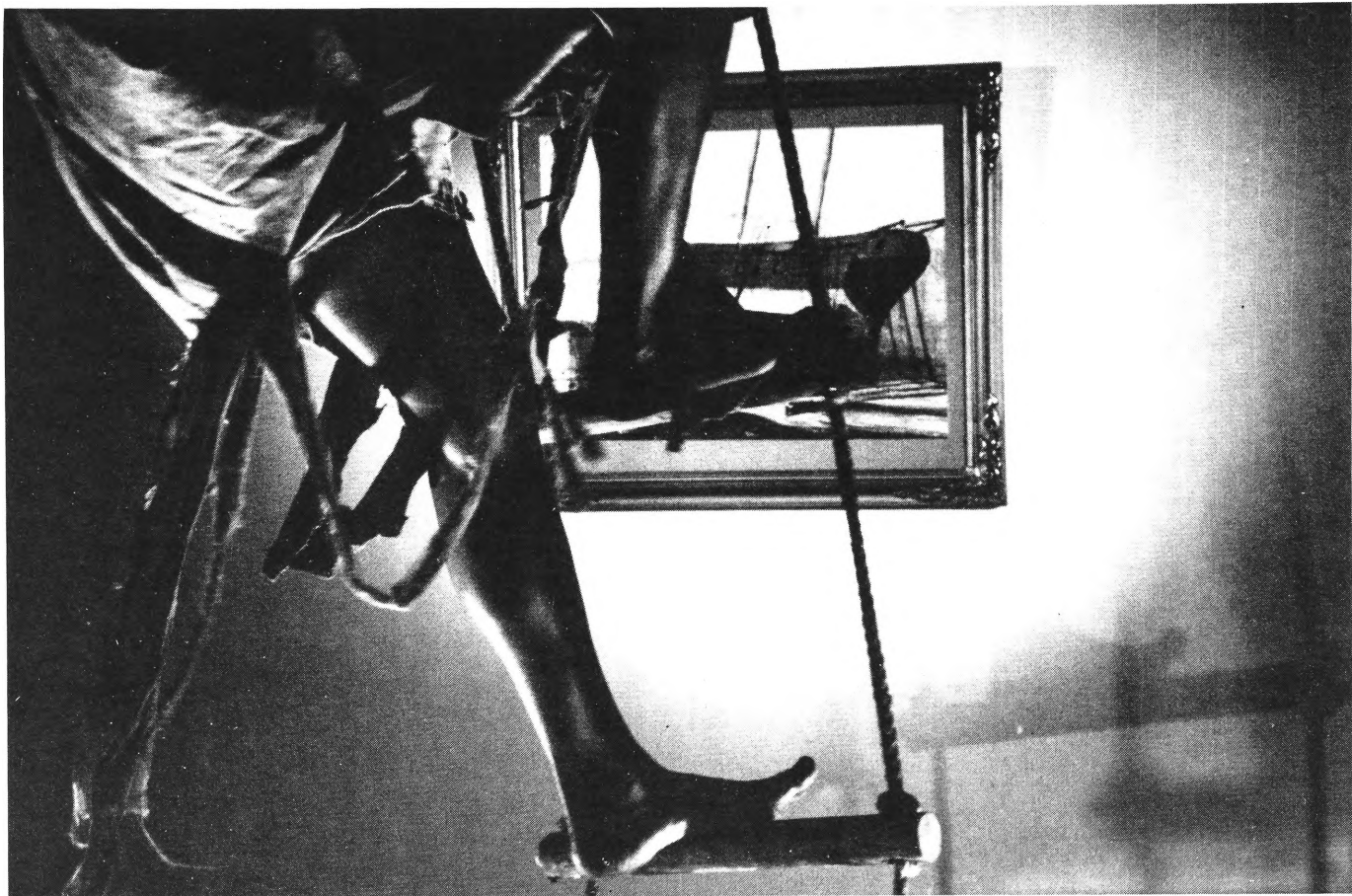
One important area is the schools where it is essential that Aboriginal Studies courses be introduced. I wish I had had Aboriginal Studies courses when I was at school. I grew up in Queensland - no mention of anything Aboriginal in those schools. I also think that white Australian kids would be interested.

*Do you think that there is a more positive and open attitude on the part of white Australians to the Aborigines?*

Well where I live in Sydney, in Glebe, I'm surrounded by people involved in the arts, film, they are people doing alternative things and because you are surrounded by a lot of good people you begin to think, 'Oh yeah, things are great', but if you take a trip to the country and you're not allowed into the pub because you're black, that's when you realise that things have not changed. You can't go around presuming that things are becoming groovy, that we're a multicultural society and that people are accepting different looking people these days. I go home to Queensland and nothing's changed. It depresses me. But I want to be optimistic.

#### NOTE

1. In Australia the Liberal party represents the conservative element of the society.



Still: *Nice Coloured Girls*



1. Map of Australian Aboriginal arts and crafts centres c. 1980.

## The Dreamers Awake: Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art

A mere twenty years ago most people thought of contemporary Australian Aboriginal arts and crafts as primarily the production of bark paintings and boomerangs, mostly for the tourist trade, or as the European-style water-colour landscapes of the Aranda artists from the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission east of Alice Springs, of whom the best-known was Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). Collecting Western institutions were generally museums whose interest was primarily in the ethnographic aspects of the art. Since then there have been some remarkable developments in both quantity and range, at a rate which makes any description or analysis likely to be out of date as soon as it is written. In this, Australia's Bicentennial year, Aboriginal art has become one of the prime ways of asserting the continued and distinct identity of Fourth World people where, unlike the Third World, the colonizers never went home.

In 1988 Aboriginal art also includes the acrylic paintings of an increasing number of communities in Central Australia, fine pottery and textiles and the paintings and prints of a range of individual artists, often city-dwellers. At the 1988 Adelaide Festival one of no less than eight exhibitions devoted to contemporary Aboriginal art displayed prints of political protest by both white and Aboriginal artists under the title of *Right Here, Right Now*; without inside knowledge it was impossible to tell which graphics were by whites and which by Aboriginals. In 1979, the Flinders University of South Australia's Art Museum began consciously collecting what, a number of years ago, Nelson Graburn (1976; 1982) first referred to as 'transitional' art, but, with a few honourable exceptions, major art institutions such as the Australian National Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia and other State galleries only began buying Aboriginal art, especially that from central Australia, to any significant degree around 1984. Commercial 'fine art' galleries – mostly run by non-Aborigines – have also begun to sell Aboriginal art at ever-increasing prices, and major overseas exhibitions have been held in the