Old Land, New Marks

As our Dreaming tells us; we don't live in the past nor the future but in the active 'now'! A form of mindfulness. Our art has a story and a meaning for every social question in our contemporary lives.

In the beginning was the word and the word was a sound - a song - the singing land. All Aboriginal art is personal and event orientated. Aboriginal art is a social act but may come out of individual acts. Rituals are conducted to bond, to induct, to bring those young into the social order. Remember an art exhibition is a social-political act - it is performing 'identity'.

This bringing together, of a number of artists to make art, conversation, and interaction is a curatorial practice I attempt to achieve. Sometimes it fails to reach a critical intensity or interaction but the attempt is an art itself. In 2009, I was invited to take up a residency at the Manning River Art Gallery (Taree). I discovered that the 1909 photograph of an Aboriginal dance band, with named members that I'd used in lectures for years was actually from Purfleet Aboriginal Reserve outside Taree. Collaborating with a local non-Aboriginal painter we enticed a response of thirty-eight descendants of the band members (Bert Marr, Fred Dumas, Bob Bungie, Lena Bungie, Harriet Neville and Hazel Bungie) to paint the image using their finger points and create a fair impressionist image that now remains not only in their fond memory but in the gallery's collection.

'Remote' and 'Regional' are such contested terms and refer to ideas within the 'centre and periphery' debate. Dubbo itself could possibly be seen as regional or remote. Are all ideas created in metropolitan centres and then disseminated out to and adopted in regions, or do the essential creative thoughts and moves grow and intensify on the margins first? Most probably a bit of both, with a leaning towards the latter I think. In a literary sense 'remote' novels were dramas placed in these landscape sites where the great human moral questions would be played out - where humans talk to nature, talk to God. Who are we? Why are we here? Where did we come from? How do we live with each other? How do we live with the land?

Filmmaker John Pilger once described the 'remote' Aboriginal communities as 'Gulags'; places where 'non-persons' are held. Aboriginal filmmaker Ivan Sen scripted and shot nearly all his films in these 'remote' places and spoke his stories in metaphysical terms but played out in real life contemporary times, people, issues, and emotions. Aboriginal people come from, have always lived in, and even now

thrive in these ‘remote’ places. All the artists talk of living on the land, moving about, either forcibly removed or, voluntarily seasonally shifting - stories of conflict and comfort.

The land is bound around Dubbo, and the wider region of the state itself, by rivers and green, and not the stereotype of red dust and desert of European eyes. Its and its people are alive and present. Aboriginal people have lived here for around forty-thousand years. The imagery, to some eyes, works in formal geometric shapes; circles, squares, triangles, wave patterns and zigzags. We should remember that these appear naturally in the world; in wave and ripple lines in the water or marked in the land by flowing streams or winds, or the natural structures of honeycomb and other insect nests.

In Arnhem Land, Gupapuyngu people construct a low-relief white sand sculpture of a circle in a square. Unknown and irrelevant to them, there is a Greek geometric conundrum called squaring the circle - an impossible algebraic problem; like all human puzzles it’s really only a mental exercise to work through, not really to solve. In Aboriginal art, circles are places in the land and concentric circles are sacred places. The sand circle installation of Aleshia Lonsdale is such an ephemeral artwork of simple natural materials readily installed or taken away.

Wiradjuri woman Linda Burney made her first speech on the 1 September this year (2016) as the first female Aboriginal person elected to the national House of Representatives. On the day, in a break from parliamentary tradition, she was welcomed to Country and the House by her Wiradjuri woman relative Lynette Riley singing her in. A kangaroo skin cloak was placed across her shoulders, and thus adorned and blessed; she spoke to the Parliament, to the nation, and to history.

Aboriginal people, post-Federation (1901), have a long tradition of political agitation for their rights and maintaining their sense of identity, language, and social practices. Lynette Riley and her sister Dianne Riley-McNaboe and others have renewed both the Wiradjuri language and singing traditions, and the technique of decorating kangaroo and possum skin cloaks. For this exhibition they both sing to the water and the rivers. Importantly, earlier this year Lynette created a kangaroo skin cloak dedicated to her godmother, Pearl ‘Gambanyi’ Gibbs (1901-1983), an earlier female Aboriginal activist. Though born in La Perouse at the time of Federation, Pearl lived and worked throughout the state before passing away in Dubbo. Through the 1920s she lobbied the Aboriginal Protection Board on behalf of Stolen Generation children and for better wages and rights for Aboriginal itinerant workers. In the 1930s she was active in the Aboriginal Progressive Association (APA) with Jack

Ferguson and Cecil Patten who formed the group in Dubbo in 1937. She was APA Secretary 1938-9 and assisted with the Day of Mourning conference and press statements on Australia Day 1938.

Karla Dickens' grandmother was also a child of the Stolen Genration, put out to slave as a domestic servant in the day and a sex slave at night. The political party Karla refers to is an earlier group from her grandmother's time, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA 1925-7) started by C. F. (Fred) Maynard at St David's Hall in Surry Hills (Sydney). Mrs Elizabeth McKenzie Hatton, a non-Aboriginal woman, was secretary. My maternal grandfather John Donovan was its Nambucca Heads representative. They fought against children being removed from their parents and called for the right of Aborigines to determine their own lives.

Karla said; "*I wanted to talk about how the discussions and politics would take place in the home, after the children had been put to bed. A quilt in its 'checkerboard' construction has a sequence of images referencing events and moves, steps and developments in their campaign for justice. Their logo, similar to the national coat of arms, is very sophisticated".*

A man goes up a river. Rivers were a fascination for the British colonists; they came up the river to find their source. W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer Lecture 'After the Dreaming' spoke of the 'great Australian silence' concerning the horrific colonial history of near annihilation of the Aboriginal peoples - he also spoke of the secret river; 'rivers of blood'. The colonial task is to break the Indigenous generational bond. Initial outright attempts at extermination and 'dispersing' moved Aboriginal populations off the land and onto 'missions' and reserves to be replaced by cattle or sheep. In this way whole populations disappeared, languages were lost, and people were no longer allowed to continue their religious beliefs and art practices. Post World War Two large numbers of Aboriginal people have in the course, of their lives joined the urban drift population migration to the major metropolitan centres seeking work, better education opportunities for their children, and a perceived more exciting social life. They usually return to retire on their country.

In the Newsletter, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, (Vol.2 No.11, October 1969.) on page 38 is the Judy Ingliss Essay Competition - *'What do I, as an Aboriginal, think about the traditions and customs of my people, and what place do they have in present life and in the future?'* A prize of $50.00.

Michael Philp and Robert Campbell Jnr. are two men who worked at many jobs and lived many lifestyles before taking to art to remember the socially and politically positive action times of the 1960s, and also their early childhoods and forms of stable family life.

They both talk of different magical rivers, full of wonder and warm memories despite all the traumatic events against all Aboriginal societies. Both worked to create an Aboriginal form of Aboriginal identity in their art - Campbell recounting forms of history paintings and to construct a type of cross-hatching to activate the land with a spiritual force. Philp's series in this exhibition simply exudes love, that thing much contested in our time - that between father and son.

In the Djambarrpuyngu language of Arnhem Land the word for spirit is Wungguli that was then used to describe the first black and white photographs they saw. Both Nicole Foreshew and Teena McCarthy approach spirit, people and land using photographic images to capture an essence of something invisible, something else.

I wasn't born yet… I was still in the water yet …
Paddy Dhathangu, Lyagalawumirr painter (dec.)

The 1857, Blandowski Expedition to the Murray Darling River junction using a number of Aboriginal assistants collected 17,400 specimens, including many fish species for the National Museum in Melbourne. For a number of Aboriginal groups young fish are thought of as souls of unborn people. At this time, in season, up to five thousand Aboriginal people would gather at the Brewarrina stone fish traps to harvest the feast of fish, to meet, to sing, dance and pay homage to God.

Teena McCarthy's family Barkindji line, as with many Aboriginal families, was broken when her grandmother was taken from her family. Reconnecting later in life she took the Darling River as the spiritual path back to country. A child removed is deprived and their love unrequited and unfulfilled. Her images reconnect and directly embed Teena into the land itself, into her country.

I first saw Nicole Foreshew in a self-curated photographic exhibition at Blacktown Art Gallery some years ago. Here her image of her grandmother moving down the road is powerful - is she departing? Is she arriving? Nicole has used minerals and other dyes from sites in her country to colour fabric before, but here she applied the minerals to magically create beautiful rose crystals to hold the form of the spirit of that country for us to see.

Singing can be performed in many ways - you can sing sitting down, you can sing standing up, you can sing walking, and you can sing dancing. You can sing in different rhythms and many songs are really just one or two line songs. When I came to put together this exhibition gathering, I tried to set something experiential, something Aboriginal about these regions away from technology, and the noise and pace of cities. I asked a number of men to make boomerangs; either returning to not, and to use them as clapping sticks to accompany singing in their Aboriginal language to bring out that original sound of those places.

Rivers form boundaries for all people, and in a sense set the colonial border lines of what we now call New South Wales. I arranged for artist Karla Dickens to capture a moving image of the Tweed River in the north and other professional filmmakers, the Murray in a rain shower, and the Darling full after a good bout of rain. A filmmaker recording a scene, or an interview always records a short piece of 'atmos'; the unique silence of that place. In the same way each site has its own peculiar shade of light; set by the time of year, temperature, humidity, and the spirit of that place.

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