

# **Pay Attention: Aboriginal Art in NSW**

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This work is the result of original research carried out by the author except where otherwise indicated in the text.

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## **Note to Readers**

Readers are advised that this text may contain names and images of deceased persons.

Please note the spellings of Aboriginal language, cultural and nations names vary across this thesis. I have used the preferred spellings of participants when discussing their ideas, work and experiences.



## Thanks and Acknowledgements

The road to PhD submission is long, and often laborious, however, in looking back on researching this work I feel a kind of disbelieving delight that so much of the process was fascinating, inspiring and fun. Much of this is due to the artists, curators, arts workers, and educators who participated in the creation of this work. Their kindness, interest and ideas, often embodied and represented in the art they made, told me everything I now know about Aboriginal art in NSW, and taught me a whole lot else besides. I would like to express my profound thanks to these participants. Simply put, without your generosity, there would be no thesis. Thank you for welcoming me to your Country; for having me in your homes and work places; sharing your ideas, feelings and experiences; reviewing transcripts and reading drafts; helping me when I got things wrong, and for your kind words when I got things right. My particular thanks to Bianca Acimovic, Tony Albert, Tess Allas, Jordan Ardler, Natalie Bateman, Mirree Bayliss, Darren Bell, Anthony 'Ace' Bourke, Cher Breeze, Sandra Brown, Kent Buchanan, Kevin Butler, Robyn Caughlan, John Cheeseman, David Collins, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Maggih Coates, Mark Cora, Michael Dagostino, Blak Douglas, Caroline Edwards, Penny Evans, Catherine Farry, Dennis Golding, Kathy Graham, Andrew Gray, Amala Groom, Eddy Harris, Wadi Harris, Lisa Havilah, Peter Hewitt, Helen Johnson, Cassandra Jones, Sharni Jones, Warwick Keen, Jann Kesby, Carrie Kibbler, Alicia Leggett, Derrick Lindh, Aleshia Lonsdale, Emily McDaniel, Darren Moffitt, Kim Moffitt, Megan Monte, John Monteleone, Gail Naiden, Paris Norton, Caroline Oakley, Rilka Oakley, Frances Belle Parker, Stephen Payne, Nathan Peckham, Michael Philp, Cara Pinchbeck, Nyree Reynolds, Sabrina Roesner, Melissa Ryan, Julie Shaw, Bevan Skinner, Kim Spinks, Victoria Sutton, Lynne Thomas, Susan Thomas, Reginald Walker, Sam Juparulla Wickman, Alison Williams, Su Williams, Jason Wing, Becci Zillig, and a number of others who preferred to remain anonymous.

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## Abstract

Despite extensive academic focus on Indigenous Australian art, sustained engagement, particularly in the discipline of anthropology, has largely focused on artists and artworks from the central, northern and western regions of Australia. Academic works examining art-making in the south east of Australia, particularly New South Wales (NSW), are relatively few, despite news articles, exhibition catalogues and monographs penned by artists and curators providing evidence of vibrant communities of Aboriginal artists and solo practitioners working across NSW. In light of this, this thesis addresses the relative academic silence around Aboriginal art-making in NSW. It asks, broadly, what kind of art is being made in NSW and why?

Drawing on fieldwork undertaken across NSW – including interviews with 65 artists, curators, arts workers and others – and on primary analysis of several data sets – including material from the Australian Art Sales Digest and Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize catalogues – this thesis seeks to *pay attention* to Aboriginal artists working across NSW in order to document the work they make, the technical, creative and social processes through which they create art, their experiences of the art-world, particularly the art market, and their motivations for making.

As a result of this attention, this thesis focuses on various themes, issues and topics. The history of intellectual and commercial engagement with Aboriginal art produced in NSW since British colonisation is canvassed in order to contextualise and make sense of the concerns and creative interests of research participants. Participant use of art to represent, affirm and constitute diverse personal, cultural and professional identities is explored and it is demonstrated that identity-focused works reveal that Aboriginality is conceptualised, by artists, in overwhelmingly non-essentialist ways, although the nature of this non-essentialism is varied. Diverse art practices undertaken by Aboriginal artists in NSW are described, including detailed analysis of two visual forms (south eastern designs and dots) and two styles or genres (urban art and contemporary art) which are commonly created, or are felt to be significant, by participants. These forms/genres are positioned by artists and others as traditional *and* non-traditional to NSW, sometimes simultaneously. Analysis of engagement with these forms reveals the ways participants conceive of culture especially as it pertains to tradition, authenticity, change and continuity. Finally, consideration of the sale of art in various art market spheres illustrates that selling work is significant for artists, and confers meaning upon artworks offered for sale.



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## Introduction: Aboriginal Art and New South Wales

*‘Pоp Attention MoitneHA yop’*

– from Tony Albert’s text-based artwork ‘Pay Attention’ (2009-2010)

### **Prologue: Pay Attention**

In September 2013 I visited Dubbo, a regional hub in central New South Wales (NSW). In preparation for fieldwork, I was visiting to see if any artists or arts professionals working across the Orana region might be interested in taking part in my research. I had contacted Kent Buchanan and Caroline Edwards, curators at the Western Plains Cultural Centre (WPCC) – the region’s public gallery and museum complex – and told them about my wish to connect with Aboriginal artists living and working in NSW, including in Dubbo. Buchanan and Edwards had invited me to come and visit them and attend the ‘Day of Dialogue’, an event being held in conjunction with Left Field Project.<sup>1</sup> Buchanan and Edwards talked with me about my project, mentioned artists I should contact and avenues I should follow up. Eventually our discussion turned to Aboriginal artists who had exhibited at the WPCC and the audience’s response to their work. At the time the WPCC was exhibiting the touring version of the National Gallery of Australia’s Second Indigenous Art Triennial, *unDisclosed*, curated by Carly Lane. The exhibition featured the work of twenty critically acclaimed Indigenous artists from different parts of Australia and the Torres Strait including Sally Gabori, Fiona Foley, Danie Mellor and Alik Tipoti. The show was organised around the theme of disclosure: ‘...the spoken and unspoken, the known and the unknown, what can be revealed and what cannot...’ (Lane 2012: 9). The exhibition sought to examine the ‘...artists’ motivations and inspirations and [to hint]...at the undercurrents of knowledge, stories and histories that artists reveal – or choose *not* to reveal – in their work’ (Lane 2012: 9).

Buchanan and Edwards explained that the show had been well attended and feedback from visitors had largely been popular and enthusiastic. Later, when I perused the gallery’s visitor’s book, I read page after page expressing admiration for the exhibition. Several visitors had praised works which they described as provocative and confronting – such as Vernon Ah Kee’s *Tall Man*<sup>2</sup> – stating that these works had prompted them to engage with ‘Aboriginal issues’. However, the exhibition was not without its detractors. Edwards and Buchanan told me that there had been some complaints: a visitor had protested about the nudity in the photographic

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<sup>1</sup> Left Field was a program which paired local emerging Aboriginal artists with established Aboriginal artists from Sydney and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Ah Kee, 2010, *Tall Man*, 4-channel video installation, charcoal, crayon, synthetic polymer paint on two canvasses, video 11:10 mins, canvasses 180 x 240 cm (each), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2010.

works of Michael Cook,<sup>3</sup> another patron had taken to the visitors book to declare themselves sick of ‘...the Aboriginal attitude that they are so hard done [sic]...’,<sup>4</sup> a sentiment which, presumably, they felt was communicated in the exhibition. However, the work which created the greatest ire was Tony Albert’s text-based collaborative work *Pay Attention*.<sup>5</sup> The large scale work consists of a series of cut-out letters which form the phrase ‘PAY ATTENTION MOTHER FUCKERS’. Complaining visitors declared themselves offended by the profanity in the work, with several commenting that it was irresponsible that an exhibition open to children should feature such language. A free local paper published a short but furious opinion piece, featuring an image of Albert’s work, penned by columnist Natalie Holmes. Holmes described the exhibition as featuring ‘...many words and images pertaining to the divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, pointing to racial violence, the stolen generation, assimilation and reconciliation’. Holmes declared herself personally offended by the content of the exhibition, especially because she did not consider herself ‘a racist’ and thus did not feel that it was right that she should be made to feel guilty for the ‘sins of past generations’. ‘When...’ she wrote, ‘...will it end this guilt, this disgust, this blame? Enough is enough...I for one would have liked to enjoy art for art’s sake and not feel brandished by the cultural big stick’ (2013: np). Buchanan and Edwards told me about the article with a mixture of bemusement and resignation. They were disappointed that Holmes had failed to engage with the many messages that the artists had sought to convey with their work but felt that her attitude reflected that of only a minority of visitors.

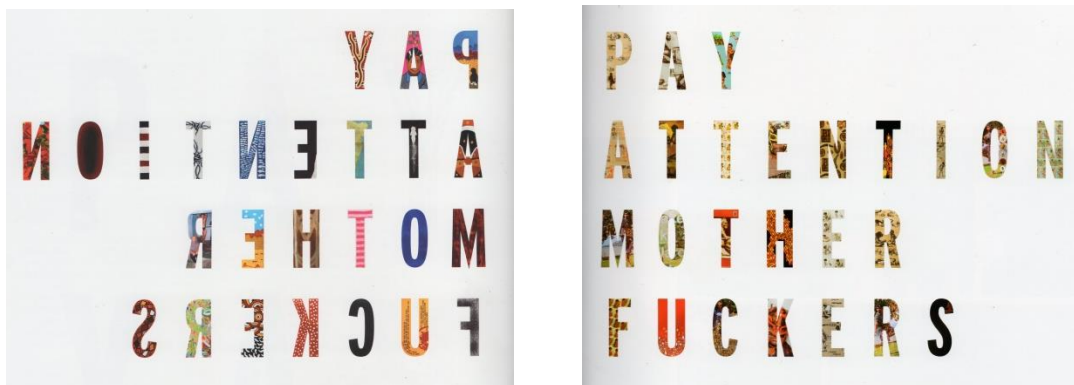


Figure 1. Tony Albert, 2009-2010, *Pay Attention*, mixed media on aluminium, 420 x 1400 cm (overall), private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Conceptio Unlimited. ©Tony Albert.

Having heard so much about *unDisclosed*, and Albert’s work in particular, I hastened to the exhibition as soon as my meeting ended. I was fascinated to see the works which had

<sup>3</sup> Michael Cook, 2010, *Broken Dreams*, 10 digital colour photographs, 125 x 100 cm (each), National Gallery of Australia, purchased 2011.

<sup>4</sup> WPPC Visitors Book 2013-2014.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Albert, 2009-2010, *Pay Attention*, mixed media on aluminium, 420 x 1400 cm (overall), private collection.

provoked such strong feelings of pleasure and disdain and I remember thinking that surely the mark of a successful exhibition was that it engaged its audience – regardless of whether this engagement resulted in joy or derision. Extended discussion of the work failed to prepare me for how momentous *Pay Attention* is. Albert's work took up one whole corner of the not inconsiderable gallery space. The words 'PAY ATTENTION MOTHER FUCKERS' were spelled forward and then, as if mirroring the original text, presented backwards. The letters running forward were adorned with Aboriginalia, Albert's term for Aboriginal kitsch (Kelada 2009: 15), particularly the images of Aboriginal people which often adorn souvenirs or feature in tourist art (Franklin 2010: 206). These letters were also decorated by original paintings and collages, as well as fragments of artworks previously created by Albert such as *No Place 1*.<sup>6</sup> The 25 letters of the mirrored text were each adorned by the work of various Aboriginal artists including Richard Bell, Dale Harding, Judy Watson, Vernon Ah Kee, Judith Inkamala, and Gordon Hookey (Sullivan + Strumpf 2011).

Given its overwhelming size, and the profanity-punctuated sentiment being presented, it is little wonder that some visitors to the exhibition – such as Holmes – read the work as intentionally offensive. Its appearance in an exhibition of contemporary Indigenous Australian art, featuring some overtly political sentiments, clearly led those visitors distressed by the work to assume that Albert's piece sought to command its viewers to *pay attention* to the socio-political woes of Indigenous Australians as well as assign guilt to those 'mother fuckers' assumed to be the cause of these ills. While this interpretation of the work may well stand, Albert's command to *pay attention* is much more literal than Holmes and other audience members may have expected. Albert uses the work to issue a very straightforward command for the audience to give their consideration to the content of the artwork itself, specifically to those images which populate the 50 letters presented.

The forward-facing text presents us with various images of Aboriginalia, stereotypical or sentimental representations of noble savages, scantily clad nubile natives, or big-eyed children, all created by non-Indigenous artists. Albert requires his audience to attend to these images, to think about the history and legacy of this kind of representation of Aboriginal people, the effect it has had on the popular imagination and, in turn, on the Aboriginal people it represents. Interspersed in this text are photographs of Aboriginal men, and other images created by Albert, for other art projects. These images stand as an antidote to the Aboriginalia, an alternative representation not dependent on cliché or stereotype. Further antidote is provided by the reflected text which, although mirroring the forward facing text, does not mirror its content. The diverse images presented here operate to distort and unsettle the

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Albert, 2009, *No Place 1*, type C photograph, edition of 5, 100 x 100 cm.

stereotypical representations dominant in the text adjacent to them. These letters, each adorned by an artist friend of Albert, stand as a mini-exhibition which showcases the diverse styles, and various thematic concerns of these 25 artists. Albert is here commanding the viewer to pay attention to these artists, to look at the artworks they have created, to acknowledge what they are seeking to communicate and to recognise them as Aboriginal artworks, despite many not resembling the desert dot paintings so highly identified, in the minds of much of the public, with Aboriginal art (Iseger-Pilkington 2012: 28). As Glenn Iseger-Pilkington observes, Albert's work unsettles preconceptions about the nature of Aboriginal art, '...asserting the breadth, diversity and unpredictability of cultural material...' which inspire, and are created by, Aboriginal artists (2012: 28).

The notion that the work has a kind of internal arts-focus is supported by Albert's appropriation of *Pay Attention* (1973),<sup>7</sup> a lithograph created by American artist Bruce Nauman. Nauman's black and white print features the phrase 'PAY ATTENTION MOTHER FUCKERS' written backwards in block lettering. Writing about the print, Elizabeth Johnson observes that audience members are unable to avoid following the 'command' explicit in the work. She writes, 'no sooner have we read these words than we have acquiesced to their demand: Nauman moulds our consciousness before we realise it, let alone have the opportunity to resist' (2015: 391). While Nauman's work compels acquiescence by forcing the viewer to make sense of the text presented backwards, Albert's work operates in a far more direct way. Even those who choose not to decipher the backwards-text cannot avoid comprehension of the text which runs forward. Albert presents the viewer with an ultimatum: engage with the work, and examine yourself as you do.

Looking back on this visit to Dubbo a number of years later, my encounter with Albert's work seems like a profound herald of things to come in the life of this thesis, a prescient reflection of the interests, concerns and passions of the artists whose work I am seeking to engage with here. There are many points of resonance; the artists from NSW who collaborated with me on this thesis, like those featured in Albert's artwork, often make art outside the parameters of the 'Indigenous brand', the '...largely established assumption regarding...what it is to be an artist who is Indigenous and the context in which such artists' work is interpreted' (Iseger-Pilkington 2012: 28). Like those who contributed to *Pay Attention*, these artists make work which is united by its dazzling and impressive visual and thematic diversity. Further, these artists are operating in the south east, a region of Australia which has historically been categorised as settled, leading to the assumption that Aboriginal people in the region fall short

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce Nauman, 1973, *Pay Attention*, lithograph, 95.6 x 70.2 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1973.

of the image of 'authentic Aboriginality' purportedly typified by the images present in Albert's 'Aboriginalia'. The intention of *Pay Attention* is relevant too, as are the negative responses of some audience members. Like Albert, many of the artists whose work is discussed in this thesis are engaged with, and make work addressing, the often hotly contested debates which arise when people seek to define the parameters of 'Aboriginal art'. They are also interested in debunking popular conceptions of Aboriginality which, because of stereotype and sentiment, are too narrow to include them. Just as those reacting negatively to Albert's work jumped to the conclusion that the artist intended to make a brash and provocative political statement, so it is all too easy to simply categorise those discussed here as 'political' artists. This label is at once relevant and too simple. While artists certainly make work with the intention of making explicit political comment, their artworks communicate meanings which also operate on other levels. As will be explored, artists use their art to share their point of view, celebrate their culture and their Country, reflect on their identity and experiences, and present strong political messages. Albert's appropriation of Nauman's work provides another point of correlation; he, like many of the artists discussed in this thesis, utilises what Ian McLean has called 'archival' research, the engaged and reflexive interrogation of not only the colonial archive but of the archive of art history (2016: 211-212).

Finally, Tony Albert is, himself, an apt artist to consider at the threshold of this thesis. Born in Townsville, with Country in the East Cape and Rainforest regions of Queensland (Pinchbeck 2013: 24), the artist now lives and works in Sydney (Marshall 2012). Like so many of the artists discussed here, Albert practices art in NSW, but was born, and has connection to Country, elsewhere. This thumbnail biography stands as an important indication of the pitfalls of looking at Aboriginal art 'from NSW' without acknowledging both histories of forced dislocation, and the voluntary movement of Aboriginal individuals and families since British settlement.

All this makes Tony Albert's work an apposite place to start, because, at base, this thesis seeks to follow the artist's directive to pay attention to Aboriginal artists who work in NSW, and to give due and fulsome consideration to the art which they create, exhibit and sell.

### **Aims and Focus**

Despite extensive academic focus on Indigenous Australian art, sustained engagement, particularly in the discipline of anthropology, has largely focused on artists and artworks from the central, northern and western regions of Australia. Academic works examining art-making in the south east of Australia, particularly New South Wales, are relatively few, despite news articles, exhibition catalogues and monographs penned by artists and curators providing evidence of vibrant communities of Aboriginal artists and solo practitioners working across

NSW. In light of this, this thesis seeks to address the relative academic silence around Indigenous art-making in NSW. It asks, broadly, what kind of art is being made in NSW and why?

On a fundamental level this thesis seeks to engage with Aboriginal artists working across NSW in order to document the work they make, the technical, creative and social processes through which they create art, their experience of the art-world, particularly the art market, and their motivations for making.

### **Scope: The Conceit and Use of 'Art from NSW'**

Tess Allas, writer, curator, artist, researcher and educator, was one of the first participants to show interest and lend her support to this research. In 2014, Allas and I undertook an interview in her office at what was then the College of Fine Arts (COFA). We spoke about her art and curatorial practice, and discussed the complicated issues surrounding the reception of Aboriginal art produced in the south east of Australia. During our interview I asked Allas if she had observed any traits or themes which she might classify as constituting a NSW style of Aboriginal art. Allas answered, 'not a NSW style, because NSW is a white construction anyway'. Allas' point about the constructed, colonial origins of NSW as a geographical and administrative designation is important because it immediately unsettles the notion that there is a homogenous category of Aboriginal art *from* NSW. After all, the states and territories which operate to divide the geographical and socio-political space of Australia bear no resemblance to the ordering of space which operated prior to colonisation (Wolfe 1997: 74).<sup>8</sup> As illustrated by the now iconic Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) map of Indigenous Australia, the area designated as NSW incorporated numerous Aboriginal nations or language groups (Horton 1996). Other participants further challenged the notion of talking definitively about Aboriginal art of, or from, NSW. For example, Lismore-based artist Michael Philp spoke eloquently about the great natural diversity encompassed in the state, and rightly pointed out that Aboriginal artists seeking to represent their Country would, by virtue of this fact, make work that was visually and culturally diverse.

While some artists identified as being from NSW, others did not. Often these artists talked about living in NSW but belonging to Country elsewhere. Sometimes their presence in NSW was the result of displacement associated with colonial expansion, or with government policies which effected the forced removal of children. For these artists, NSW was the state in which they lived and worked, but was not a marker of their identity or of the identity of their

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<sup>8</sup> Further, the parameters of NSW have shifted since its foundation. NSW once accounted for two-thirds of the Australian continent. The geographic region we now recognise as NSW was established in 1863 (Hirst 2003).



artworks. All this illustrates that discussing Aboriginal art from NSW in a definitive or totalising way ignores the many nuances which surround how artists imagine their identity and how they understand and represent their relationship to the place of NSW. Indeed, the comments from Allas, Philp, and other artists demonstrates clearly that, in various ways, the notion of art from NSW is an intellectual conceit. So, why use NSW as a frame? As Allas pointed out, NSW can be seen as a kind of imaginary demarcation which was overlaid on pre-existing borders and boundaries. It does not follow, however, that NSW is a concept without power. As Benedict Anderson has observed with regards to nationalist movements, the *imagined communities* which form around the sometimes arbitrary, sometimes considered, divisions of geographic space into nations, states or territories, readily become powerful markers of identity, which act to both unify and exclude, regardless of how recently they were fabricated (1983). It is these effects of inclusion and exclusion which make NSW such an important frame through which to consider Aboriginal art. Aboriginal people who live in what is now NSW have historically been classified in ways which act to exclude them from the status of being properly Aboriginal while simultaneously unifying them – regardless of their cultural background or the nations to which they belong – as being a specific *type* of Indigenous Australian: settled and acculturated.

Sydney, the capital of NSW and the largest city in Australia, was the geographical starting-place of British colonisation. Thus, Aboriginal people living in what is now NSW were subject to the most sustained engagement with colonists and settlers (Beckett 2000: 82). The sometimes abrupt, sometimes gradual, disruption of British pre-settlement patterns of living, combined with the pervasive perception that settlement resulted in the inevitable assimilation of Aboriginal people into Euro-Australian culture, generated, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popularly held myth that Aboriginal people in NSW were culturally impoverished ‘half-castes’ living on the margins of white society.<sup>9</sup> In this myth, ‘true’ Aboriginal people are those living away from cities and towns and, therefore, away from the presumed pervasive influence of ‘non-Aboriginal culture’ (Creamer 1988: 45-47).

Although it is roundly criticised as apocryphal in academic literature, scholars report this attitude persists in the present, and continues to be felt by Aboriginal communities in NSW and the south east.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on this history, Bundjalung art curator Djon Mundine dubbed NSW the *premier state* and observed, ‘to be *premier* is to be first. Aboriginal people are often called the *first people* and so NSW Aboriginal people are the first of the first: the first to suffer

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, Stanner (1979: 2-3).

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Cowlshaw (1987: 223-225), Macdonald (2001: 180-181), Gibson (2013: 35-36), Fredericks (2013: 1), House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (1992: 199), and Langton (1981: 16).

the catastrophe of full European encounter; first to be confronted and attacked; first to be forgotten' (2008: 15). Mundine's description of NSW as the *premier state* is apt because it neatly captures the way the association of NSW with the start of British colonisation results in the artificial unification of Aboriginal people living in the state and the simultaneous exclusion of them from the designation of genuine Aboriginality. Historically, the pervasiveness of the *premier state myth* resulted in scholarly non-engagement with Aboriginal people from NSW and the south east, and an appraisal of their visual culture as acculturated (Leslie 2008: 35, Kleinert 2000: 246). Where they merited discussion, Aboriginal people from NSW – and their art products – were often discussed in terms of loss, acculturation and dispossession.<sup>11</sup> These notions were not only present in academia. By the 1960s they were popularly accepted by the general public, as was the notion that authentic Aboriginal art could only be created by 'full blood' Aboriginal people from beyond the south east (Leslie 2008: 43). Later, as will be explored, this stance softened and morphed into the classification of artworks from NSW as a particular iteration of Aboriginal artwork identified as non-traditional, urban or contemporary.

Many of the artists who participated in this research were not only aware of this history but had felt the effect of these perceptions in their own lives. Thus, while not all artists related to NSW in terms of defining their personal identity, many certainly related to the experience of having their work appraised and assigned value in a particular way because they lived and worked in NSW. Artists also often explained that they felt their work had been marginalised, ignored or belittled because of the state in which they lived. While Aboriginal artists from outside the south east appeared to be celebrated and supported, they felt that, because they lived in NSW, they were sidelined as a result of 'Northern bias and Southern Suspicion'<sup>12</sup>: the perception that they were the '...poor-cousins-in-the-south-no-language-no-culture-blacks' (Neale 2005: 488). While increasingly Aboriginal artists from NSW and the south east are attaining critical and commercial success, this feeling of marginalisation in terms of access to funding and resources for individual artists has been validated by Allas and Eassie who reported that 'the distribution of Commonwealth funds for the arts still favours those organisations north of the "Rowley" line' (2009: 40).<sup>13</sup> In view of this, using NSW as a framing

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<sup>11</sup> See Macdonald (2001) for an exploration of the articulation of these themes in literature on Aboriginal people from NSW and the south east across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this text Macdonald also points out that among the Wiradjuri people with whom she worked, narratives of loss were pervasive and commonly articulated (2001: 176). Narratives articulated by participants associated with cultural pride, shame and loss are discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>12</sup> A phrase used by former Senator Aden Ridgeway (Jackson 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Allas and Eassie note that much of NSW state funding goes to what they call '..."conventional" areas such as heritage, museums and galleries with a large portion of these funds going to local governments' (2009: 41). Local governments also receive '...capital grants for regional arts centres' who in turn distribute these funds to individual artists, arts collectives and other art groups (2009: 41). Allas and Eassie conclude that, 'in terms of capital and program grants, the support and funds required to make

and scoping tool stands as a means of pushing back against the mythology which operates to invalidate the cultural products of Aboriginal people in the state. Aboriginal artists, scholars, educators and politicians from the south east have been rejecting this myth for decades, using the arts, scholarship, protest, agitation and talk.<sup>14</sup> This thesis seeks to respond to and acknowledge this push back, and to lend its modest support. It goes without saying, that despite its title, this thesis has never sought to be a comprehensive survey of all Indigenous art as it is practiced across NSW. Nor does this thesis presume to draw together a group of diverse individuals under the homogenising label of 'NSW artists'. Rather, it seeks to provide a partial snapshot of the practice of artists in NSW, to acknowledge and describe complexity, diversity and difference, and to present a thematic exploration of the issues and ideas which are represented by, and inform the production of, art made by Aboriginal artists in NSW.

### **Challenges and Considerations**

In researching and writing this thesis I was confronted by a series of issues which have shaped my understanding of, and approach to, writing about Aboriginal art produced in NSW. Many of these issues are addressed directly in the body of this thesis and will not be discussed here. Others are touched upon, but are not investigated in detail because their complication and breadth would require far more space than can be afforded. Nevertheless they require acknowledgement and consideration and so will be discussed briefly here.

### **Language**

Several times I have come up against what might be called the limits of language, when words employed by participants have no single straightforward meaning, are inadequate at expressing nuance, or accommodate a vast array of connotations. Words like *tradition*, *culture*, *authenticity*, *contemporary*, or *black* and *white* have both straightforward, common-sense associations and yet also mask complex meanings. As is the case for terms like *tradition* or *authenticity*, such words are sometimes also encumbered by a history of usage linked to colonial modes of engaging with and categorising Indigenous peoples. Despite this history such words are important for participants in terms of conveying particular meanings and situating their own art or cultural practices. While discussion with participants helped to unpick and clarify the meanings embedded or obscured by such words, the challenge has been preserving this complexity when writing this thesis. Where appropriate, I have included discussion about

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creative arts groups and individual artists more sustainable and viable has been static over time and resulted in these grants making little difference in creating a vibrant Indigenous creative arts sector in urban or regional NSW' (2009: 41-42).

<sup>14</sup> For useful overviews of this history see Kleinert (1994, 2000), Neale (2000a), Croft (1999), Gough (2006), Perkins (2003).

the various meanings accommodated by particular terms, or explored the shortcomings or difficulties associated with my use of particular words.

## **Culture**

A great deal of literature has been written by anthropologists and others on the concept of culture, its meaning, its analytical usefulness, its shortcomings as an etic category, and its value as a conceptual tool.<sup>15</sup> In researching art practices and art production it has been impossible not to engage with the concept of culture or to consider its usefulness. Various criticisms have been levelled at the theoretical and analytical deployment of the concept in scholarship. In the late 1980s and 1990s such criticism tended to focus on culture being utilised historically in an essentialist manner, meaning that *authentic culture* was envisioned as static, reified, isolated and pure.<sup>16</sup> In deploying culture as a thematic concept, I found it prudent to heed such criticisms and interrogate my own use of the term. In this thesis I follow James Clifford, who concludes that culture – though perhaps a compromised concept – is one that he is not yet able to ‘...do without’ (1988: 10). Frances and Howard Morphy have observed that it is ‘almost too easy’ to criticise scholars who employ concepts like culture of having ‘...rigid bounded entities in mind rather than more abstract concepts that can be applied to interpret real-world situations’ (Morphy and Morphy 2013: 639). They assert that such criticisms ignore the reality that typically those who utilise these concepts do so in acknowledgement that they are ‘abstract, theoretical, and contingent’ (2013: 639). It is in this spirit of acknowledgement that I utilise culture as a key thematic concept.

As will be explored across various chapters, culture is a concept which is extremely important to the participants who collaborated in this thesis. Discussions of culture, cultural knowledge and having and keeping culture permeated discussions with participants. Artists spoke about their artworks as cultural products, imbued with and reflective of cultural knowledge, or discussed the way audiences sought to appraise their works in terms of its traditional cultural content. Others discussed their level of cultural learning, or explained cultural nuances to help me make sense of anecdotes. Arts workers discussed projects they had organised in terms of the opportunity they offered for the sharing, keeping or sustaining of culture, and curators described exhibitions as facilitating audience engagement with cultural knowledge. In short, culture – as an entity that individuals and groups are imbued with, act within and engage with – was an extremely important concept for many participants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and for this reason it is used here.

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<sup>15</sup> See Barnard and Spencer for an overview (2002: 206-215).

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of these criticisms see Brumann (1999).

Further, to omit the concept of culture from this thesis would be to disengage it from relevant texts and analyses which preceded it. The importance of culture in the context of Aboriginal NSW, and the south east more broadly, is affirmed by various ethnographic works on these regions. A recurring theme in various strains of this literature is the expression of anxiety associated with feelings of cultural inferiority and loss. Gibson writes, for example, that many Barkindji people living in Wilcannia feel embroiled in a ‘...struggle to possess this thing [culture] which has been lost...’ and wish they could be more like the ‘...full bloods...up North’ (2013: 57, see also Cowlshaw 2011: 171, Macdonald 2001: 176).<sup>17</sup> Directed and strategic cultural maintenance is another thematic thread common to this strand of literature. For example, Kristina Everett writes about the Gwalan Nation,<sup>18</sup> a community made up of individuals and families who once identified with other Indigenous groups, or were unaware of their Indigeneity. Everett notes that it was only after a group of academics undertook research into Gwalan genealogies that the Nation emerged as a unified cohort. As a result certain factions in the community undertake to confirm, sustain and legitimate their cultural identity by meeting regularly to develop their culture, ‘...from the dreams and imagination of senior people...’, and to enact this culture via dance, song and art-making (2010: 230).

On a broader level, culture is thematically important to much of the literature relevant to this thesis. Frequently culture is utilised as an analytic trope that demarcates the parameters of an investigation – as with the study of Aboriginal art as opposed to Anglo Australian art (see for example, Caruana 2003) – or else is employed in order to account for difference – be it in terms of lived experience (see for example, Gibson 2013: 5-10), ontological outlook (see for example, Merlan 2000), or access to health or justice services (see for example, Ivanitz 1999). Elsewhere culture is, in and of itself, the topic of academic inquiry and thus, often treated as a palpable entity: something that can be lost, retained, regained or deployed. For example, Donna Leslie, in exploring the Aboriginal response to assimilationist policies, stresses the protective function of art as an expression of culture (2008: 14, see also Lane 2012: 15). Similarly, culture is also often represented as an entity that can physically manifest via practice. For example, Aboriginal artwork is often described as an expression of culture, representative of ritual and spiritual practice (see for example, Morphy 1998: 91), of connection to Country (see for example, Carty 2010: 27-28), and of cultural continuity and survival (see for example, Kleinert 2000: 240). As such, artworks are often conceptualised as tangible, portable and, thus, saleable *pieces* of the culture they represent (Gibson 2013: 64). Further, the concept of culture

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<sup>17</sup> As will be explored, these attitudes were not present in my own fieldwork. However, these texts illustrate the centrality of culture for other Aboriginal communities in the south east.

<sup>18</sup> A pseudonym which Everett utilises in view of the ‘...fraught politics’ dividing the group at the time of writing (2010: 230).

plays an important role in narratives, enunciated in the art-world, surrounding the analysis, promotion and exhibition of Indigenous art. Thus, curator Hetti Perkins envisions contemporary Aboriginal art as a challenge to Western modernism by citing culture as the source of, and inspiration for, all Indigenous art making. She writes: ‘...at odds with a premise of modernity – to erase the old with the new – is the apparent conundrum of the world’s oldest continuous culture being the wellspring of a dynamic contemporary art movement’ (2007: 11). Similarly, artists frequently identify their art making as a means of connecting to, and maintaining, their cultural heritage (see for example, Gough 2000: 259).

### **Geographies**

The *south east* or the *southern states* are geographic labels which have been utilised to distinguish various ‘settled’ regions of Australia from those which were ‘unsettled’. The south east of Australia typically refers to NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and parts of Queensland and South Australia (Cooper 1994: 92). As outlined above, the notion that Aboriginal people in these southern states are acculturated due to their ‘settled’ lifestyles has long historical roots. Johnson, Allas and Fisher argue that the work of C.D. Rowley has had a particular impact on the Australian psyche in terms of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous peoples across Australia (2009/2010: 2, see also Macdonald and Bauman 2011). Rowley devised a line which separated the south east of Australia from the rest of the continent (Rowley 1971: vii).<sup>19</sup> Rowley designated the south east as ‘settled Australia’ on the basis that the 1961 census showed that these areas were home to as many ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal people as ‘full-blood’ ones (Rowley 1971: vii, Macdonald 2001: 178). This division created the impression that Aboriginal ‘half-castes’ in these settled states were acculturated, in contrast to ‘full blood’ Aboriginal people elsewhere (Macdonald 2010: 50).

The geographic and socio-cultural classification of Aboriginal people typified by the Rowley Line has long been out of academic favour, although it arguably maintains popular currency.<sup>20</sup> This thesis seeks to challenge the concept that Aboriginal people in the south east, specifically NSW, are culturally impoverished. While there may well be an argument for abandoning the geographic sphere of ‘south east’ when writing about Aboriginal Australia because of the history of its usage, the classification has been retained here. This is not only because of its extensive use in relevant literature, but because, as with NSW, participants with whom I collaborated discussed their experience of being perceived – by both Aboriginal and non-

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<sup>19</sup> This line is identified by Johnson, Allas and Fisher as the *Rowley Line* (2009/2010).

<sup>20</sup> Rowley later criticised the use of blood percentages in the evaluation of cultural authenticity (Johnson et al. 2009/2010: 2). In 1986 he wrote that ‘one of the less forgivable myths of the colonial system...is that the person with European “blood” is not a “real” native...It dismisses the fact that culture and belief systems are not inherited with skin colour’ (Rowley 1986: 22-23).

Aboriginal people – as being non-traditional, and thus producing non-traditional art, because they lived in the *settled south east*. Despite my use of the geographic designation, it is worth clarifying that it is not my intention to render homogenous all Aboriginal people living in the south east. Nor, in speaking of the south east, do I wish to perpetuate the notion that Aboriginal people in this region are, by default, radically different, or divorced from Aboriginal people outside of it. As will be illustrated, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal art produced in NSW has connections to, and is also distinct from, art produced beyond its borders.

## **Art**

There has been considerable debate in anthropology, and elsewhere, about the use of ‘art’ as a classificatory designation in cross-cultural research. Scholars have questioned whether art stands as a valid etic term, or if, at base, it is a European classificatory concept not applicable in non-Western cultural contexts.<sup>21</sup> Alternative terms such as *material culture* or *visual culture* have been suggested, as have various ways to appraise and analyse art-type objects (Morphy 2010: 276). In the Australian context, theorisation around the category of art has included debate regarding ‘...whether the application of the term “art” to the products of indigenous cultures misrepresents the products of indigenous societies’ (Coleman 2009: 9). While this argument might be valid in some contexts, and for some Indigenous communities, it is, in the context of this thesis, fairly irrelevant. For many decades Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have embraced the designation of art, and used galleries, museums and other ‘fine art’ establishments to exhibit and sell objects they uncomplicatedly identify as art (Morphy 2007: xii). This is certainly the case for the artists discussed here, each of whom, without exception, considered the objects they produced to be art. Further, as will be illustrated, this classification does not operate to diminish the spiritual, cultural and other values or functions attached to or embedded in these works. For this reason, while this thesis features an exploration of the way Aboriginal artworks are classified and conceptualised by participants and others, it does not engage in debates around the relevance of art as an analytic category.

## **Positioning this Research: Relevant Literature**

The content and approach of this thesis has been shaped by, and can be positioned within, several bodies of literature coming from anthropology, art history and social history. The scope, aims and thematic orientation of my thesis were initially inspired by the work of Langton, Perkins and Leslie. These scholars have written extensively about Indigenous art, its reception and representation in Australia and internationally (Langton 2005, Perkins 2007,

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<sup>21</sup> For a useful overview of anthropological thinking around, and engagement with, art see Morphy and Perkins (2006: 1-23).

Leslie 2008). Also important is *Storylines* (Johnson et al. 2009/2010), a project which sought to document the biographies of 641 Aboriginal artists living in 'settled' Australia as defined by the Rowley Line (2009/2010: 2). These biographies, now accessible at Design & Art Australia Online (DAAO)(2017), are a testament to the diversity of artistic practice occurring across NSW and give a sense of various artistic hubs across the state.

Further, as among the most frequently cited contemporary anthropological authorities on Aboriginal art, it would be difficult to avoid mentioning the works of Howard Morphy (1998, 2007) and Fred Myers (2002). Morphy provides a deft survey of Aboriginal art while canvassing its ritual, familial, geographic, personal and political uses and articulations (1998). Elsewhere he clarifies longstanding definitional issues which have dogged the anthropology of art via a clear historical exploration of the collection, exhibition, reception and representation of Aboriginal art in Australia and abroad (2007). Myers' documentation of the history, creation, sale and circulation of the work of Pintupi painters from the Western Desert is, like Morphy's work, highly and richly detailed, informed by extensive association with the community about which he is writing (2002). The works of these scholars have been formative in my research not only because they model best practice in terms of engagement with, and representation of, Indigenous artists but also in their illustration of the way art and art-making processes simultaneously shape, are implicated in, and can reveal the broader socio-cultural relational dynamics that constitute the postcolonial landscape of Australia. This non-reductive approach to the analysis of material culture – modelled also by anthropologists working in alternative ethnographic milieus such as Daniel Miller (1994, 2010), Laura Peers (2003) and Ruth Phillips (1998) – has been inspirational to this project by demonstrating the importance and worth of material culture generally, and art specifically, as a sphere for research. These scholars demonstrate that material culture is not merely a reflection of the socio-cultural sphere in which it is produced, but is, in fact, constitutive of this sphere – 'feeding-back' and constructing, in turn, those utilising it (Miller 2010: 59, Ingold 2011: 6). Further, as scholars associated with the *anthropology of technology* have asserted, it is not merely the presence of material culture that mediates and shapes human action and experience, but the practice; the physical, processual techniques of participation denoted by the production of material culture, that does so (Warnier 2009: 459). Thus, as Naji and Douny articulate, '...through "making" and "doing", we create ourselves' (2009: 415). Such a position finds support in the work of Miller, who in outlining his theory of 'objectification' contends that objects make people just as people make objects (2010: 59), and Ingold, who arguing that action and process are the essence of production, writes that, as the actor '...labours, it is not only the materials with which...[he or she] works that are transformed. The worker, too, is changed through the experience' (2011: 6). Thus, the aforementioned scholars demonstrate that material



ethnographies are a ‘...rather circuitous route to understanding people and relationships...[via which] we may arrive more swiftly at our destination, and reach much further, than many more tempting and more direct paths’ (Miller 2010: 153). Therefore, this thesis is underpinned by an attendance to the impact and importance of artworks made by participants.

Although, thus far, I have declared a relative lack of scholarly attention paid to Aboriginal art from the south east, there is a group of relevant and useful works with Indigenous art from this region as their central focus.<sup>22</sup> This literature can be broadly divided into two camps: the first takes an historical approach, providing an overview of Aboriginal art practice in the region over particular periods of time. The second body of literature focuses on individuals, families or communities and their experience of learning about, making, and circulating art. This literature is discussed below.

### **Histories of Making**

Carol Cooper’s influential catalogue essay, ‘Art of the Temperate South East’ (1981) explores the British pre-settlement art practices of Aboriginal communities living in the south east of Australia. Cooper utilises historical evidence recorded by collectors, colonial administrators and anthropologists as well as objects residing in museum collections to provide detailed descriptions of the forms, functions, motifs and rituals associated with visual culture from the region. Cooper’s approach is historical, outlining the practices, objects and styles that existed prior to colonial contact and which did not survive long beyond its onslaught (1981: 29). Reference to art practice in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is nominal, although Cooper makes mention of the fame achieved by Tommy McRae and William Barak (1981: 38-39). Thus, ultimately, the objects littering ‘Art of the Temperate South East’ are described as coming from a culture that ‘no longer exists’ (1981: 40) but which, nevertheless, should serve as inspiration for present day Aboriginal people wishing to revive their culture (1981: 40).

Despite showing a then-progressive attitude in the recognition of an art practice or culture in the south east, Cooper’s eulogising for the art of the south east can be seen as indicative of prevailing perceptions regarding what types of Aboriginal art were regarded as traditional or cultural continuous. This aside, Cooper’s work provides a welcome wealth of highly detailed information about the aesthetic dimensions, material quality and visual motifs which were predominate in south eastern Indigenous communities prior to, and immediately after,

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<sup>22</sup> While *academic* works on art from the Indigenous south east are relatively few, it’s worth noting that there are numerous exhibition catalogues, artist monographs and other items produced by art institutions which provide insight into the nature, depth and dimensions of the art scene in NSW. These will be referred to throughout the course of this thesis.

colonisation. As such, Cooper's influence can be detected in a number of texts on south eastern art (see for example Kleinert 1994, 2000, Morphy 1998).

Kleinert's doctoral thesis (1994) is a useful counterpoint to Cooper's article, that addresses the gap in the historical record '...from the death of William Barak and Tommy McRae [in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century], to the emergence of an urban Australian art in the 1970s' (1994: vi). Kleinert writes, as if in direct dialogue with Cooper, that the silence around art from the south east:

...implies that traditional Aboriginal culture came to an end, then subsequently re-emerged, as if from a cultural vacuum, transformed into a culture of resistance. Such selective responses deny the cultural continuity of Aborigines in settled Australia and the historical context of contemporary Aboriginal art (1994: 1).

The recovery of the history of south eastern art is achieved, in many instances, by Kleinert broadening the definition of art to include objects previously categorised by anthropologists and art historians as (acculturated) kitsch, curio or souvenir.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Kleinert asserts that items created for trade or the tourist market (such as poker-worked boomerangs, carved emu eggs or feather baskets) need to be included in a survey of south eastern art and understood in terms of a *continuous* art practice reaching back into the deep past (1994, see also Kleinert 2000).

Kleinert's assertion of continuity of artistic practice can be positioned within the context of a humanities-wide reconsideration of the portent of Indigenous or minority group appropriation of colonial or majority cultural tropes (be they artistic, material, linguistic, or social). As a result of this reconsideration, such appropriation came to signify creative adaptation, resistance and survival (see for example, Phillips and Steiner 1999), rather than, as previously asserted, capitulation, acculturation or assimilation (Clifford 1988: 5). Thus, Kleinert's analysis of Indigenous art from the southern states can be understood as articulating, in the context of academia generally and anthropology in particular, a now-prevailing approach to representing Indigenous responses to colonial settlement in Australia. As such, a focus on art making as a means of cultural maintenance and as evidence of cultural persistence (regardless of what form this art takes) is prevalent in literature on art from the south east and indeed on First Nation art around the world (see for example, Phillips 1998, Ettawageshik 1999). My thesis can be positioned as an extension of Kleinert's in that it is an exploration of contemporary iterations of Indigenous art from the south east, specifically NSW, which have their roots in the kind of continuous and diverse art practice outlined in her work.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, classification of such objects by Graburn (2006: 415) and Stanner (1939: 5).

It is worth noting that historical overviews of Aboriginal art making in the south east can also be found in several texts aiming to provide a top-level audit of Aboriginal art across Australia. Key texts here include Morphy's *Aboriginal Art* (1998), Kleinert and Neale's mammoth *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (2000), Caruana's *Aboriginal Art* (2003) and McCulloch and McCulloch Childs' *McCulloch's Contemporary Aboriginal Art: The Complete Guide* (2008). Approaches to a synopsis of the history of art in the south east vary across these works. Kleinert and Neale, in a section reconnoitring the history of Aboriginal art by geographic region, devote eight articles to the exploration of art making in *The Southern States* (2000: 240-264). Caruana (2003: 194-223) and McCulloch and McCulloch-Childs (2008: 278-291) include art created in the south east in sections on the work of urban or contemporary city-based artists. By contrast, both Kleinert and Neale (2000: 267-294) and Morphy (1998: 369-420) canvas the work of urban or contemporary artists in separate chapters to those on art from the south east. Thus, perhaps due to the discipline from which they were produced, in the art-historical works of Caruana and McCulloch and McCulloch-Childs, art from the south east becomes enmeshed or conflated with urban or contemporary art.

The influence of Cooper (1981) and Kleinert (1994) can be detected in Morphy, and Kleinert and Neale's works, which provide a comprehensive chronology of south eastern Aboriginal art from pre-contact to the present day. Caruana and McCulloch and McCulloch-Childs focus largely on urban art created from the 1970s onwards. However, Caruana, like Morphy, mentions Mickey from Ulladulla, William Barak, Tommy McRea, Albert Namatjira, Roland Bull and Revel Cooper as the aesthetic forebears of present day contemporary and urban artists (Caruana 2003: 195 & 199). It is worth noting that all of these authors explicitly acknowledge that, due to great and sustained pressure from colonising forces, Indigenous artists from the south east have often had to actively reforge a connection with their cultural heritage, or indeed devise new artistic forms to connect with and express their cultural identity (Morphy 1998: 319, see also, Caruana 2003: 194, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2008: 8 & 26-27, Kleinert 2000: 241). Importantly, Kleinert and Neale (Kleinert 2000: 240), Morphy (1998: 319) and Caruana (2003: 194) acknowledge that the lack of historical information about Indigenous art in the south east has more to do with colonial perceptions of Indigeneity and authenticity than with the actual production of work by south eastern artists.

### **Socio-Political Histories**

Distinct from the aforementioned works are several pieces of literature which take a socio-historical approach to the analysis of Aboriginal art from the south east. These works position localised investigations of Indigenous art production in the broader context of British colonialism, the settlement of particular regions in the south east, and the subsequent

enactment of particular social or economic government policies, thus providing insights into the connections between localised art production and the colonial administration of Australia. Within this literature, the work of Maria Nugent, including *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet* (2005), is perhaps the most significant. In this book, and elsewhere, Nugent traces the post-contact history of Indigenous settlement at the Sydney suburb of La Perouse. In doing so she illustrates the way isolationist government policy, intended to 'protect' Aboriginal people in NSW, helped to fertilise a booming market in Indigenous tourist art at La Perouse from the 1910s to the 1960s (2005: 63-81).<sup>24</sup>

Kleinert's work on Indigenous souvenir and art production in Victoria during the 1950s (2010a) is reminiscent of Nugent's in its socio-historic approach. Kleinert provides a detailed historical account of the establishment and operation by Aboriginal activist Bill Onus, of *Aboriginal Enterprises*, a company that produced and sold Indigenous-themed souvenirs for the tourist trade in Belgrave on the outskirts of Melbourne (2010a: 171). In an argument similar to that posited in her doctoral thesis (1994), Kleinert asserts that the establishment of this business, at a time when assimilationist policy was predominant, meant that it offered '...a model of cultural maintenance that began to rebuild pride in Aboriginality, contributing toward a new urban Aboriginal presence in Melbourne' (2010a: 171).

These texts provide excellent detail regarding the history of production, sale and circulation of art objects in specific communities and geographic regions. Further, they position the trajectories of these art objects in the context of wider social, political and economic actions and events. My thesis seeks to follow this approach by tracing the various ways that Indigenous art making in NSW is connected to, reflects, shapes and is shaped by the wider socio-cultural milieu of the state. Nugent and Kleinert's works are also instructive in terms of their analytical omissions. The focus of both authors is on items made explicitly for trade in the tourist market and yet their analysis of the portent of these items differs considerably.

Kleinert's focus is cultural, on the way that the creation of objects at *Aboriginal Enterprises* was ultimately a means of making, connecting with and sustaining Indigenous culture. The financial imperative of the operation of *Aboriginal Enterprises* is not in focus here because Kleinert's aim is to rescue the objects created by the company from classification as inauthentic tourist kitsch (2010a: 171), something best done by emphasising the social function and cultural meaning of their creation (see for example 2010a: 173). Nugent's focus is, conversely, on economics – a consideration of the economic savvy of La Perouse locals and their exploitation of tourist interest in curios produced by 'exotic' natives. Indeed, Nugent contends that the central motivation for the creation of shellwork – which has commonly been

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<sup>24</sup> See also Nugent (2011: 85) and Vanni (2000: 400).

neglected in the literature in favour of analyses that emphasise their cultural significance – has been the need to earn money (2011: 71-77).

While Kleinert focuses on the cultural value of art-objects made for sale, and Nugent emphasises the economic imperative that sustained the creation of objects considered culturally important, both scholars ultimately illustrate the interrelationship between the *cultural* and *economic* and undermine the modernist division which casts art and the market as detached from one another (Myers 2006: 275). This thesis follows this approach by exploring the interrelationship between the economic and the artistic or cultural in order to illustrate that these supposedly distinct entities are thoroughly interrelated (Carty 2011: 13).

### **Personal Acts: Individual and Community Art Practice**

The second category of scholarship exploring Indigenous art making in the south east tends away from the broad historical approach of works outlined above, instead focusing on the personal narratives, experiences and life histories of individual artists and their colleagues or families. Recurring themes include identity making, art as cultural expression, and the connection between art and public perceptions of Indigeneity.

Marianne Riphagen's writings on contemporary Melbourne-based Indigenous artists are a particularly successful example of individual-focused investigations of south eastern art. For example, Riphagen's *Black on White: Or Varying Shades of Grey?: Indigenous Australian Photo-media Artists and the 'Making of' Aboriginality* (2008) explores issues linked to identity formation and the artistic exploration and representation of Aboriginality via a close analysis of Christian Thompson and Dianne Jones' contribution to an exhibition at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography in 2005. Riphagen demonstrates how Thompson's work explores and enacts his Indigenous *and* European heritage, and in so doing, 'stresses...the interrelatedness of Indigenous and non-Indigenous practices, ideas, experiences and philosophies' (2008: 84). Elsewhere, Riphagen combines an exploration of the personal biography of artist Brooke Andrew with a detailed analysis of his creative output from the last fifteen years, to tease out issues associated with the categorisation of works by Aboriginal artists in terms of ethnicity (2013). Here, Riphagen brings an ethnographic depth of analysis to bear on material collected on a single artist, with fruitful results.

Like Riphagen, Lorraine Gibson (2013) makes use of personal biography in her analysis of the art practice and aesthetic preferences of Barkindji people living and working in Wilcannia in the north west of NSW. Using the personal history of artists Badger Bates (2013: 91-113) and Murray Butcher (2013: 229-262), Gibson illustrates the way art making has become, in Wilcannia, explicitly identified as an act of culture-keeping and, as such, a form of insulation

against accusations that the Barkindji have 'no culture' (2013: 70). Gibson writes that many Aboriginal people from Wilcannia have taken on the 'white view' that they have no culture and, as such, experience and express a profound sense of loss with regards to not being able to live off the land, speak language or enact rituals such as initiation (2008c: 295, 2013: 125 & 297). Artists in Wilcannia, like Bates and Butcher, conceptualise their work as cultural and/or traditional and thus, while engaging with the art world, find themselves navigating complex terrain regarding their status as artists: they reject or feel ambivalent about designations like urban or contemporary because their art is representative of Barkindji tradition, and yet, because of the artworks they make and the way they live, they feel different to Aboriginal artists typically designated as making traditional work (e.g. those working in central Australia) (2008a: 301-310). As Gibson summarises:

The categories and discourses of "urban Aborigines" and "urban Aboriginal art" often appear to effortlessly encompass all people and art that is not from geographically "remote" places such as "the Top End", [or] "the Western Desert"...Categories such as "urban", "settled" and "south-eastern" are default categories, which in many ways exclude what are important differences to many of the people and artists being so named (2008a: 308).

In some ways, Daphne Nash's scholarship on shellworkers on the South Coast of NSW, can be seen as a sister to Gibson's work, in that it focuses on the artistic and cultural productions of Indigenous groups in a regional area of NSW who, like artists in Wilcannia, are making artworks which do not fit neatly into the categories of urban or traditional (2010: 2). While artists described by Gibson seem dogged by a sense of cultural loss, for shellworkers discussed by Nash the focus is on the cultural knowledge embodied by the works they make. These artists celebrate their art in terms of its ability to connect them with their forebears and sustain and perpetuate their cultural heritage (2009: 272, 2010: 13-14).

Relevant here are a variety of modest works, including exhibition catalogues, that offer accounts of the establishment of Indigenous collectives such as ProppaNow (Edmundson and Neale 2007) or Boomalli (J. Jones 2007), and provide analysis of the work of individual artists (Macdonald 2005, Greeno and Gough 2014, Koolmatrie et al. 2015), or explore the art practice of organically affiliated artistic communities, such as those united by geographic region (Gough 2000, Lehman 2006) or artistic media (Allas 2011, Couzens and Darroch 2012). These works are a testament to the diversity of art practice across the south east of Australia, and also, importantly, to the relative levels of inclusion and marginalisation experienced by Indigenous artists and their communities in both the art market and in wider social arenas. Given that much of this literature focuses on art-making in south eastern regions beyond NSW, or where

it focuses on NSW has an historical or fine-art rather than contemporary or socio-cultural focus, it is my contention that this thesis contributes to gaps in this literature.

### **The Indigenous South East and the Urban Experience: General Ethnographic Works**

Relevant here is a body of ethnographic literature with a generalised focus on Aboriginal communities in the southern states of Australia, often in urban regions. Early examples include works by R.H Mathews (1901), A.W. Howitt (1904) and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1929), which document specific cultural practices such as those linked to totemic and ritual performance (Radcliffe-Brown 1929) or language (Mathews 1901), or offer a detailed overview of *all* aspects of cultural life (Howitt 1904). By and large these works are intent on documenting cultural practice unsullied by the impact of colonial settlement and, as such, there is little information about Indigenous groups living in close quarters with non-Indigenous persons in towns or settlements.<sup>25</sup>

These early texts aside, scholars working with Indigenous groups in the southern states note that, compared with the volume of ethnographic material produced on Indigenous groups in the central and west of Australia, texts on the south east are relatively few (Cowlshaw 1987: 226, Kleinert 1994: 16, Macdonald 2001: 179-180). In the period spanning the 1930s to the 1980s, this appears to be the result of the perception that Indigenous people in this region assimilated into European culture, meaning their cultural practice was indistinguishable from the white communities which surrounded them (Macdonald 2001: 177). Key texts from this period include the works of Marie Reay (1949), Malcom Calley (1957), James Bell (1965), Diane Barwick (1964, 1978), Jeremy Beckett (1965, 1988), Gillian Cowlshaw (1987) and Barry Morris (1989). Gaynor Macdonald, in a useful review of material published across this period, argues that many of the aforementioned researchers tended to couch their analyses in terms of cultural loss, often focusing on the success or failure of a community's assimilation into wider society (2001: 178-179). Scholars such as Beckett, in the 1970s, or Cowlshaw and Morris, in the 1980s, attempted to move away from narratives of loss and focus instead on Indigenous engagement with wider society and the state. In these works cultural change and adaptation were *reread* as a form of creative resistance (Macdonald 2001: 181). However, in Macdonald's analysis this altered approach still equated change with cultural loss and reduced Aboriginal culture in the south east to the result of, or reaction to, colonialism (2001: 181-182).

Since the 1980s, several scholars – notably Cowlshaw (2011, 2012), Macdonald (2001, 2010), Gibson (2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2010, 2013), Everett (2009, 2010) and Yamanouchi (2012) – have undertaken studies on Indigenous communities in NSW. Several key themes, which are

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<sup>25</sup> This focus on pre-contact cultural life means that such texts are frequently utilised in the present by south eastern groups pursuing Native Title claims (Centre for Native Title Anthropology 2014).

also prevalent in literature on south eastern art more broadly, recur across this literature. These themes can be glossed as authenticity, invisibility, Indigenous people and the nation state, identity, and cultural (re)connection. These themes resonate strongly with data collected during my own fieldwork, thus they will be explored in detail through this thesis, as will the relevant work of the aforementioned scholars.

### **Methodologies and Approaches: Collecting and Analysing Data**

Much of the content of this thesis is the result of fieldwork undertaken in 2014 in various locations across NSW. While collective and co-operative organisations certainly exist in NSW,<sup>26</sup> the majority of artists who participated in this research operate as individuals, working in and across informal networks with colleagues and friends, rather than in formal collective arts groups.<sup>27</sup> The manner in which artists work in NSW made interview-based fieldwork a good fit for this project. Utilising DAAO, catalogues, and exhibition and arts-prize literature, I generated a list of 124 artists who appeared to be practicing in NSW and made contact via email or phone. I also contacted officers affiliated with the Arts NSW Regional Arts Network who passed on my contact information to artists working in their region. I also contacted arts workers and curators who worked in NSW with Aboriginal artists. Throughout 2014 I visited the following regions: the Far West, South East, Orana, Murray, Eastern Riverina, Mid West, Northern Rivers, the Mid North Coast, the Illawarra, South Coast, and Greater Sydney. In total I spoke with 66 participants: 34 self-identified Aboriginal artists, 29 arts professionals, and 3 artists who also worked as arts-professionals. Participating artists had diverse backgrounds in terms of life-experience, education, and engagement with art making. They spanned the ambit from high profile, full-time artists, to occasional makers who create art sporadically for their friends and family. Arts professionals included regional arts workers, public servants, public gallery curators, arts educators, academics and commercial arts retailers.

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<sup>26</sup> Boomalli is perhaps the most famous example of a NSW-based Aboriginal arts collective. The foundation of Boomalli is discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>27</sup> The *NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy Background Paper: NSW Aboriginal Arts and Culture Snapshot 2009* reported that there were 20 Aboriginal art centres, cooperatives or art-groups in NSW (Arts NSW 2010d: 15-16).





**Figure 2. Screenshot of author's working fieldwork map plotting the location of participants, April 2014.**

I conducted loosely structured interviews with artists and arts professionals. These participant-led interviews lasted anywhere between 45 minutes and four hours. When speaking with artists we canvassed topics associated with their experience of the art world, their art practice, and the experience of exhibiting and engaging with audiences. In instances where artists were comfortable, I spent time watching them work, providing an opportunity to engage more deeply in a dialogue about their creative process. Interviews with arts workers, curators and other arts professionals focused on their experience of the art market, approaches to interpreting and exhibiting Aboriginal art, the complexities surrounding the categorisation of different types of Aboriginal art, as well as discussion about the art scene in the area they worked. Some interviews were one-offs; other participants preferred to speak with me on several occasions.

After interviews were completed and I had transcribed them, I sent transcripts and audio back to participants, giving them a chance to review our conversation and advise me if they felt anything should be amended, added or removed. A similar process of consultation has occurred with regards to the written material which forms the basis of this thesis. This has had the effect of extending the conversation undertaken between participants and myself and also means that I had a forum to air my ideas and test the soundness of my interpretation of interview material. I am indebted to project participants who have been very generous in this regard.

Initially I expected to conduct between ten and twenty interviews but a larger number of artists and industry professionals than I anticipated were interested in participating. The increase in interview numbers meant that I have been able to analyse my data on two levels.

On the one hand, interviews can be understood as intimate biographical narratives that provide deep detail with regards to the experiences, creative practices, and desires of individuals involved in art production and circulation in NSW. On the other hand, these interviews, taken as a whole, speak to points of diversity and convergence in this art scene allowing me to map certain trends in terms of modes of practice and artistic forms. Alongside interviews I attended art events including exhibition openings, artists' talks and art fairs. I also participated in several public workshops with artists.

In analysing data I utilised the qualitative data management software NVivo in order to undertake an iterative, thematic analysis based on the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved coding visual data, interview transcripts and other material a number of times until I had assigned all material to a series of top-level codes. These codes represented the central themes which emerged from the data collected. These central themes informed the content of this thesis, shaping the focus of each chapter.

### **Themes and Content**

In view of these themes and in light of the overarching questions which prompted this research – what kind of Aboriginal art is being made in NSW and why? – this thesis is made up of 9 chapters, the aims and intentions of which are outlined below.

Chapter 1 provides an historical overview of intellectual and commercial engagement with Aboriginal art produced in NSW since British colonisation. This contextualises and makes sense of the concerns and creative interests of research participants which have informed the content of, and which are analysed across, the remaining chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 2 posits that identity is an important issue for participants both personally and in their art practice. Utilising Morphy's observation that art making is a form of action (2009: 117, 2010: 266), this chapter outlines the way artists use art to explore, affirm and constitute their identity, often in the face of perceptions that they are not authentically Aboriginal. This chapter demonstrates that Aboriginality is conceptualised, by participants, in overwhelmingly non-essentialist ways, although the nature of this non-essentialism is diverse.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of artworks included in the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize from 2005 to 2015 in order to describe, and define the parameters of, the diverse art practices enacted by artists born in, and working across, NSW. Using this broad overview of NSW art forms as a springboard, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 explore two visual forms (south eastern designs and dots) and two styles or genres (urban art and contemporary art) which are commonly created, or are felt to be significant, by participants. These forms/genres are

positioned by participants as traditional and non-traditional to NSW, sometimes simultaneously.

Picking up the thematic threads raised in the preceding three chapters, Chapter 7 analyses the way participants work with and talk about, dots, south eastern designs and urban and contemporary art. Engagement with these forms and genres speaks directly to the ways participants conceive of culture especially as it pertains to tradition, authenticity, change and continuity. This conception of culture affirms that it is problematic to conceptualise culture and cultural traditions as entities which are inherently static and eroded by change.

Chapters 8 and 9 consider the circulation of art forms described in Chapters 2 to 7 in the art market. Chapter 8 describes the market for Aboriginal art from NSW. It illustrates that participants engage with the art market via three market spheres, each demarcated by price, media, sale venue, the artists' level of direct exposure to commercial transactions, the means via which the work is commercially promoted, and the levels of fiscal and legal regulation the sphere is subject to. Chapter 9 builds on this description of market spheres and illustrates the way engagement with the art market is meaningful for artists, and confers meaning upon artworks offered for sale.

On a broad level, each of these chapters seeks to *pay attention* to Aboriginal art created in NSW, and to the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the artists who create these works, and the arts professionals who facilitate their creation and circulation.



## Chapter 1 Engagement with Aboriginal Art from New South Wales

*'If Aborigines learned anything about Cook, besides his bad manners, it was his fondness for their artefacts'* – McLean (2016: 32)

### **Aboriginal Art in NSW and the South East: A Brief History**

The overriding focus of this thesis is the practice of artists making work in NSW in the present. This chapter situates this research by providing a brief history of Aboriginal art making in NSW, and an overview of the market for such art. Consideration of this material contextualises and clarifies the concerns, and creative interests, of research participants that are to be addressed across the remaining chapters. The following abbreviated history takes as its starting point the engagement of British and other settlers with Aboriginal art objects. Art objects and other material culture produced prior to colonisation will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.<sup>1</sup>

### **Colonial Encounter**

From the first, the British colonisation of Australia was accompanied by the collection of objects produced and used by Aboriginal people who resided in the area now known as NSW. These objects, coveted as curios, were obtained via trade, sale, or theft by those who arrived in Australia via Cook's expedition, the First Fleet, and after.<sup>2</sup> Indeed in 1770, on the day of Cook's first landing on the east coast of New Holland (now NSW), botanist Joseph Banks remarked in his journal on a bark shield, and other objects, encountered at Botany Bay, then known by the expedition as Sting-Rays Bay. Banks wrote:

Defensive weapons we saw only in Sting-Rays bay and there only a single instance--a man who attempted to oppose our Landing came down to the Beach with a shield of an oblong...made of the bark of a tree; this he left behind when he ran away and we found upon taking it up that it plainly had been pierced through with a single pointed lance near the centre (2005).<sup>3</sup>

Banks goes on to relate that the landing party then entered an abandoned settlement and took a number of spears and left various objects – such as beads, ribbons and cloths – as 'presents'. Banks reflected in his journal, 'we...thought it no improper measure to take away

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<sup>1</sup> Needless to say comprehensive historical overviews regarding the engagement of European settlers and colonials with Aboriginal art can be found elsewhere and are cited throughout this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Jones (2007: 13-31), McLean (2016: 32-33), Peterson et al. (2008: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Today, the shield resides in the British Museum where it is counted as one of the 'highlights' of the collection (The British Museum n.d.). The shield has been subject to calls for repatriation (Cannane 2016).

with us all the lances which we could find about houses, amounting in number to forty or fifty' (Banks 2005).<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.1. Shield, Gweagal people, collected at Botany Bay in April 1770, 97 x 29 x 12 cm. British Museum Oc1978,Q.839. ©Trustees of the British Museum.**

While Cook and his cohort resorted to theft of Aboriginal material culture, when the First Fleet later made landfall and founded a colony, a vigorous trade relationship was established with Aboriginal people who bartered objects such as weapons and tools with settlers (McLean 2016: 33, P. Jones 2007: 31, Watson 2007: 17). Numerous references in texts penned by British officers and others present in the colony at the time stand as testament to the widespread collection of these objects (P. Jones 2007: 13-14). Indeed, Aboriginal objects were collected with such frequency that, in his chatty account of the settlement of Port Jackson published in 1793, Watkin Tench quips that he will devote only a few paragraphs to description of the 'manufactures' of the 'natives of New South Wales' because '...very ample collections of all these articles are to be found in many museums in England' ([1793] 2014: np).<sup>5</sup>

It appears that collectors were often interested in items associated with warfare, such as spears, boomerangs, axes, nulla-nullas, shields and clubs. Tools, ritual objects, and other items such as woven bags and baskets, associated both with men and women, were also collected.<sup>6</sup> However, the focus of many collections seems to have been on objects related to men's activities (Peterson et al. 2008: 16-17, Satterthwait 2008: 40). Accarigi has suggested, in relation to objects that appeared in the Garden Palace's Ethnological Court (Sydney), that this is likely because collectors were mostly men and thus either '...ignored women's material culture or were unable to make women part from this material' (2016: 136). Despite this focus,

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<sup>4</sup> For information on the collection of this shield and other objects see Nugent (2009: 40-42), Osbourne and Simpkin (2015: 48-49), Attenbrow and Cartwright (2014: 886-888).

<sup>5</sup> Watkin Tench, Captain-Lieutenant of the Royal Marines, published two books about his experiences in Sydney's British Colony. As Clendinnen observes, his texts are characterised by a '...sunny self-irony' (2003: 64).

<sup>6</sup> See for example, the items displayed as part of the Ethnological Court at the Garden Palace (discussed below).

objects associated with the labour of women, such as grinding stones or coolamons, are present in collections.<sup>7</sup>

Possum skin cloaks, or items of adornment such as shell necklaces, because of their more ephemeral materiality, have only infrequently survived (Cooper 1994: 100). At this time Aboriginal objects were treated as artefacts – functional or decorative objects associated with social processes, such as warfare, the collection of food, or ritual – rather than as fine art objects, produced for contemplation and reflection (Langton 2000a: 19).

Despite the vigorous collection of Aboriginal art and material culture over this period, appraisal of the aesthetic quality of such objects was often equivocal. From the first, Europeans tended to classify Aboriginal art and material culture as ‘...“rude”, “curious” and “strange”’ (Cooper 1994: 92).<sup>8</sup> However, as Bernard Smith observed, terms like curious were often utilised ‘...to express...interest...without passing an aesthetic judgement’ (1985: 123, see also Thomas 1991: 130). Thus, even though admiration for Indigenous art work may have been tempered by negative or ambiguous language, often collectors ‘...could not help admiring many of the objects they observed and collected’ (Smith 1985: 124). Texts produced by those early visitors to the colony in Sydney bear out Smith’s observations, with their language often suffused by mild or grudging surprise that a people they considered uncivilised or barbarous could produce such well-made and aesthetically pleasing objects. The following from *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay* is typical:

The natives of New South Wales, though in so rude and uncivilised a state as not even to have made an attempt towards clothing themselves...are not without notions of sculpture...in the neighbourhood of Botany Bay and Port Jackson, the figures of animals, of shields, of weapons, and even of men, have been seen carved upon the rocks, roughly indeed, but sufficiently well to ascertain very fully what was the object intended...on the top of one of the hills, the figure of a man in the attitude usually assumed by them when they begin to dance, was executed in a still superior style (Stockdale [1789] 2003: np).<sup>9</sup>

Peterson, Allen and Hamby have identified five phases in the history of the collection of Aboriginal objects, the first of which was a ‘...period of unsystematic collecting, which stretches from first contact to c.1880’ (2008: 8). Collection in this period was undertaken by private individuals rather than by institutions or organisations (2008: 8). Examination of

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<sup>7</sup> See for example items from NSW in the collection of the Australian Museum: Wheeler (2012, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Vigorous collection is demonstrated by the many Aboriginal objects in collections in Australia and across the world. Jones estimates that during the colonial period approximately 10,000 people collected around 250,000 ‘Aboriginal artefacts’ which are now held in ‘museums and collections’ across the world (P. Jones 2007: 5).

<sup>9</sup> See also Southwell ([1893] 2012) and Chapter 17 of Tench ([1793] 2014: np).

Aboriginal objects exhibited at Sydney's Garden Palace, as part of the International Exhibition (1879), offers an insight into the type of material culture from NSW gathered in this *first period* of collecting.

The Garden Palace, housing a vast international exhibition intended to showcase Australia's agricultural, technological and cultural assets, opened in Sydney in 1879 (Proudfoot and Young 2000: 3).<sup>10</sup> The Garden Palace housed the Ethnological Court, created in order to exhibit objects and other material collected from '...Indigenous peoples' from Australia, the Torres Strait, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Pacific (Accarigi 2016: 133). Also included – offered for comparison – were Stone Age items collected in Europe, and objects from First Nation peoples in North America (Sydney International Exhibition 1879 1880).

The ethnological exhibition featured objects collected by government groups, private citizens and institutions, with the Australian Museum the major contributor (Sydney International Exhibition 1879 1880: vi-vii). All displayed items are listed in the *Official Catalogue of the General Ethnological Collection* (1880). The catalogue records 5,200 exhibition 'specimens', listed by patron and recording the item type and the location from which it originated. Review of the catalogue indicates that 101 artefacts from NSW, a little under 2% of total items exhibited, were displayed at the Garden Palace.<sup>11</sup> As outlined in Table 1.1, weaponry such as axes, shields and boomerangs make up the largest portion of NSW items exhibited. Other items like dilly bags and stone tools, such as mortar and pestles, were also displayed, albeit in fewer numbers. This broad interest in Australian Aboriginal weaponry is reflected in the items from beyond NSW listed in the rest of the catalogue (Sydney International Exhibition 1879 1880).

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<sup>10</sup> The Garden Palace burnt down September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1882 (Accarigi 2016: 133).

<sup>11</sup> As many of the contributing collectors were private citizens, it is unsurprising that the details regarding the locale from which items originated is often imprecise or erratic. Objects are listed variously as originating from a particular country ('New Zealand'), a state ('New South Wales') or a specific place ('Stoney Creek, near Picton'). Because of this I have only included items in this count that are definitively described as coming from NSW. The objects that don't have a provenance recorded have been excluded as have those that have been identified in such a way as to make it impossible to clearly identify them as from NSW. For example several items from the Australian Museum are listed as coming from the 'Murray River' (Sydney International Exhibition 1879 1880: 42-43). As this could designate areas in either NSW or Victoria, these items have not been included. In line with the focus of this chapter, 12 items collected in NSW – human remains, plant and other natural material and written material relating to Aboriginal language (donated by English Missionary Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, see Sydney International Exhibition 1879 (1880: 14)) – and displayed at the exhibition were also excluded.



Object Type	Number of Items
Stone Axe†	25
Heilaman (Shield)‡	19
Boomerang	13
Fibre Bag/Dilly Bag	10
Stone Tool	7
Tomahawk†	6
Nulla Nulla/Club	7
Womerah (Spear Thrower)	4
Clay Caps (Funerary Object)	3
Water Carrier	2
Necklace	2
Rock Painting	1
Fire Sticks	1
String Fibre (Woven Hair)	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>

**Table 1.1. NSW material in the Ethnological Gallery. †Stone Axe and Tomahawk are both used in the document. It's not clear if these are used interchangeably or denote different types of objects, I have retained the distinction here. ‡Catalogue spelling retained.**

### **Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Engagement**

Despite evident early-colonial interest in Aboriginal art and material culture, by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a ‘...tradition of harsh denigration of Indigenous Australians’ and their artistic traditions (Thomas 1999: 112). Prevalent evolutionist attitudes cast Aboriginal people as uncivilised and unevolved, and, as such ‘...they were regarded as a people without art’ (Caruana 2003: 18).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Nicholas Thomas reports that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was relatively little popular and critical engagement in Aboriginal art or culture, especially when compared with Pākehā interest in Maori art (1999: 112-114).<sup>13</sup> Despite this apparent broad-level non-engagement, across the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Aboriginal people in the south east – as elsewhere – continued to create art objects and non-Indigenous people continued to engage with, and purchase, them. For example, towards the end of the 1800s, several south-eastern Aboriginal artists such as Mickey of Ulladulla, Tommy McRae and William Barak found success and renown.

<sup>12</sup> While these generalisations may stand, Van Damme has made the important observation that ‘...European perceptions and evaluations of Aboriginal cultures have never been homogeneous...’ (2012: 5) and that indeed, ‘...many nineteenth-century European writers made positive comments on the artistic merit of Aboriginal visual expression...’ (2012: 4-5).

<sup>13</sup> See also, Leslie (2008: 23), Goodall (2008: 124).



**Figure 1.2. Mickey of Ulladulla, undated [ca.1800s], *Scenes of Aboriginal Life*/drawn by Mickey of Ulladulla, pencil, coloured pencil, and watercolour drawing, 16.5 x 40.5 cm, SV/49, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. FL3173259.**

Mickey of Ulladulla, also known as Mickey the Cripple, was a Dhurga artist who lived in Ulladulla, a settlement on the South Coast of NSW (Sayers 2000b: 645). The artist's detailed, almost rambling compositions, typically depict scenes of the everyday lives of Aboriginal people, showing them fishing, cooking, gathering food, selling their wares, interacting with settlers, and sometimes, enacting rituals (Sayers 1994: 51). Similarly, Tommy McRae, presumed a Kwatkwat man, lived and worked around the upper Murray River as a stockman. As an older man he took up drawing and made a living selling his artworks and undertaking agricultural work in Victoria and NSW (Sayers 2005). McRae's pen and ink drawings on paper covered various subjects including the representation of ceremonies and cultural rituals he had witnessed as a young man, as well as depictions of squatters, Chinese immigrants, and subsistence activities, such as fishing, undertaken by Aboriginal people (Perkins 2010: 176, Sayers 2005). William Barak was a Wurundjeri man who was one of the first to settle at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in Victoria (Sayers 2000a: 534). Barak drew and painted on paper using a combination of watercolours, charcoal and ochre. His paintings were sold to tourists who would make day trips from Melbourne to Coranderrk, but he also gifted artworks to Aboriginal people living on the Station at significant times in their lives, often in lieu of appropriate ceremonial performances as such activities were discouraged (Sayers 2000a: 534, Grishin 2013: 21). By drawing ceremony, ritual and other traditional activities like hunting, Barak sought to document the cultural life of his people, to create a record of vital practices and spiritual duties which were no longer able to be performed by his community. By making and selling these works to non-Aboriginal visitors, he sought to communicate to the outside

world the richness and importance of Wurundjeri culture, and thereby foster a respect for this culture (Sayers 1994: 51). As would later occur when Albert Namatjira achieved fame and recognition in the late 1930s, novelty and curiosity played at least some part in the popularity of artists such as Mickey of Ulladulla, McRae and Barak. These men were considered master-mimics: primitive artists who could replicate a European manner of image making with such efficacy as to make their work notable and novel (Burn and Stephen 1992: 249, Croft 2002: 147, Sayers 1994: 87).<sup>14</sup>

In 1994, Kleinert wrote that there was a pervasive scholarly assumption that, following the death of ‘...William Barak and Tommy McRae at the turn of the century’, Aboriginal art ceased to be produced by south eastern Aboriginal people and that art making did not resume until ‘the emergence of an urban Australian art in the 1970s’ (1994: vi). Kleinert demonstrated that, in fact, in the 1900s Aboriginal people in the south east continued to create objects as part of a continuous, culturally informed art practice reaching back into the deep past (1994, see also Kleinert 2000). According to Kleinert, the reason that these objects were ignored by scholars is that they were made almost exclusively for commercial sale (1994: 25-27). Thus, while the works of McRae and Barak were appraised by audiences *as art* – albeit hybrid or half-cast (Sayers 1994: 9) – from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Aboriginal artists in the south east were creating and selling objects that, rather than being considered fine art, were consumed as souvenirs or tourist mementos and felt to have little aesthetic or cultural value (Morphy 1998: 367-368).

Across the southern states in the 1800s, reserve areas were gazetted and mission stations established by government for occupation by Aboriginal peoples displaced to make way for pastoral and other activities.<sup>15</sup> Aboriginal people were encouraged to work in order to supplement the resources of the mission or reserve (Kleinert 2000: 241-242). While speaking in language, undertaking religious or social rituals, or sharing cultural knowledge was typically discouraged – sometimes strenuously – mission administrators condoned and actively promoted the creation of ‘craft’ objects by women and artefacts, such as boomerangs, by men (Kleinert 2000: 241-244). These items were produced for sale to non-Indigenous tourists who visited missions and reserves – such as Lake Tyers and Coranderrk in Victoria, or La Perouse in Botany Bay, Sydney – as tourist attractions (Kleinert 2012: 86).

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<sup>14</sup> In the last few decades the life and work of Mickey of Ulladulla, McRae, Barak and Namatjira have been reappraised, with scholars focusing on the cultural knowledge which informed, and is reflected in their work, their artistic innovation, and their engagement with, and documentation of, the (often rapidly changing) world around them. See for example, Burn and Stephen (1992), Sayers (1994), Croft (2002), Perkins (2010: 174-187).

<sup>15</sup> For an overview see Goodall (2008: 49-65) and (Office of Environment & Heritage 2012).

Souvenir objects produced at La Perouse provide a clear example of the kind of art identified by Kleinert (1994). In the years following the Federation of Australia (1901), there was increased public interest in Captain Cook, who was seen as the founding father of the nation. Thus the site of his landing at Botany Bay became a popular spot for tourists (Nugent 2005: 63). La Perouse had, since 1885, been officially gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve meaning that various proscriptions were placed on access to the area, with missionaries and police attempting to discourage Aboriginal and white Australians mixing with one another. Thus, Nugent argues that the area's identification with the past, in public consciousness, was two-fold. La Perouse (located on the shores of Botany Bay) came to represent both the site of Captain Cook's landing and a 'prehistoric', pre-contact past from which Aboriginal people from La Perouse were believed to be relics (Nugent 2005: 72-75). Consequently tourists came to La Perouse due to its association with Cook and, also, to experience a lost, exotic past, as embodied by the Aboriginal people who lived there (Nugent 2005: 72-75, see also McKenzie and Stephen 1987: 179). In response to this fascination with Aboriginality, Indigenous people at La Perouse '...positioned themselves as one of the tourist attractions on offer at Botany Bay and as tourist traders, making and selling souvenirs' (Nugent 2005: 64). Therefore, the opportunity to purchase shellwork or a poker-worked boomerang became one of the great selling points of La Perouse as a tourist destination. Tourist interest in objects from La Perouse was sustained for many decades, until the 1960s, when gentrification of the suburb (Hinkson 2001: 108) resulted in a decline in tourism (Nugent 2011: 85).



**Figure 1.3. A contemporary iteration of La Perouse shellwork: Esme Timbery, (c.2010), *Shellworked booties*, 3 x 5 x 2 cm, collection of the author, image by the author.**

Despite the popular appeal of objects sold at La Perouse and elsewhere, contemporary academic appraisal was far from effusive, with these items labelled impoverished in terms of aesthetic merit and cultural meaning (Thomas 1999: 15). In an essay first published in 1938, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner expressed what Nugent asserts was a common academic contempt for tourist objects produced at La Perouse (2005: 85). He wrote, 'spurious

boomerangs are still made for tourists, and others only slightly less spurious for innocents who visit the encampment at La Perouse, but most of these artefacts are so inferior that even tourists pass them by' (Stanner 1979: 2-3). Stanner offers this appraisal in an essay that laments the dying out of Aboriginal people. Here, Aboriginal people are painted as a race on the brink of wipe-out, with Indigenous people from the south east – 'wretched half-caste remnant(s)' – acting as a bell-weather of what 'outback' tribes will soon experience (1979: 1). Stanner writes '...the old tribesmen of New South Wales...might as well have been shadows moving in the trees of the eighteenth century for all the imprint they have left behind' (1979: 2).<sup>16</sup> The boomerangs for sale at La Perouse were, for Stanner, symbols of loss; like the people who made them they were read as the acculturated remnants of a culture that had all but disappeared. For those who articulated 'dying race' narratives, objects offered for sale in the south east were considered ersatz because of what they looked like, where they were sold (a tourist spot), who they were sold to (the general populace) and, most profoundly, who produced them.<sup>17</sup> Here, the assumption was that only *real* Aboriginal people could produce *real* Aboriginal cultural products and Aboriginal people from the southern states could not be said to merit the sobriquet (Leslie 2008: 35). Aboriginal people were also felt to be not properly Aboriginal because of their lifestyle. Having long been encouraged, by missionaries and others involved in their 'protection', to adopt a European lifestyle in terms of dress, dwelling, social mores and religious belief, Aboriginal people from NSW were understood to have become acculturated, due to their immersion in 'white Australia' (Leslie 2008: 33).

In manifold ways, those Aboriginal people living in the southern states were popularly represented as not being truly Aboriginal and, thus not having, or being able to create, culture. As a result, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, art created by Aboriginal people in NSW was excluded both from the category of art-object *and* from the category of Aboriginal by academics and others (Morphy 1998: 319-320, Caruana 2003: 194).

### **Mid-20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Reception**

Material and visual culture produced by third and fourth world peoples was not generally classified as fine art until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when 'primitive art' became popular. This catch-all label was deployed in art history as a means of finding non-European objects a place in the narrow linear history of (Western) fine art (Morphy 2010: 269-270, Myers 2006: 268).

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<sup>16</sup> Tasmania was spuriously assumed to be without an Aboriginal population at the time that Stanner was writing. In a footnote in this essay he summaries this position bluntly; 'The Tasmanian Aborigines are extinct. Many of them were shot' (1979: 6).

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Stanner spent much of his professional life researching and advocating for Aboriginal people and much of his written work involves calling for the provision of rights for Indigenous Australians (Dodson 2008). However, he was a man of his time and this essay reflects contemporary attitudes about Aboriginality as a bio-social category.

Avant-garde artists experimenting with an increasingly abstracted or stylised visual lexicon, began to celebrate, study and replicate icons, motifs and forms produced by makers from the non-West, particularly Africa and Oceania (Clifford 2006: 154, Vogel 2006: 213). While these European artists rarely engaged with Aboriginal art (Burn and Stephen 1992: 260), the popularity of primitive art prompted, during the 1940s, a re-classification of Aboriginal material culture from artefact to primitive art object (Morphy 1998: 320). Morphy has described 'primitive art' as an inherently conservative designation which conceptualises the authentic primitive object as 'untouched' by European influences (1998: 320). Objects perceived as having the taint of the non-Indigenous did not achieve the status of primitive art. As a result, as in the previous century, art produced in the south east – much of which utilised materials or techniques perceived to be European in origin – was perceived as 'assimilated' and thus as falling outside the category of both primitive and Western fine art (Morphy 1998: 320, McLean 2011: 19).

Despite their classification as acculturated or touristic, the art objects produced at this time by Aboriginal people in NSW, and the south east more broadly, can be seen as having laid foundations for the verdant 'renaissance' of Aboriginal arts and culture which took place in the south east in the 1970s and 1980s (McLean 2011: 56). As Morphy observed, these objects were often created:

...in the face of opposition from the authorities who saw them as potentially disruptive, running counter to the assimilation policy and outside their direct control. It was this resistance to incorporation within the mainstream of Australian society, combined with the flexible approach to new forms and practices, that set the background for the apparent rebirth of Aboriginal art and revival of Aboriginal culture in New South Wales and Victoria...(1998: 368).<sup>18</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, an expanding public consciousness regarding the rights of Indigenous Australians, the result of persistent and articulate political activism by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their allies since the 1960s, and the revocation of assimilationist policy, led to a greater public and institutional interest in, and appreciation of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture (Caruana 2003: 195, Morphy 1998: 320, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2008: 278). This cultural renaissance produced a generation of self-identified 'urban' or 'Koori' artists who, via their art practice, sought to problematise the classification of Aboriginal people, and their cultural products, as primitive, traditional, or assimilated. These artists declared themselves Aboriginal artists and rejected the notion that they should be required to make art that looked a particular way, or represented particular topics (Morphy

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<sup>18</sup> For an exploration of issues surrounding the production of art for tourists at this time see Kleinert (1994: 105-139).

1998: 320-321 & 378-380, Benjamin 2000: 468). Such artists utilised diverse media – including print making, photography, performance art, and painting – and deployed diverse visual styles to make works that represented topics such as the British invasion of Australia, identity politics, discrimination, racism, Country, the Stolen Generations and other political and social issues (Caruana 2003: 198, Morphy 1998: 379-380). In NSW, Sydney became a locus for the practice of artists such as Brenda Croft, Michael Riley, Tracey Moffatt, Fiona Foley, Bronwyn Bancroft and Gordon Syron. Rural artists operating across NSW, such as Robert Campbell Junior, Milton Budge and Harry Wedge, were also embraced and incorporated into this Sydney-centred urban art movement (McLean 2016: 201, Croft 1999: 111).

Distinct from visual culture produced in the immediate aftermath of colonisation, and from the acrylic paintings on board from Papunya Tula and other desert communities that were becoming popular, artworks produced by this first wave of ‘urban’ Aboriginal artists, while often appreciated for their aesthetic qualities, were sometimes derided as not properly Aboriginal (Croft 1999: 101, Le Roux 2011: 123).<sup>19</sup> In response, Aboriginal artists, curators and others worked together to form artistic communities and establish their own spaces to make and exhibit work (Le Roux 2011: 123, Altman 2000: 463). The Boomalli Aboriginal Artist Co-operative, founded in Sydney in 1987, became the most vocal and influential organisation to champion the critical and commercial acceptance of art created by ‘Urban Kooris’ (J. Jones 2007: np, see also McLean 2016: 209).<sup>20</sup> In the face of a critical refusal to allow that their artistic products were authentic expressions of the Aboriginal experience, the Boomalli founders strove to create a space for the exhibition and sale of urban art, as well as to educate and agitate on behalf of artists (Croft 1999: 108, J. Jones 2007: np).<sup>21</sup> Boomalli articulated the right of their artists to make work without reference to cultural practices from the past, while at the same time asserting their right to identify as Indigenous. They also challenged the colonial era assumptions that valorised the work of desert artists as authentic, while at the same time, disavowed that they too could be making genuine Aboriginal art (Edwards 2007: 58-59).<sup>22</sup>

McLean has observed that while Boomalli ‘...galvanised the urban Indigenous art movement...’, it was the energy and diversity of individual artists who ‘...defined its course’ (2016: 211). In the intellectual space opened by Boomalli, numerous Aboriginal artists from the south east working with various media and diverse styles and themes, have achieved critical and

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<sup>19</sup> Desert acrylics were also initially derided as inauthentic in similar ways (Caruana 2003: 194).

<sup>20</sup> Boomalli continues to operate and has the distinction of being ‘...one of Australia’s longest running, Black or white, artists’ co-operatives’ (J. Jones 2007: np).

<sup>21</sup> Boomalli founders were Arone Raymond Meeks, Fiona Foley, Brenda Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft, Avril Quail, Euphemia Bostock, Fernanda Martins, Tracey Moffatt, Jeffrey Samuels and Michael Riley.

<sup>22</sup> See also, Fisher (2012: 258-259) and Riley (1988).

commercial acclaim.<sup>23</sup> In the present, many NSW-based artists including – r e a, Daniel Boyd, Danie Mellor, Tony Albert, Kevin Butler, Jonathan Jones, Nicole Foreshew, Elaine Russell, Esme Timbery, Jonathan Jones, Karla Dickens, Blak Douglas (aka Adam Hill), Jason Wing and Lorraine Connelly-Northey – have achieved national and international commendation. Several of these high profile artists have moved away from working in a single medium and instead utilise the media that will best serve the concepts they seek to explore.<sup>24</sup> A strong interest in utilising or reinterpreting colonial archival materials also unites many of these artists (McLean 2016: 211-212).

Across the 1980s and 1990s, art-historical discourse on the work of south eastern artists tended to focus on their contemporaneity, with works analysed in terms of their commentary on political and historical issues, the present-day experiences of Aboriginal people, and their reappropriation of ‘traditional’ forms for various intellectual and creative ends. Critics did not typically analyse such works as being related to traditional, culturally-led modes of practice, nor indeed, did many artists.<sup>25</sup> This was in contrast to the frequent analysis of the work of desert artists as an expression of ancient or sacred knowledge (Croft 1999: 102). As will be demonstrated in Chapter 5, while this interpretation of south eastern art is still articulated by artists and others, there has been a growing tendency to acknowledge that ‘urban’ or ‘contemporary’ artists may also draw upon, and explore, traditional cultural and spiritual practices in their works.

The use, in contemporary artworks, of motifs and designs which were part of pre-settlement south eastern visual culture, such as those featured on carved trees, wooden weapons, tools, and possum skin cloaks, has had the effect of spot-lighting the ancient roots of certain forms of south eastern art.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the historical disavowal of the cultural authenticity of objects produced in NSW for commercial sale, such as shellwork or poker-work, has been challenged. Curators such as Tess Allas (Message Stick 2009) and Hetti Perkins (McGregor and Perkins 2014), and scholars including Kleinert (1994, 2010a, 2012) and Nash (2010), have worked to reframe the interpretation of these objects by emphasising their long historical production, and discussing the connections and resonances that such works have, for makers, with pre-contact knowledge and practices.

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<sup>23</sup> See McLean (2016: 211-245) for a discussion of influential contemporary Aboriginal artists which includes an overview of the practice of several south eastern artists.

<sup>24</sup> For example, see the work of Jason Wing Poll (2014), Tony Albert (Albert 2011), Brook Andrew (Walter 2008), Blak Douglas (Douglas and Geczy 2013) and Nicole Foreshew (Sebag-Montefiore 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Crocker (2011: 147), Kean (2011: 152-155), Croft (2011: 152), Sutton et al. (1988: 203-204).

<sup>26</sup> These issues will be explored in Chapter 4.



## Commercial Engagement with Art from NSW

Since the 1980s there has been increased commercial engagement with artworks produced in the south east, however, desert art has remained dominant in terms of market share of Aboriginal art.<sup>27</sup> In response to this, in 2002 Richard Bell wrote his now often cited and frequently reproduced 'Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It's a White Thing' (2012).<sup>28</sup> Here, in a reiteration of ideas expressed twenty years earlier by Boomalli, Bell criticises the degradation of 'urban blacks' as inauthentic and the valorisation of Aboriginal art from the 'least settled' areas of Australia (Bell 2012: 32-34) ultimately arguing that, '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. They are mostly White people...' (Bell 2012: 31). Bell argues, both fiercely and playfully, that the classificatory systems and the aesthetic registers privileged in the Western art market – into which Aboriginal art has been incorporated – ultimately serve to commodify Aboriginal art, rather than celebrate and respect it. As Bell writes, 'Aboriginal Art is bought, sold and promoted from within the system... Western Art consigns it to 'Pigeon-holing' within that system. Why can't an Art movement arise and be separate from but equal to Western Art – within its own aesthetic, its own voices, its own infrastructure, etc.?' (Bell 2012: 40).<sup>29</sup>

While there is evidence of increased commercial and critical interest in Aboriginal art produced in NSW (see below), the narrative that such work is not properly valued by the art market persists. Bell's notion that Aboriginal art is a white thing was frequently mentioned to me by artists in our discussions about the art market as was the colonialist presumption that south eastern artistic expression is invalid and inauthentic.<sup>30</sup> This illustrates the profound influence of pioneer urban artists in terms of shaping discussion, criticism and analysis of art produced in the south east. It also demonstrates that Aboriginal artists in NSW have both an awareness of the history of market engagement and that certain elements of this history – such as consumer expectations regarding what Aboriginal art should look like – continue to resonate in present day engagements. The engagement of NSW artists with the art market will be explored in

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<sup>27</sup> See discussion below.

<sup>28</sup> Bell's attitudes are also embodied in his painting *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorem)*, which features the slogan 'Aboriginal Art It's A White Thing'. The work won the Telstra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards in 2003 (Mundine 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Bell also takes what Fisher identifies as an 'anti-anthropology' and 'anti-ethnography' position in this text, asserting that ethnographic analysis of Aboriginal art perpetuates the authentic/inauthentic geo-social divide described above (see for example, Bell 2012: 32-33). Fisher illustrates that 'for urban Aboriginal artists', like Bell, this stance, '...signifies the resilience and legitimacy of an eclectic Indigenous identity that has withstood the colonial project and the discriminating "authenticity faultline" that accompanied it within the cultural domain' (2012: 264).

<sup>30</sup> Though, it now appears that, at least in terms of commercial and critical evaluation, that certain objects once considered inauthentic have achieved an 'authentic' status, a point to which we will return.

detail in Chapters 8 and 9, however the concluding portion of this chapter seeks to present an appraisal of the market for Aboriginal artworks from NSW, in order to give a sense of the commercial landscape in which thesis participants operate.

### **The Aboriginal Art Market: National Numbers**

While a number of studies have attempted to calculate the size of the Aboriginal art market, typically in terms of annual revenue, Jon Altman has asserted that the datasets produced by these studies are 'guesstimates' at best (Altman 2006: 3).<sup>31</sup> In 2006 Altman estimated that the annual revenue generated nationally by the sale of Indigenous visual art, including what he identifies as 'manufactured product', was between \$100 and \$300 million (Altman 2006: 3). Despite the broad nature of this estimate, this figure appears to have been popularly accepted. For example, in 2007 this figure was included in a report prepared by the Australian Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts which examined the Indigenous visual arts and crafts sector. The report noted that this estimate was frequently cited by stakeholders in the sector, but also acknowledged that elsewhere the sector's worth was estimated to be up to \$500 million, although the data supporting this was not described. In view of the various estimates of fiscal value presented in the report, the Standing Committee included a caveat in which they noted the problems inherent in estimating sector size, and went on to predict that difficulties relating to making such estimates were likely to be exacerbated in the future due to:

...increasing sales taking place on the Internet...the range of types of transactions and discounting in the sector, the increasing number of businesses participating in a complex market and...the large number of sales, paid for in cash or in kind, made by individual artists independent of galleries... Australian Parliament Senate Standing Committee on Environment Communications Information Technology and the Arts and Eggleston (2007: 14).

Consideration of literature produced after 2007 by government organisations makes clear the influence of the Standing Committee's report, with their figures reproduced widely.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, these figures have yet to be supplemented with more recent national estimates. It seems likely, however, that the \$500 million figure constitutes a high-water mark in terms of revenue generated by the sector. While datasets about primary sales in the art market are hard to obtain, information about sales in the secondary market, specifically auction sales, is more readily available. Examination of auction data indicates that Aboriginal art sales began to

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<sup>31</sup> For a concise summary of historical estimates regarding the annual revenue produced by Aboriginal art sector see Australian Parliament Senate Standing Committee on Environment Communications Information Technology and the Arts and Eggleston (2007: 9).

<sup>32</sup> See for example Office for the Arts (2015).

decline after 2007 (Australian Art Sales Digest 2015a).<sup>33</sup> Indeed in 2013, various media outlets reported that the Aboriginal art sector was experiencing a significant downturn. For example, a report broadcast on Radio National's PM program cited figures from the Australian Art Sales Digest<sup>34</sup> that indicated that 'after hitting a high of \$26 million in 2007, turnover has plummeted to around \$8 million annually' (Hamann 2013: np).<sup>35</sup> This broadcast, and other reports, indicated that the downturn was due not only to the global financial crisis, but also to changes made, in 2011, to the self-managed super funds (SMSFs) laws which were said to render 'investing in artworks a financial liability by prohibiting investors from displaying artworks purchased through SMSFs' (Lehman-Schultz 2013: np, see also Hamann 2013: np).

Currently, some industry stakeholders are expressing optimism about future growth of the sector. For example, in 2014, Adrienne Newstead gleefully declared, 'the secondary market has been experiencing a substantial recovery since it bottomed out in 2011...We may be far from the heady days when a single work by Clifford Possum or Emily Kngwarreye sold for more than \$1 million, but the future appears promising' (Newstead 2015: np, see also Australian Council for the Arts 2015: 30). In the same article Newstead also noted that, '...the growing strength of the secondary market is matched by signs of revival in primary gallery sales and the spectacular success of a number of currently practicing artists. Urban artists Danie Mellor and Tony Albert were the most triumphant during 2014...' (Newstead 2015: np). Given that, historically, desert artists such as Emily Kngwarreye and Clifford Possum have dominated Aboriginal art market sales – commanding the highest prices and most fervent collecting<sup>36</sup> – it is interesting that Newstead declared Mellor and Albert, two artists currently based in NSW, as the practicing artists who were the most successful, with regards to commercial and critical acclaim, in 2014. Given the momentum – in terms of critical and public interest – which appears to be building around Aboriginal art from NSW, it is tempting to identify the success of Mellor and Albert as indicative of both this interest and, also, of the acceptance of 'urban', 'contemporary', or 'city-based' Aboriginal art as a valid category of Indigenous art. The veracity

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<sup>33</sup> The robust nature of the Aboriginal art sector in 2007 is perhaps best illustrated by the sale of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's 'Earth's Creation' which sold in 2007 for \$1.074 million. Interestingly a large portion of the lot offered for auction alongside Kngwarreye's work did not sell, perhaps hinting at the downturn in sales to come (Fish 2007: np). This aside, the sale has been labelled historic as 'Earth's Creation' was the first artwork by an Australian women and the first work by an Aboriginal artist, to sell for over one million dollars at auction (National Museum Australia 2015: np).

<sup>34</sup> The Australian Art Sales Digest is a pay-for-access online database which collects data on Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand auction results.

<sup>35</sup> Presumably these figures refer to auction sales, given they were provided by Australian Art Sales Digest. The report does not describe the kind of sales included in these figures.

<sup>36</sup> See for example AIAM100 (2015). The AIAM100 (The Australian Indigenous Art Market Top 100), a web-business, lists the top 100 most collectable (in terms of investment value) Australian Aboriginal artists. While there are a few south eastern artists included here, such as Lin Onus, desert artists account for the majority of artists in the top 100. This attests to the revenue generated, historically, by the sale of their work at auctions.

of this observation will, of course, only be possible to evaluate in view of future sales of these, and other, NSW-based artists.

### **The Market for Aboriginal Art from NSW**

While the commercial success of artists like Mellor and Albert indicate, at the very least, some market interest in contemporary Indigenous art produced in NSW, it is difficult to extrapolate, on a broad level, the size of what might be called the NSW Aboriginal art market. Part of the difficulty comes when attempting to determine which transactions constitute the market under consideration. For example, does the NSW Aboriginal art market refer to works sold by commercial institutions based in NSW and created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) artists, regardless of where they are from? Or does it refer instead to the sale of artworks created by ATSI artists based in NSW, regardless of the location sold? The statistical information presented here focuses, though not exclusively, on the sale of art created by artists from NSW and sold in Australia.

### **Artists Selling Work**

The most relevant statistical material relating to the size of the sector was collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and provides an indication of the number of ATSI artists producing art in a professional capacity across the state. The 2006 census showed that 118 Indigenous people in NSW worked as ‘visual arts and crafts professionals’ for their main job (Arts NSW 2010a: 7), which decreased to 41 in the 2011 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013a) (see Table 1.2).

<b>Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals</b>	<b>ATSI Persons</b>
Painter (Visual Arts)	16
Photographer	16
Potter or Ceramic Artist	4
Sculptor	0
Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals (not elsewhere classified)	5
Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals (not further defined)	0
<b>Total Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals</b>	<b>41</b>

**Table 1.2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employment in visual arts and crafts occupations. Data derived from ABS 62730\_2011 Employment in Culture, 2011 – New South Wales (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013a).**

In the process of seeking out potential research participants, I compiled a list of ATSI artists practicing in NSW. I identified artists by consulting exhibition catalogues, critical and academic texts, news articles, regional arts organisation websites, gallery websites and DAAO. I ultimately compiled a list of 124 artists working in NSW. After a few months fieldwork, during which I was introduced to numerous artists *not* featured on the list, it was clear that the number of practicing artists in the state was greater than I had initially calculated.

The significant discrepancy between the number of practicing artists I identified and the number of NSW residents who listed visual arts and crafts as their main occupation in the 2011 census speaks to the large portion of Indigenous artists in NSW who practice in a part-time or casual capacity, and rely on a 'day job' in order to make a living, a point which will be explored in Chapter 9.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, survey data collected as part of the ABS' 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) indicates that a greater number of Indigenous residents in NSW participate in activities designated as 'ATSI Arts and Crafts', than is indicated by the main occupation figures produced in the census.<sup>38</sup> The survey reported that 170 participants from NSW, aged 15 years and over (15.9%) reported making 'ATSI Arts and Crafts'.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, when these participants were asked to identify the reasons they had engaged in 'ATSI Arts and Crafts' only 12 participants (4.5%) cited payment with a greater portion citing other motivations, such as 'Enjoyment and Fun' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009).<sup>40</sup>

I had expected that statistical information collected via the NATSISS relating to Indigenous participation in arts and craft activities for payment would provide an indication of the number of artists working in NSW who earn money from making artwork, but not as their main job. Given that the majority of research participants did not consider art making their main job, I was surprised to find that such a small number of artists had cited payment as a motivation for making, especially given that survey respondents were able to nominate more than one reason for their participation in cultural activities. The minimal response may be explained by a stigma, commonly articulated to me by participants, attached to artists who are perceived to make art *only* to make money. Such distaste was sometimes heightened when participants understood art-making as an expression and confirmation of cultural identity. Given that survey questions relating to participation in art making activities are explicitly framed as cultural in the NATSISS survey it is perhaps not surprising that only a minority of survey respondents cited payment as a motivation for art making (Australian Bureau of Statistics

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<sup>37</sup> A study by Throsby and Petetskaya affirms that a significant portion of *all* Australian artists work in a part-time or casual capacity. Reporting on a survey of professional Australian artists, carried out by Macquarie University, they noted that only 56% of surveyed artists '...spend all their working time at arts work (creative plus arts-related), and many fewer (23 percent) spend 100 percent of their time solely at creative work' (2017: 9).

<sup>38</sup> The NATSISS collected information about participation in designated 'Indigenous cultural activities' including making art and craft, writing or telling cultural stories, playing music, gathering plants or berries, fishing, hunting, or engaging in dance or theatrical performance (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009).

<sup>39</sup> The figure of 170 participants is based on my own analysis of ABS CURF data, for respondents aged 15 years and over (CULPQ4).

<sup>40</sup> These findings are based on my own analysis of ABS CURF data (CULPQ4). Due to the small number of survey respondents some care should be taken in generalising from these numbers.

2008: 40). Issues relating to tensions produced by making art for sale will be explored in Chapters 8 and 9.

### **Sales Figures**

There is relatively little useful data about revenue generated from sales of art made by Indigenous artists based in NSW, especially compared to information about the sales of art produced in other states and territories in Australia. This may be due, in part, to what Arts NSW has called the comparative youth of a formalised and regulated Indigenous art sector in the state. As a report from the organisation stated, 'the development of a coherent NSW Aboriginal arts and cultural sector is, in many ways, still in its infancy...' (Arts NSW 2010d: 6). It may also be that the relative dearth of information is linked to the nature of art practice in NSW. Artists in the state typically work in a solo capacity, rather than working in art centres, or other cooperative, community-based arts organisations. Reports and research regarding Aboriginal art sales are often derived from publicly available annual reports from Art Centres and Co-operatives (see for example Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). Thus, the sales revenue of individual artists working in NSW, or of private commercial galleries carrying their work, is not included in such research because of the difficulty associated with auditing sole traders or private commercial enterprises.

While there is some relevant statistical material available regarding revenue from sales of Indigenous art in Australia aggregated at a state level, much of this material is of limited use in terms of estimating revenue produced by sales of work by Aboriginal artists from NSW. For example, a report from the ABS, which listed revenue generated by sales at commercial art galleries in the year 1999-2000, reported that gross sales of Indigenous artworks in NSW commercial galleries totalled \$8.1 million, constituting 22.8% of the state's gross sales (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001: 10). While these figures do indicate the amount of money generated by sales of ATSI art in the state, they do not provide any indication of what percentage of these works were created by artists working in NSW, nor the amount of money such works generated. Similarly, figures relating to national sales of Indigenous art presented in this same report do not include any information about where sold artworks were produced.<sup>41</sup>

In view of the paucity of statistical material related to the primary market, and the ready availability of data related to auction sales in the secondary market, what follows is a quantitative description of the sale, by auction, of works produced by Aboriginal artists from NSW. This material was generated by analysis of data collected from auction sales in Australia

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<sup>41</sup> All dollar amounts in this chapter are Australian Dollars.

and Aotearoa New Zealand over a 28 year period, up until the 5<sup>th</sup> November 2015, catalogued on the Australian Art Sales Digest website (Australian Art Sales Digest 2015b).<sup>41</sup> Analysis of auction data revealed that 32 Indigenous artists from NSW sold a total of 283 works at auction between 1988 and 2015.<sup>42</sup> The total value of all works sold by each artist listed in the database is represented below in Table 1.3 and Figure 1.4.<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, Tracey Moffatt (who recently returned to Sydney after working for many years in New York) was the artist whose works generated the highest earnings. Over the surveyed time period, 103 of Moffatt's works were sold for a total of \$2,146,027. The second highest selling artist was Brook Andrew with 32 of his works generating \$476,683. Robert Campbell Junior's work generated the third highest returns, with 17 of his works generating \$116,050. Michael Riley and Danie Mellor constituted the fourth and fifth highest selling artists. These results are perhaps not surprising given that these artists are frequently identified as among the most renowned contemporary or urban artists from NSW and the south east more broadly (see for example, Morphy 1998: 392-400, McCulloch 2001: 206, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2008: 278-291). Indeed, most of the artists whose works were sold over this period could arguably be labelled as well known, at least in the art scene in NSW, due to the number of exhibitions in which they have participated, and the critical and academic engagement this participation has generated.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> 1988 is the earliest year of sales data available on the Australian Arts Sales Digest. There were no sales by NSW Aboriginal artists recorded until 1994. 5<sup>th</sup> November 2015 was the year-to-date at the time data was collected.

<sup>43</sup> Sales figures presented are based on the hammer price and are not adjusted for inflation. However, adjusting for inflation does not change the overall patterns observed.

<sup>44</sup> I have read critical or academic material about each of the artists listed in Table 1.3 excluding Albert Woodlands, Darren Cooper, Timothy Ives, Frank McLeod and George See. However, biographical and other data can be found online regarding each of these artists.

Artist	Artwork sales (\$)
Tracey Moffatt	2,146,027
Brook Andrew	476,683
Robert Campbell Junior	116,050
Michael Riley	90,105
Danie Mellor	69,100
Harry J. Wedge	43,765
Daniel Boyd	36,700
Gordon Syron	10,600
Bronwyn Bancroft	5,900
Karla Dickens	3,680
Lorraine Connelly-Northey	3,550
Albert Woodlands	3,250
Milton Budge	3,050
Elaine Russell	2,070
Robyn Caughlan	1,900
Jonathan Jones	1,600
James P. Simon	1,520
Mervyn Bishop	900
Jeff Samuels	650
Roy D. Kennedy	580
Darren Cooper	460
Timothy Ives	360
Sam Wickman Jupurrulla	325
Treahna Hamm	300
Adam Hill	250
Danielle Mate Sullivan	200
Frank McLeod	175
Donna Brown	120
Gail Naden	100
Nyree Reynolds	100
Euphemia Bostock	80
George See	80

Table 1.3. Auction sales per NSW artist.

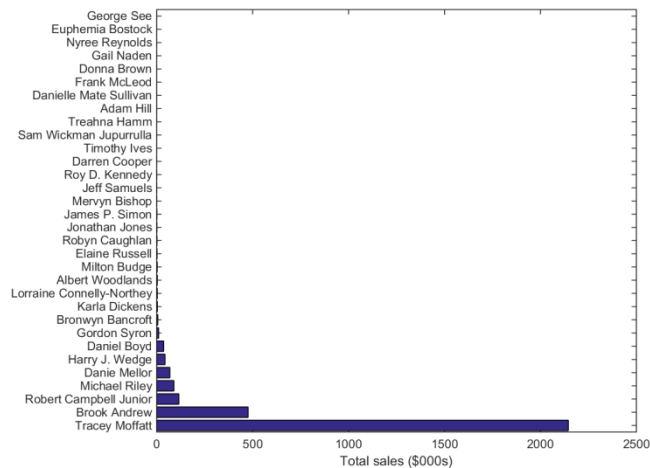
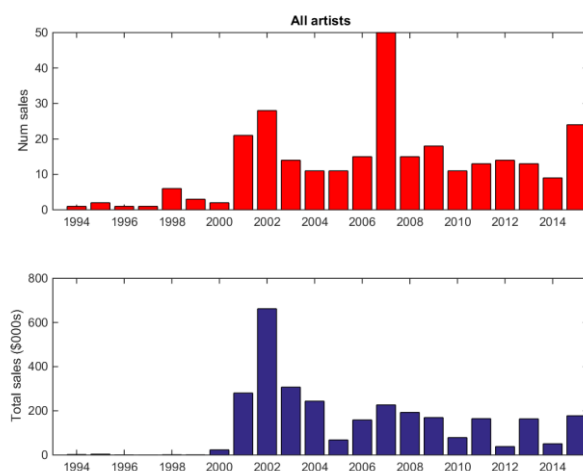


Figure 1.4. Auction sales per NSW artist.



Figure 1.5 contains two graphs. The first represents the number of artworks by NSW artists which have been auctioned annually since 1994, while the second graph represents the revenue generated each year from these sales. These graphs illustrate that significant fiscal returns from the sale of works by artists from NSW were not generated until 2001, a year in which the number of items auctioned also increased. The highest number of items auctioned occurred in 2007, coinciding with the largest annual auction returns for ATSI art nationally (\$26,455,000). The high number of auctioned items in 2007 would seem to indicate strong seller confidence in the health of the secondary market at that time. While 2007 represents a high water mark in auction returns for all works made by Aboriginal artists, the highest fiscal return from the auction of artworks by Aboriginal artists in NSW occurred in 2002. Here the sale of 28 items generated \$662,450. Significantly, 95% (or \$631,800) of this revenue was generated by the sale of 17 works created by Tracey Moffatt, including what are arguably her most famous photographs including images from the ‘Something More’, ‘Scarred for Life’, ‘Up in the Sky’ and ‘Some Lads’ series, as well as the photograph ‘Movie Star’, depicting actor David Gulpilil on Bondi Beach.



**Figure 1.5. Annual number of auction sales (top) and revenue (bottom) from NSW artists.**

In 2002 sales of art produced by artists from NSW represented 8% of the total revenue generated by the sale of ATSI art that year, the highest percentage of annual revenue generated by the sale of works by NSW artists to date. Further, as Table 1.4 illustrates, auctioned artworks by NSW artists have, on average, accounted for a mere 1.5% of the total annual revenue generated by Indigenous art sales.<sup>45</sup> While this average percentage is modest,

<sup>45</sup> While all other statistical material extracted from the Australian Art Sales Digest includes Indigenous artists that were not designated as ‘Australian (Aboriginal)’, this table excludes them. Figures regarding the annual sale of all ATSI art were taken from a table on the Australian Art Sales Digest website (2015a). Given that these figures do not include the sale of works made by artists who are not designated ‘Australian (Aboriginal)’, artists I identified as Indigenous who did not have this designation have been excluded from annual totals of NSW artists’ works in order to generate accurate percentage data.

given that the annual revenue listed in Table 1.4 is the result of the sale of artworks created by just 32 NSW artists, these fiscal figures are not insubstantial.

Year	ATSI Art Sales (All Artists) \$000s	ATSI Art Sales (NSW Artist) \$000s	Percentage of all ATSI Sales Generated by NSW Artists
1988	666	0	0
1989	527	0	0
1990	169	0	0
1991	181	0	0
1992	157	0	0
1993	315	0	0
1994	715	2	0.3
1995	1,354	4	0.3
1996	1,421	1	0
1997	4,421	0	0
1998	5,546	1	0
1999	5,440	1	0
2000	6,962	24	0.3
2001	6,917	281	4.1
2002	8,272	662	8.0
2003	10,918	307	2.8
2004	15,911	244	1.5
2005	15,411	68	0.4
2006	16,543	159	1.0
2007	26,455	227	0.9
2008	13,407	193	1.4
2009	12,552	170	1.4
2010	10,101	79	0.8
2011	8,164	165	2.0
2012	8,208	38	0.5
2013	11,094	164	1.5
2014	5,694	51	0.9
2015†	10,318	178	1.7

Table 1.4. Annual ATSI auction sales 1988 to 2015. †Year to 5 November 2015.

While the auction data presented provides some sense of the secondary market for work created by Aboriginal artists in NSW, information about primary sales is not so readily available. This is an area where further research could be fruitfully undertaken.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to provide a brief outline of historical and market engagement with Aboriginal art produced in NSW and the south east more broadly. Historical material illustrates that there has been persistent interest and engagement with Aboriginal art produced in NSW from non-Aboriginal people, even though the tenor of this engagement has been varied in terms of the appraisal and analysis of these works and their aesthetic, cultural and artistic properties. In the present, there is a growing acceptance that works once classified as ‘non-traditional’, ‘urban’ or ‘contemporary’ may be just as likely as ‘traditional’ desert works to

stand as an expression of a continuous connection to culture. In view of the paucity of collated material about the market for Aboriginal art from NSW, statistical material derived from the Australian Art Sales Digest, and elsewhere, has been offered to give an indication of the value of the market over time.

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<sup>i</sup> The process of collecting auction data was not without its difficulties. The Australian Art Sales Digest search engine allows users to search artists via name only. Therefore, entering each letter of the alphabet in turn enables the user to generate alphabetical list of artists featured in the website's database. Artists classified by the Australian Art Sales Digest as being Aboriginal are designated, in these lists, as 'Australian (Aboriginal)'. In view of the limited functionality of this search engine, data was collected by reviewing the entries for 'Australian (Aboriginal)' artists listed in the aforementioned alphabetical lists. If an artist was currently living and working in NSW, or had done so for a significant period of their artistic life (5+ years), data about auction sales of their work was captured. In instances where exact biographical information about the residence of the artist was not available, artists were included if they were identified as living and working in NSW for a significant amount of time, in relevant literature. This method of determining inclusion is, of course, not without its limitations, not least because there is no guarantee that auctioned works were created when an artist was living and working in NSW. However, given the lack of documentation about many of the artworks listed in the database and the subsequent difficulty in ascertaining where these works were created, this method of inclusion was utilised. The database lists works which were offered for sale at auction but were not sold, these works were excluded from capture. Further, although it is well documented that Tracy Moffatt and Brook Andrew, two high profile artist who live, or have lived, in NSW do not wish to be classified as Aboriginal artists, auction sales of their work have been captured in this statistical material because their identification as Aboriginal in the Sales Digest indicated that their work has been classified as 'Aboriginal' when offered for sale at auction, and thus was captured in the pre-compiled national 'Australian Aboriginal' sales totals. Beyond this, in the process of analysing data, it became clear that several high profile artists, including the photographer Mervyn Bishop, who have publicly identified themselves as Aboriginal artists were included in the database but had not been designated as 'Australian (Aboriginal)' artists. Working from the list of NSW artists which I had produced in the initial stages of research, I manually searched for artists that were missing from the list of 'Australian (Aboriginal)' artists and this led to the inclusion of six extra artists – Mervyn Bishop, Blak Douglas (aka Adam Hill), Daniel Boyd, Karla Dickens, Milton Budge and Roy Kennedy. Further, while I recognised the names of some of the artists in the alphabetical lists, I was not familiar with all of them. In instances where I did not recognise a name I attempted to determine whether an artist's sale records should be included by seeking out any biographical information. Unfortunately this material was not always available, especially for artists who were working in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were deceased. In instances where I was unable to access any biographical material, artists were excluded.



## Chapter 2 Cultural Identity in Art

*'It is my birthright that allows me to be who I am, I am born Aboriginal, it is in my blood I do not have to question who I am or where I am from'* – Aaron Raymond Meeks (in Riley 1988)

### Expressing and Representing Cultural Identity

The notion that Indigenous peoples in post-colonial countries, including Aboriginal Australians, utilise art in identity formation and differentiation is commonly articulated in anthropological and art historical literature. This body of writing focuses both on intra-community consolidation and representation of identities related to kin, clan and community,<sup>1</sup> as well as the expression and representation of cultural identities to extra-community members.<sup>2</sup> A particular focus of literature concerned with this latter strand of identity communication has been the way Indigenous peoples have used art, craft and souvenir trades to both maintain their cultural identities and represent these identities to non-Indigenous consumers.<sup>3</sup> This form of identity representation has – since the 1990s – typically been framed as an assertive communicative act intended to instil, in non-Aboriginal art consumers, interest and respect for the ways of being, knowing and acting encompassed by these cultural identities. The following comment, by Luke Taylor and Peter Veth, is typical of this intellectual framing:

...artists want to educate non-Indigenous persons about the central importance of pre-existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social practices...[the circulation of artworks] provide occasions to present and forge new identities or to re-present existing ways of being Indigenous in this country today (2008: 3).<sup>4</sup>

Art, as a tool which communicates something about Aboriginal identities to audiences, is a common theme in the literature about Aboriginal people in the south east and with Aboriginal art produced in NSW in particular.<sup>5</sup>

The notion that Aboriginal art is, for consumers, an expression and marker of cultural identity has also been the focus of theorisation and study. For example, Gibson argues that, in 'white art worlds' Aboriginal art and culture have become conflated so that artworks not only represent, but stand as physical manifestations of, Aboriginal culture (2013: 99). Thus, for Aboriginal artists, visual art production has become a means of '...expressing identity...' by

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Awekotuku (2006), Tapsell (1997), Morphy (2000).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Myers (2002), Caruana (2003: 194), Dussart (2006).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Phillips (1998), Kleinert (2010a), Ettawageshik (1999), and Nash (2009) on the significance of art and craft objects created for sale to non-Indigenous consumers in the North American and Australian context.

<sup>4</sup> See also Morphy (1998: 6), Watson (2007: 26), Mills (2007: 295-296).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Creamer (1988), Cowlshaw (2011, 2012), Everett (2010), Yamanouchi (2012), Kleinert (1994, 2000), Gibson (2013).

enacting their Aboriginality, in a way ‘...that has credibility in both Aboriginal and white communities...’ (Gibson 2013: 99).

Identity is also recognised, by academics, art critics and curators, as one of the key thematic concerns of south eastern Aboriginal artists, particularly those ‘city-based’ artists producing contemporary or urban work. Consideration of exhibition catalogues, artists’ monographs and critical reviews demonstrate that identity is a key analytic frame through which the work of such artists is analysed.<sup>6</sup> A review of the artworks created by artists who participated in this research affirms that identity is a commonly explored theme amongst artists in NSW.<sup>7</sup>

Numerous participants explicitly used their art to represent their identity, often as it related to their Aboriginality. Artists explained they were motivated to make these works for various communicative and personal ends, including and beyond, asserting their Aboriginality in the face of the assumption that there are no ‘real’ Aboriginal people in NSW.

In view of this, this chapter explores the ways artists express and represent their identity via their art making. Following Morphy, it will contend that the creation and circulation of identity-centred works is a *form of action* (2009: 117, 2010: 266) which has, for artists, a communicative and constitutive effect. The creation and circulation of these works is a communicative action because it facilitates the expression of particular ideas about the nature of Aboriginality and cultural identity to particular audiences. The creation and exhibition of identity-centred works is also a constitutive action because it allows artists to consolidate and enact their Aboriginal selves. In order to explore the actions implicit in identity-centred art making, what follows is an overview of the various ways artists represent their identity – including by focusing on issues associated with authenticity, hybridity and anti-essentialism – and what they seek to establish about the nature of cultural identity, particularly, Aboriginality, in doing so. This will be followed by a discussion of the way participants conceptualise the cultural identity of their artistic persona and their art works.

### **A Word on Identity**

Reginald Byron has observed that in anthropological enquiry the term ‘identity’ denotes both ‘...uniqueness and individuality...’: those qualities which make a person ‘...distinct from all others, as in “self-identity” ...’ as well as the ‘...qualities of sameness’ which connect the individual to an ethnic or cultural group (2002: 292). This definitional ambiguity was in evidence amongst research participants who used the term to refer both to those unique qualities which marked them as individuals and to shared cultural traits which link them with

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Lane (2012: 16-18), Neale (2011: 23), Moreton (2014: 70), G. Jones (2014), McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 286-289), McLean (2016: 242), Williams (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 3 for further exploration of key themes in Aboriginal art produced in NSW.

others. Participants most frequently discussed their cultural, rather than individual, identity and how this identification related to their art practice.<sup>8</sup> In view of this, this chapter focuses on the ways in which participants use their art practice to represent their cultural identity. It is worth noting, however, that artists also use their art to represent various elements of their identity which they conceptualise as both linked to, and discrete from, their cultural identity. For example, artists made works which explored their identity as it related to their gender, sexuality, life-experiences and familial connections. As multi-disciplinary artist Karla Dickens noted, art-making provides her with a space to work on, challenge, and heal herself, and she sees the exploration of various dimensions of her identity as key to this process. Dickens observed, '[art is] a perfect vehicle for healing...I just feel really privileged to be Indigenous, gay, mentally ill...I like all that stuff because I just have this giant bucket, hey I've got some stories! And I've got great material' (Left Field Project 2013). As Dickens' comment demonstrates, the unique individual and experiential elements which constitute an artist's identity are often drawn upon, and represented, by artists seeking to define themselves, for audiences, via the circulation of identity-focused artworks.

Beyond this, in speaking with artists, it became evident that describing cultural identity and self-identity as discrete entities is misleading. As will become clear, while it is convenient to distinguish between cultural and personal identity for descriptive or analytical purposes, in reality it is not nearly so easy to unpick the *cultural* or *individual* parts of identity.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, even when explicitly discussing cultural identity, artists demonstrated that they each have distinct conceptions of what it is to *be* Aboriginal, and these conceptions are shaped by their own personal experiences, family background and political attitudes.

### **Anti-Essentialism and Identity in the South East**

Identity is a key theme in literature concerned with the Aboriginal south east and is commonly explored in tandem with issues associated with popular and localised perceptions of what it is to be authentically Aboriginal. Essentialist presuppositions, regarding how *real* Aboriginal people should appear and live (for example, have dark skin, live in remote regions, dress traditionally, live nomadically, speak in language), are reported to render Indigenous Australians living in the settled south east invisible and their Aboriginality inauthentic (see for example, Cowlshaw 1987: 223-225, Macdonald 2001: 180-181, Gibson 2013: 35-36). The

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<sup>8</sup> Given that discussions about identity took place in the context of research into Aboriginal art, this focus on cultural identity isn't surprising.

<sup>9</sup> There is extensive anthropological literature regarding the connections and differences between, and various cross-cultural conceptions of, social and/or cultural identity, selfhood, individuality and personhood. These issues, while pertinent, ultimately fall outside the scope of this chapter. For analysis and interpretation of this body of literature see, for example, La Fontaine (1985), Poole (1994), Sökefeld (1999), and Carsten (2004).

reactions of Aboriginal people to public perceptions of Indigeneity vary. Gibson (2008a: 295, 2013: 125 & 297) and Macdonald (2001: 176), for example, report that the Barkindji and Wiradjuri communities with whom they respectively work have taken on ‘...a White view of themselves as lacking “real” Aboriginal culture...’ because their lives and appearances, differ from the aforementioned popular representations of traditional Indigeneity (Gibson 2008a: 295). As a result individuals in these communities feel a deep sense of inferiority, loss and frustration and express a profound desire for access to a culture they feel is lost for good (see for example Gibson 2013: 58-59). Elsewhere, the response is defiant; Everett reports that Darug community members in Western Sydney persist in emphasising their cultural authority, custody of Country, and their deep connection to pre-contact culture, despite the rejection of several of their Native Title claims and derision regarding their authenticity from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and institutions in the region (2009: 53-54, see also Everett 2010: 231).

Authenticity is also central to conceptualisations of Indigenous Australians’ relationship to the nation state. Gibson (2013: 125), Macdonald (2001: 186) and Everett (2010: 231) note that the association of genuine Aboriginality with pre-contact ways of being is enforced by federal legislation such as that associated with Native Title. On a more esoteric level, Cowlshaw (2011) and Povinelli (2002) explore the way multiculturalism and other liberal ideologies perpetuate a state-sanctioned and largely generic version of Aboriginality which is remote from the actual lived experience of most Aboriginal people.<sup>10</sup> Thus, as Povinelli writes, Aboriginal people are:

...inspired to identify with the impossible object of an authentic self-identity...a domesticated, non-conflictual “traditional” form of sociality...and to transport [its]...ancient pre-national meanings and practices to the present in whatever language and moral framework prevails (2002: 6, see also Cowlshaw 2011: 171).

Cowlshaw asserts that in places such as Western Sydney the desire to be associated with this state-sanctioned Indigeneity leads Aboriginal people to identify with a generic Aboriginality which is dislodged from specific, localised cultural anchors (2012: 402). Povinelli and Cowlshaw do an excellent job of contextualising personal, localised experiences of Indigeneity in the milieu of larger socio-political networks. However, in their over-ascription of the power of the state and their reduction of Aboriginal culture to a response or reaction to (colonial) state mechanisms, they can be seen as having inherited the baggage of earlier works on the Indigenous south east which focused on Aboriginal loss and victimhood (Macdonald 2001: 178-

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<sup>10</sup> Povinelli’s work does not exclusively deal with the experience of Indigenous communities in the south east.



179). Gibson (2013), Everett (2010) and Macdonald (2001) ultimately present a far more nuanced account of the tensions arising from the gap between public/government expectations regarding Indigeneity and the reality of daily life – with its attendant experiences of marginalisation *and* enactments of agency – for Indigenous people in the south east.

Personal conceptualisations of cultural identity is a theme also explored across this body of literature. As illustrated above, scholars such as Gibson (2013: 297), Macdonald (2001: 176) and Everett (2010: 231) explore the importance, for Indigenous communities in the south east, of identification with distinct and fixed, *traditional* culture, even if this culture is something they are actively reviving. Alternative forms of Indigenous cultural identification not reliant on a singular fixed culture also appear in literature on the southern states. Yamanouchi explores various forms of Indigenous cultural identification in south west Sydney (2012) describing two dominant forms. The first is a relational sense of Aboriginality, maintained and validated via ongoing relationships with Indigenous kin and community. Typically, those experiencing this sense of Aboriginality have always known of, and identified with, their Aboriginal heritage (2012: 63). The second form of identification is not dependent on relationships, but rather the result of a knowing and decisive choice to identify as Aboriginal. Yamanouchi reports that this form of identification is practiced by community members who have only recently discovered their Indigenous heritage. For this group of individuals the act of self-identifying as Indigenous is sufficient to render them so (2012: 63-69). Yamanouchi's thesis is reminiscent of Riphagen's (2008) work on the artist Christian Thompson whose identification with both his Aboriginal and European heritage illustrates that in the south east cultural identity may manifest in a multitude of ways. Further, literature focusing on Aboriginal art produced in the south east, and in Australian cities, has indicated that artists are frequently interested in representing their Aboriginality in ways which undermine essentialist conceptions of culture and cultural identity.<sup>11</sup> A broader body of literature focusing on identity politics reveals a diverse mix of attitudes about Aboriginality articulated by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars, politicians and others. Over time, opinions regarding what constitutes Aboriginality, which fall between and encompass essentialist and anti-essentialist stances, have been expressed and continue to be debated.<sup>12</sup>

The attitudes of research participants regarding Aboriginality and cultural identity both resonate with and contradict, the above mentioned literature. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the majority of participants expressed anti-essentialist attitudes about Aboriginality. These attitudes strongly resonate with constructions of culture that flourished from the 1970s

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Riphagen (2008, 2013) and McLean (2016: 222-236).

<sup>12</sup> See Carlson's detailed overview of this literature (2016).

onwards as a result of post-structuralist approaches to social analysis, and what has been called the 'cultural turn' (Acheraiou 2011: 6, Nash 2001: 78-82). At this time scholars sought to re-envision concepts such as culture, identity and ethnicity, and to question the efficacy of these terms as tools in cross-cultural analysis.<sup>13</sup> Previously understood as stable and homogenous and thus eroded by change, culture and cultural identity were reimagined as being broadly constituted and, by their very nature, changeable. Cultural identities were reconceived as being able to adapt and incorporate difference while simultaneously retaining their uniqueness without erosion.<sup>14</sup> In Australia, this approach was applied to the analysis of Aboriginality.<sup>15</sup>

### **Identity Representation and Expression**

For many participants the creation and circulation of identity-centred artworks is a communicative action. Artists use diverse visual and intellectual strategies to convey something about their Aboriginality to audiences. In creating these works artists are often responding to presumptions made about their cultural and ethnic heritage, or to stereotypes about Aboriginal people articulated in the media and elsewhere. As such, these works can be understood as an engagement on the part of the artist with their Aboriginality, and with the way others – friends, family, community, audiences, the general public, politicians and the media – perceive Aboriginality generally, and their identification as Aboriginal in particular. Examination of identity-themed artworks created by participants reveals heterogeneity in terms of how Aboriginality is conceived and experienced by artists. These differing conceptions of Aboriginality also denote diverse notions regarding the nature of culture, particularly the mechanisms or actions by which one can say that they *have*, or are *part of* a culture. What follows is an examination of various identity-centred artworks which, via their exploration of issues associated with authenticity, hybridity, blackness and essentialism, seek to communicate something about the nature of Aboriginality as experienced by the artist.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Handler's critique of identity as a tool for cross-cultural analysis (1994: 31).

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Clifford (1988), Bhabha (1994), Turner (1979), Hall (1996).

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Beckett (1988: 1-2), Langton (1981: 17), Glowczewski (2011: 21).

<sup>16</sup> McLean has asserted that one of the central themes which defined urban Indigenous art in the late 1980s and early 1990s was an '...underlying dialect of essentialism and cosmopolitanism...' (2016: 211). McLean writes that urban artists of this period can be classified as generating and exploring either an essentialist identity discourse (focusing on Aboriginality as distinct to other cultural identities) or a cosmopolitan discourse (which explored plurality, diversity and inter-cultural connections) (2016: 209-222). McLean argues that, in the present, most urban artists take a cosmopolitan approach to their art making, signalling that 'the old struggle between essentialism and cosmopolitanism...[has become] less of an issue, as if the dialectic...[has] played itself out' (2016: 231). As is explored here and in Chapter 7, while McLean's ideas about cosmopolitanism resonate with the attitudes of participating artists regarding conceptions of identity, conceptualising Aboriginality as a distinct type of cultural identity remains important for artists.

### **Authenticity: Who Has the Right to Identify?**

Warwick Keen's *A Question of Identity #1* and *A Question of Identity #2* are a pair of digital prints featuring pictures of the artist and his family.<sup>17</sup> These works stand as two halves of a dialogue which the artist is conducting with himself. In work #1, Keen poses questions about his right to identify as an Aboriginal man. In work #2 the artist reiterates these questions, and by utilising images of his Aboriginal family, answers in the affirmative. *A Question of Identity #1* features a photograph of the light-skinned Keen smiling for the camera in front of one of his own artworks, a mixed media work featuring linear patterns akin to those featured in NSW dendroglyphs. While the photograph of Keen is coloured, the background of the print is constituted by a series of overlapping, blurred grey-scale portraits of Keen's family. Also in grey, and only just visible, are the images of two book covers, *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker* (Barker 1977) and *The Sun Dancin': people and place in Coonabarabran* (Somerville 1994). Black text, positioned above Keen's photograph reads, 'do I really have the right to call myself an Aboriginal man?'. White text, placed below Keen's image, reads, 'or am I just a crazy mixed-up whitefella who has some black blood running through his veins?'.

*A Question of Identity #2* repeats the question posed in #1, with the words 'do I really have the right to call myself an Aboriginal man?' written, this time in white, across the centre of the print. By way of an answer, Keen utilises the same collage of portraits which constituted the background in #1, here, however, these works are brought to the foreground, grey transformed to bold browns and blacks, the faces of those captured in the portraits made visible. The covers of *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker* and *The Sun Dancin'* are also more visible and slightly larger. By contrast, Keen's portrait, while still present, is much smaller than in #1, appearing almost to be receding into the background. Here, Keen offers images of his Aboriginal family and references Jimmie Barker – his grandfather's brother, and *The Sun Dancin'*, a book chronicling the history of Burra Bee Dee, the Aboriginal mission at Coonabarabran where Keen's maternal family lived – as evidence of his Aboriginality.

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<sup>17</sup> Warwick Keen, 2010, *A Question of Identity #1*, digital print on canvas, 200 x 115 cm (image). Warwick Keen, 2010, *A Question of Identity #2*, digital print on canvas, 200 x 115 cm (image).

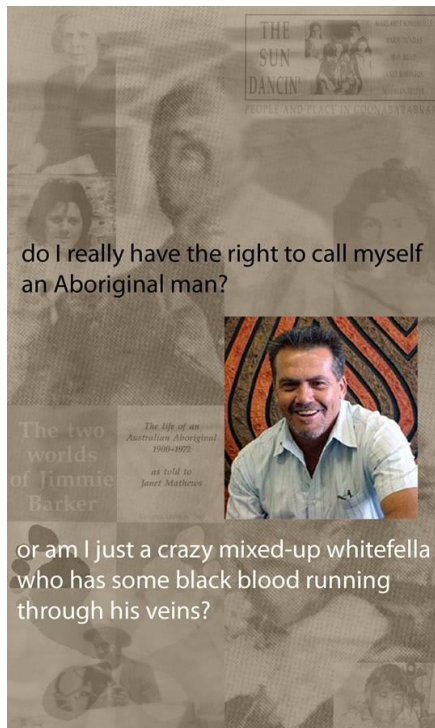


Figure 2.1. Warwick Keen, 2010, *A Question of Identity #1*, digital print on canvas, 200 x 115 cm (image).  
Courtesy of the artist. ©Warwick Keen.

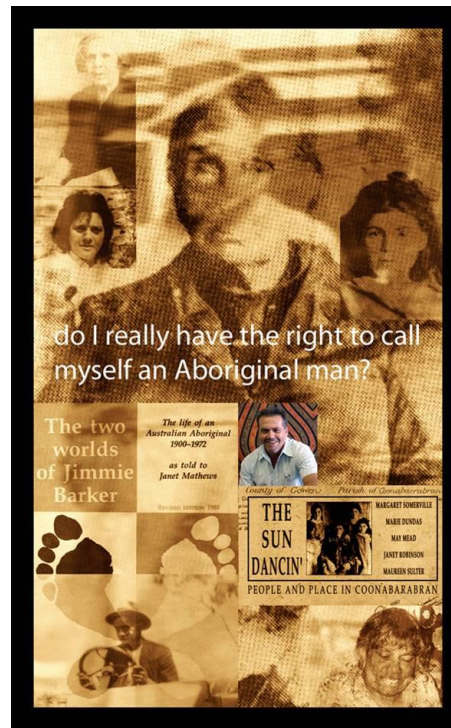


Figure 2.2. Warwick Keen, 2010, *A Question of Identity #2*, digital print on canvas, 200 x 115 cm (image).  
Courtesy of the artist. ©Warwick Keen.

The artist statement accompanying *A Question of Identity #2* includes a thorough overview of the history of Keen’s family on his mother’s side from whom, as he notes, his ‘...Aboriginality stems’ (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010: 33). Keen also discusses his connection to the Barker and Somerville books, noting, ‘these books provide evidence of my heritage, does that make me Aboriginal?’ (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010: 33). Finally, Keen concludes that he and his two brothers were raised by their Aboriginal mother, grandmother and great aunt. ‘...[It] is my belief...’ he writes, ‘that these Aboriginal women passed on the true spirit of our “caring and sharing” culture. I identify as Aboriginal. I’ve always felt like I belong to this land. I feel strongly connected to my Aboriginal ancestors’ (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010: 33). As Keen’s closing statement illustrates, while *A Question of Identity #2* reiterates Keen’s question about his right to identify as Aboriginal, the visual focus on the portraits of Keen’s family, and the positioning of his photograph within, rather than on top of and apart from them, stresses that Keen’s Aboriginality – or more accurately, his identification with his Aboriginal heritage – results from his connection to his family.

Warwick Keen is one of several artists who have used their art practice as an avenue to explore their Aboriginal cultural heritage and to pose questions about who they are and their Aboriginality.<sup>18</sup> As in Keen’s work, skin colour is often a key factor which causes artists to

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Amala Groom, 2014, *The Invisibility of Blackness*, single-channel digital video, sound 47s, dimensions variable, videographer: Elizabeth Warning. In this work, Groom declares and affirms her Aboriginality by naming her maternal Wiradjuri family, from her mother to great-great-great-great-great-great Grandmother. As Groom speaks the names of these kin, the screen darkens, thereby evoking

question their right to identify, as is a perceived lack of access to language or other types of cultural knowledge. Despite sharing thematic concerns with other works created by artists in NSW, Keen's two works are quite unique in that they do not, unlike many other identity-themed works I observed during fieldwork, definitively present a resolution to Keen's questions about his right to identify. As is demonstrated below, artists typically offer strong affirmations regarding their right to call themselves Aboriginal, rather than expressing doubt.

### **White Skin, Black Blood: Aboriginality as More than Skin Colour**

Robyn Caughlan's *Self Portrait – I AM WHO I AM* consists of three canvas panels, painted in acrylic. The central panel is dominated by a stylised head and shoulders portrait of its maker, gazing directly at the viewer.<sup>19</sup> Caughlan's face is painted in an off-white colour and her short yellow hair is flecked with waving lines of black and red – a clear evocation of the Aboriginal flag. These coloured lines flow from the artist's head onto the surrounding panels, breaking off and morphing into circular patterns and organic lines. Caughlan's face, though largely rendered in white, is also shaded with daubs of yellow, black and red. The white dots which provide a dynamic, shimmering background to the portrait are also present, in small numbers, on the artist's face. The pupils of Caughlan's eyes are constituted by two small Aboriginal flags, surrounded by a circle of fine white dots. The accompanying artist statement recounts Caughlan's experience of discovering her Aboriginality at the age of thirty and emphasises how strongly, and proudly, she identifies as an Aboriginal woman.<sup>20</sup> Caughlan concludes the statement by declaring, 'my name is ROBYN CAUGHLAN I AM A PROUD ABORIGINAL WOMEN, I AM OF DHARUG AN (sic) DARKINJUNG DESCENT. LOOK I know I am really fair but guess what I really DON'T CARE AS I SEE THROUGH INDIGENOUS EYES' (Cheeseman 2010: 12).

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'...the skin colour of...[her] maternal Ancestors, a process that makes visible Groom's heritage, something which is invisible to those who understand Aboriginality as a particular skin colour' (Groom 2017b). At the end of the video, the screen is in darkness and the artist is rendered invisible to the audience. As Groom articulates in the statement accompanying this work, 'this final bodily invisibility has a dual significance; illustrating that, pre-contact, Aboriginal peoples were invisible to the Colonial Project and yet, 244 years after their "discovery", they are often the most invisible and marginalised people in Australian society' (Groom 2017b). In *The Invisibility of Blackness* Groom resolutely confirms that she is a Wiradjuri women, while simultaneously affirming that she, and indeed all Aboriginal peoples, have the irrefutable 'right to be seen and heard' (Groom 2017b).

<sup>19</sup> Robyn Caughlan, 2010, *Self Portrait – I AM WHO I AM*, acrylic on canvas (3 panels), 154 x 92 cm.

<sup>20</sup> Caughlan's discovery of her Aboriginality is detailed in Chapter 6.



Figure 2.3. Robyn Caughlan, 2010, *Self Portrait – I AM WHO I AM*, acrylic on canvas (3 panels), 154 x 92 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Robyn Caughlan.

Reflecting on the portrait during our interview, Caughlan noted that over the years she has been mocked and criticised for calling herself Aboriginal by people who felt she was too light-skinned to do so. While, in the past, these criticisms caused her hurt, and made her unwilling to exploit professional opportunities presented to her as an Aboriginal artist, now, she ‘...doesn’t give two hoots’. As Caughlan explained, ‘the problem is with [those who criticise me for not being black enough]...not with me. We grade out, other nationalities don’t, we do, so can I help that? Am I responsible for it? I don’t think so, so that is what *I AM WHO I AM* is about’.

Darren Bell’s *How’s the View*, is a large scale digital print which was included in the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize finals in 2013.<sup>21</sup> The work consists of 16 headshot-style photographic portraits of the artist’s friends and family, all of whom are Aboriginal. Each sitter has their face painted to form a crude mask. Those with light-skin have masks of black paint, and those with dark skin have white ones. Each sitter holds a different pose: some staring straight at the camera, others looking to their left or right, others have their eyes downcast or appear to be calling out to the viewer. The print is divided into two halves. On the left side, the 16 portraits are presented in black and white. On the right, the portraits are presented as negatives with their colours inverted. The statement accompanying the work reads:

Identity. Aboriginality. Am I too black to be part of your society? Am I too fair to be viewed as Aboriginal? Colour is only skin deep. With this work I am trying to dispel the stereotype of colour to explore how an Aboriginal person is perceived, by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people alike. What does it mean to be who you are? See me in a positive or negative view but,

<sup>21</sup> Darren Bell, 2013, *How’s the View*, digital photograph, 209 x 41 cm.

when it comes down to it, my view and who I am is all that really matters. I know myself. I am Aboriginal (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 10).



Figure 2.4. Darren Bell, 2013, *How's the View*, digital photograph, 209 x 41 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Darren Bell.

Bell and I discussed the experiences which informed his creation of *How's the View*. Bell explained that he has the lightest skin of all of his siblings, and as a result he sometimes finds himself having to answer questions about his right to identify as Aboriginal. Bell explained that he often uses humour to address such queries, 'because I'm the youngest of eight kids and my dad's an Aboriginal person and my mum's not...I always say, being the youngest, dad ran out of his black ink by the time he got to me...That's how I say it because people look at me and say are you sure you're a blackfella?'. Reflecting on these experiences, and responding to Andrew Bolt's assertion that several Aboriginal public figures were not black enough to qualify as Aboriginal, Bell was motivated to create *How's the View*. As he stated, 'that was me thinking of Andrew Bolt when he carried on with people like Anita Heiss...You know, am I black enough, or am I too black, do I need to be a bit whiter for you?'<sup>22</sup>



Figure 2.5. Robyn Caughlan, 2010, *Self Portrait – I AM WHO I AM* [detail], acrylic on canvas (3 panels), 154 x 92 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Robyn Caughlan.

Darren Bell and Robyn Caughlan's artworks are two excellent examples of works created by artists working in NSW which directly address the assumption that to be Aboriginal a person must have black skin. Bell and Caughlan, like other artists who have also addressed this issue, strongly defend their right to identify as Aboriginal, by presenting a visual argument that Aboriginality is constituted by more than skin colour. The focus of Caughlan's work is internal

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<sup>22</sup> In 2011 alt-right commentator Andrew Bolt was convicted of breaching section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act in relation to a string of articles which alleged that several so-called light-skinned Indigenous public figures had stressed their Aboriginality for monetary and social gain, rather than because they were genuinely Aboriginal. See Stone (2015) for an overview.

and personal, a representation of her own experiences and feelings. She proudly and defiantly declares that she *is what she is*: Aboriginal. Although the artist depicts herself with light-skin, the red, yellow and black patterns and shapes that colour and give definition to the portrait and that proliferate the work's background, show Caughlan to be both constituted, and surrounded, by Aboriginality. Caughlan is unambiguously declaring herself an Aboriginal woman with fair-skin, who looks at, and experiences the world, with 'Indigenous eyes'.

Bell's work, although inspired by personal experience, is more outward-looking than Caughlan's. The artist does not, as is so common in identity-works, include a self-portrait in *How's the View*. Instead he presents 16 portraits of Aboriginal people of different ages, genders and with different skin colours. In doing so, Bell connects his experience of being thought too fair to be Aboriginal with abuse or discrimination experienced by both dark and light-skinned Aboriginal people as the result of negative perceptions regarding Aboriginality. Here, the notion that Bell is too fair to be Aboriginal is depicted as a manifestation of the same kind of prejudice that sees Aboriginal people being discriminated against because they have black skin – both attitudes are represented as part of a spectrum of bigotry which is present in Australian society. Bell's models all wear face paint, regardless of the colour of their skin, thus implying that Aboriginal people always fall short – being, for example, too black or too fair – in the estimations of those who carry loaded preconceptions about what it is to be Aboriginal.



Figure 2.6. Darren Bell, 2013, *How's the View* [detail], digital photograph, 209 x 41 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Darren Bell.

### **Black, White, Neither: Hybridity**

Artists such as Caughlan and Bell use artworks as a means of unequivocally declaring themselves Aboriginal, regardless of their appearance and of their mixed cultural heritage. Elsewhere, other artists create works which seek to explore the culturally mixed, ambiguous



nature of their identity. Illawarra-based artist Peter Hewitt is among those artists who, via deployment of the metaphor of hybridity, make work in this way.

Hewitt's *Creamy Brudda* is a densely layered, mixed media work on board. Evoking a graffiti covered wall, the work features a textured, multi-layered black background, augmented with white and grey daubs of paint and scratched lines of red, orange and blue.<sup>23</sup> The word *Mob* has been spray painted seven times down the left hand side of the work like the tag of a graffiti artist. To the right, 'IM NOT A BLACK FELLA NOT A WHITE FELLA IM CREAMY' is painted in white block letters. The words BLACK and WHITE are highlighted by a pink line of spray paint. The sentence is surrounded by various symbols such as crosses and arrows, as well as a partially obscured Aboriginal flag adorned by a crown, which is oft-used in graffiti and also present in several works by high-profile Aboriginal artist Reko Rennie (Alessi 2014).



Figure 2.7. Peter Hewitt, 2013, *Creamy Brudda*, mixed media on board, 90 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Peter Hewitt.

*Creamy Brudda* is part of Hewitt's 'Urban Series' which the artist created in order to explore and represent his identity. Hewitt described this series as a fusion of 'abstract mark making' which he had been experimenting with for a number of years, and the visual vernacular of graffiti, the '...old mark making' that Hewitt used as a teenager. Hewitt combined these forms, creating a hybrid visual language, in order to explore what he described as his 'hybrid identity': the way he is read as both black and white, and able to strategically and knowingly be both of these things, as needed. As he explained, 'yes, I'm Aboriginal but I'm also in and out of

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Hewitt, 2013, *Creamy Brudda*, mixed media on board, 90 x 120 cm.

whiteness and being a blackfella'. The declaration, painted in bold capitals, that Hewitt is *CREAMY*, is a playful, even flippant, acknowledgment that the artist is neither just black or white. Here, using a sometimes derogatory slang word denoting mixed heritage, Hewitt declares himself to be both the sum of, and more than, his constituent parts.<sup>24</sup> He is hybrid, simultaneously black, white and also neither of these things exactly. At the same time, Hewitt, with his repetitious scribing of the word *Mob*, declares himself connected to and embedded within his Aboriginal family and community. This declaration is important because it makes clear that while Hewitt sees himself as having a hybrid identity, this hybridity does not preclude him from being part of his Aboriginal family. Perhaps in repeating the word mob numerous times the artist is also illustrating his affiliation with other mobs, such as his non-Aboriginal family.<sup>25</sup> While Hewitt presents himself as being able to operate across and between two cultures, elsewhere artists who identify as Aboriginal are also interested in aligning themselves with other cultures and cultural identities in order to unsettle essentialist conceptions of culture and cultural identity.

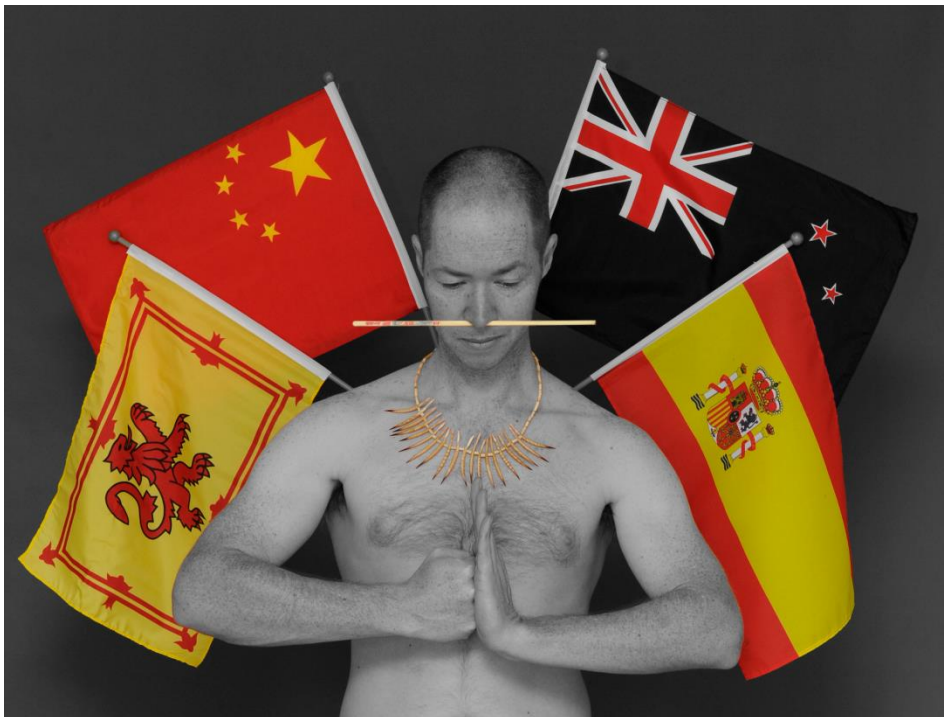


Figure 2.8. Jason Wing, 2012, *Wing Dynasty*, digital print on metallic paper, edition 1/5, 84 x 119 cm. Image credit: Adam Hollingworth. Courtesy of the artist. ©Jason Wing.

<sup>24</sup> Connor notes that in 1941 *The Argus* reported that 'creamy' was '...army slang for quarter-caste Aborigines' (2010: 106). I only rarely encountered use of the term creamy while researching this thesis, most frequently online in the context of discussions about Aboriginal people of mixed heritage, where it was typically used in a derogatory manner.

<sup>25</sup> The term mob is utilised by Aboriginal people across Australia to designate kin, social or language groups (Mullins 2007: 32). Mob also has a broader history of use in Australia where, in a manner not unrelated to Aboriginal use, it has designated 'a number, or class, of people sharing a distinctive characteristic, identity etc.' (Hughes 1989: 338).

### **I Refuse to Choose: Multiple Cultural Identities**

Jason Wing's *Wing Dynasty*,<sup>26</sup> a photographic self-portrait, is a prime example of an identity-work which explicitly affirms its maker's alliance with more than one cultural or ethnic group.<sup>27</sup>

*Wing Dynasty* depicts the upper half of Wing's naked body: his shaved head is bowed, his hands are held in front of him in the Wushu Salute – clenched fist resting against flat palm – an iconic kung-fu gesture of respect. Wing stands surrounded by four flags: the Royal Banner of the Royal Arms of Scotland, and the Chinese, Aotearoa New Zealand and Spanish national flags. While Wing's body and the background of the print are rendered in greyscale, the flags are brightly coloured. The echidna spine necklace worn around Wing's neck and the single chopstick worn like a septum piercing through the artist's nose, are also rendered in colour.

On a very straightforward level, the portrait can be understood as Wing '...paying homage to his mixed ancestries' (O'Riordan 2014). Wing commented that the portrait's form was inspired by his first viewing of Chinese opera. As he explained, 'I noticed that the general on the battlefield in the opera has flags to show the name of his family or clan' (Jingxi 2014). The Scottish and Chinese flags are a reference to the artist's Scottish and Cantonese heritage. The Spanish and Aotearoa New Zealand flags are an oblique reference to Wing's Aboriginal family, a nod to the way they felt forced to hide their Aboriginality – calling themselves Spanish or New Zealander – in order to protect themselves from vilification or abuse. As Wing explained, 'a lot of people lied about being Aboriginal because of the social pressure' (Jingxi 2014).

While only indirectly represented by the flags present in the portrait, Wing's Biripi heritage is evoked in other ways. Wing's necklace, a string of echidna quills and bone-coloured beads, and the septum piercing, are both a reference to his Aboriginal cultural heritage. Indeed, the black and white of the portrait, Wing's near nakedness and the septum piercing all evoke the staged studio photographs, taken for commercial and other purposes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lydon 2015: 2-5). Here – as with his assumption of a classic kung-fu pose – Wing is both playing with, and unsettling, visual stereotypes associated with Aboriginal and Chinese culture. Yes, Wing is topless, wearing adornments (the necklace and septum piercing) associated with pre-settlement Aboriginal people and, more generally, with the stereotype of 'tribal' peoples. On the other hand, Wing's septum is pierced by a chopstick and the artist is holding a kung-fu pose – two icons of Chinese culture. Wing's body is thus presented as both Aboriginal and Chinese, the unequivocally Aboriginal quill necklace, the simultaneously Aboriginal and Chinese nose piercing, and the kung-fu pose are all on, or part of, the artist's body, close to his

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<sup>26</sup> Jason Wing, 2012, *Wing Dynasty*, digital print on metallic paper, edition 1/5, 84 x 119 cm.

<sup>27</sup> *Wing Dynasty* was created by Wing for *Yiban Yiban – Yellah Fellah* an exhibition held at Redtory Art & Design Factory, Guangzhou, China. The exhibition featured Wing, Sandra Hill and Gary Lee, who each made work exploring their Aboriginal and Chinese heritage (O'Riordan 2014).

heart and his mind, things he embodies or is constituted by. The iconic or stereotypical elements of Chinese and Aboriginal culture represented on and in Wing's body co-exist within the artist, their co-presence rendering them something beyond stereotype.<sup>28</sup>

### **Identity Works and Envisioning Aboriginality**

The artworks described above are expressions of their makers' identities. In representing and identifying themselves for others in these works, artists also give an indication of the way they conceptualise culture, cultural identity and Aboriginality.

Warwick Keen, despite identifying as Aboriginal and possessing 'evidence' of this heritage – namely knowledge of, and documentation proving, his Aboriginal descent – still asks, in *A Question of Identity #1* and *#2*, if he has the right to identify as an Aboriginal man. While the artist statement accompanying this work (and the fact that Keen entered it into the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize) would seem ultimately to affirm Keen's right to call himself Aboriginal, the artworks are not definitive in and of themselves. While artists like Darren Bell and Robyn Caughlan privilege their personal experiences and feelings when affirming their right to identify, for Keen, this kind of personal connection to, and identification with, Aboriginality does not appear to be enough to render him definitively Aboriginal.<sup>29</sup> Here, Keen is struggling to reconcile his personal and emotional identification as Aboriginal with a view of culture that would take his skin colour as an indication that he is 'a...mixed-up whitefella who has some black blood running through his veins...'. By contrast, Caughlan and Bell appear untroubled by the essentialist construction of culture which dogs Keen. By engaging with their skin colour, both artists acknowledge tacitly that they have non-Aboriginal kin. However, this mixed heritage does not impact on their sense of identity, or cause them to question their right to call themselves Aboriginal. Both artists describe their Aboriginality as innate, an irrefutable part of who they are, the result of belonging to an Aboriginal family.

Caughlan describes her Aboriginality as something which lay dormant inside her and then, when identified, flourished and grew, causing her to connect to her Aboriginal heritage. Various scholars have commented that Aboriginality is more than merely genetic inheritance, rather it is constituted by familial and community relationships and the socialisation and

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<sup>28</sup> Wing has created many works that represent the intersections between his Aboriginal and Chinese cultural heritage. As such, his work can be understood as reflecting a long, though not widely known, history of engagement and interaction between Aboriginal and Chinese peoples across Australia (Edwards and Shen 2003: 4-7).

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Keen has also used his artworks to definitively and proudly declare himself Aboriginal. Many of his works explicitly reject the notion that having fair skin disqualifies a person from being Aboriginal. See for example, Warwick Keen, 2012, *Diaspora*, digital print on canvas, 153 x 100 cm, viewable in Campbelltown Arts Centre (2012: 44-45).

cultural learning that accompanies the establishment and maintenance of such relationships.<sup>30</sup> This vision of Aboriginality is in some ways opposite to Caughlan's who, in this work, presents her Aboriginal culture as something that existed within her and only required self-knowledge to connect with.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Bell's vision of his own Aboriginal identity would seem to have a stronger resemblance to this relational conception of Aboriginality. As described above, when Bell discussed *How's the View* he recounted that when people challenged his right to identify as Aboriginal, he speaks about his Aboriginal father and his siblings. This discussion of his family identifies Bell as part of an Aboriginal family, and thus engaged in a set of important and ongoing relationships that, alongside his genetic/cultural inheritance, affirm his Aboriginality.

When I met with Robyn Caughlan and Darren Bell they both comfortably discussed their non-Aboriginal family and their mixed heritage, referring to them positively and, in Bell's case, with a sense of levity (the artist cheerfully joked that in this day and age we are all 'mongrels').

However, as yet, neither artist has sought to represent their non-Aboriginal cultural backgrounds through their work beyond representations of themselves as Aboriginal people with fair-skin. Both identify as Aboriginal and are publicly identified as Aboriginal artists. Further, both artists have created numerous artworks which represent their Aboriginality, or engage more broadly with Aboriginal people and culture. Bell, for example, has taken many striking portraits of Aboriginal family and friends, using them as a visual frame via which to comment on the experience of contemporary Aboriginal people.<sup>32</sup> Bell and Caughlan, alongside numerous participants, while not ashamed or uninterested in their non-Aboriginal heritage, strongly identify as Aboriginal (rather than as Aboriginal *and* something else). Their understanding of Aboriginality is anti-essentialist because they don't interpret the presence of non-Aboriginal cultural or genetic heritage as undermining or eroding their Aboriginality. Peter Hewitt and Jason Wing, on the other hand, in representing themselves as both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, demonstrate a different kind of anti-essentialism in their view of culture and Aboriginality that is distinct from Bell and Caughlan's.

Post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha explores, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the subject of hybridity in the context of the colonial state. For Bhabha, hybridity is an inherently ambiguous force which unsettles colonial authority as it transgresses the imagined essentialist boundaries

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<sup>30</sup> See Carlson (2016: 77-78) for a discussion of this scholarship. See also, Russell (2001: 15).

<sup>31</sup> Upon finding out she was Aboriginal, Caughlan began to engage with Aboriginal family members, Aboriginal artists and others. In other words, Caughlan can be said to belong to a community of Aboriginal people.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Bell's *Down cast, cast out, half cast* (2014, photographic installation, 59 x 84 cm), which depicts a 14 year old Aboriginal boy looking mournfully at the camera. Of the work, Bell writes, 'being who you are is hard, even harder when you are told you are different...Are you black, are you white, creamy, half-caste?' Campbelltown Arts Centre (2014a: 12).

on which this authority rests (1994: 111-112).<sup>33</sup> Thus, the hybrid colonised subject, in utilising the tropes, language, manners, dress etc. of the coloniser, shows the supposedly immovable boundary between the coloniser and the colonised as permeable. This boundary implies a hierarchy of worth – the coloniser as *civilised* and superior to the colonised *primitive* – thus, in transgressing this boundary the ‘subaltern’ undermines this hierarchy (1994: 112-114). In keeping with scholars such as Turner (1977: 95), Bhabha is interested in the way hybridity produces a ‘third-space’. That is, an in-between space (in-between cultures, languages, societies, classes etc.) that constitutes a ‘terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (Bhabha 1994: 1-2). Bhabha’s writings on hybridity – like the definition of the hybrid which he offers – are a challenge to an essentialist vision of culture as strongly demarcated and pure. Rather than casting the hybrid person as culturally impoverished or ersatz, Bhabha describes the hybrid identity as powerful and unsettling to power structures dependent on a clear separation – and hierarchy – existing between people of different cultures.<sup>34</sup>

Peter Hewitt’s utilisation of the metaphor of hybridity to represent himself in *Creamy Brudda* has a strong resonance with Bhabha’s conception of hybridity as an ambiguous and powerful force. In *Creamy Brudda*, Hewitt represents himself as in possession of cultural and social knowledge that allow him to transgress the supposed boundaries between black and white, and engage in both social and cultural worlds. As simultaneously both, and more than, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Hewitt presents himself as a cultural hybrid. Hewitt’s use of the term *creamy*, a usually derogatory term, is significant too, standing as an act of reappropriation whereby a word intended to diminish and cause offense is used as an evocation of pride and power (Galinsky et al. 2013: 2021). Like Bhabha, Hewitt uses hybridity as a metaphor to unsettle essentialist conceptions of culture as needing to be strongly bounded and homogenous.

While Hewitt defies essentialist conceptions of culture by representing himself as having a hybrid identity, Jason Wing takes a different, though equally anti-essentialist, approach to his

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<sup>33</sup> Bhabha’s hybridity is akin to Bhaktin’s concept of ‘intentional’ hybridity (Young 1995: 20).

<sup>34</sup> There is not space here to engage deeply with hybridity literature, however, use of the term by Bhabha and others has received extensive criticism (see for example, Young 1995: 28, Thomas 1998: 9). For example, in utilising the metaphor of the ‘third-space’, Bhabha has been accused of merely reproducing the notion of cultures being fixed and bounded entities that can indeed have space in-between them (see for example, Friedman 1997: 79). However, as Acheraiou notes, Bhabha clearly attempts to avoid duplicating such conceptions of fixity and thus, redefines ‘...culture, discourse, and identity as fluid and ambivalent, rather than fixed and one dimensional...[thereby] emphasising the hybridity of all cultures...’ (2011: 90). Whether Bhabha and those who utilise his definition of hybridity can truly be said to have transcended analyses of culture as bounded, remains a point of contention (see Acheraiou (2011) for a comprehensive overview of hybridity’s use and misuse by scholars and others).

identity. In *Wing Dynasty*, Wing – by flying four flags around him – presents himself as simultaneously Aboriginal, Chinese and Scottish. In so doing, he reveals himself to have an anti-essentialist attitude to his cultural identity, one which posits that it is entirely possible to be of, and within, more than one culture simultaneously. Like Hewitt, Wing presents himself as the product of more than one culture, but unlike Hewitt, he does not position his resultant cultural identity as hybrid. The notion of cultural mixing present in Hewitt's work is absent in Wing's, replaced by a representation of the artist as embodying and acting within multiple cultures simultaneously.

While Wing is publicly identified as an Aboriginal artist, his identity-centred works focus on both his Biripi and Chinese heritage and the intersections between these cultures (Art Monthly Australia 2008).<sup>35</sup> In discussing his art practice, Wing has affirmed his strong pride in all elements of his cultural background and declared that he has no interest in proclaiming himself a member of one cultural group to the exclusion of the other. As he stated in a lecture, 'when people ask me what percentage of what I am, I tell them I am 100% Aboriginal, 100% Chinese, 100% Australian' (2015). *Wing Dynasty* affirms that Wing refuses to capitulate to an essentialist view of culture that would seek to categorise him as either Aboriginal or Chinese, a hybrid of the two, or (because of his mixed cultural background) not properly either. Wing's attitude is not unique, and has been expressed by various artists and scholars (see for example Paradies 2006, Riphagen 2008).

Wing's conception of his identity, specifically his representation of himself as simultaneously Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, has a strong resonance with Bronwyn Carlson's concept of *variant selves*. In her comprehensive monograph on the politics surrounding the way Aboriginal identities are imagined and enacted, Carlson explains that in conducting research on Aboriginal identities, she developed the notion of variant selves as a means of acknowledging the '...complex nature of Aboriginality without resorting to the uncomfortable term "mixed descent" which...implies a quantum of Aboriginality that can be measured and reduced according to colonial discourses' (2016: 171). Variant selves denotes the '...multiple and often conflicting modes of subjectivity that Aboriginal people negotiate daily...' and seeks to acknowledge that these modes of subjectivity '...are not merely random adoptions of identity that suit particular contexts...' but are a reflection of selves negotiating everyday engagements with the world (2016: 171). Carlson's notion of variant selves is formulated in response to Martin Nakata's writing about the 'cultural interface', the 'contested space' where Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems meet (Nakata 2007: 9). For Carlson, the concept of

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<sup>35</sup> Wing's public identification as an Aboriginal artist is confirmed, for example, by his participation in the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize.

variant selves helped her acknowledge the 'strategic intent' of Aboriginal people as they operate in the cultural interface (2016: 172), and yet also enabled her to account for the experiential and personal nature of these engagements. Beyond this, the concept of variant selves is predicated on an expansive rather than reductive conception of Aboriginality. As Carlson asserts:

The multiple identities in all their variations can be made sense of through a lens of possibility, rather than through an interpretation that sees only a chameleon-like set of 'selves' donned for particular occasions. Variant selves are often political constructions of 'self' that speak to – but are not limited to – the identities prescribed by colonial discourses (Carlson 2016: 172).

Wing's presentation of himself as Aboriginal, Chinese, Scottish and Australian is both personal and political, a reflection of his emotional connection with his cultural heritage and also a kind of push back against what Carlson identifies as reductive colonial discourses about Aboriginality. *Wing Dynasty* represents the artist's variant selves, which are constituted by multiple subjectivities and utilised and explored at various times and in various ways, as Wing moves through the world and engages with it.<sup>36</sup>

### **Aboriginality as Inheritance**

Although their conceptions of Aboriginal identity are diverse, each of the artists discussed here have created works which present a challenge to essentialist conceptions of culture as singularly constituted and homogenous. This expansive view imagines Aboriginality as something that is not eroded by cultural mixing or the co-presence of non-Aboriginality, or dependent on a singular type of lifestyle or form of life experience to be valid. However, Keen, Caughlan, Bell, Hewitt and Wing's conceptions of their Aboriginality – as represented in the works described above – each hinge on the notion of inheritance. Regardless of how they represent their identities, each artist identifies their Aboriginality as something inherited from their parents or grandparents.

Lynette Russell is one of many scholars who have strongly disavowed conceptualisation of Aboriginality as inherited by physical descent. Calling this definition of Aboriginality 'the genetic fallacy' (2001: 15), Russell has written despairingly about the way descent, a concept largely disavowed by 'mainstream' academia, continues to be used by both Aboriginal and

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<sup>36</sup> I admire Carlson's clear and insightful overview of identity politics as they pertain to Aboriginality. However, I can't help but feel her use of the term variant selves is somewhat unfortunate. It seems to connote fractured or split selves which are irreconcilable and yet uncomfortably coexist within a person. Carlson does not discuss why she utilised this term. While she does describe Aboriginal people with multiple subjectivities as having to navigate conflicts between these multiple modes of self, she in no way suggests that an Aboriginal person with variant selves must necessarily have a fractured or non-cohesive sense of identity.



non-Aboriginal people when defining Aboriginality. For Russell, the notion that Aboriginality is based on descent is inextricably connected to the concept of Aboriginality as a pure category, affirmed by mathematical calculations that cast the real Aboriginal person as having 100% Aboriginal blood (2001: 15-16). Resisting definitions dependent on the concept of descent, Russell proposes that Aboriginality is ‘...a cultural concept, determined by the processes of socialisation’ (2001: 15). While the artists discussed above certainly share Russell’s strong negative view of definitions of Aboriginality dependent on quantifications regarding blood, they do not share her rejection of the concept of descent.

For many participants, Aboriginality is indeed understood via the metaphors of blood inheritance and bodily relatedness. The notion of Aboriginality as a bodily, physiological, genetic substance that is inherited, is in evidence in the works of art described above. However, while this idea of inherited Aboriginality certainly includes the notion of Aboriginality as something physiological, it is not exclusively biological. Artists like Bell and Keen clearly represent their Aboriginality as both biological *and* social – something that is *in their blood* and that is also the result of growing up with their Aboriginal family and community. For example, Keen’s two works focus on his *relationship* with the women in his family who taught him Aboriginal values. Similarly, although Caughlan’s identification as Aboriginal began when she discovered her heritage, she describes embarking on a journey of personal and artistic discovery in order to connect with her Aboriginal culture. Here, having Aboriginal ‘blood’ acts as a kind of gateway through which artists gain access to their Aboriginality, something that is imagined variously as constituted by familial and community relationships; accessed or produced by engaging in cultural activities like making art; or as something more esoteric that one finds within oneself.

### **Artistic Representation of Aboriginality as a Coalition**

While inherited Aboriginality (as a bio-social entity) seems to be the baseline that unites these artists in their conception of what qualifies a person as Aboriginal, this is seemingly the only requirement. In depicting and discussing an expansive view of who can claim to be Aboriginal, these artists represent the identity group of Aboriginality as a coalition of diverse peoples rather than an assembly of homogenous and fundamentally alike individuals. The notion that identity groups are coalitions has been explored by Anna Carastathis in her work on intersectionality. Carastathis has written that, at present, the concept of intersectionality is defined as the acknowledgement that ‘...axes of oppression are not separable in our everyday experiences and therefore must be theorised together’ (2016: 1). Intersectionality is, therefore, typically utilised to trace various intersections of oppression based on a ‘positivist approach to categories’ such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc. (2016: 4). This essentialist

approach to identity categories is contra to the original aims of intersectionality as they were defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Carastathis argues that a close reading of Crenshaw's seminal texts on the subject illustrates that intersectionality is envisioned by the scholar as a 'provisional' concept that is intended to challenge '...us to grapple with and overcome our entrenched perceptual-cognitive habits of essentialism, categorical purity, and segregation', especially as they pertain to conceptions of personal and social identity (2016: 4). Thus, in Carastathis' view, the political potential of intersectionality lies in its power to provoke people to think about their identities and their alliances with others, in such a way as to reveal the '...potential impurity of categories...' due to the various intersections, interconnections and points of convergence between them (2016: 6-7). Intersectionality's inherent anti-essentialism encourages the conceptualisation of identity groups not as homogenous groupings of alike people but as coalitions that are '...internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power...' (Carastathis 2013: 942). This reimagining of social identity groups as coalitions has political efficacy as it allows groups of people to '...form effective political alliances that cross existing identity categories and...pursue a liberatory politics of interconnection...' (2013: 942).

Carastathis' analysis of identity groups as coalitions is useful in illuminating the way Aboriginality is conceived by many of the artists who contributed to this research. Of particular relevance is Carastathis' identification of the political efficacy of envisioning identity groups as coalitions. The expansive notion of Aboriginal identity represented by artists like Caughlan and Wing has strong political connotations primarily because it opens up the possibility that people who identify as Aboriginal (and have Aboriginal heritage) can garner a sense of community, belonging and solidarity with other Aboriginal people, regardless of what they look like, their lifestyle, how they grew up, or the languages they speak etc. The notion of the Aboriginal identity group as a coalition also undermines conceptions of Aboriginality which cast 'acculturated', 'half-caste' or 'mixed-blood' Aboriginal people as inauthentic, culturally impoverished, and not truly Aboriginal. Relevant too is Carastathis' emphasis on the intersections and interconnections between groups conceptualised as discrete. Artists like Wing and Hewitt represent Aboriginality as co-present, and in the case of Hewitt, co-mingled, with non-Aboriginality. This co-existence with non-Aboriginality has not eroded or diminished their connection or identification with Aboriginality, even if, in the case of Hewitt, it has caused them to think of themselves as something other than straightforwardly Aboriginal. A vision of Aboriginality as a coalition, in acknowledging that identity always has the potential to be manifold in nature, allows individuals to identify simultaneously as Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal, or something else altogether.

Aboriginality as a coalition is akin to the concept of pan-Aboriginality, particularly in terms of its inclusivity of people from diverse cultural groups and with diverse life experiences (Ariss 1988: 134). However, as Paradies has argued, ‘...Indigenous constructions of (pan-)Indigeneity...[nevertheless] involve elements of boundary constructing/policing, which seek to construct Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities as “mutually impermeable and incommensurable”’ (2006: 356). Conversely, artists’ conceptions of Aboriginal identity as a coalition do not depend on the construction of Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality as mutually exclusive.

### **Discussions about Artistic Identity**

While art making plays a role in the representation and expression of identity for participants, the way they negotiate the attribution of the title of artist is also part of the *action* which communicates the way they think about their identity. Riphagen has observed that over the past few decades there has been an emergence of city-based artists, such as Lin Onus, Trevor Nicholls, Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt, who ‘...have challenged critical reception to their productions purely in terms of their categorisation as Aboriginal’ (2013: 93).<sup>37</sup> Riphagen explores the rejection of the ethnic classification and interpretation of artists and their works by tracing the professional biography of Melbourne-based artist, Brook Andrew. Over more than a decade, Andrew has variously identified as an ‘...Indigenous artist, Aboriginal artist, Wiradjuri artist, Aboriginal photographic artist and urban-based Indigenous artist...’ and now, rejects any ethnic classifications of his artistic identity, and the work he produces, wanting instead to be known as an artist only (2013: 94).

In speaking with participants, I routinely asked how they would like to be identified as artists. In view of Riphagen’s writing on Brook Andrew, and of literature regarding the rejection of ethnically oriented classification of artists and artworks from the global south,<sup>38</sup> I was interested to find out if research participants wished to be identified as Aboriginal artists, or if they preferred alternative attributions. Answers about artistic identity were diverse, with some participants affirming that they would like to be known as Aboriginal artists, or as artists from specific cultural or language groups (e.g. Wiradjuri or Koori). Others simply wished to be recognised in terms of the media they produce (e.g. photographers or weavers) or to be identified in terms of the style or genre of their work (e.g. contemporary, traditional or urban artists). However, a surprising number of participants (around one quarter) expressed unease about, or completely rejected, the classification of Aboriginal or Indigenous artist, and, often in turn, the identification of their artworks as Aboriginal. I was surprised by the number of artists

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<sup>37</sup> See also Kleinert and Koch (2012: 4), Williamson and Moffatt (1992), Fisher (2012: 259-260).

<sup>38</sup> See for example, Araeen (2000), Picton (2001), Harris (2006: 706-708).

who expressed ambiguous or negative attitudes to the designation of Aboriginal artist, because in recruiting participants I had clearly framed my research as an investigation into the production of Aboriginal art, and the practice of Aboriginal artists in NSW. I assumed that artists who did not wish to be identified as Aboriginal would have elected not to participate. This, however, turned out not always to be the case. The stance of artists like Bennett, Nicholls, and particularly Moffatt, was often mentioned as inspirational by those participants who were uneasy about the classification of 'Aboriginal artist', especially in view of Moffatt's illustrious career.

### **The Trophy on the Table: Rejecting 'Aboriginal Artist'**

Various related reasons were offered by participants regarding their feelings of discomfort towards the ethno-cultural classification of artists and their works. Like Bennett, Nicholls and others, some of the artists who reject the label of Aboriginal experienced the classification as repressive and reductive, something that imposes stylistic and thematic restrictions on their work. As Blak Douglas (aka Adam Hill) explained, 'basically we, as certified Indigenous artists, have just added another fucking stress point to the equation by having to fit another pigeon hole'. Further, artists felt that being classified as Aboriginal restricted critical engagement with their work and meant that curators included them in exhibitions not because they felt their work was of high quality, but because of a need, or pressure, to include a token Aboriginal artist. Jason Wing discussed this issue, explaining that while he draws on his Aboriginal heritage when creating work, he felt it was '...important, to be an artist first', rather than an Aboriginal person making art. 'Otherwise', he explained, 'it can be misinterpreted, when your work is selected [for an exhibition], as a tokenistic choice'.

Gibson has written that Aboriginal artists in the rural NSW town of Wilcannia, while happy to be identified as Aboriginal artists, sometimes felt frustrated or restricted by the expectations that this title sets up in the minds of consumers in terms of the style and content of their artworks (Gibson 2013: 200). Participants expressed similar attitudes, stating that in being identified as artists (rather than as Aboriginal artists) they were free to create any form of art they desired and, perhaps more importantly, that audiences viewed their works without particular expectations. This attitude is typified by the following comment from artist Alison Williams:

I think [being identified] as an artist is fine. I think sometimes if you say Aboriginal artist there is an immediate expectation on the style of the work that you do and that is about the stereotypical perception about what that art would be...Suddenly we are thinking of Western Desert work...so then there is maybe a disappointment because that is nothing like what I produced. So I am happy just to be known as an artist of Aboriginal descent and that is

obviously part of what informs my work but sometimes I will just do a portrait because I want to.

In a related vein, some artists felt a kind of personal discomfort about being classified as an Aboriginal artist because they felt that having their art lumped into the broad category of 'Aboriginal' had the effect of homogenising their work – erasing the distinctiveness of their individual art practice – in the eyes of viewers. Elsewhere participants were concerned that in identifying as Aboriginal artists, they would be restricting their work to circulation in a niche market accessed by a limited number of consumers.

While the artists cited here largely expressed concern at the label of Aboriginal for professional reasons relating to the reception of their work and their success as artists, others expressed discomfort about the classification for more personal reasons associated with their family and cultural identity.<sup>39</sup> For example, Robyn Caughlan told me that she prefers to be called an 'Australian artist of Aboriginal descent' because this form of identification leaves room for her to acknowledge and explore both her Aboriginal cultural heritage as well as other elements of her background. As the artist explained, '...my father was Irish, his grandmother was Spanish, my mother was Aboriginal and there is English in there and there is apparently Chinese somewhere in there too. So you know what I mean? I am multicultural. But I'm very proud of my Aboriginality, very, very proud'. Caughlan's profound feeling of pride in her Aboriginality, expressed even as she explained that she wishes to be identified in such a way as to accommodate acknowledgement of multiple cultural identities, is significant. Comments from artists make clear that discomfort with the designation of Aboriginal artist does not typically reflect discomfort with being identified as an Aboriginal person. Nor does it signify a desire not to represent Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal people in artworks. This might appear to be a contradictory attitude, however the nature of the artistic practice of many of these participants, particularly those who explore the theme of identity, clarifies and makes sense of their aversion to being labelled as an Aboriginal artist expressed alongside pride in their Aboriginality.

Take for example Wing and Caughlan, two artists who represent their cultural identities via their artworks. Both of these artists are, through their practice, seeking to define themselves on their own terms with as much nuance or simplicity as they so desire. Such works can be viewed as a reaction to, and protection against, reductive and exclusionary conceptions of

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<sup>39</sup> For other artists the designation of Aboriginal artist felt somewhat superfluous because they felt known and accepted by their community as an Aboriginal person and as an artist. As Kevin Butler explained, 'I used to call myself that [an Aboriginal contemporary artist] but these days I think I like to be called a community artist; everybody knows that I am Aboriginal so just Kev Butler, or Uncle Kev, the artist'.

Aboriginality that are articulated by those *external* to the artist's community, family or simply to the artist themselves. In the same vein, the reaction against Aboriginal artist as a title is at base a response to the external classification of the self by others, and to the restricted set of qualities this classification denotes. What unifies each line of protest against the designation of Aboriginal artist is the conviction that it is restrictive. As people, as members of families and communities, and as political advocates, these artists are proud to identify themselves as Aboriginal. As artists, they are inspired by Aboriginal visual and intellectual culture, or by political issues connected to the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal people. However, when it comes to their discussion and representation by external parties, they are resistant to being subject to a narrow classification which might work to deny them artistic freedom, professional opportunities or their personal identity. Just as artists use art to identify themselves on their own terms, so rejection of the classification of Aboriginal stands as a bid to be artists on their own terms. As Riphagen observed regarding Brook Andrew, 'essentially, the artist rejects the reduction of his art to one dimension of his self' (2013: 101).

Participating artists, whether wanting to be identified as Aboriginal or not, could not be said to make work that fits into a particular aesthetic category. Some who did not want to be identified as Aboriginal artists made work which could be said to be highly identifiable as Aboriginal, utilising visual forms (such as dots, or chevron patterns, or representations of Aboriginal people) or particular themes (such as the colonisation of Australia) that are strongly identified with Aboriginal art.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, various participants who wished to be designated as Aboriginal artists often made works that had little thematic or aesthetic connection to the classic tropes of Aboriginal art as it is popularly conceived. Further, while artists such as Moffatt and Bennett have often refused to participate in 'Aboriginal' exhibitions (McLean 2016: 224), participating artists who had rejected the designation of Aboriginal were not so hard-lined. They continued to participate in Aboriginal-only art shows or participate in Aboriginal art competitions. Perhaps some of these artists will, as Riphagen recounts in her examination of Brook Andrew's career, eventually strongly reject the ethnic classification of their work. Others appear to be comfortable participating in both Aboriginal-only exhibitions and exhibitions without an Aboriginal art focus, and with identifying themselves as Aboriginal artists, or rebuffing this title, at their own discretion and as they see fit.

This is not to say that having pride in one's Aboriginality and feeling discomfort about being classified in an ethno-cultural manner did not create a sense of tension or ambiguity for some participants. Some artists clearly felt that there were both professional and personal pros and

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<sup>40</sup> Riphagen notes that Brook Andrew's continued utilisation of what art critics read as 'Aboriginal' imagery and subject matter has caused these critics to disregard Andrew's desire not to be identified as an Aboriginal artist (2013: 110-111).

cons associated with being identified as an Aboriginal artist, just as there were political implications linked to their rejection or embrace of the sobriquet. Professional and personal pros included being afforded opportunities to participate in certain exhibitions and having the opportunity to represent their Aboriginal community in the art world to a largely non-Aboriginal audience. Dubbo-based artist Paris Norton neatly summarised this tension, 'I don't mind the label...I am comfortable with it because I really am proud to be Indigenous...[but] I can understand why people might say why do you always have to label it? Why does it have to be the trophy that we have to put out on the table for everybody to see?'



Figure 2.9. Amala Groom, 2014, *The Invisibility of Blackness* [production still], single-channel digital video, sound 47s dimensions variable, videographer: Elizabeth Warning. Image credit: Elizabeth Warning. Courtesy of the artist. ©Amala Groom.

### Embracing 'Aboriginal Artist'

While a sizable portion of participants expressed reservations about being described as Aboriginal artists, others were unequivocally positive, excited and proud of the attribution. Typically, comfort with this label was due to the artists' pride in being publicly identified as an Aboriginal person, and due to their conviction that their Aboriginality centrally informed their art practice and indeed, their whole way of life. The following comment from Amala Groom typifies this attitude. Groom was responding to the question, 'how would you like to be identified as an artist?':

Well, I want to be known as Amala firstly. And then, secondly, as a Wiradjuri artist because I'm inherently proud of my cultural identity. It's my politics, my philosophy, my spirituality, my ontology, my whole way of life and way of being. So that informs everything in terms of the way I carry about my business and go about my life...if I didn't identify within my practice a lot of the stuff I do wouldn't make sense and I wouldn't be able to carry the story or tell the story about myself, my own identity and my own story.

Here, the participant's Aboriginal self was not divisible from her artistic self.

## The Identity of Art Products

As well as seeking to define themselves personally and as artists, participants also discussed the various ways that they classified the art they produced. As with their artistic identity, the cultural identity of art products was often far from straightforward. Often responding to assumptions that Aboriginal artworks must look a certain way or have a certain content (such as including dots),<sup>41</sup> a number of participants who identified as Aboriginal artists strongly argued that they created Aboriginal artworks, regardless of what they looked like or represented. The following exchange with Frances Belle Parker typifies this attitude:

**Frances Belle Parker (FBP):** I would describe...[my art] as contemporary paintings, predominantly paintings, of aerial views of the Yaegl landscape, and because they are painted by me, an Aboriginal person, they just so happened to be Aboriginal art...

**Priya Vaughan:** So is that a difficulty? Because some people have said...that the public expectation of Aboriginal art is X and I make Y and so I get criticised. And then other people don't find that and find their work is accepted readily. Do you find that?

**FBP:** I haven't really found that, or if I have found it then I've just told them Aboriginal art is art created by an Aboriginal person...I've done talks in schools...and shown them examples of all different Aboriginal art and I have said which one is Aboriginal art? And they point to the one that looks obviously like Aboriginal art, and then I'll say well it's all Aboriginal art because it's all been done by an Aboriginal person.

Gibson has written that for Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia, properly executed artworks stand as physical evidence that they *have* culture. According to Gibson, many Barkindji people in Wilcannia experience anxiety because of a feeling that they have lost their culture, this despite having a strong sense of their identity as Aboriginal people (2013: 57). Thus the cultural quality of the artworks produced act to affirm the cultural quality of the person who produced it; art as a cultural product confers the status of cultural person on the artist (2013: 106, 2010). As reported above, Gibson (2013) and Macdonald (2001: 186) assert that certain groups of Aboriginal people in NSW have taken on a 'white view' of themselves as not 'having culture' because of where, and how, they live. In view of this literature, there is a logical and psychological sense to the affirmative power of art described by Gibson. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, attitudes such as those described by Gibson were not in evidence amongst those artists with whom I spoke. As has been demonstrated in this chapter's exploration of the way participants utilise art to represent their identity, participants proudly, even defiantly, declared themselves bearers of Aboriginal culture regardless of whether they conform to the popular

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<sup>41</sup> See Iseger-Pilkington (2011: 38) for a discussion on the Aboriginal art 'brand'.



notion of what it is to be Aboriginal. Thus, for those artists, such as Parker, who see their artworks as clearly and uncomplicatedly Aboriginal, the dynamic described by Gibson is inverted; the Aboriginal quality of works produced is the result of their creation by an Aboriginal person. Here, as in Wilcannia, artworks are still conceptualised as cultural products, just as they are manifestations and markers of Aboriginal culture. However, whereas in Wilcannia this cultural status acts to affirm, to others, the cultural nature of the person who made the work, for those artists who hold attitudes similar to Parker, this affirmation is not necessary; they are Aboriginal artists, and therefore, they invariably produce Aboriginal works.

Significantly, for artists described by Gibson, the cultural status of their artworks is dependent on the production of certain kinds of artworks – for example they must look a certain way (typically they must feature lines and linear patterning) (2013: 123). As illustrated in Parker’s comments, for those artists who feel, as Aboriginal people, that they, by default, create Aboriginal works, this Aboriginal quality is present regardless of the style, subject matter and media of their art. This implies something about the nature of Aboriginality, as it is conceived by some research participants. Namely, that being Aboriginal denotes acting and being in the world in an Aboriginal way. When Parker describes her work as just happening to be Aboriginal because it is made by an Aboriginal person she is describing her art making as being intrinsically Aboriginal because she, as a Yaegl woman, exists and acts in an Aboriginal way. As reported above, Amala Groom spoke about how being Wiradjuri was fundamental to who she is, shaping how she knows and understands the world, and therefore key to her art practice. Parker’s comments are an extension of this notion, because, being Yaegl, making work in a Yaegl way is positioned as being an involuntary, even unconscious action. Therefore, here, being Aboriginal means acting, engaging and making things in a fundamentally Aboriginal way, and consequently making works that are involuntarily a manifestation of this Aboriginality.

Other participants reported that they see their works as Aboriginal because of the particular aesthetic or thematic qualities they hold. For example, an artwork might be Aboriginal because it utilises specific motifs or visual forms that are associated with their Aboriginal cultural heritage, or because it tells an Aboriginal cultural story. For others, the Aboriginality of their work might also be the result of their approach to art making, including the media and style they utilise. For example, Wollongong-based artist Caroline Oakley, who creates precise and detailed paintings, collages and prints, spoke with me about why she is attracted to media like print-making, which lend themselves to creating layered, multi-textured works. As she observed, ‘print-making has lots of layers and that’s what I love about it, like Aboriginal culture it has lots of layering. And just when you think you’ve got all those layers finished there is always going to be another layer to find. Drawing is the best layering for me’. For Oakley,

drawing and print-making have an intrinsically Aboriginal quality because they facilitate the creation of layered works which echo and reflect the many layers of meaning attached to much Aboriginal cultural knowledge, which are revealed over time to those with specific rights or authority.



Figure 2.10. Caroline Oakley, 2015, *Cummeragunja women knitting socks and scarves for WW2*, mixed media drawing and hand knitted scarves, dimensions unknown, Wollongong Art Gallery, (Winner of the Inaugural Blue Scope Steel prize, Wollongong and South Coast Aboriginal Acquisitive Art Award 2015). Image credit: Caroline Oakley. Courtesy of the artist. ©Caroline Oakley.

### Aboriginal People Making Non-Aboriginal Art

Several participants did not classify their works as Aboriginal art. Typically, this was because of the way their work looked, the media it was created with, the subjects they canvassed, or because they did not wish to be seen as an Aboriginal artist. Here, the attitude expressed by artists was opposite to that held by Frances Belle Parker and others. As Darren Bell, a photographer working in Western Sydney, explained:

I don't believe just because an Aboriginal person did it that it's Aboriginal art...some of my photos you might look at it and say well that's not done by a blackfella. Well it is, but that's not Aboriginal art, it's just my art, it's Darren's art. It's not black, white or brindle...Obviously there are some works where you say...I was trying to portray this part of my Aboriginal culture...Or this one I'm trying to portray the gay aspect of my life. But I'm not going to be pigeon-holed into all that. I don't want to be known as the Aboriginal artist or the gay Aboriginal artist...when I do focus on the gay issue or Aboriginal issue it's still not Aboriginal art, it's Darren's art with that focus.

Various artists expressed attitudes akin to Bell's. For example, painter Dave Collins explained that although he sees himself as an Aboriginal artist, he does not think that he creates Aboriginal art, because, '...until I'm taught by an Elder then I can't do Aboriginal art'. By contrast, painter Nyree Reynolds made a distinction between her Aboriginal art practice –

depictions of Aboriginal people in the Wiradjuri landscape – and her practice painting portraits of people’s pets on commission. Here, such artists, while identifying as Aboriginal people, envision their work as being able to incorporate, transcend or exist separately from this identity. Bell sees his work as falling outside the category of Aboriginal because it is an expression of his own personal experience. Others, like Collins, feel that their work is not Aboriginal because it does not communicate what they identify as traditional cultural information and the communication of this information is, for them, what makes a work Aboriginal. Here, cultural identity is understood as something that constitutes a person, but not as something that automatically manifests in things produced by this person. It might be invoked in the production of some works, or something that the artist feels they can potentially learn to use if they have the right guidance, but it is not something that is automatically present.

### **Conclusion: Diverse Identities in Action**

Howard Morphy, in arguing for the utility of art as a cross-cultural analytic concept, has posited that art ‘is a form of action’ (2010: 266), a way in which people act ‘in the world...a way of expressing knowledge – a means of expressing the experience of being in the world and a means of communicating ideas and values’ (2009: 117). For Morphy, art is not, as Alfred Gell (1998) posits, an agent (an actor with agency), but is, rather, a mediating object that intercedes between, for example, audience and artist and that reflects, constitutes and is expressive of the culture, knowledge and identity of the person who made it (Morphy 2009: 117).

This chapter, utilising Morphy’s observations, has sought to illustrate that for many of the participating artists, art making, alongside the act of defining oneself as the creator of an art object, stands as an action that affirms and expresses their Aboriginal identity. Expressions of identity are often presented in response to popular conceptions regarding what it is to be an Aboriginal person and, thus, often seek to unsettle essentialist notions about culture and cultural identity. Artistic representations of identity reveal a diversity of viewpoints regarding how Aboriginal cultural identities are conceived and imagined. Indeed, in the context of this examination of identity and art making, diversity is something of a watch word: participants hold diverse ideas regarding what it to be Aboriginal; they imagine their own Aboriginality (especially as it relates to other cultural identities) in diverse ways; they conceive of the relationship between their Aboriginality and the artworks they produce in diverse ways, and; they visually represent their own Aboriginality using a diverse range of aesthetic strategies. Despite this, what is clear is that art stands as an important vehicle for the exploration and representation of Aboriginal identities. The artists whose works and attitudes are presented

here are united in their diversity by their use of art as a means of visualising, exploring and representing their cultural identities.

## Chapter 3 Describing Diversity: The Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize 2005-2015

*'My artist son,/busy with brush, absorbed in more than play,/Untutored yet, striving along to find/What colour and form can say...'* – Oodgeroo Noonuccal 'My Artist Son' (1970).

### **Introduction: Regional Styles in NSW and Describing Diversity**

One of the foundational aims of this thesis was to examine and document the kinds of artworks being produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW. In line with the academic focus on particular artistic traditions emerging from specific geographical and cultural locales across Indigenous Australia – such as paintings produced in Papunya Tula<sup>1</sup> – a related aim of this research has been to identify particular visual styles and forms that are predominant in various parts of NSW. Existing literature on art from the south east and NSW typically focuses on the practice of specific artists<sup>2</sup> or examines, on a broad level, the genre of urban or city-based art.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there are certain art forms produced in NSW and the south east that have been subject to documentation and analysis. These include: carved wooden weapons and tools, including the ultimate icon of Aboriginal Australia, the boomerang (Kleinert 2012, Jones 1996); poker work and shellwork produced in La Perouse (Nugent 2005) and on the South Coast of NSW (Nash 2009); possum skin cloaks (Couzens and Darroch 2012); weaving (Allas 2013) and line-based carved and print works created by the Barkindji in Wilcannia (Gibson 2008c).

With an interest in documenting any regional styles in evidence across NSW, I asked research participants if they were aware of any styles or other visual features that united the work produced in the region in which they lived. Almost without exception participants answered in the negative, often disclaiming any unifying visual styles or traditions, and asserting instead that, if anything, the region in which they worked was unified by the diversity of art being produced. However, a small minority did think that regional styles were in evidence in the areas they worked. For example, Jann Kesby, director of Dunghutti-Ngaku Aboriginal Art Gallery in Kempsey, noted that several artists selling through the Gallery create works in a particular style – featuring stylised animals and particular dotting techniques – that she considers unique to the region. Similarly Andrew Gray, Executive Director of South Eastern Arts, based in Bega on the far South Coast of NSW, noted that Yuin women were actively working to establish a distinctive Yuin visual language. This active creation of a particularly regional, or nation-specific style, is not unique to Yuin artists. For example, when I met Tess Allas, she reported that in the 1980s artists Robert Campbell Junior and Milton Budge had

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Benjamin (2009), Langton (2000b).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Walter (2008), Allas (2014), Poll (2014), Neale (2000b).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Caruana (2003: 194-223), McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278-291).

worked towards creating a 'Kempsey style'. Similarly, Kristina Everett reports that Gwalan people in Western Sydney have set about actively creating their own artistic visual language by borrowing from other Aboriginal art traditions (2010: 230).

The diversity of art produced in particular regions in NSW was typically explained by artists and arts professionals in three ways. Firstly, participants suggested that stylistic diversity was the result of artists in their region coming from all over Australia, rather than being local to the area, and, therefore, creating artworks related to their particular Country and cultural practices. As ceramicist Penny Evans observed of art produced in the Northern Rivers Region where she lives and works, 'it's very diverse...and there are people from [elsewhere], like myself who is connected out to Kamilaroi Country, there is a lot of Aboriginal people that are not necessarily from here that live here'.

Participants also suggested that artistic diversity was the result of particularities in the life and cultural experience of artists working in a certain region. As Mark Cora, Indigenous Arts Development Officer for Arts Northern Rivers, noted:

Well I think the artwork that everybody does...is very personal...it depends how they depict, I suppose, their upbringing. Some are cultural people, cultural artists which means they know their culture and understand where they're from. And they might be bringing it along [in their art]...as teachers to share with others. And then others may not be in that role as a teacher, or a fully cultural person, but...[they depict] their knowledge and their stories. And their stories could include being part of the Stolen Generation, the dispossession, all this stuff.

Finally, the diversity of art practice in particular regions was also identified as being due to the solitary, rather than collective, nature of the practice of artists in NSW. Tess Allas, for example, noted that artists in the state tend to work in a solo capacity, rather than in a collective manner. As a result there tends not to be the collective development of a shared visual style so often seen in regions where artists operate in arts collectives. As Allas explained, 'it's more there's an individual practice going on in the contemporary art world in NSW rather than that collective thing. There's no art centre system under the Rowley Line'.<sup>4</sup>

While most participants discussing regional art styles asserted there was little, if any, unity across their region, or NSW generally, further discussion often revealed that this rather totalising denial of unity was not, as it were, the whole story. Certain common or shared aesthetic or visual forms were only infrequently in evidence. However, points of convergence in the works of artists operating in particular regions were typically evidenced in the subjects

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<sup>4</sup> As noted in the introductory chapter, art centres are in evidence in NSW (see Arts NSW 2010d: 15-16), however Allas' observation correlates with my own impression that in NSW there are more artists working in a solo capacity than there are operating within formal collectives or cooperatives.

or themes artists chose to depict and explore in their work. In other words, while artworks produced by different artists in particular regions might not bear a visual resemblance to one another, thematically these artworks could be said to be similar, perhaps even adhering to a kind of regional style, defined by theme or focus. For example, Lisa Havilah, Artistic Director of Sydney's Carriageworks, outlined the types of stories that she understood as unifying Aboriginal art from NSW:

I think there is no consistent medium but I think there is a consistency in terms of the type of story that has been told in the work. Because there is a shared New South Wales story to a degree, different individual experiences but shared stories...the senior generations of artists that went into the [Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art] Prize...[told] stories of being relocated, and home, and family and...losing place and being connected to place and trying to re-find your place. But then I think the generation that sits under them like the Jason Wings and the Adam Hills is much more about self-identity.

Elsewhere, artists, curators and arts workers emphasised the impact the local environment had on the work being produced by artists in the region. For example, in regions with large tracts of Country by, and including, the ocean, participants would often observe that regional artists created works about this 'salt water Country' and what it was like to be a 'saltwater' person. Likewise, mountainous or arid regions were cited as influencing the colour palette or subject of an artist's work. Similarly, the presence of particular animals, or the types of food collected in specific landscapes, were also often described as elements that might influence the production of art. Jann Kesby, for example, noted that the Dunghutti artists, living in and around Kempsey, often make works about local animals and their experience of hunting these animals. As she explained:

[Artists have] got stories about where they went hunting with dad, and it is back when they were spearing the wallabies in the area through to the fishing. There's a lot of stories about the dolphins which would quite often hunt the fish in [for the fishermen].

Related to this influence of Country is the impact that religious and cultural stories (usually relating to place) have on the practice of artists. For example, Andrew Gray observed that local visual arts, including works created by a group of Yuin women, were typically informed by, or representative of, a narrative. As Gray explained, 'it is about people telling their story, or stories they've been told, or stories that are a part of their life. That is consistent in all Aboriginal visual art...'. Gray explained that the stories told in local paintings needed to be explained or decoded for non-Yuin audience members by those with the appropriate cultural knowledge. Gray spoke particularly about the work of local artist Cheryl Davison:

When I've sat down and chatted...about her work she will say well...this is the story about a dog that did this, or this is...a creation story, or this is about Gulaga Mountain and this was the mother mountain and she had two sons and one went out to sea. So there will be those kind of stories where they are expressing their knowledge of their land.<sup>5</sup>

Comments about the centrality of Country in Aboriginal art from NSW resonate strongly with observations made by Kleinert regarding the continuities between the creative practice of artists operating in the south east, and those based in remote locales '...where ritual life is intact' (1994: 288). Kleinert notes that her research was founded on the hypothesis that if Aboriginal people living in the south east felt 'bound' to their Country via a schema of complex and active relationships akin to those found in remote communities then, '...these bonds between kin and land will emerge as a significant influence on the style, form and content of south eastern art' (1994: 288). Kleinert concludes that this hypothesis was ultimately supported by her research, noting in particular that the artist's Country, or the land on which they live, is central to the work produced by artists in the region she studied (1994: 288-289). As in Kleinert's study, fieldwork and other data collected as part of this thesis, confirms the centrality of Country in the art practice of many artists working across NSW. Not all artists create work focused on Country; indeed some of the best known artists working in NSW such as Jason Wing or Tony Albert do not typically explore this theme in their art practice. However, it is worth stressing that a majority of participants did make work broadly concerned with their Country. This issue will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **The Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize 2005-2015**

While there are certain themes or subjects that unite the practices of artists operating in particular regions across NSW, aesthetic and thematic diversity is, nevertheless, much in evidence. In order to get a concrete sense of the types of art practices that are common amidst this diversity, the remainder of this chapter is concerned with the catalogue of artworks included in the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize (PNSWAAP) finals from 2005 to 2015. To date, 469 artworks have featured in Prize finals. Images of these works, and their artist statements, have been included in catalogues produced by the Campbelltown Arts Centre. It is my contention that the PNSWAAP, as represented by these catalogues, stands as a valuable resource for anyone endeavouring to discern the types of artworks being produced by Aboriginal artists from, or working in, NSW. Thus, I have used both quantitative and qualitative analysis of Prize catalogues to discern frequently utilised media, visual styles, themes, and subjects. Where appropriate, I have compared data collected from PNSWAAP catalogues with

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<sup>5</sup> Mount Gulaga, formally known as Mount Dromedary, is significant to the Yuin religious belief system. The Mountain was renamed after the national park in which it sits was handed back to the Yuin people in 2006 (Office of Environment & Heritage 2015).



that collected from research participants. The commonalities between Prize and fieldwork data suggest that, in many respects, the PNSWAAP stands as a microcosm for the Aboriginal art world in NSW.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of works included in Prize finals indicates that while work produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW is, in many ways, distinct from that produced by Aboriginal artists operating beyond the state, there are also significant points of convergence. These points of convergence ultimately undermine any rigid division between the apparently 'contemporary' artworks produced in NSW and the so called 'traditional' works produced elsewhere in Australia. This issue will be discussed at the conclusion of this case study. Further, in view of contentions articulated in literature on arts prizes, this conclusion will also consider the consecrating power of the PNSWAAP for Aboriginal artists in NSW. Before this, the history and operation of the Prize will be described and the findings of my analysis will be outlined.

### **History and Operation of the Prize**

The Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize was launched by Campbelltown City Council and the NSW Parliament in 2005<sup>7</sup> as an acquisitive award worth \$20,000.<sup>8</sup> The brain-child of then President of the Legislative Council Meredith Burgmann, and the then Director of the Campbelltown Arts Centre (CAC) Lisa Havilah, the Prize was established to '...promote and support the strength and diversity of Aboriginal visual artists born or living in NSW' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np). Explaining her motivation for establishing the Prize, Havilah recalled:

At that time Campbelltown had a very strong and developing Aboriginal program...we were really looking at trying to find pathways for Aboriginal artists from New South Wales into the sector and to provide more visibility for New South Wales Aboriginal artists...[We thought] every other state in the country has an Aboriginal art prize and why doesn't New South Wales? And if we do have one it was always that we should have the biggest one and the best one...and really there was a lot of discussion at the time around supporting contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> PNSWAAP catalogues devote one page to each finalist. Each page contains a brief artist's biography, artist's statements about artworks and a high resolution photograph of the artist's work. Until 2013 judges were able to include multiple works by the same artists in the competition. Typically in cases where an artist had more than one work in the exhibition, a photograph of only one of these works is included in the catalogue. Artist statements for all works are often, though not always, included in catalogues, thus in instances where images of particular works were not included I have relied on artist statements to classify the theme, content etc. of these works.

<sup>7</sup> The Prize was called *Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize* from 2005 to 2008, after which *Aboriginal* replaced *Indigenous* in the title.

<sup>8</sup> There is relatively little published or publicly accessible material available on the founding and operation of the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize. I owe a debt of thanks to Lisa Havilah, Michael Dagostino, Megan Monte and Kim Spinks for speaking with me about their involvement with the Prize and for explaining how the process was established, and administered.

Aboriginal practice and moving away from communities thinking that remote community practice was traditional Aboriginal practice.

Held annually, as of 2015 the Prize has been offered 11 times and, since 2011, has been funded by Campbelltown City Council, NSW Government (via Arts NSW),<sup>9</sup> University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Coal & Allied (a mining operation in the Hunter Valley managed by Rio Tinto). In 2006, a Professional Development Award, offered by the College of Fine Art (COFA; now UNSW Art & Design) was added to the Prize and in 2011 the winner's prize money was increased to \$40,000 (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).<sup>10</sup>

Any Aboriginal person over the age of 18 who was born in NSW, or has been a resident of the state for 12 months, is entitled to enter up to four works. Art works created in any media, or produced by a group of artists are eligible for entry; however works must have been created within a year of entry. Entrants must sign a declaration that they are Aboriginal, and that they were born, or have lived in, NSW for the required length of time; however, no additional documentation regarding identity or residency is required (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014b). The Prize is arbitrated by three independent judges, typically high profile Aboriginal artists, academics, arts writers or curators. Past judges have included artists Danie Mellor and Fiona Foley and curators Djon Mundine, Hetti Perkins and Stephen Gilchrist (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

The Prize is administered by staff at the Campbelltown Arts Centre who process the entries in order to produce 'Artist Files' which include images of artworks, artist statements and biographies (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np). All submitted works are reviewed by judges in line with the criteria outlined in Table 3.1. Judges choose which artworks should be included in the Prize finals and these are displayed in the Fountain Court at the NSW Parliament House in Sydney's CBD. Prior to the exhibition opening judges decide on the winning work. At this time, UNSW Art & Design judges also view the exhibition and nominate a winner for the professional development award (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np). The exhibition is launched with an official opening party and award ceremony, and then remains open to the public for a number of weeks. A catalogue is produced that includes images of the works displayed, artist statements and biographies, and essays of introduction by judges and Prize sponsors. The exhibition then tours to towns in regional NSW, typically visiting around four venues, usually regional art centres (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

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<sup>9</sup> Arts NSW is now Create NSW.

<sup>10</sup> Two annual scholarships are also offered to Aboriginal artists under the auspice of the Prize's sponsors. These scholarships were intended to aid Aboriginal students to study at UNSW Art & Design (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

Criteria	Criteria Description
Merit	The artwork is of high artists and/or cultural quality.
Significance	The work is considered as a significant work in its field. This includes genre and medium.
Diversity	The work reflects the diversity of Aboriginal cultural express in New South Wales.
Artists	The artists is considered a leader in the Aboriginal arts and or cultural sector.
Artistic vibrancy	The winning work will be an important addition to Parliament’s collection and the collection will be enhanced by its inclusion.

**Table 3.1. Assessment criteria for PNSWAAP finalists. Criteria outlined in Campbelltown Arts Centre (2014c: np).**

Engagement with the Prize by artists across NSW is described by Megan Monte, curator of contemporary art at the Campbelltown Art Centre, and one of the Prize’s administrators, as consistent, with around 60 artists submitting works annually. In 2014 the number of entrants jumped to 83, reflecting, according to Monte and CAC Director Michael Dagostino, increased outreach, by the CAC and partner organisations such as Arts NSW and the Regional Arts Network, to various communities across the state and to a new generation of younger artists.<sup>11</sup> Alongside a push to promote the Prize to a range of communities and young artists, it also appears that there have been moves by PNSWAAP executives to increase the overall quality of works included in the Prize. To this end, Prize executives have been seeking to entice professional, high-profile artists from NSW to take part.



**Figure 3.1. Exhibition view of the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize 2014. Works L to R: Gordon Syron ‘Opera House Dreaming – NAIDOC’, Stella O’Halloran ‘Trees’, Michael Philp ‘My Heart’s a Beacon’, Blak Douglas ‘Do or Die’, Caroline Oakley ‘The Affliction of Colonisation’. Image by the author. All artworks © of the artists.**

### **Prize Finalists**

Analysis of PNSWAAP catalogues reveals that in any given year, after its inauguration, most Prize finalists have been included, often numerous times, in previous finals. In other words, Prize entrants enter and re-enter the PNSWAAP as a matter of course. Consideration of catalogues over time show that while various artists drop in and out of the competition, a core group of artists participate consistently. Thus, a total of 181 artists and four groups of co-

<sup>11</sup> Despite this increased engagement, at the time of writing the future of the Prize is in doubt. It was not held in 2016 or 2017.

artists were responsible for the 469 works included in Prize finals from 2005 to 2015.<sup>12</sup>

Warwick Keen is the only artist to have participated in all finals. Data collated by the Campbelltown Art Centre indicates that artists who entered the Prize from 2009 to 2013 (who lived in NSW at the time of entering) came from a total of 14 regions across NSW.<sup>13</sup> The Sydney Metro region accounted for the largest portion of entrants (22.9%), followed by Northern Inland (17.8%), Western Sydney (10.5%), Northern Rivers (10.2%) and Illawarra/South Coast (7.3%) (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

Biographical material about Prize entrants included in PNSWAAP and other exhibition catalogues and in online biographical databases such as Design and Art Australia Online, indicates that PNSWAAP entrants are, typically, semi-professional, part-time or occasional makers, rather than full-time artists. This said, several well-regarded, professional artists have entered the Prize more than once. Such artists, including Blak Douglas, Gordon Syron, Jason Wing and Karla Dickens, enjoy either a high profile amongst connoisseurs and arts professionals interested in contemporary Aboriginal art or a certain level of local or state-wide renown. Similarly, Leonie Binge, Lola Binge and Auntie May Hinch, who are affiliated with the well-regarded Euraba Paper company, have regularly entered the PNSWAAP.

While well-regarded artists have participated in the PNSWAAP, 'blue-chip', internationally renowned artists only infrequently take part. For example, Tony Albert was a Prize finalist in 2012 but has not participated since, despite being an active entrant in other Indigenous and contemporary art prizes (Albert 2015). Similarly, in 2005, Brook Andrew participated in the Prize but has not taken part since. It is unclear why high-profile artists like Albert or Andrew have not taken part in the Prize with more frequency.<sup>14</sup> As outlined above a central aim of the Prize is to support and promote the work of artists from NSW. A large portion of artists with whom I spoke had taken part in the PNSWAAP and many commented on how welcome this support was. However, the Prize's clear community orientation (as displayed by recruitment via the Regional Arts Network and promotion via Arts NSW) also meant there was a feeling, expressed by a very small minority, that the Prize was not particularly competitive nor, by implication, prestigious. For example, upon running into an artist I had met in the course of this research, I congratulated her enthusiastically on being a finalist in the Prize. She rolled her

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<sup>12</sup> Campbelltown Arts Centre (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> These regions are designated as follows; Northern Inland (New England), Northern Rivers, Orana, Far West, Mid North Coast, Hunter, Central West, Central Coast, Western Sydney, Southern Inland, Illawarra/South Coast, Riverina, Murray and Sydney Metro. A total of 40 Prize entrants did not state where they lived in NSW (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

<sup>14</sup> Data compiled by the CAC between 2011 and 2013 shows that mid-career artists, defined as 'artists who have a developed arts practice and have exhibited...nationally and internationally' account for the largest portion of Prize entrants. Emerging artists accounted for the second largest, while Established artists accounted for the smallest portion of entrants overall (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).

eyes and answered, 'I'm a finalist, but then everyone who enters gets into the finals'. While statistical material collected by the CAC from 2009 to 2013 shows that fewer than 40% of Prize entrants were accepted as finalists (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np), the feeling that the Prize is merely a 'community' show was articulated by a very small number of artists with whom I spoke. This perception of the Prize as community orientated may explain the relative lack of engagement from high profile NSW based artists. Further, in view of participant resistance to ethnic classification (as discussed in Chapter 2), the ethnic focus of the Prize may dissuade artists who have vocally rejected the designation of *Aboriginal artist* from participating.

### **Prize Data**

In many ways, consideration of works presented as part of the PNSWAAP confirms observations from research participants that art produced in NSW is too diverse, in relation to media, style and subject, to be characterised in terms of cohesive styles or genres. This is not unexpected given that one of the inclusion criteria for finalists is that 'the work reflects the diversity of Aboriginal cultural expression in New South Wales' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014c: np).<sup>15</sup>

In spite of this diversity, consideration of works included in the Prize reveals certain trends in terms of frequently utilised stylistic elements or techniques, media deployed, themes canvassed and subjects depicted. In view of this, some generalisations can be made about what typically unifies artwork submitted to the Prize.<sup>16</sup> The media, styles, subject matter and themes most frequently in evidence in Prize works will be described below, and these will be compared and contrasted with works created by research participants. Calculating the most popular media types was a matter of simple arithmetic using catalogue descriptions. However, the quantification of the visual style, subject and themes was a difficult task in view of the large number of works under consideration. I utilised thematic analysis and, rather than establishing a set of stylistic categories prior to analysing the works, I appraised each work, assigning it a set of keywords relating to style, theme and subject. I repeated this process, refining these keywords until I had produced a set of broad categories relating to theme, subject and style.

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<sup>15</sup> There is a kind of tautological poetry at play here; PNSWAAP exhibitions are diverse because the PNSWAAP celebrates the diversity of art produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW, thus the exhibition is able to include diverse artworks because Aboriginal artists in NSW make work that are visually and thematically diverse.

<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above there is a great amount of continuity, year to year, in terms of the artists who are featured as finalists in the PNSWAAP. While new artists enter, and are included as finalists each year, the population of artists competing is fairly stable. In this sense, the generalisations I offer about theme, media, style and content of work included in the Prize are generalisations about a relatively stable population of artists.

## **Popular Media in the Prize**

Art works of any media are eligible for submission in the PNSWAAP, although size and weight restrictions apply. In total, the works included in the PNSWAAP over the eleven years under consideration can be categorised into seventeen broad media types. These are detailed in Table 3.2. While the media of works included in the PNSWAAP has diversified only slightly since the Prize's inception, the spread of media has broadened over time, particularly as compared to the Prize's first four years (2005-2008), when paintings constituted between 76% and 80% of works included. Since 2009, the portion of painted works has lessened with paintings making up between 38% and 64% of all works.

<b>Media (PNSWAAP)</b>	<b>%</b>
Painting	65.0
Mixed media	8.8
Print	6.2
Photography	4.1
Drawing	3.4
Sculpture	3.4
Digital print†	2.4
Other‡	2.1
Ceramics	1.5
Textiles	1.5
Woodwork	1.5

**Table 3.2. Media utilised by PNSWAAP finalists (2005 – 2015). †'Digital print' denotes works created on computers often featuring manipulated or collaged photographic and other images. ‡'Other' denotes media types of which less than 5 works were included in the PNSWAAP, in this case film, glass work, video, jewellery, paper work, shellwork and weaving.**

Analysis of Prize catalogues reveals that paintings were the most common media presented in the finals between 2005 and 2015. Further, painted works hold the largest percentage share of any type of media in any given year of the Prize. 65% of the works included in the Prize from 2005 to 2015 were paintings. Of these paintings, around 80% were created primarily using acrylic or synthetic polymer on canvas, board or, less frequently, materials such as linen or paper. As will be discussed in greater detail, painted works are diverse in terms of theme, style and content.<sup>17</sup>

Works classified broadly as mixed media stand as the second most frequent media type, constituting just under 9% of all works included in Prize finals between 2005 and 2015. Here, mixed media works included assemblages featuring found objects that have been amended or embellished in particular ways. Karla Dicken's *January 26, Day of Mourning* provides a good example of this style of mixed media submission (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 24).<sup>18</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> Acrylic and synthetic polymer are apparently used interchangeably in these catalogues, likely according to the preference of the catalogue editor.

<sup>18</sup> Karla Dickens, 2013, *January 26, Day of Mourning*, thread and embroidered applique, 280 x 124 cm.

work consists of an Australian flag that the artist salvaged from her local tip onto which she embroidered black crosses (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 24, Left Field Project 2013).<sup>19</sup> Two and three dimensional collages, often utilising text, found objects, archival material or images from popular or other media sources, such as magazines, books or the internet, are another common form of mixed media work featured in the Prize. Ethal-Anne Gundy's submission *Skins*, a shallow box filled with precisely arranged feathers, gum nuts, photographic reproductions of deceased and live native Australian birds, a bird egg, a bird figurine and archival text regarding the theft of bird skins, exemplifies this style of mixed media work (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010: 28).<sup>20</sup>

Print works, including etchings, mono and lino prints, embossed works, wood block prints and screen prints, constituted the third most common media type, making up just over 6% of all works. Photographic works were the fourth most common media type, constituting a little over 4% of works shortlisted, while drawings accounted for just under 3.5% of all works, making them the fifth most frequently used media.

### **Popular Media in the Field**

The predominance of painting resonates with my own observation of artworks created by research participants: that painting stands as one of the most popular and commonly utilised forms of media employed by Aboriginal artists in the state.<sup>21</sup> Analysis of the media most commonly utilised by participants (see Table 3.3) confirms the popularity of painting, with over 37% of artists regularly creating paintings, making painting the most commonly produced media.

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<sup>19</sup> This piece won the Prize in 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Ethal-Anne Gundy, 2010, *Skins*, mixed media, 51.5 x 41.5 x 5.0 cm (irreg.).

<sup>21</sup> Without access to information about all works submitted to the PNSWAAP prior to judges allocating works to the finals, it is not possible to make definitive declarations about painting as the most popular or most commonly utilised media amongst Aboriginal artists practicing in NSW.

Media (Participants)	%
Painting	37.8
Mixed media	12.2
Drawing	8.1
Photography	6.8
Print	6.8
Ceramics	4.1
Digital prints	4.1
Sculpture	4.1
Video	4.1
Glass work	2.7
Sound based	2.7
Weaving	2.7
Wood work	2.7
Textile	1.4

**Table 3.3. Media utilised by participating artists.**

So, what is it about painting that makes it so popular with artists? Comments from research participants indicate that painting appeals for various reasons. Firstly, painting is a very accessible artistic medium, in the sense that it does not require specialised knowledge, or equipment, to execute. While those seeking to create a print or ceramic work require access to specialised and often costly pieces of equipment or materials (such as a kiln or printing press), painting does not. Similarly, those seeking to make prints need technical knowledge (such as, how to apply bitumen or aquatint to a plate, or how long to leave a plate in acid). Painting is a medium that an absolute beginner can undertake without external instruction. Beyond this, materials associated with paintings (paint, brushes, canvas etc.) are relatively cheap and are widely available for purchase in newsagents, discount stores and art supply stores. Finally, participants indicated that paintings are a popular medium with art buyers as they are relatively easy to transport and simple to display in the home. For some artists, particularly those who create dot paintings, there is a sense that painting, especially the application of acrylic paint on canvas, is a particularly Aboriginal, even a traditional method of art making. Indeed, this sense of painting as a traditional practice sometimes motivates artists to *break away* from painting and explore other artistic avenues. For example, Albury-based artist, Sam Juparulla Wickman described his experimentation with glass as a medium in the following way: ‘I wanted to do something else where I was encouraging people, Aboriginal people particularly, but anyone generally, to look at other mediums. We are all stuck on the acrylic on canvas...’.

While paintings are the single most commonly created media type amongst participants, it is worth acknowledging that only 28% of artists who regularly create painted works do so exclusively, with the remaining 72% also frequently creating works in other media. Indeed, 62% of the artists who participated in this research regularly utilise more than one media to create work. For example, Gumbaynggirr woman Alison Williams explained that, at the time of



our meeting, she was producing work along ‘...a few different lines...so I’ll have ceramics, or I’ll be sculpting or I’ll be painting.’ Further, a number of these artists, including Tony Albert, Jason Wing and Amala Groom, are multi-disciplinary practitioners in the sense that their art practice is defined by their routine use of, and experimentation with, various artistic media. These artists identified themselves primarily as conceptual artists, stressing their desire to communicate particular ideas via the strategic use of certain media rather than refining and exploring one singular visual medium. As Tony Albert explained, ‘I look at myself as very much conceptually based as an artist and to me that means when I know theoretically what I want to say in a work I pick the best medium to achieve that message...the content is more important than the outlay’.



Figure 3.2. In studio kiln shot of Alison William’s ceramic works, February 2014. Image credit: Alison Williams. Courtesy of the artist. ©Alison Williams.

As in the PNSWAAP, mixed media (including the use of collage, found objects etc.) stands as the second most commonly use media by artists who participated in this research. Drawing, photography and print making were the third, fourth and fifth most popular media employed.

### **Top Five Stylistic Categories**

Stylistic diversity is arguably a hallmark of Aboriginal art created in NSW. Artworks appearing in the PNSWAAP stand as a testament to this assessment, so much so that the multiplicity of visual forms in evidence in submissions to the Prize is noted with frequency in the commentary of judges.<sup>22</sup> The five most common styles in evidence in catalogues are described below. I have

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<sup>22</sup> See judges’ comments by Allam and Jones (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 11), Browning (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2010: 10), Mellor and Wilson-Miller (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2011: 12),

classified just over 11% of works as *Not Depicted* because not all artworks included in finals are represented by photographs in Prize catalogues (see Table 3.4 for a list of all styles used).<sup>23</sup>

Style (PNSWAAP)	%
Stylised	34.1
Abstract	16.0
Not Depicted	11.1
Naturalistic	7.9
Semi-Abstract	6.8
Dots	4.7
South Eastern Designs	3.4
Text Based	3.4
Photograph (no obvious digital processing)	2.8
Naïve	2.3
Photograph (digital processing)	2.3
Collage	1.7
Found Object	1.3
Installation	1.1
Wearable	0.4
Weaving	0.4
Video	0.2

Table 3.4. Style of works in PNSWAAP finals (2005 – 2015).

*Stylised* works constitute the stylistic category with the largest share, accounting for just over 34% of works depicted in Prize catalogues. The term *Stylised* is used here to denote ‘figurative visual representation seeking to typify its referent through simplification, exaggeration, or idealisation rather than to represent unique characteristics through naturalism’ (Chandler and Munday 2011a). *Stylised* works are representational in that the events, places, creatures and characters they portray are depicted with enough naturalism to make them recognisable to all viewers, regardless of cultural background, and yet are distinct from those works classified here as *Naturalistic*.<sup>24</sup> Depictions of people (including portraits), the natural landscape, and fauna (typically Australian natives) are the most frequently depicted subject matter for artworks classified as *Stylised*, accounting for around 27%, 26% and 18% of works respectively. Often these subjects are depicted together.

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Baum, Bishop and Cumpston (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2012: 6), Poll, Watson and Ah Kee (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 6), Poll, Lane and Gilchrist (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014a: 6) and Gilchrist, Gough and Syron (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2015: 5).

<sup>23</sup> It’s worth noting that the various categories used here to describe style, theme and subject are fuzzy around the edges, meaning that there are points of overlap between them.

<sup>24</sup> Arguably works by artists from, say Papunya Tula, which are commonly classified as abstracted in western art history, are only abstracted to those without the requisite cultural knowledge to understand and interpret what they are viewing. Thus, *Stylised* works, as with realistic ones, are intrinsically open to certain levels of interpretation because comprehension of their content is not predicated on particular types of cultural knowledge.

*U...R...an' I Ummm...we are AFAILINGLAND* by Blak Douglas stands as a good example of a *Stylised work* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2007: 24).<sup>25</sup> The painting, an acrylic on canvas, is dominated by a blue sky, shot through with thick bands of pink, and Douglas' trade mark 3D clouds. The sun is setting to the right of the canvas and against its yellow and orange rays two Aboriginal people, a teenage boy and a toddler, are depicted. They stand on arid, cracked ground, which stretches out towards the horizon. At the line of the horizon stands the letter U from which a chimney protrudes belching smoke. The boy holds a stick with the symbol denoting nuclear material pulsating at the end. The segmented circle of the symbol is echoed by the lines of colour constituting the sun. The skeleton of a kangaroo lies not far from the teenager's feet. The painting is made up of vivid colours, bright blue and pink, strong oranges, browns and yellow. The white clouds are starkly painted against the lined sky. While Douglas gives the painting a strong sense of depth and perspective, particularly in his depiction of the landscape, other visual elements in the painting, such as the human figures and the clouds, are deliberately flattened. The subjects in the painting are represented in a bold and distinctive manner, reminiscent of both pop art and surrealism. Douglas' visual style is highly recognisable as unique to him.



Figure 3.3. Blak Douglas (aka Adam Hill), 2007, *U...R...an' I ummm...we are AFAILINGLAND*, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 250 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Blak Douglas.

The category *Abstract* holds the second highest share of works in Prize finals, representing 16% of works depicted in the catalogues. The category of *Abstract* denotes art works that do not contain '...recognisable scenes or objects, but instead...[are] made up of forms and colours that

<sup>25</sup> Adam Hill, 2007, *U...R...an' I ummm...we are AFAILINGLAND*, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 250 cm. NB: Blak Douglas was, at the time of the 2007 PNSWAAP catalogue publication, making work under the name Adam Hill, and is cited as such in the 2007 catalogue. At the time of our meeting the artist was working under the name Blak Douglas.

exist for their own expressive sake' (Chilvers 2015a). *Abstract* works are not literally representational, meaning they contain shapes, marks and forms that are *not* recognisably referents to particular things, characters, creatures, places etc., even though the particular visual expression utilised by an artist sought to evoke these things. *Abstract* works are, as indicated in artist statements, aimed at exploring and expressing a variety of thematic issues and concepts, including most prominently: artists' experiences of and engagement with their Country (31%); expressions of cultural and religious knowledge (10%); and issues associated with contemporary Aboriginality (8%). Alex Blacklock's *My beautiful country* is a good example of an *Abstract* work. The painting, an acrylic on canvas, stands as a representation of '...the changing forms in the landscape' of Blacklock's Country (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 15) and is made up of organic bands and shapes of cool creams, yellows and greens.<sup>26</sup> These coloured forms overlap and blend into one another and due to being formed by repetitive, tightly applied brush strokes, appear finely textured. The marks made by these strokes create a sense of movement, as if the differently coloured forms on the canvas are moving towards, and into, one another.

The *Naturalistic* category correlates broadly with the concept of 'naturalism', a term '...denoting an approach to art in which the artist endeavours to represent objects as they are empirically observed, rather than in a stylised or conceptual manner' (Chilvers 2015b). Here, artists represent their subjects in a realistic or hyper-realistic manner, carefully reproducing colours, dimensions and features as they appear in life. *Naturalistic* works account for just under 8% of artworks depicted in PNSWAAP catalogues, making naturalism the third most common style used by Prize finalists. Barry Cooper's *My Throbbing Love: The Greatest Hits of Deano Stiffelli* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014a: 24) provides a nice example of a *Naturalistic* work.<sup>27</sup> Cooper's playful work, a pencil drawing on paper, features fictional 'Indigenous musical personality' Deano Stiffelli engaging in various exploits and adventures. The work includes detailed and highly recognisable portraits of various American disco-era celebrities such as Barry White, John Travolta and Pam Grier. Works assigned to the *Naturalistic* category most commonly depicted people (46%), the natural landscape (27%) and various fauna (8%).

The stylistic category with the fourth largest share of works (a little under 7%) is *Semi-Abstract*. *Semi-Abstract* works utilise many of the same visual techniques as those classified as *Abstract* – including expressive utilisation of colours, shapes and non-representational mark making – and yet also include some representational elements, such as clearly discernible, if extremely stylised, depictions of flora, fauna or human forms. Alternatively, they may include symbols,

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<sup>26</sup> Alex Blacklock, 2009, *My beautiful country*, acrylic on canvas, 101 x 80 cm.

<sup>27</sup> Barry Cooper, 2014, *My Throbbing Love: The Greatest Hits of Deano Stiffelli*, pencil on paper, 145 x 164 cm.

pictographs or cultural motifs, often borrowed from Central and Western Desert visual culture (such as patterns denoting animal tracks, or concentric circulars representing campfires etc.). *Semi-Abstract* works are distinct from those included in the *Stylised* category because abstracted visual elements are their central feature and because human and other forms depicted are subject to extreme stylisation. The most common subject matter for *Semi-Abstract* works was the natural landscape (38%). Verna Barker's *My Birth, My Journey, My Country* stands as a clear example of a *Semi-Abstract* work.<sup>28</sup> Here Barker has embroidered, on silk cotton, various repeating patterns featuring lines, circles and crosses in various colours, in order to represent her life journey and her physical movement across her Country. Included here also are stylised foot prints, and representations of emus, kangaroos and birds (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 8).

The *Dots* category represents a little under 5% of works depicted in PNSWAAP catalogues, and is the fifth most commonly used style. Just over 38% of works assigned to this category were abstract in nature, with dots forming an optical field, or constituting repetitive patterns and organic, often multi-coloured shapes, as in Kim Holten's *Among Women* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2011: 25).<sup>29</sup> Depictions of native Australian and other fauna, and of the natural landscape each account for just over 23% of works assigned to the *Dots* category. These works feature animal figures, or motifs and symbols, filled with, constituted or surrounded by, finely painted, evenly spaced dots, or more expressive, organic clusters of dots, as in *Mother and Earth* by Danielle Mate (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2005: 33).<sup>30</sup>

### **Dominant Styles in the Field**

There are various correlations between trends outlined here and with the stylistic practices of research participants (see Table 3.5). As with PNSWAAP artists, stylisation was the most frequently utilised visual style deployed by participants, with just over 17% of artists regularly creating works that could be broadly classified as *Stylised*. The predominance of *Stylised* works amongst research participants affirms the importance of figurative, though not necessarily *Naturalistic*, representations in Aboriginal art from NSW. The use of *Stylised* visual representation allows participating artists to depict animals, humans, objects and places in such a way as to make them recognisable to a general viewing public, while simultaneously facilitating the use of their own distinctive visual language. *Stylised* representation also allows artists to portray particular religious lessons or experiences in ways that can be 'read' and recognised by viewers not from their cultural background and yet also give a sense of the out-of-the-ordinary, sacred or transcendental quality of that lesson or experience. The broad

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<sup>28</sup> Verna Barker, 2013, *My Birth, My Journey, My Country*, sewn fabric and silk cotton, 93 x 93 cm.

<sup>29</sup> Kim Holten (Hill), 2011, *Among Women*, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 122 x 152 cm.

<sup>30</sup> Danielle Mate, 2005, *Mother and Earth*, acrylic on canvas, 75.5 x 61 cm each unit.

accessibility of *Stylised* figurative work for audiences was confirmed by comments made by research participants regarding the kinds of works frequently purchased by tourists and others. As Cher Breeze, the then curator at Grafton Regional Gallery, observed regarding art produced in the Northern Rivers Region, ‘...you will see a lot of figurative works on animals and...they are often very collectable because people can access them on their wall’.

Style (Participants)	%
Stylised	17.4
Dots	16.3
Installation	8.7
Text Based	7.6
Semi-Abstract	6.5
Aboriginal Motifs	5.4
Naturalistic	5.4
South Eastern Designs	5.4
Abstract	4.3
Found Object	4.3
Photograph (digital processing)	4.3
Film	3.3
Photograph (no obvious digital processing)	3.3
Collage	2.2
Weaving	2.2
Ochre	1.1
Wearable	1.1
X-Ray	1.1

Table 3.5. Style of works by research participants.

Whereas *Abstract* visual styles were common in the PNSWAAP (16% of works), only 4% of research participants created *Abstract* works with any regularity. The disparity between these numbers can be interpreted in various ways. It may indicate the preference of Prize judges for abstracted works over other stylistic forms, or may indicate instead the broad popularity of abstract styles amongst artists in NSW that was simply not reflected in the pool of artists who participated in my research. Without access to works submitted to the PNSWAAP prior to finalists being selected, it is difficult to assess which of these interpretations is correct.<sup>31</sup>

The second most utilised visual style amongst research participants was *Dots*, with about 16% of artists habitually making such works. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, dot painting was much in evidence during my fieldwork and was being produced by a greater portion of artists than is indicated by dotted works included in the PNSWAAP (4.7%). The relatively few dot works included in the competition is likely the result of the Prize’s explicit focus on

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<sup>31</sup> I was not able to access this material, and it is not clear whether such material has been consistently collected by Prize administrators.

promoting and celebrating Aboriginal visual styles from NSW.<sup>32</sup> That dots are conceptualised as a visual style not properly of NSW is made clear in the 'Message from the Parliament of New South Wales' penned by Meredith Burgmann and John Aquilina, included in the 2005 catalogue. They wrote, 'the extraordinary variety of Indigenous art from NSW would surprise those who are expecting the "dots" of the desert style and dispel the misconception that Indigenous culture in NSW has been lost' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2005: 3). Thus, the relatively few dot works included in the Prize may well be the result of a decision made by various judges not to include such works in the competition, due to a desire to celebrate and promote NSW styles of work. This attitude is articulated, though without specific reference to dots, in the judges' statement included in the 2012 catalogue. Here, Tina Baum, Mervyn Bishop and Matt Poll state:

The most successful artists are those who have managed to find their own unique ways of expressing themselves...As Aboriginal people we need to be aware of what our imagery is, especially if we are expressing a response to our cultural heritage...It is of the utmost importance to be respectful and use only what is culturally appropriate to ourselves when creating our works of art (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2012: 6).

A little under 9% of artist participants regularly created works that could be stylistically classified as *Installations*, meaning 'mixed-media constructions or assemblages usually designed for a specific place and for a temporary period of time' (Tate Art Galleries 2016) intended to be entered, moved around and physically engaged with by a viewer. Only 1% of works in the PNSWAAP were classified as *Installations*, likely due to size and weight restrictions applied to competing artworks.

Around 8% of participants frequently created *Text-Based* artworks using text as either a primary or secondary style. Around 7% of works in PNSWAAP catalogues included text as a primary or secondary visual component. In the field, as with Prize artworks, text was often deployed to make ironic or provocative statements about political, social or historical issues and injustices experienced by Aboriginal people. For example, in 2017 Wiradjuri artist Amala Groom iterated a 2014 series of paintings into the *Cider Series*,<sup>33</sup> a collection of 12 bottles of 'colonial cider'. The labels for these cider bottles featured made up words which riffed on the suffix – *cide* denoting the act killing. Intended as a critique of contemporary iterations of

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<sup>32</sup> The relatively small portion of PNSWAAP works classified in the *Dots* category is partially due to the manner via which the style of works were categorised. If dots were the central or dominant feature of an artwork then I assigned that work to the *Dots* category. However if dots were utilised in an artwork, but were a secondary stylistic feature, then the work was classified elsewhere. Thus, while 5% of works have been assigned to the *Dots* category, in total 9% of Prize works featured dotting.

<sup>33</sup> Amala Groom, 2017, *The Cider Series*, glass, cork, wire, apple cider, ink, paper, 31 x 124 x 8.5 cm, Edition of 12 +1 AP (as a series of 12).

British colonisation, cider bottle labels included words such as *Memoricider* (designating ‘Desecrating Collective Memories’), and *Linguicider* (‘Desecrating Languages’) (Groom 2017a). Groom purposefully uses the term ‘desecrating’, rather than ‘killing’ to define these words in order to acknowledge the resilience and survival of Aboriginal peoples in the wake and ongoing conflict of colonisation.



Figure 3.4. Amala Groom, 2017, *The Cider Series*, glass, cork, wire, apple cider, ink, paper, 31 x 124 x 8.5 cm, Edition of 12 +1 AP (as a series of 12). Image credit: Penelope Benton. Courtesy of the artist. ©Amala Groom.

Over 6% of research participants created *Semi-Abstract* works, making this the fifth most frequently utilised style. As with PNSWAAP artworks, *Semi-Abstract* works by participants featured a mixture of abstract forms and patterning, but incorporated abstracted but clearly figurative representations of flora, fauna, human and spirit figures and also often included icons or symbols borrowed or adapted from Western and Central Desert artists. While the frequent use of *Stylised*, *Dotted*, and *Semi-Abstract* visual styles by research participants correlates with visual styles most in evidence in works appearing in the PNSWAAP, *Naturalistic* and *Abstract* works were made with much lower regularity by research participants. This difference may be due to the preferences of judges in terms of the styles of works felt to adhere to the criteria outlined in Table 3.1. It may also reflect the artistic focus of participants, indicating they prefer to create stylistic works that, as was discussed above, are generally more evocative than *Naturalistic* works, and more accessible than *Abstract* ones.

During fieldwork it became clear that there is a growing interest from artists and arts workers in what I have dubbed *South Eastern Designs*; repetitive linear and geometric patterning in evidence on artefacts produced in NSW prior to British settlement. This phenomenon will be explored in detail in Chapter 4. In view of the popular interest in this visual form, I was



somewhat surprised that only 3.4% of works depicted in the PNSWAAP catalogues fall under the stylistic category of *South Eastern Designs*. These works are typified by Terrance Wright's *Country Connections* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 74), a shield-shaped glass dome patterned with repeating diamond shapes.<sup>34</sup> While only a relatively small portion of PNSWAAP works were allocated to the *South Eastern Designs* category, a far greater number of works (a little under 10%) utilised these designs as a secondary stylistic feature. Kevin Williams' *Wundarra* typifies this kind of secondary utilisation.<sup>35</sup> Here, Williams has painted, in a *Naturalistic* manner, an Aboriginal child surrounded by various flora and fauna including an eagle. In the top left hand corner of the painting the artist has included a depiction of a tree that has a dendroglyph carved onto it, thus including in the work '...the markings and symbols of the Wiradjuri' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2014a: 70). Whether included as a central or secondary stylistic feature, artists using *South Eastern Designs* in their works frequently mention, via their artist statements, the importance of such designs to their cultural identity as Aboriginal people from NSW.<sup>36</sup> Although only 3.4% of participants made works using *South Eastern Designs*, the cultural and personal importance of these designs expressed by artists engaged in the PNSWAAP echoes sentiments reported by participants during fieldwork.

#### **Top Five Subjects Represented**

In analysing works that appeared in the finals of the PNSWAAP, I considered the subject matter – the actual visual content of a work – that artists sought to depict. Here, I distinguish between the subject represented in an artwork and its thematic content, designating the former as what is directly discernible to the viewer when looking at a work, and the latter as the ideas, messages, and meanings embedded in the artist's choice of subject and how they approached its representation. As such, while I consulted the artist statements associated with each work when analysing thematic content, I looked only at an artwork when discerning the content, or subject represented in a work (see Table 3.6).

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<sup>34</sup> Terrance Wright, 2013, *Country Connections*, reclaimed bloodwood timber and glass, dimensions variable.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Williams, 2014, *Wundarra*, synthetic polymer on Italian linen, 120 x 180 cm.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Campbelltown Arts Centre (2013: 28).

Subjects (PNSWAAP)	%
Landscape	17.3
People	17.3
Abstract	14.1
Not Depicted	12.6
Fauna	9.6
Objects	7.2
Flora	4.7
Patterning	4.5
Text Based	4.1
Mission	3.6
Ancestral/Spirit Figures	3.2
Urban Environment	1.9

Table 3.6. Subject of works in PNSWAAP finals (2005 – 2015).

In 2013, judges Matt Poll, Judith Watson and Vernon Ah Kee, observed, in their catalogue essay:

...it is interesting to note how the rural landscape in New South Wales is still a predominant feature of many submissions. Whether this landscape is depicted in representational or abstract form, this underlying subjective motif possibly reflects the strong desire of participating New South Wales Aboriginal artists to affirm and acknowledge their many regional affiliations (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2013: 6).

This observation is relevant not only to the 2013 competition but for all Prize finals. Indeed, 17% of all works depicted in Prize catalogues represent the natural landscape, making *Landscape* one of the most frequent subjects of works appearing in finals. Such works include depictions of various landscapes, including forests, bushland, desert, rivers, ocean and the night sky. Such artworks often represent the Country of the artist, or are intended to document particular natural phenomena such as drought, rains or bushfire. These works sometimes include images of human or animal forms, though always as a feature *within* the landscape, rather than the central focus of the work. For example, Eileen Carberry's *My Little Gunyha* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2011: 20) is a lush, stylised painting of a green natural landscape, replete with trees, rolling hills and, in the distance, a snaking river system.<sup>37</sup> In the foreground of the painting is a small gunya, or humpy, containing a photograph of the artist collaged on it. Representing the artist imagining returning to the land as it was prior to settlement, the humpy and the human figure are subsumed by the sweeping landscape.

Representations of *People* stand, alongside *Landscapes*, as the most common subject matter for PNSWAAP works, accounting for 17% of artworks depicted in Prize catalogues. These works include portraiture of friends, family members, mentors, prominent Aboriginal people such as

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<sup>37</sup> Eileen Carberry, 2011, *My Little Gunyha*, synthetic polymer paint and collage on paper, 39 x 56.5 cm (sight), 74.5 cm (frame).

community leaders, and self-portraits. More commonly however, people depicted are imagined, populating historical scenes that artists have researched and sought to represent, as in Janice Bruny's *Defending Country*, which depicts a violent skirmish between Aboriginal men and British soldiers (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 19).<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, Aboriginal people depicted are intended as symbols, representing for example, the Stolen Generations, the keeping of culture, or Indigenous resilience in the face of forced assimilation. For example, Nyree Reynolds' *Mr Speaker, I commend this motion to the house!* depicts four Aboriginal girls in white smocks and an Aboriginal boy painted up for ceremony (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2008: 31).<sup>39</sup> These children represent members of the Stolen Generations responding positively to the Rudd government's official apology to them.

Just over 14% of artworks were *Abstract*, meaning that it was not possible to discern, by considering the visual qualities of the work alone, the subject of the work. Here works were strictly non-representational and were made up of organic, irregular shapes and expressive mark-making.<sup>40</sup> Catherine Moyle's *Untitled* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2015: 46) is typical of works with *Abstract* content. This acrylic painting is largely black, highlighted with a painted cascade of blue, purple and white that appears to melt into the black background.<sup>41</sup>

*Fauna*, frequently native Australian animals, stand as the fourth most frequently represented subject matter, accounting for just under 10% of artworks depicted in PNSWAAP catalogues. Cindy Laws' *Yiluk platypus (Sun platypus)* is a good example of a work featuring *Fauna*.<sup>42</sup> The pastel drawing on linen is a stylised depiction of a platypus constituted by repetitive triangular patterning and coloured with cool greys, whites and oranges (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 33).

Representations of *Objects* account for just over 7% of artworks. *Objects* depicted include cultural items such as weapons (like shields or boomerangs), clothing (often possum or other animal skin cloaks), tools or objects of utility (such as coolamons or fishing nets). Commercial objects, often represented or repurposed for ironic social observation, are present here also, as in Blak Douglas' *Really Bin #1* (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2012: 22), a moulded resin facsimile of a household wheelie bin with the word 'sorry' embossed on it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Janice Bruny, 2009, *Defending Country*, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm (stretcher).

<sup>39</sup> Nyree Reynolds, 2008, *Mr Speaker, I commend this motion to the house!*, acrylic, natural ochre and sand on canvas, 98 x 78 cm (frame).

<sup>40</sup> These works occasionally included a small number of representational elements, such as motifs, borrowed from desert dot painting. They were still classified as abstracted as the motifs were minor visual elements in the work.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Moyle, 2015, *Untitled*, acrylic on board, 84 x 59 cm.

<sup>42</sup> Cindy Laws, 2009, *Yiluk platypus (Sun platypus)*, charcoal and pastel on linen, 110 x 90 cm (stretcher).

<sup>43</sup> Blak Douglas (Adam Hill), *Really Bin #1*, moulded resin, 60 x 60 x 140 cm, Brenda May Gallery.

## Subjects in the Field

The subjects commonly depicted by research participants correlate in some respects with those in PNSWAAP finals (see Table 3.7). 21% of research participants frequently create works depicting *People*, 20% regularly depict *Fauna*, just under 15% make works depicting *Landscape*, often their Country, 8% commonly make work featuring native and other *Flora* and 8% also create, or represent *Objects*, including those associated with ritual and secular activities. Around 8% of artists also create *Text-Based* works. While 14% of works appearing in the Prize had purely *Abstract* content, a little under 7% of participating artists regularly made works with *Abstract* content.

Subjects (Participants)	%
People	21.3
Fauna	20.0
Landscape	14.7
Flora	8.0
Objects	8.0
Text Based	8.0
Abstract	6.7
Patterning	5.3
Ancestral/Spirit Figures	4.0
Urban Environment	4.0

Table 3.7. Subjects of works by research participants.

## Top Five Themes Explored

Works presented in the PNSWAAP finals were analysed to discern and classify their thematic content (see Table 3.8). This was achieved by both consultation of artist statements and, where images of works were included in Prize catalogues, visual analysis of the artworks under assessment. Here, I use theme to denote the broad, underlying comment, message or issue that the artist seeks to communicate or explore, either tacitly or overtly, via the creation of an artwork (Chandler and Munday 2011b). This includes direct didactic messaging, often with regards to a specific issue or event, and more diffuse and explorative presentations of particular concepts or ideas. Often the thematic concerns of an artwork directly correlate with its visual content (for example, the depiction of a natural landscape as an expression of the artist's desire to explore the theme of *Country*), although this is not always the case. Before examining the central themes evident in works presented in the PNSWAAP, it is worth acknowledging that the British colonisation of Australia – both the initial actions which initiated the process, and its on-going impact and legacy – underpin many of the themes popularly explored by artists participating in the Prize, both directly and obliquely. For example, works that are, ostensibly, thematically focused on cultural and religious knowledge or on the artist's relationship to Country often also address the impact colonisation had on their ability to access their Country, or the way the artist's family maintained cultural

knowledge despite forced assimilation. Works classified as under the thematic category of *Colonialism* overtly and directly address the history and legacy of British colonisation.

Theme (PNSWAAP)	%
Country	19.6
Colonialism	19.6
Cultural or Religious Knowledge	14.3
Contemporary Aboriginality	10.4
Contemporary Socio-Politics	6.2
Family	5.8
Environmental issues	5.1
Fauna	4.9
South Eastern Culture	4.1
No Theme Described or Evident	3.6
Personal Biography	3.4
Flora	2.1
Art	0.9

**Table 3.8. Thematic content of works in PNSWAAP finals (2005-2015).**

The thematic category of *Country* holds one of the greatest shares of artworks included in the PNSWAAP, accounting for just under 20% of works. Here artists seek to explore ideas associated with the notion of Country; that is, the specific areas of land and sea to which they belong, and to which their Dreaming is connected. Artworks assigned to this category typically focus on documenting their maker’s relationship and connection to their Country, including their custodianship of that Country, movement around Country, restriction of access or forced removal from Country, knowledge related to accessing resources (often food and water) on Country, and performing rites and rituals on Country. Frances Belle Parker’s *A fragmented history* presents a good example of a work thematically concerned with *Country*.<sup>44</sup> The work is a multi-layered and visually fragmented painting, featuring three overlapping depictions of the topographical form of Ulgundahi Island, an important site for Parker’s Yaegl community. The work, according to the artist, is a ‘...personal *response* to country...[and] deals with an Aboriginal *perception* of connection to country’ (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 36, emphasis original). The work seeks to represent the natural resources of the land, and the way the land has been exploited throughout Australian history.

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<sup>44</sup> Frances Belle Parker, 2009, *A fragmented history*, acrylic and cane ash on canvas, 150 x 138 cm (unstretched)

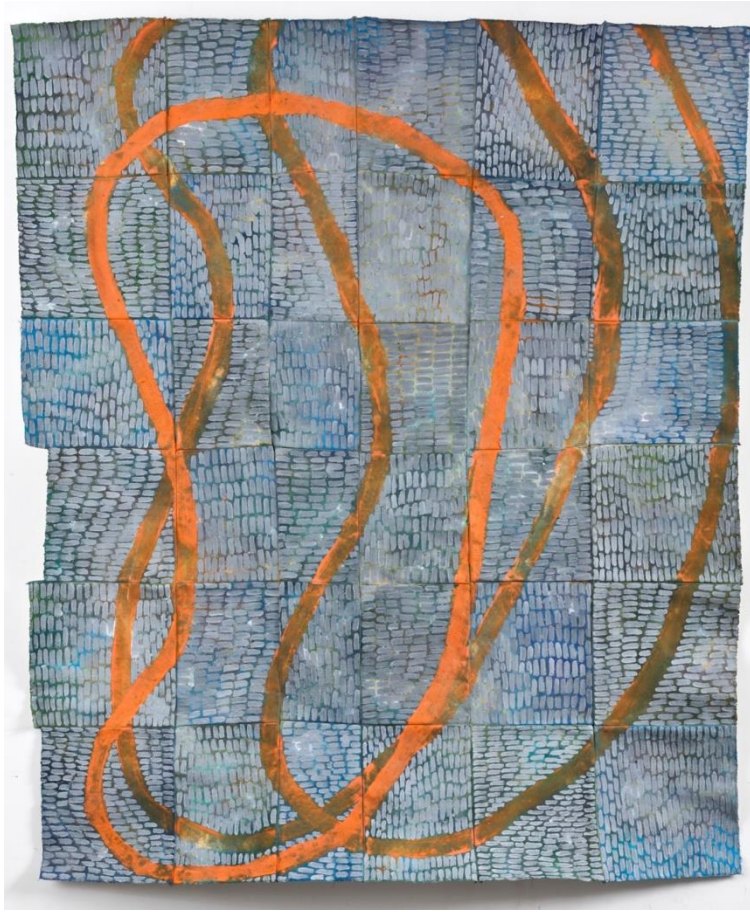


Figure 3.5. Frances Belle Parker, 2009, *A fragmented history*, acrylic and cane ash on canvas, 155 x 135 cm. Courtesy of the artist. ©Frances Belle Parker.

Works with a thematic concern broadly related to *Colonialism* also account for just under 20% of works presented. Here, artists are concerned with exploring and commenting on the circumstances surrounding the British invasion of Australia, commencing when Cook landed at Botany Bay in 1770 and the subsequent colonisation of the country. Primarily utilising the *Stylised* visual style, artists focus on a broad range of thematic issues, including: the violence of colonial encounter; the loss of cultural knowledge (often language) as the result of the forced displacement of Aboriginal people; exposure to disease and physical violence; the white-washing of the history of colonialism; ongoing Indigenous disenfranchisement as the result of forced assimilation and other government policies of ‘protection’; the mission settlement experience; and the experience of the Stolen Generations. Badger Bates’ *Life Coming back to Moon Lake, Wilcannia* is a lino print that typifies this thematic category.<sup>45</sup> Bates’ work depicts a primarily birds-eye view of Moon Lake, populated by black swans and fish and surrounded by lush fauna. Bates writes that the work ‘...reflects how it has been for my people, since white occupation it has been a terrible drought for my people physically and spiritually, but I can see our country is healing a bit and my people are healing with it...’ (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2011: 15).

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<sup>45</sup> Badger Bates, 2011, *Life Coming back to Moon Lake, Wilcannia*, linocut print, 72.5 x 43 cm (image), 108.5 x 76.5 cm (frame).

The thematic category *Cultural or Religious Knowledge* has the third largest share of works, accounting for just over 14% of all artworks. This category is concerned with the communication, representation and maintenance of handed-down cultural and religious knowledge. Both pragmatic or profane knowledge are represented in these works. Pragmatic cultural knowledge represented includes subsistence activities (gathering or hunting food) and processes related to making tools, weapons or clothing. Sacred or spiritual knowledge represented includes that associated with rites and rituals, the artist's Dreaming, and moral and ethical lessons handed on from ancestors. Take for example, Myangah Pirate's *The Gods Had No Mouths*, in which the artist has adorned two headless, plastic mannequins – one male and one female – with paint, leather and the quills and bones of an echidna, to represent, among other things, the way '...Koori people's creation ancestors were also anthropomorphic, changing shape during their interactions with each other and with all other living spirits...' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2012: 54).<sup>46</sup>

Artworks concerned with the exploration of themes associated with the experience of *Contemporary Aboriginality* account for a little over 10% of PNSWAAP works. Here artists seek to explore the experience of being an Aboriginal person in present day Australia. Issues frequently canvassed include: identity (often related to skin colour and the public perception that black skin equates with 'genuine' Aboriginality); the actions associated with maintaining and practicing culture (including language) in the present; the experience of living in cities or towns; and the importance of looking after and educating young Aboriginal people. Leanne Tobin's *Defending Country*, the winning work in the 2011 Prize, provides a clear example of a work thematically focused on *Contemporary Aboriginality*.<sup>47</sup> The painting depicts a light-skinned Aboriginal woman with flowing ginger hair. The woman holds a carved shield, covered in south eastern designs, and stands naked in her Country, surrounded by the spirits of her ancestors. Tobin said of the woman depicted in her work, 'today the colour of the traditional people's skin may vary, but the woman's story and her connections to country continue to run deep' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2011: 43).

A little over 6% of works presented at Prize finals were thematically concerned with *Contemporary Socio-Politics* as experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and, to a lesser extent, other minority and vulnerable groups (including migrants and victims of sexual abuse). Here, artists focused on communicating often very specific messages about various issues including: racism and prejudice in contemporary Australian society, Aboriginal deaths in custody, poverty, and political policies such as the Northern Territory Intervention.

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<sup>46</sup> Myangah Pirate, 2012, *The Gods Had No Mouths*, leather, echidna parts and plastic moulding, 2 of 76.2 x 30.48 cm.

<sup>47</sup> Leanne Tobin, 2011, *Defending Country*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 122 x 91 cm (stretcher).

Jason Wing's *Rainbow Dreaming* provides a good example of a work thematically focused on *Contemporary Socio-Politics*.<sup>48</sup> The work features seven plastic syringes mounted on a wall, each filled with a brightly coloured liquid. Wing noted in the statement accompanying this work that 'substance abuse is related to the dispossession of traditional Aboriginal culture. For some individuals, traditional rituals and connection to the spiritual world is gradually being replaced by synthetic modern alternatives...' (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 47).



Figure 3.6. Jason Wing, 2009, *Rainbow Dreaming*, food colouring, syringes and perspex, 18 x 10 cm (irreg.). Image credit: Adam Hollingworth. Courtesy of the artist. ©Jason Wing.

### Themes in the Field

There are, generally, significant correlations between central themes in works submitted to the PNSWAAP and those commonly explored by research participants (see Table 3.9). As with PNSWAAP works, the most frequently explored theme was *Country*, making it the theme explored by the greatest number of participants. The theme of *Colonialism* held the joint-highest share of works appearing in PNSWAAP finals, however, in the field, it was the 6<sup>th</sup> most frequently explored topic. However, as mentioned above, the history and legacy of colonialism is addressed, in subtle and oblique ways in works ostensibly thematically-focused elsewhere. Other themes regularly canvassed by the greatest number of participants are *Contemporary Aboriginality*, *Contemporary Socio-Politics*, *Cultural and Religious Knowledge*, and *Family*. As

<sup>48</sup> Jason Wing, 2009, *Rainbow Dreaming*, food colouring, syringes and perspex, 18 x 10 cm (irreg.).



with PNSWAAP works concerned with *Contemporary Aboriginality*, research participants exploring this theme are concerned with examining their relationship to their cultural identity, often with regards to the way their appearance and lifestyle impacts on how they are perceived by the wider society and within their own Aboriginal community.<sup>49</sup>

Theme (Participants)	%
Country	17.0
Contemporary Aboriginality	16.0
Contemporary Socio-politics	12.8
Cultural & Religious Knowledge	10.6
Family	8.5
Colonialism	7.4
Environmental Issues	7.4
Fauna	5.3
Flora	4.3
Personal Biography	3.2
South Eastern Culture	3.2
Art	2.1
Other	2.1

**Table 3.9. Thematic content of works by research participants.**

Prize and fieldwork data affirms that, in terms of subject matter and thematic concern, Aboriginal artists from NSW make work that is reflective of what might be called the south eastern experience, particularly as it relates to issues associated with identity politics, the socio-political issues facing Aboriginal people in NSW, and the historical, and present-day, impact of colonisation in the state. Beyond this, PNSWAAP data also illustrates points of convergence, in terms of thematic concerns, between works created by Aboriginal artists in NSW and the rest of Australia. The predominance of works thematically associated with *Country* and with *Colonialism* illustrates that while Aboriginal artists from NSW may often make works stylistically distinct to those produced by Aboriginal artists from outside the state, there are important points of thematic convergence. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, there has been a tendency amongst some art historians to conflate Aboriginal art from NSW with ‘urban’ Aboriginal work, giving the impression that art produced in the state is exclusively concerned with political and social commentary. This concern with social and political themes is sometimes contrasted with the thematic interests – the artist’s *Country*, spiritual and cultural knowledge, or family and kinship – of so called traditional artists working in remote areas such as the Western and Central Deserts.<sup>50</sup> Such an analysis of ‘urban’ and ‘remote’ artists fails to acknowledge the continuity that exists between artists working in the south east and elsewhere in Australia. It also reinforces a false division between traditional and contemporary/urban work, as well as negating the political and social messages

<sup>49</sup> Examples of these identity-themed works were explored in Chapter 2.

<sup>50</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1 on the emergence of urban art.

embedded in work produced by desert artists living in remote areas<sup>51</sup> and the traditional focus of many artists working in the south east. Such an analysis also belies the multi-faceted nature of Aboriginal art in which the sacred, political and personal – often conceptualised as discrete – co-exist or are indivisible. Thus, while analysis of Prize and fieldwork data affirms the interest of artists from NSW in creating works that deliver social and political commentary, it also serves to make clear important points of correlation, in terms of subject matter and theme, between the so-called ‘contemporary’ artists of NSW and those apparently ‘traditional’ artists from elsewhere in Australia. The profound centrality of Country, as both a subject to be depicted and a theme to be explored in the work of Aboriginal arts Australia-wide, affirms this continuity (Watson 2007: 17, Caruana and Cubillo 2013: 42, Kleinert 1994: 288-289). It also demonstrates the importance of Country, and its associated Dreaming, to the artistic, and daily, life of Aboriginal people from NSW.

### **Conclusion: The Consecrating Power of the Art Prize**

There has been a tendency in literature focusing on arts prizes to analyse such events as either serving particular economic ends (Street 2005: 834) or as ‘circuits of legitimation’ (English 2002: 111) that validate particular art forms or artists (and indeed, those awarding them prizes) as important and therefore culturally, socially and financially worthy. Scholars focusing on economic outcomes position arts prizes as mechanisms for marketing that function to promote the consumption of the art form they evaluate. Here, the art prize is ultimately intended to encourage the sale of the artworks that are valorised by it (English 2002: 114), or operates as a ‘consumer judgement’ device to ‘...reduce...the gap between what a consumer knows and what she would need to know to make optimal [consumer] choice’ (Rossman and Schilke 2014: 88, see also Moeran 2013: 234).

The second approach that dominates sociologically focused literature relies on Bourdieusian analysis, framing art prizes as a part of the ‘circuits of legitimation’ or ‘...systems of sponsorship, evaluation, and consecration by means of which power euphemizes itself as merit...and thereby secures its symbolic efficacy’ (English 2002: 111). Thus, prizes act to ‘consecrate’, by endorsement and promotion, particular forms of art, or specific artists, and also affirm the cultural and other capital of those involved with a prize including competition judges or sponsors (Street 2005: 883).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See for example, the observations about the political implications of many of the History Paintings produced in the East Kimberly (Skerritt 2012).

<sup>52</sup> While prizes can validate the knowledge or taste of judges or others affiliated with them, they can also undermine them. As English observes, scandals, as reported by the media, associated with the awarding of arts prizes are so common that they might even be seen as requisite to the process (2002: 112). Such scandals are often centred on derision regarding the choice of winner, which may reflect

These two assessments of arts prizes are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, can be understood as unified by an assumption that arts prizes are *functional*, in the sense that they are intended to, and often achieve, specific social, economic or other impacts on the art scene, including improving an artist's reputation and perhaps increasing the price their works can command (Street 2005: 834-835). In a broader sense, prizes, or more properly those who judge and promote prizes, have the ability to shape '...public discourse on art and artistic merit...' (Street 2005: 837) and to '...validate certain cultural forms, in ways that advertising and marketing cannot...' (Street 2005: 835).

Consideration of the aims of the PNSWAAP, as expressed by the event's creators, administrators and sponsors – namely to promote and support a diverse arts practice in Aboriginal NSW – resonate in particular ways with these two overarching analyses of arts prizes. While the Prize is not directly economically oriented in the same way as, say the Man-Booker Prize – PNSWAAP works are not, for example, offered for sale to the audience – its outcome does have an economic impact for winning artists. The Prize does not explicitly aim to raise the profile (or the prices) of the winning artist. Rather the aim is a general consecration of art created by Aboriginal artists working across NSW. By endowing a prize for art produced in the state, making the prize money financially significant, recruiting high profile judges, and by holding the exhibition at the NSW Parliament (arguably the symbolic heart of state authority), the Prize acts to endorse and legitimise Aboriginal art in NSW by deeming it worthy of a cash prize, critical attention and an exhibition. Here, the PNSWAAP is used by the NSW Government and other partners, to '...signal...' specific '...valued social functions and practices' (Street 2005: 821), in this case the diverse art practice of Aboriginal people living, or born, in NSW.<sup>53</sup> I witnessed this consecration in action during fieldwork. In the days after the 2014 Prize winner, Nicole Foreshew, was announced, I visited Arts NSW and spoke with Sharni Jones (the then Senior Aboriginal Cultural Development Officer). Foreshew had, only a few weeks previously, been awarded the 2014 NSW Aboriginal Arts Fellowship, thus receiving \$30,000 for 'professional development' (Arts NSW 2014). For Jones, who was already impressed and excited by Foreshew's work, her win at the PNSWAAP confirmed her conviction that, as she explained, '...there really is a high standard of midcareer artists [from NSW] who are much more visible [than artists from NSW have been in the past]'

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negatively on those who made this decision, though may, conversely, increase media and consumer interest in the prize. See for example, English's discussion of Man-Booker Prize related controversy (2002: 112). The PNSWAAP has not been without controversy, see for example O'Shea (2014) and Vaughan (2017) on Jason Wing's 2012 winning work.

<sup>53</sup> In outlining a history of arts and other prizes, Street identifies *signalling of value* as the uniting feature of early prize giving (2005: 821), a feature that arguably continues to be relevant to contemporary prize giving.

Economic analyses of arts prizes are relevant here because such social consecration is not divorced from economic processes of valuation. Therefore, an increase in recognition regarding the artistic value of Aboriginal art from NSW is also likely to result in an increased presence, and price command, for NSW Aboriginal art in the art market (Street 2005: 835). Further, the Prize effects an obvious immediate economic change for the winner, who receives \$40,000.

In view of the validating aims of the PNSWAAP, how does data about the competition outlined above relate to, or elucidate, the *consecrating* aims of the Prize? On a very straightforward level an analysis of works exhibited in PNSWAAP finals could offer an indication of the kinds of works deemed able, in an artistic, visual and cultural sense, to represent the 'diversity' and 'strength' the Prize seeks to endorse and support. Thus, works presented annually in the PNSWAAP can be said to not only offer an indication of the types of artwork produced by artists in NSW but, crucially, the kinds of artworks that are seen as worthy of endorsement and circulation – by Prize officiates – as representative of Aboriginal Art from NSW. While written material by Prize judges included in catalogues gives an indication of the types of works that have been valorised by the PNSWAAP (for example, as described above, works that utilise south eastern visual heritage rather than dots), without access to information regarding all of the artworks submitted to the PNSWAAP prior to works being selected for the finals, it is not possible to assess if the types of works selected have been included to the end of valorising particular visual forms or types of artworks. In view of the inaccessibility of this information, it seemed reasonable to assume that analysis of PNSWAAP award winners would provide an indication of the types of works valorised by officials as typifying prize criteria (see Table 3.1). However, an analysis of the media, style, content and theme of winning works shows that, rather than reflecting a particular agenda from judges – in terms of promoting a particular type of artwork – winning works reflect the dominant trends seen across all artworks appearing in Prize finals. In other words, a rank comparison between the most frequently used themes, styles, content and media of all works in Prize finals and of winning works reveals that the latter is typically reflective of the former.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond this, a visual appraisal of winning works reveals there is considerable diversity – aesthetically speaking – between winning works, further undermining the assumption that the Prize is reflective of an agenda to promote certain types of artworks over others. This

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<sup>54</sup> Rank comparison between works that won the UNSW Art & Design (formally COFA) Award and all works submitted to Prize finals also revealed similarities, namely between dominant media (paintings) and style (*Stylisation*). However there was some diversity in terms of theme (with winning works having a fairly even spread between identified themes) and content (with *Landscape* and *Objects* each accounting for the largest percentage of winning works).

assumption is further undermined in two ways. Firstly, despite a clear discomfort regarding the use of visual forms strongly associated with art produced outside of NSW (as exemplified by the above mentioned judges' statement by Baum, Bishop and Poll) artworks containing such visual forms appear with relative regularity in Prize finals.<sup>55</sup> Presumably such works would be excluded from finals if the agenda of the Prize was consecration of particular visual forms deemed authentically of NSW. Secondly, the many points of confluence between Prize data and data collected during my fieldwork, particularly with regards to popular themes and subjects canvassed, and media and styles utilised, also undermine the idea of PNSWAAP administrators and judges having a particular agenda to valorise particular visual forms and undermine others. In view of this, it is more accurate to conceptualise the PNSWAAP as being concerned with consecrating Aboriginal art from NSW broadly, rather than seeking to promote specific art forms over others. Here, the aim is to raise the profile of Aboriginal art from NSW and to engender an attitude that art from the state is worthy: of being exhibited in the state's parliament, of being documented in a catalogue, and, most importantly of being awarded \$40,000.

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<sup>55</sup> Although it is worth noting that a dot painting has, for example, never won the PNSWAAP or received the UNSW Art & Design Award.



## Chapter 4 South Eastern Designs

*'My addressee,/ my patterned tree, for thee I plea/ for our shared key/ is time's payee, our internee'* – Peter Minter 'The Tree, The Tree' in Hill et al. (2011)

### NSW 'Traditions'

The previous chapter sought to provide a top-down, bird's-eye view of the types of artworks being produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW. The aim of this chapter, and the two which follow, is to drill down and focus on four iterations of Aboriginal art from NSW that hold a particular significance for research participants: south eastern designs (this chapter), urban art and contemporary art (Chapter 5), and dot painting (Chapter 6). These forms were created with such frequency, or were discussed by participants as so unquestionably *of* NSW, that I am tempted to gloss them here as visual traditions. What follows is a discussion of these visual forms, as well as an account of the ways they are conceptualised by research participants. The conviction that some of these art types (south eastern designs, and urban and contemporary art) are genuine NSW visual forms, while others – such as dot painting – are sometimes regarded as not genuine to the state, raises questions regarding the criteria by which artists, arts workers, curators, gallery staff (and by extension, the institutions they work for), judge the authenticity and validity of various types of visual expression. The epistemological convictions underpinning the designation of certain visual forms as authentic, traditional or cultural will be explored here, and across Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

### South Eastern Designs

*South eastern designs* is a term I use to designate a suite of visual motifs and forms strongly associated, at least in the museum record, with various language groups across the south east including, in NSW, the Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Barkindji nations.<sup>1</sup> These designs are in evidence in the collections of various public institutions in Australia, including the Australian and Macleay Museums, and in collections housed abroad, such as the British Museum.<sup>2</sup> Appearing on weapons, wood carvings, dendroglyphs, cylindroconical stone carvings, rock paintings, possum skin cloaks and other articles associated with daily life, medicine, magic and religion, the defining feature of these designs is the employment of repetitive geometric patterning, particularly the use of diamonds, chevrons and other linear configurations (Cooper 1981: 33). Non-Indigenous interest in south eastern designs appears to have begun in the early years of British settlement when settlers, explorers and others began collecting weapons and

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<sup>1</sup> As noted previously the spelling of these nation names varies. I use the preferred spelling of participants when discussing their practice, hence the spelling of Wiradjuri, Gamilaroi and Barkindji (and other nations) varies across this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, objects documented in Osbourne and Simpkin such as the 'Parrying Shield' (2015: 65).

other so-called artefacts adorned with these designs, from the Aboriginal people they encountered (Cooper 1981: 30). The early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw sustained engagement by Europeans with a particular iteration of south eastern designs, which is now highly identified with Aboriginal art in NSW: the dendroglyph.<sup>3</sup> Dendroglyphs are carved trees incised with lined patterns or, occasionally, figurative forms, created by chiselling the outline of a particular motif onto the bark of a tree, or by cutting out the spaces surrounding the designs so that patterns and shapes are created in the negative space where bark is removed (Cooper 1981: 34). It is suggested that dendroglyphs were typically created as part of particular ceremonial activities such as initiation or mortuary rituals (Purcell 2011: 4, Morphy 1998: 159-160, Cooper 1981: 34). Trees were documented and discussed by explorers, anthropologists and enthusiasts such as Robert Etheridge ([1918] 2011), Lindsay Black (1941) and Clifton Cappie Towle.<sup>4</sup> From the early 1900s onwards, individuals, universities and museums mounted collecting expeditions, travelling to the central and western parts of NSW to remove carved trees (Briggs 2011: 12). Private collectors also removed trees and, as a result, relatively few remain in Country (Brennan 2016), although they are present in various museums.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 4.1. Henry King, c1910s, *Taphoglyphs (Aboriginal carved trees), near Dubbo, N.S.W., [191-?]*, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales FL224363.

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<sup>3</sup> Etheridge utilises a system of classifications to distinguish between different types of carved trees ([1918] 2011). For ease, I am using the term dendroglyph to refer to all carved trees in evidence in NSW.

<sup>4</sup> A collection of Towle's photographs of dendroglyphs and other ceremonial carvings are accessible at the State Library of NSW.

<sup>5</sup> There is at least one dendroglyph in the collection of the Australian Museum, collected from Peak Hill (NSW) (Fisher 2015). Staff at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre (BMCC) and at the Western Plains Cultural Centre (WPCC) reported having dendroglyphs in their collection. BMCC staff noted that while they encountered some challenges in terms of displaying and conserving their dendroglyph, its display was welcomed by the local Aboriginal community. Staff at the WPCC noted that their display of a local dendroglyph had caused some distress for Aboriginal people visiting the gallery because of their cultural significance. Elsewhere this discomfort has been addressed via repatriation. In recognition of its significance as a mortuary marker, in 2010 a carved tree in the collections of Museums Victoria was returned to the Gamilaroi people of Baradine, NSW (Museums Victoria 2010).



During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, depictions of south eastern designs, often adorning weaponry or the bodies of ceremonial dancers, were created by European explorers or settlers and circulated in illustrated, wunderkammer-style books, depicting flora, fauna, and Aboriginal people and their material culture.<sup>6</sup> Later, such designs were documented by anthropologists such as Howitt, whose vast *Native Tribes of the South-East of Australia* (1904) includes various illustrations of weaponry adorned with south eastern designs (see for example 1904: 337). Howitt does not discuss the artistic or aesthetic properties of such items, although many references to their use in ceremonial and daily life can be found across the text. Elsewhere, south eastern designs adorning various items are positioned as archaeological evidence of an extinct culture, rather than the product of a living one (see for example, Massola 1971: 54-71). As far as I can discern, the first engaged analysis of south eastern designs that positions these visual forms as having, or more accurately *potentially* having, a relationship with Aboriginal people in the present is Cooper's important *Art of the Temperate South East* (1981). Cooper's approach is historical, an outlining of practices, objects and styles that existed prior to colonial contact and that did not survive much past its onslaught (1981: 29). Although ultimately positioning south eastern designs, and the objects they adorn, as coming from a culture that 'no longer exists' (1981: 40), Cooper asserts that they should, nevertheless, serve as inspiration for present-day Aboriginal people wishing to revive their culture (1981: 40). Cooper writes:

...the high artistic standards of south eastern tribal Aborigines should greatly encourage their descendants, who have recently expressed a strong desire to re-identify themselves with the traditions of their forebears...there is a strong possibility that...[there will] emerge talented Aboriginal artists who may recapture the dynamic feeling of line and design at which their forefathers excelled (1981: 40).

### **Grassroots Revivals**

Cooper's statement seems prescient in view of the sustained interest that individual artists, and various communities, in the south east have taken in south eastern designs, as demonstrated by their utilisation in various cultural and artistic endeavours. During fieldwork, although only a few research participants made works that utilised south eastern designs, it became clear that these forms were of interest, and were important, to many artists, curators and arts workers because they were felt to be clearly and uncomplicatedly *of* the Indigenous south east, and, thus a visual tradition that Aboriginal artists from NSW could utilise as part of their inherited cultural property. This enthusiasm for south eastern designs can be understood as part of a community-led push to rediscover and revive local pre-contact cultural practices originating from the south east. The possum skin cloak movement is perhaps one of the best

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Skottowe (1813), Blandowski (1855).

documented revivals of this kind, having gained considerable momentum across various communities and, consequently, receiving academic and media attention.

Prior to British settlement, possum skin cloaks were made and worn by various Aboriginal groups across NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria (Fernando 2010: 7). Cloaks were created by sewing together numerous possum skins, and were intended for daily use, either being worn as a cloak, with the fur side of the cloak worn against the body for warmth, or being used as a blanket for sleeping (McGaw 2014: 12). The skin side of a cloak would be adorned with south eastern designs and figurative forms, which were incised using heated implements such as mussel shells. McGaw notes that decoration of cloaks was associated with the '...mapping of "Country" ...' with Aboriginal people inscribing '...the "place-stories" of their Country using image and symbol...' (2014: 12). Thus, 'the markings on a possum skin cloak...identified one's personal connection to clan and Country...[and each] person's cloak was different, depending on the knowledge they were responsible for' (McGaw 2014: 12). Given to an individual at birth, as a child grew skins would be added to their cloak, as would various designs. Further, when an individual died they would be buried in their cloak. Thus, while cloaks were associated with practical, every-day use, because of their link to the lifecycle of an individual, they also had a sacred and ceremonial significance (Kleinert 2010b: 9, McGaw 2014: 12-13). Restricted access to Country, combined with use of woven blankets in lieu of cloaks, or missionary insistence on Aboriginal residents wearing European clothes, caused the practice of creating possum skin cloaks to decline in the years following settlement (Gibbins 2010: 125). Although still created after the 1800s<sup>7</sup> possum skin cloaks were not made regularly again until the close of the 1990s. At this time Victorian-based artists Lee Darroch, Debra Couzens, Trehna Hamm and Vicki Couzens, along with other community members, were given access to one of the few possum skin cloaks made prior to the 1800s that had survived into the present (Couzens and Darroch 2012: 63, Kleinert 2010b: 15). The experience had a profound impact on the artists, as they recount, 'it was a deeply spiritual experience. The cloak is from Vicki's grandmother's Country. Vicki and Lee felt the presence of the Ancestors or Old People in the room with us. They have been with us ever since' (2012: 65). As a result the pair sought to revive the cloak-making tradition; they sourced possum pelts from Aotearoa New Zealand (as many species of possum are now protected in Australia), experimented with various strings to sew together pelts (finally settling on waxed thread, rather than Kangaroo sinew due to the complexity of sourcing this material), and utilised poker work burners to incise patterns onto cloaks, as imported pelts were too soft to be incised in the manner their ancestors used (2012: 65). For Couzens and Darroch this revival was of profound importance, with possum skin

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<sup>7</sup> Gibbins reports, for example, that Melbourne's Koorie Heritage Trust retains a number of possum skin cloaks created by artists during the 1980s and 1990s (2010: 125).

cloaks acting as ‘...vehicles for: healing, bringing back self-respect, reconnecting to culture sites, creation stories and the Land’ (2012: 67). The artists have since travelled to various communities across the south east, sharing their knowledge of possum skin cloak making (Somerville 2014: 187, Banmirra Arts Inc 2017).



Figure 4.2. William Barak, 1898, *Figures in possum skin cloaks*, pencil, wash, charcoal solution, gouache and earth pigments on paper, 57 x 88.8 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1962, 1215A-5 ©Public domain.

Several of the communities I visited during my fieldwork had, often due to the facilitation by their regional arts office or local gallery, hosted a possum skin cloak making workshop or an exhibition featuring locally made possum skin cloaks. In September 2013 the Blue Mountains Culture Centre, together with the Gundungurra Tribal Council, held a Possum Skin Cloak Healing workshop for Aboriginal men and women. Visitors to the centre were invited to come and observe the workshop. Similarly, Dubbo Regional Gallery curator Caroline Edwards, reported on the great success of an exhibition – *Dhaga Ngiyanhi Ngan.Girra (Where We All Meet)* – held in 2012 featuring a possum skin blanket, kangaroo skin cloaks, and other items created by local sisters Lynette Riley and Di Riley-McNaboe (Western Plains Cultural Centre 2012). As Edwards explained:

It was a really ground-breaking exhibition for Dubbo because it was exploring these traditional craft practices but intertwining it with what it means to be Aboriginal now...[Riley and Riley-McNaboe] thought it was the first blankets made in living memory in this area. And they just said this is something that they've always wanted to do. That was why it was very emotional for them...because they wanted to do it for their whole lives and they had heard [about the practice] from their aunts and mums and grandmothers...

I later visited an iteration of this exhibition at Sydney University's Macleay Museum. At an artist's talk held in conjunction with the exhibition, Riley, who has worked for many years as an educator, spoke at length about the educative potential and cultural power of cloaks for all

Aboriginal people, seeing them as tangible evidence of Aboriginal cultural vitality and, thus, a powerful tool for healing (2015). Riley has also affirmed that cloaks were an important tool for educating non-Indigenous audience members about Aboriginal culture (Riley 2016: 9).

Other community driven revivals associated with the use of south eastern designs, such as the *Carved Up...By Design* project, which will be discussed below, and those associated more broadly with pre-contact cultural practices such as weaving, canoe building, or gunyah construction, were reported by research participants, or are in evidence elsewhere (see for example, J. Jones 2014, Osbourne 2016).<sup>8</sup> Alongside the revival of practices featuring south eastern designs, there has also been a move to elucidate, for the public, the relationship that art practices commonly understood as European in origin have with pre-settlement visual arts that incorporated south eastern designs. This kind of re-interpretation of objects or art practices, previously considered as kitsch, souvenir or, at least, European in style,<sup>9</sup> is consistent with a humanities-wide reconsideration of the portent of Indigenous or minority group use of colonial or other cultural tropes (be they artistic, material, linguistic or social). As a result of this reconsideration, such use has come to signify creative adaptation, resistance and survival (see for example, Phillips and Steiner 1999, Kleinert 1994), rather than, as previously asserted, capitulation, acculturation or assimilation (Clifford 1988: 5). A relationship to south eastern designs has been reported with regards to several different art-practices, including the carving of emu eggs (Kleinert 1994: 188); lino printing, as practiced by the Barkindji artists, such as Badger Bates in Wilcannia (Jones and Peacock 2013: 3, Gibson 2013: 122); print making, particularly the practice of Roy Kennedy; and in the line based painting and drawing practice of certain renowned Koori artists such as Tommy McRae, William Barak and Harry Wedge (Jones 2015). Each of these practices has been positioned as being associated with pre-contact south eastern design traditions, particularly the carving of such motifs on weapons, dendroglyphs and other objects. Other south eastern art forms, most prominently shellwork as practiced by women in La Perouse and on the South Coast of NSW, have also been reinterpreted as linking back to pre-contact cultural practices (Freeman 1997: 8, see also Vanni 2000: 402, Timbery-Russell and Freeman 2003: 19).<sup>10</sup>

### **Fine Art Use**

In line with this community revival, interest in utilising south eastern designs is also in evidence in the fine art arena. The use of the term revival here is, in some ways, misleading. After all,

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<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that other states in the south east, such as Tasmania, have seen community driven maintenance (and sometimes revival) of unique practices enacted prior to settlement, such as the creation of shell necklaces and kelp water vessels (see Gough 2000, Lehman 2006).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, classification of such objects by Graburn (2006: 415), Stanner (1939: 5).

<sup>10</sup> Shellwork has not, to my knowledge, been tied to any activity associated with the use of south eastern designs.

south eastern designs were incorporated in the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century artists like Tommy McRae and William Barak, who included them in, for example, their representations of ceremonial actors. After McRae and Barak, such literal representations are not much in evidence – in work appraised as fine art – until the 2000s, when direct depiction resumes, but they certainly do exist. For example, Robert Campbell Junior's 1981 painting *Initiation Tree* features a carved tree decorated with diamond patterns.<sup>11</sup> Literal representation aside, as Jonathan Jones has observed, the influence of south eastern designs, especially linear patterning, can be detected in the work of various south eastern artists such as Roy Kennedy and Harry Wedge whose use of line can be said to be a defining element of their work (Art Gallery NSW 2015). Jones' observation is important as it helps make clear the way both continuity and change are inherent to processes of cultural production.

Alongside the creation of works by the likes of Kennedy and Wedge there has been, since at least the early 2000s, a move to overtly and directly incorporate south eastern designs, as they were produced in NSW prior to British settlement, into fine artworks. This move could certainly be labelled a purposeful fine art revival of south eastern designs. Jonathan Jones, Brook Andrew and Reko Rennie are three such artists who utilise south eastern designs, particularly diamond, rhomboid and linear patterning to various aesthetic ends.<sup>12</sup>

Works created by these artists and featuring south eastern designs have received critical and commercial acclaim, and have been collected and exhibited in public galleries such as the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Sydney and the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW). In these works there is a certain thematic unity with regards to the use of south eastern designs, with each artist deploying these designs in order to articulate and assert an Aboriginal presence in Australia in the face of non-Indigenous attitudes and actions such as forgetfulness, indifference, romanticisation or exploitation (Art Gallery NSW 2014, McGregor and Perkins 2014). For example, Andrew's *Loop. A model of how the world operates*,<sup>13</sup> a large installation featuring repetitive black and white rhomboid shaped linear patterning and circular neon tubing, is described as:

...using black and white patterns inspired by...[the artist's] matriarchal Wiradjuri cultural heritage of western New South Wales...In *Loop* Andrew has overlaid these monochromatic

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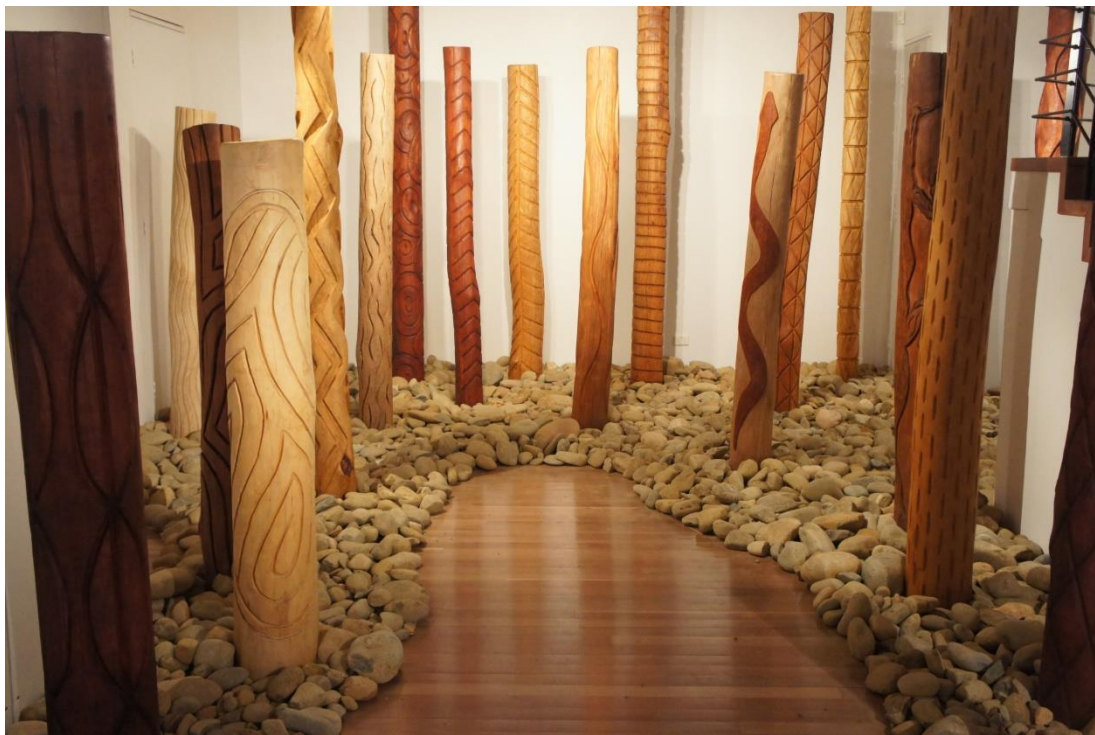
<sup>11</sup> Robert Campbell Junior, 1981, *Initiation Tree*, enamel paint on cardboard, 64 x 50.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria.

<sup>12</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Andrew is among a group of artists uncomfortable with being labelled an Indigenous or Aboriginal artist. I am, however, including him here because, by his own admission, his use of south eastern designs is linked to his Wiradjuri heritage.

<sup>13</sup> Brook Andrew, 2008, *Loop. A model of how the world operates*, wall painting, animated neon, electrical components, dimensions variable, Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds provided by the Coe and Mordant families, 2008.

diagonals of traditional memory with slowly throbbing spirals of neon, to challenge the relationship to the inheritance of tradition in a society built on activities of trying to forget Aboriginal culture (Museum of Contemporary Art 2015).

A number of participants utilised south eastern designs in the course of their art practice in various ways. Some, like Lorraine Connelly-Northey, reference south eastern designs, and the forms they commonly adorned, without directly reproducing them. In *Hunter's possum skin cloak*,<sup>14</sup> one of several of her works in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, the artist has used rusted sheets of corrugated iron and numerous wire spikes to form a hard, inhospitable possum skin cloak constituted of waste collected in the landscape around her home (National Gallery of Victoria 2016). The artist explained that she draws inspiration and plays with the forms of objects created by her Waradgerie forebears – such as cloaks, coolamons and narrabongs (or, dilly bags).<sup>15</sup> However, these works are not direct reproductions of objects created by her ancestors. Working with discarded metal materials, often collected on Country, the artist creates sculptural assemblages that reference, but do not directly reproduce, Waradgerie cultural objects in order to comment on environmental issues, or the experience of Aboriginal people in the present and the past (Munro 2012: 40).



**Figure 4.3. Warwick Keen, 2012, *Country* [installation view for *Bungaree: The First Australian*, Mosman Art Gallery], hand carved sculptural installation of 24 trees, dimensions variable, Mosman Art Gallery. Image credit: Warwick Keen. Courtesy of the artist. ©Warwick Keen.**

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<sup>14</sup> Lorraine Connelly-Northey, 2005-2006, *Hunter's possum skin cloak*, rusted corrugated iron, wire, 119.5 x 131.5 x 5.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased with funds provided by NGV Supporters and Patrons of Indigenous Art, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Waradgerie is Connelly-Northey's preferred spelling of Wiradjuri.

Other artists, such as Warwick Keen and Penny Evans, create works that are inspired by south eastern designs in evidence in museum collections or on Country, without directly reproducing them. Keen has utilised south eastern-inspired designs for many years in paintings and multi-media works, including *Country*,<sup>16</sup> a forest of 24 carved poles now on permanent display at the Mosman Art Gallery, which he describes as contemporary dendroglyphs (Brennan 2016). Keen explained that, nowadays, he sees lots of artists using south eastern designs in their work, however when he began working on *Country* he didn't know anyone else working with them. Keen was motivated to use south eastern designs because he no longer wanted to make artworks that borrowed from the visual languages of Aboriginal cultural groups outside of NSW. However, aware of the cultural significance and of a certain level of ambiguity (in terms of meaning) surrounding south eastern designs, especially those featured on dendroglyphs, Keen made sure he created his own patterns and motifs. As he explained, '[I] didn't want to do anything that was transgressing cultural considerations so some of them have elements that are obviously taken from there [existing dendroglyphs] with a twist...'.<sup>17</sup>

While Keen's use of such designs is the result of an active decision to utilise a south eastern visual language, multidisciplinary artist Penny Evans explained that her use of these designs is the result of a kind of subconscious, creative and bodily impulse. In discussing the artist's style, I observed that Evans' work displayed a strong visual continuity over time.<sup>17</sup> Evans agreed, explaining:

...the aesthetics carries through with me from the word go to now...Something that I didn't realise is that it connects to my Indigenous heritage, which I realised more and more since I've grown up and decolonised. Now I know it connects to my Kamilaroi background and all the concentric diamond work and line work, like I was kind of unaware but doing a lot of this work on my ceramics anyway. And I've come to understand that it actually clearly connects back to my cultural heritage...it's like a genetic memory.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Warwick Keen, 2012, *Country*, hand carved sculptural installation of 24 trees, dimensions variable, Mosman Art Gallery, purchased with funds provided by Create! Campaign supporters and 'Carved Tree Project' sponsors.

<sup>17</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 9, Evan's primarily makes ceramic works.

<sup>18</sup> Kamilaroi is Evans' preferred spelling of Gamilaroi.



Figure 4.4. Penny Evans, 2014, *Stranded*, multimedia, dimensions variable. Image credit: Penny Evans. Courtesy of the artist. ©Penny Evans.

Artists spearheading community-based revivals of practices employing south eastern designs typically frame their practice in terms of maintaining culture to the ends of educating and instilling pride in young Aboriginal people. However, for high profile contemporary artists, motivations for use are somewhat different. While grass roots revivalists typically create south eastern designs to enact internal community-focused maintenance of traditional visual arts practices, high profile artists like Andrew or Jones seemingly employ south eastern designs in order to communicate *outwards*, to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members alike. Andrew, for example, typically utilises south eastern designs in order to articulate broad political statements related to the history and legacy of British colonialism (Museum of Contemporary Art 2015). Similarly, artists like Evans and Rennie use Kamilaroi designs in personal (though no less political) ways to express and assert their own cultural identity and, in Evans' case, to connect to her Kamilaroi family.<sup>19</sup> An exception here is Warwick Keen who explicitly described the carved poles that make up *Country* as having an educative bent. As he noted in a radio interview, 'nobody that I'm aware of sort of has continued on with that practice...So this was an opportunity to bring that out into the open as a talking point, as a discussion to acknowledge and promote New South Wales Aboriginal art. So it's an educational piece of work really' (Brennan 2016). This said, Keen has created several works featuring south

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Rennie (2014: 61-62).



eastern designs that explore political and personal themes associated with cultural knowledge and identity.<sup>20</sup>

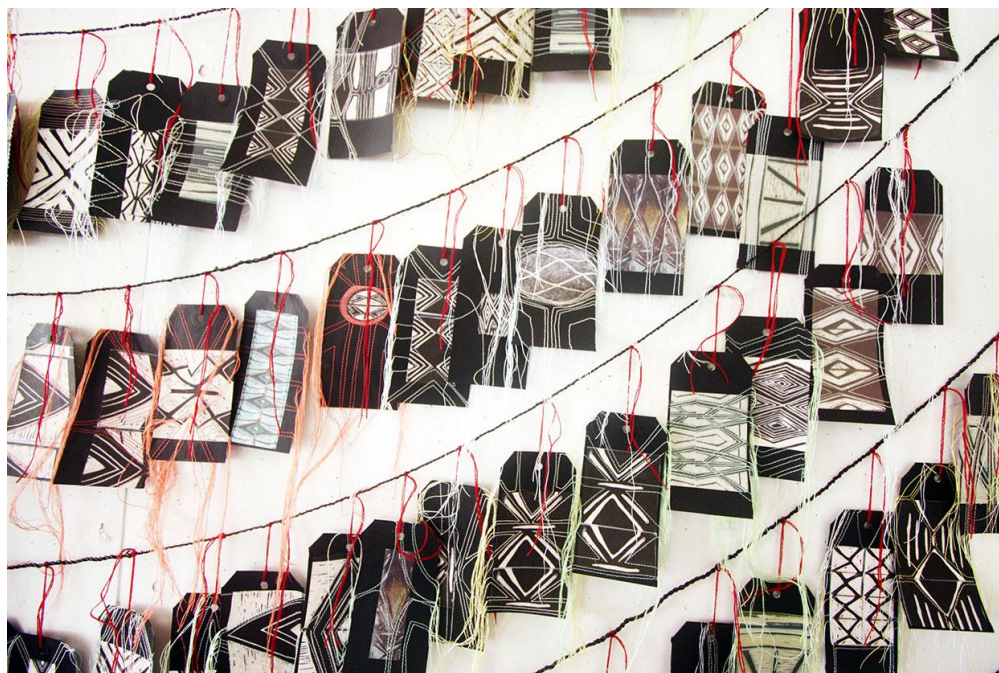


Figure 4.5. Penny Evans, 2014, *Stranded [detail]*, multimedia, dimensions variable. Image credit: Penny Evans  
Courtesy of the artist. © Penny Evans.

While Evans, Keen and Connelly-Northey have been creating works featuring, or inspired by, south eastern designs for at least the last decade, other artists reported that they had started to experiment with line work or geometric patterning on the advice of regional arts officers or gallery staff who had deemed the use of dots, or other apparently non-south eastern visual forms, as unethical, kitsch or inauthentic. Here, government and institutional interest in promoting the use of south eastern designs led artists to experiment with these forms, sometimes just so they were able to participate in particular exhibitions or events. It is to this governmental and institutional interest that we now turn.

### **Institutional Engagement**

Alongside, or perhaps due to, the grassroots and fine art engagement with south eastern designs, there has also been institutional and state interest in engaging with these visual forms. In speaking with arts officers in the NSW Regional Arts Network, it became clear that there has been, and continues to be, a concerted effort to recover and foster an Indigenous south eastern or NSW artistic tradition, often achieved by promoting the use of visual language that draws directly from the historical record held in museums. This push to utilise and promote south eastern designs can be traced, at least in part, to the strategic focus of Arts NSW, the NSW Government's art and culture policy development body. Though concerned

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Keen's *Weilwan #2* (2009, acrylic and foam core on board, 151.7 x 102 cm), which appeared in the 2009 Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2009: 30).

with the arts in NSW, in a broad sense, the organisation counts the promotion and support of Aboriginal arts (including visual arts) as one of its central goals (Arts NSW 2016). In 2010 Arts NSW began community consultation with various Indigenous communities and organisations in order to develop its 'NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy 2010', intended to guide funding and other supports provided by the organisation up until 2015. The report on consultation outcomes noted that community participants identified a need to develop '...the identity and brand for NSW Aboriginal arts, in all its forms' (Arts NSW 2010b: 4) as a means of promoting NSW as a '...gateway to genuine Aboriginal art' (Arts NSW 2010b: 5). Participants advocated for the promotion of NSW as the state to visit for those interested in the '...contemporary face of Aboriginal arts', a point addressed in Chapter 5. Beyond this, the report identified:

...strong support for the concept of local branding; building a sense of identity for artists in particular geographic areas, connected to the NSW identity, but growing from within Aboriginal communities. The concept is that people would know that this state is the place to see Aboriginal art, in all its many forms, with identifiable regional styles and strengths, linked to local stories, language, customs and communities (Arts NSW 2010b: 5).

Community consultation ultimately led to Arts NSW outlining four central 'directions' – *Artists*, *Visibility*, *Community* and *Jobs* – which guided the Strategy. Direction Two, *Visibility*, ultimately addressed community interest in establishing a NSW Aboriginal Arts and Culture brand (Arts NSW 2010c: 6). This move to promote Aboriginal art and culture from NSW in terms of a specific brand-identity not only reflects the broad push towards raising the profile of Aboriginal artists in NSW, but also indicates an interest in finding and promoting cultural forms and practices unique to the state. While the strategy document's description of *Visibility* does not explicitly articulate the goal of encouraging and raising the profile of art forms predating British colonisation, there are certain comments that make this goal appear implicit. For example, discussion of the *Visibility* strategy direction includes the following comment: 'efforts will be directed to bringing Aboriginal people in contact with their own culture and making it more visible...' (Arts NSW 2010c: 12). Further, one of the case studies offered to illustrate how the *Visibility* direction might be enacted, reports on Boolarng Nangamai Art and Culture Studio's collaboration with the Museum of Sydney to produce objects for display in the Museum's Gadigal Place Gallery.<sup>21</sup> Commissioned to create '...a range of items made using traditional methods such as shields, spear throwers, fishing implements, and woven bags...' (Arts NSW 2010c: 15). Studio artists were provided with historical and reference material and visited collections at the Australian Museum in order to research techniques and forms to be

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<sup>21</sup> Boolarng Nangamai Art and Culture Studio was based on the South Coast of NSW, in Gerringong.

reproduced for the gallery (Arts NSW 2010c: 15). Of this process the case study report notes that for artists ‘...the process of making was just as important as the final outcome...’ as ‘...accessing museum collections [enabled them] to reconnect with ancestral objects, and...[share] their own Aboriginal history with the broader community’ (Arts NSW 2010c: 15). Here, access to the museum record, resulting in the reproduction of ‘traditional’ Gadigal objects such as a shield patterned by a linear design, is offered as an exemplar of supporting and promoting NSW Aboriginal artistic and cultural visibility.<sup>22</sup> While the kind of government-led support embodied by Arts NSW’s Cultural Strategy can certainly be understood as helping to foster an interest in south eastern designs, as the community consultation document illustrates, community and grass roots engagement with south eastern forms, and their promotion as part of unique NSW heritage, predates, and thus guided, government interest in doing the same.

Various regional arts officers described being involved in projects which promoted, or facilitated, the use of south eastern visual forms. For example, Mark Cora reported facilitating a project between local Bundjalung artists and National Museum of Australia staff, in preparation for the *Encounters* exhibition, in which local artists created works inspired by Bundjalung objects held by the British Museum. This focus on utilising the museum record was common, with many arts workers describing engagement with museum collections as a means for the communities they worked with to rediscover their ‘original design’, as Rilka Oakley, curator at Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, described it. A desire to reconnect local artists with their own ‘original design’ underpinned the Orana Arts project, *Carved Up...By Design*, which is offered here as a case study typifying the motivations, approaches and issues underpinning many of the government or institutionally funded art projects focused on south eastern designs that I encountered during research.

### **Carved Up...By Design: A Case Study**

Arts workers at Orana Arts, based in Dubbo, discussed with me the delivery of *Carved Up...By Design*, a series of workshops where local Aboriginal artists were taught how to carve south eastern designs onto wooden boards to resemble the dendroglyphs that can be found dotted around Dubbo, Gilgandra, Coonabarabran and beyond. Launched in 2013, the project was inspired by the work of local Orana artist, Jack Randall, who had taught Wiradjuri carving techniques to young men in the context of the juvenile justice system. Randall aimed to utilise

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<sup>22</sup> In 2015 a report on Stage Two of the Strategy, intended to be enacted from 2015 to 2018, was released by Arts NSW. Here Arts NSW declared their intention of ‘continuing the vision of the original Strategy...[in order to] build on the achievements of the last four years and focus in particular on Direction four. *Action 4.1 Create job opportunities in the creative and cultural industries*’ (Arts NSW 2015: 12).

carving in order to help young Aboriginal men to take pride in, and feel respect for, their cultural heritage. Randall was a *Carved Up* project partner, and delivered the workshops to participants.

The first stage of the project was delivered to young people of any Aboriginal heritage who lived in the Orana region and culminated in an exhibition of the works created (Orana Arts 2014, McIntyre 2014). In its second year, a further six workshops were delivered to Aboriginal people over the age of 16. Those interested in participating were invited to submit an expression of interest. As with the first round of workshops, Orana Arts staff saw the project as a means of reconnecting local Aboriginal people with a cultural practice that originated from the Orana region, but to which many locals had lost contact. As Alicia Leggett, the Executive Officer and Regional Arts Development Officer for Orana Arts, explained, ‘...it’s putting the knowledge back out there...this is a significant cultural tradition for our region and...not that many people know about it.’

Melissa Ryan, the then Aboriginal Arts Development Officer, spent time prior to conducting the workshops researching the carving practices of Wiradjuri and other communities, including visiting museum collections in Sydney to see Wiradjuri objects. The goal here was to seek out information about Wiradjuri designs, present this information to interested local artists, and then allow these artists to decide how they would like to use this information, including if they would like to circulate it to others in the community. As Leggett noted, ‘it’s going back to putting down the path, we put the information in front of you and we step back...’. Leggett and Ryan explained that in holding the second round of workshops they were also seeking to help local Aboriginal people acquire new skills to the end of establishing a creative enterprise centred on the production of souvenirs, art objects and furniture featuring dendroglyph-inspired designs.

During the second round of workshops Ryan organised for workshop participants, and several Elders supportive of the project, to travel to Sydney to visit the Australian Museum and the Macleay Museum. The group viewed various objects in the collections of these museums. By organising the trip, Ryan hoped to inspire artists in the creation of works featuring south eastern designs. Participants also shared cultural information with museum staff about the objects they viewed, thus the visit also facilitated an information exchange between the two museums and visiting artists and Elders. Workshop participants were highly positive about these museum visits, describing them as both artistically inspiring and, because they facilitated interaction with Wiradjuri cultural objects, spiritually and personally meaningful.

While workshop participants and certain groups in the community were positive about *Carved Up*, the project was not without its detractors. Participants and Orana staff were subject to criticism from certain members of the Indigenous community in Dubbo, as the use of south eastern designs, or the creation of objects akin to carved trees, by non-Elders or those felt not to be sufficiently culturally knowledgeable, was deemed to be inappropriate, even dangerous. For some, discomfort with the use of these forms arose because of the association of the creation of dendroglyphs with mortuary and other sacred rituals. Others saw the creation of carved objects in the context of *Carved Up* as problematic due to the mixed gender and ages of participants. A common factor underlying these reactions was a discomfort about the lack of clarity regarding the meaning of carved designs and, therefore, what they communicate and evoke when created. The ambiguity surrounding these designs meant that sometimes those uncomfortable with the *Carved Up* project had difficulty identifying exactly what it was that caused them distress. Melissa Ryan described one such situation:

On Saturday I had a new person coming into the language class and we had one of the contemporary logs from last year's course just as an example in the [Narromine] museum...[The new person] was actually really like, "can you please move that somewhere else because it is too sensitive and I can feel somebody's energy coming off that". So she had all these reservations about it...We were talking to this lady, we said well if it wasn't in the canoe shape would that make you feel more comfortable? If it was a circle or a diamond or a different shape would that be different? She just said because it was in the tree she felt uncomfortable.<sup>23</sup>

In view of the sensitivities around the creation of carved designs Ryan, Leggett and Randell sought to find ways to encourage participants to utilise south eastern designs in ways that would not transgress the cultural boundaries community members feared the project might cross. For example, facilitators directed participants to create works that were inspired by, but did not directly replicate, those original designs featured on carved trees and objects shown to the group. As Ryan explained, participants ultimately did '...their own carving...[based on] their own stories, so it's contemporary...[the workshop featured] a conversation about copyright and respecting what came before and not copying that, or replicating it, but coming from within yourself and producing work that is your own...[The following year we] had a Wiradjuri elder come in [to address that]'

Ultimately *Carved Up* was felt, by its facilitators, to be a success, and feedback from participants and some community members was positive. Leggett and Ryan were philosophical about the criticisms the project received. Leggett concluded that although there were tensions

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<sup>23</sup> The language class was an initiative of the Elder's Group at the Narromine Museum and Meeting Place. Ryan would occasionally attend this class to catch up with class members and have 'a yarn'.

and concerns over the use of south eastern designs in the project, local artists and community members ‘...are coming, they are just coming slowly. And you can’t put the pressure on either, they have to come when they’re ready and if they want. The things we are doing...[the focus on carving] isn’t coming from us...it is coming from the community, just in the soft conversations’.

### **Tensions Around Use**

As *Carved Up* illustrates, the use of south eastern designs in the context of present-day art practices is both a point of pride and, sometimes, a source of anxiety or tension. Warwick Keen, for example, reported being criticised by an Aboriginal man at an exhibition that included his work. The man alleged the designs Keen had used were sacred and should only be viewed by certain people rather than the general public. Here, as in the context of *Carved Up*, uncertainty about the meaning, power and, thus danger, of certain designs led certain artists or community members to feel concerned about their use and public display.<sup>24</sup> Similar tensions have been reported in scholarship on art making in NSW.<sup>25</sup>

While Keen and Orana staff reported concerns regarding the use of south eastern designs related to cultural rights and responsibilities associated with their use, others expressed concerns about the motivations of those artists using them. In particular, there was a conviction that certain artists incorporated such designs into their work not because they felt a strong connection to them, or felt interested in exploring or maintaining a visual cultural practice associated with their community, but because the use of such designs was an easy means of marking themselves as authentic artists. For example, Tess Allas, in speaking with me about her own engagement with her Wiradjuri heritage, discussed Wiradjuri objects she had seen in museums. Allas described these objects as beautiful and inspiring but noted that she had not yet used them in her own work. She explained this decision in the exchange reproduced below:

**Tess Allas (TA):** ...I know artists that do, that just go and claim, claim it without knowing what it’s used for, why it’s used or their own cultural link to it, apart from saying I am of this people. I know artists who do that all the time and I think their work is really shallow...

**Priya Vaughan:** Do you think that it’s cynical that kind of use?

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<sup>24</sup> A situation that would seem to echo that arising at the birth of the dot painting movement at Papunya Tula (Langton 2000b: 265).

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Gibson’s discussion of Murray Butcher’s choices regarding representation of cylcons (carved stones) (2008b: 71-73). Butcher, like Warwick Keen or Lorraine Connelly-Northey, found an approach to representing a particular set of south eastern designs that he felt to be both safe and culturally appropriate.

TA: Yeah, very.

Some research participants articulated concerns regarding institution-led engagements with south eastern designs, typically those associated with facilitating access to museum objects. Here, participants were concerned not because they saw the reproduction of these designs as problematic, but because they objected to the assumption, articulated by some arts workers and museum staff, that local artists did not have any cultural knowledge and that they were, therefore, reconnecting them with cultural heritage that, rather than being alive and vital, was only in evidence in museum collections. For example, Mark Cora, speaking with me about the *Encounters* project described above, explained these concerns. He stated: 'what [a lot of museum staff and researchers] don't take into account is that these are traditional designs and motifs that we've seen...as Aboriginal artists and...cultural people these things come to us anyway...We don't need to be informed by research or anything because [for] those who are aligned with their culture and understand the spiritual path, it comes to us'. With a hearty laugh he added, 'but I keep that to myself'. Despite these feelings, Cora continues to work with researchers, museum staff and others to facilitate community access to Bundjalung and other cultural objects in museum collections.<sup>26</sup>

### **Conclusion: Engaging with South Eastern Designs, What's at Play?**

The motivation driving engagement with south eastern designs by artists, their communities, and the arts organisations with whom they collaborate is, at base, associated with the desire to connect with, and utilise, a particular manifestation of culture that originates from the deep past and has survived into the present. This motivation is informed by ideas and convictions regarding authenticity, tradition and culture as they pertain to Aboriginality. These three concepts and their role in, and relationship to, Aboriginal art making in NSW will be explored in depth in Chapter 7. However, the connection that the use of south eastern designs have, for participants, to these concepts will be described here.

South eastern designs are culturally important to those Aboriginal artists with connections to cultural groups whose Country can be found in what is now called NSW. They signify a tangible cultural practice that, as they utilise them, explicitly links them with their ancestors and with culture as it was prior to colonisation. In this way, south eastern designs act as a kind of proof:

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<sup>26</sup> Other south eastern artists are increasingly less inclined to participate in such exchanges. For example, artist and academic, Julie Gough, spoke of her involvement with the *Encounters* exhibition at *The Return of the Native*, a two day symposium on museum practices, held by the Australian National University (2015). She explained that she felt an increasing discomfort at being asked to make art works that engaged with cultural objects in museum collections. She wondered if, rather than signifying a kind of positive act of visual and intellectual repatriation, such activities merely justify a museum's retention of precious cultural objects that, by rights, should be in the control (and on the Country) of their makers' descendants.

proof that Aboriginal people from NSW have survived the profound disruption of colonisation, and have access to cultural knowledge maintained continuously for many thousands of years.

This attitude was articulated by various artists and, also, informed *Murruwaygu*, an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2015-2016. Curated by Jonathan Jones, the show aimed to demonstrate the influence on the art practice of Aboriginal men from the south east 'from pre-contact to today', of 'the line', conceptualised as '...a foundation to Koori men's work, and its most dominant feature' (Art Gallery NSW 2015). For Jones, '...the line can be traced through the generations – a clear cultural tradition that has endured massive change' (Art Gallery NSW 2015). The notion that south eastern designs have been continuously maintained from pre-contact to the present is important on many levels, particularly because of the feeling, articulated by participants, that there is a pervasive perception (held by both art gallery audiences and the general public) that Aboriginal people from NSW do not *have* culture (especially when compared to Aboriginal people living in remote regions of Australia) and are, therefore, cultureless and thus, not properly Aboriginal.<sup>27</sup> The continued use of south eastern designs undermines this perception and combats the association of Aboriginal NSW with loss and acculturation.

Further, south eastern designs are important because they are seemingly unique to the south east of Australia. Arts workers and artists who felt that artists from NSW had been critically and commercially ignored due to a perception that dot or bark painting is the *lingua franca* of Aboriginal art, believed that south eastern designs helped to distinguish Aboriginal artists from NSW as having their own unique visual language, as distinct from work created in communities such as Papunya Tula. Further, where there were feelings of anxiety about the appropriateness of artists borrowing visual forms – such as dots – from Aboriginal communities beyond NSW, use of south eastern designs was seen as culturally appropriate and ethically sound. These designs were considered as authentically *of* NSW and thus, a genuine expression of south eastern Aboriginality that artists had a clear and largely uncomplicated right to make art with.

Likewise, despite the ancient origins of south eastern designs, participants – arts workers in particular – felt that designs were appropriate when used in contemporary art practice. Rather than seeing such designs as valid only when adorning 'traditional' forms such as weaponry, arts workers were highly positive about their use in paintings, installations, sculptures and other forms understood as contemporary in nature. Here, the influence of well-regarded south eastern artists like Jonathan Jones and Reko Rennie was clear, with arts workers praising these artists for using their own visual cultural language in the creation of their work and, crucially,

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<sup>27</sup> As was discussed previously, 'culture' denotes practices, actions, activities and ways of behaving practiced by Aboriginal people in NSW prior to British settlement.



for being commercially successful in a competitive art market often dominated by desert artists. Indeed, in some instances, well regarded artists who make work featuring south eastern designs and other British pre-contact visual forms, have been employed by arts workers or government departments to work with local artists to promote and celebrate the use of south eastern designs and traditional forms. For example, Jonathan Jones was commissioned by the City of Wagga Wagga to create, in collaboration with local Aboriginal artists, a public artwork for the town's airport, which utilised 'significant traditional forms' from pre-contact Wiradjuri culture, specifically woven forms (Miller 2014). Similarly, Lorraine Connelly-Northey was involved in mentoring Wiradjuri artists creating an exhibition for the newly opened Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA 2015). The critical and commercial acclaim of artists like Jones must account, at least in part, for the enthusiasm arts workers expressed for them, with the popularity of these artists increasing the appeal of replicating their use of south eastern designs. Further, the contemporary nature of the work produced by such artists also adds to their appeal, for, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, contemporary art was conceptualised, by many participants, as being the provenance of artists from NSW.



**Figure 4.6. Aunty Joyce Hampton, Aunty Lorraine Tye, Aunty Sandy Warren and Jonathan Jones, 2013, *Wagga Wagga weaving welcome* [installation view], stained sandblasted glass, dimensions unknown, Wagga Wagga Airport. Image by the author.**

The tensions and expressions of anxiety arising from the use of south eastern designs demonstrate, firstly, that Aboriginal people from NSW are in no way homogenous in their attitudes regarding cultural products produced prior to colonisation and their use, and display, in public spheres. These tensions and anxieties also highlight, in the same way that the importance of practicing *with* these designs does, the living, active relationship many Aboriginal people in NSW maintain with cultural products whose origins extend back in time

beyond the British settlement of Australia. That south eastern designs are considered sacred and redolent of ancestral power and, for some, too dangerous to use in artworks intended for public display, even in instances when their meaning and significance is not fully known, demonstrates the vitality and significance they retain for Aboriginal people. Beyond this, the tension – to be discussed in detail in Chapter 6 – felt between arts workers encouraging the use of south eastern designs and those artists who are committed to painting with techniques such as dotting, speaks to the power that pre-contact cultural products have to authenticate artists in the eyes of arts workers and others.

## Chapter 5 Urban and Contemporary Art in NSW

*'You can't be the world's oldest living culture standing still'*

– Jonathan Jones in McGregor and Perkins (2014).

### NSW Traditions: Urban and Contemporary

As described in Chapter 4, south eastern designs are frequently referred to, by participants, as part of the traditional visual language of Aboriginal groups from NSW. Similarly, other artistic styles or genres less overtly connected to pre-settlement art practices are also felt to form part of the state's artistic heritage. Artworks conceptualised as urban or contemporary were described by various participants as quintessentially south eastern: part of a visual tradition that artists from NSW, Victoria and elsewhere had pioneered and now practice with great proficiency. Young, emerging artists were amongst those who described urban and contemporary art in this manner. For example, Dennis Golding, an artist living in La Perouse, explained that although much of his current practice was 'traditional' in form (in that it told cultural stories, represented the Dreaming and featured depictions of native animals and abstract symbolism) he was hoping to start making art in an urban style, because as an artist from NSW, this genre of art-making was part of his visual heritage, a tradition he wished to participate in. Renowned artists – such as Tracey Moffatt, Brenda Croft, Michael Riley, Trevor Michaels, Harry Wedge, Mervyn Bishop, Fiona Foley, Gordon Bennett and Robert Campbell Junior – who have become strongly identified with the birth of the urban art movement in NSW, were cited by various participants as their artistic forebears.<sup>1</sup>

The terms contemporary art and urban art are less easily defined than south eastern designs, which designate specific visual forms. Literature on Aboriginal urban or contemporary art often omits absolute definitions regarding these art forms, offering instead discussion of the work of particular urban or contemporary artists, the visual diversity of these genres, the history surrounding the emergence of the urban art movement, or the thematic focus of such works (often emphasising engagement with political issues).<sup>2</sup> Upon commencing fieldwork, my idea of what constituted contemporary or urban art was fairly amorphous and strongly associated with those prominent Aboriginal artists listed above. In articulating why their works were contemporary, or urban, or both, participating artists expanded my understanding of what was denoted by these terms as they pertain to Aboriginal art in NSW. Of particular interest was how infrequently specific types of aesthetic and material qualities seemed to

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<sup>1</sup> These artists are also cited in literature canvassing urban or city-based art. See for example, Caruana (2003: 190-216), McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Sutton et al. (1988: 203-204), Neale (2000a: 267-277), McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278-280), Caruana (2003: 194), McLean (2016: 209-222).

define these concepts. Here, contemporary and urban are terms that designate certain types of artistic practice and, often, imply something about the artist who made the work under consideration, but are otherwise quite elastic in terms of the aesthetic qualities or material features they denote. Ultimately these categories were not defined by stable connections to particular visual forms or media, instead artists utilised them to indicate something about the nature of their art practice, and indeed, something about themselves as artists and individuals. Thus, regardless of the type of work they made, almost all participating artists identified their work as either urban, contemporary or both.

This near universal identification with these terms affirms that urban and contemporary art are considered to be part of the artistic heritage of NSW. In view of this, this chapter explores contemporary and urban art as it is created by Aboriginal artists in NSW, with a focus on how artists understand these artistic categories. First though, it is worth noting that, as with art practices featuring south eastern designs, just as artists articulated the opinion that contemporary art was part of their artistic heritage, so there is evidence of government and institutional support of this notion. For example, one of the aims of Arts NSW's Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy is to 'promote NSW as a gateway for contemporary Aboriginal arts and culture' (Arts NSW 2010c: 13). This strategic aim was inspired by community consultation sessions in which participants, describing the kinds of support they were seeking in the Aboriginal arts industry, stated that they 'wanted to see a greater focus on NSW and contemporary Aboriginal arts, not the exclusive focus that some galleries give to traditional Aboriginal arts and artists' (Arts NSW 2010b: 5).

In the context of my research, artists, arts workers and curators tended to use the terms urban and contemporary interchangeably as a kind of shorthand to describe work that they saw as distinct from dot or bark paintings, or other art forms originating outside of NSW that are popularly supposed to be 'traditional' Aboriginal art. The designation of contemporary was evoked by artists as a means of describing their work with far greater regularity than the term urban, although the latter was certainly used. Indeed, it is my feeling that urban as a descriptive term has fallen somewhat out of favour, and has, at least in part, been replaced by the term contemporary. In view of this frequent conflation of urban and contemporary by participants, these terms, and their implicit meanings, are discussed in tandem in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Time, Place and Personhood**

In designating artworks that were broadly distinct from those perceived to have been inspired by practices originating from the past, the term contemporary was used by artists to highlight

the temporal contemporaneity of their practice, specifically to acknowledge that they make work in the present. Artists would explain that they saw themselves as contemporary because they make work *now* and, as will be explored in greater detail below, as such their work reflected their experiences of contemporary life. The term urban was occasionally utilised in this way also. This usage of urban and contemporary also operates to signal that an artist is making work that is not 'traditional'. As will be explored further in Chapter 7, tradition is a term that has various meanings for artists and arts professionals in NSW, however, in this context traditional artworks usually denoted dot paintings created by desert artists. Such artworks were felt to be distinct to the practice of artists identifying as contemporary or urban because of a perception that these works were reproductions of a visual heritage from the past and, as such, did not express individual personal experiences, or contemporary political and social occurrences. More than this, because work from desert artists has, in some commercial and critical quarters, been hailed as traditional Aboriginal art, artists making work they felt to be visually distinct from, for example, desert dot paintings, identified themselves as contemporary or urban.

Conceptions and experiences of place play a part in artists' understandings of the terms urban and contemporary. Urban has frequently been utilised in the literature to refer to art made by artists working in metropolitan locales, particularly Australian cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.<sup>3</sup> Artists, in self-identifying as urban and contemporary, often reflected on the role their current place of residence, and the locations they had lived previously, particularly where they spent their childhood, played in their artistic practice. Take for example the following comment from Blak Douglas who lives and works in Redfern, in central Sydney, but grew up, and spent the early years of his adult life in Western Sydney. Following a comment about urban art, I asked Douglas if he identified as an urban artist and he responded:

Evidently I am because I came from an urban environment, semi-rural, but most of my art practice has been forged in Sydney, so that's an urban environment. However, interestingly a lot of stuff is influenced from the landscape and elsewhere but fundamentally it's a political commentary that has been the crux of my output. So I guess you would strongly sway towards the urban tag and particularly now if you look at this three dimensional stuff [sculptural installation works]...it's only stuff you can really create in an urban environment. So yes, I guess it is an urban thing and whether that is an unnecessary label I'm not sure...

As Douglas' comments indicate, artists often identify as urban not only because they live, or grew up in an urban environment, but because they feel that their work has been shaped,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278).

visually and thematically, by that environment. For Douglas, growing up in Sydney meant he was exposed to, and engaged with, particular social and cultural milieus that both enabled and motivated him to explore particular political issues in his work, such as racial prejudice in Australian society. For other artists the term urban does not appeal, precisely because it denotes an art practice forged by, and reflective of, the experience of living in a city, or regional centre.

Artists who live and work in rural or remote parts of NSW almost universally preferred to identify themselves as contemporary, because they felt the term was free of the geospatial implications embedded in the term urban, and yet still distinguished their art practice from the work of artists operating in remote regions beyond NSW. This preference for the classification of contemporary, over urban, was in evidence when artists living in regional or remote areas of NSW, made work that represented this landscape. In these instances their depictions of non-metropolitan environments made it impossible to identify their work as urban. In some instances the line between urban and rural was less clearly demarcated. For example, Michael Philp, a painter based in Lismore, discussed how he would like to be classified as an artist and ruminated on the applicability of the terms urban and contemporary in view of where he lived and worked. While ultimately identifying himself as an 'urban storyteller', Philp's affinity with the label urban was not straightforward or without qualification. When I asked him how he'd like his work to be described he responded with the following:

I suppose there's them words; contemporary or urban. It's funny because I was just doing a bit of drawing before and I was thinking rural, you know. Because...I grew up in Tweed [Heads] and when I was young it was rural, as I was growing up it became more urban as time went on. So it became a very different environment from when I was a child to the time I was in my early 20s. It had gone from being a rural country town to an urban centre and it was essentially an extension of the Gold Coast which is right next door to it. So as a child I'd seen mainly all bush but by the time I was in my late teens a lot of the bush was cleared. And there were homes built and shopping centres were put in and the place was starting to get high-rise buildings.

Here, Philp identifies the mutability of the term urban as both an artistic and geosocial designation. Tweed Heads, once clearly a rural location is now experienced by Philp as an urban one, however, in contrast to other metropolitan centres, such as Sydney or Newcastle, Tweed Heads remains a rural or regional hub. Similarly, urban, as a classification of Aboriginal art, has for artists varying, sometimes shifting, applicability; in some respects it might be an adequate description of the geographical space they live, but not of their art work, and vice versa.

Discomfort with the term urban, as expressed by artists and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the south east of Australia, has been explored by scholars such as (Gibson 2008a, 2013, Kleinert and Koch 2012: 10). Gibson, in particular, has focused on the uneasiness that Aboriginal artists living in rural or remote parts of NSW have felt about the term. Gibson writes that the Aboriginal community in Wilcannia reject, often stridently, the classification of themselves, and their cultural products as urban (or, indeed contemporary), because of a conviction that this implied that they were somehow less properly Aboriginal than non-urban, 'traditional' Aboriginal people living in the remotest regions of Australia (2008a: 306-307). More than merely rebuffing the label of urban, community members actively distinguished themselves from urban Aboriginal people living in cities, concluding that such people – unlike themselves – knew 'fuck all' about culture (2008a: 306-307). Artists in Wilcannia sometimes conceded that they would utilise the classifications of urban or contemporary, with regards to the artwork they produced, if it enabled them to more effectively play the art 'game', but otherwise were uncomfortable with such terms (2008a: 309). In view of these attitudes Gibson ultimately concludes that '...there remains a clear and indeed hierarchical separation between "remote", "tribal", tradition-oriented and "urban", "non-tribal" or "settled" Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people...' and that in Wilcannia, terms like urban and contemporary were inextricably associated with cultural loss and ersatz Indigeneity (2008a: 309).

While, as reported above, some artists participating in this research did not utilise the term urban to describe their work because of a feeling it did not adequately represent the art they made, or the places where they lived and worked, there was little indication that they held similar attitudes to those artists discussed by Gibson. Indeed artists were often quick to assert that urban and contemporary Aboriginal art is as valid, and, as will be discussed below, sometimes more authentic, than so-called traditional artwork created outside of NSW. As is explored in Chapter 2, rather than expressing discomfort about the terms contemporary or urban, artists were often more interested in teasing out issues arising from the classification of their work as Aboriginal or Indigenous art, as opposed to simply art.

Gibson's discussion of the way terms like urban and remote, or contemporary and traditional mask value judgements about the cultural life of those to whom the terms are applied, brings us neatly to another meaning embedded in the labels urban and contemporary. It was evident that for many research participants identification of an artwork as urban or contemporary was the result of inferences made, or knowledge about, the artist who had created it. Consider, for example, the following comment from photographer Paris Norton who, in discussing the way audiences responded to her work, noted: '...to have people telling you that it's really good and

really interesting, it's good to know that they get it and that as an Indigenous person I might not have access to doing things traditionally but I am still passing on the stories and people are listening'. Norton describes her photography as a contemporary expression of the traditional cultural knowledge she was in the process of learning about from her family and Elders in her community. As articulated in the quote above, Norton's pleasure in the positive response her work elicited in viewers derives, at least in part, from the knowledge that she has succeeded in communicating important cultural stories and concepts to her audience, even if, as she states, she does not have 'access to doing things traditionally'. Growing up in Coonabarabran, a small town with a population of just under 8,500 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013b), and living and working there and in nearby Dubbo, has meant that Norton lives and practices her culture in certain ways, which are, for her, distinct from traditional iterations of such cultural practices. Art making is, for Norton, an expression of her cultural identity and a means for her to represent and explore the traditional knowledge she is in the process of learning about, practicing and maintaining. Classifying her photographic work as contemporary is, here, an acknowledgement that she is living, and learning about, her cultural life in particular ways and using particular tools (such as photography) to share and honour her traditions in contemporary ways.

Paris Norton's classification of her work as contemporary illustrates that while the term might be deployed to describe aesthetic or thematic elements of certain artworks, it ultimately has implications regarding the kind of lifestyle, and tenor of cultural engagements, of artists identified as contemporary. In other words, urban and contemporary works are, in the parlance of many participants, made by contemporary people living in urban or rural locales, rather than, say, 'traditional' people living in remote parts of Australia. This might seem like a simple reiteration of the observation that urban, as a descriptive word, evokes an artist's residence in a metropolitan location in NSW. However, as Norton's statement indicates, while the terms urban and contemporary are indeed reflective of the locations an artist lives and makes work in, they are also evocative of the kind of Aboriginal person – as a product of these urban or rural environments – an artist is. This also points to an explanation as to why rural artists who do not identify with the urban nomenclature identify themselves as contemporary; the term captures not only the aesthetic and other properties of the work they create, it also speaks to their daily life experiences, and engagements with culture.

### **Originality and Openness**

Beyond an association with place and personhood, the terms urban and contemporary were used by participants to gesture to a certain level of openness in their works, in terms of the ways they can be interpreted by audiences. While traditional works are often conceptualised,



by participants, as having highly specific, localised, cultural meanings that facilitate only specific culturally informed interpretations – such as the decoding of a particular religious lesson or ancestral story associated with particular Country – contemporary or urban artworks may address or represent cultural stories but also encapsulate and facilitate broader interpretations relevant to audience members from diverse backgrounds. Paris Norton clearly articulated this conceptualisation of contemporary art in the following exchange in which we were discussing the difference between her photographic and painting practices:

**Paris Norton (PN):** I find when I am painting you are telling the old stories, and when I'm taking photos I'm telling the new stories with an element of old. It's more like talking about, in photos, what it's like to be Indigenous today.

**Priya Vaughan:** So it's a very contemporary take?

**PN:** Yes a contemporary take on things because traditionally you wouldn't explore so far into it. Whereas, that's what my photography does, goes much deeper with it. Like I find traditional art shows you, once you know what the symbols mean, it's a really direct story, very directive. Every symbol leads along and you can read it like a book...Whereas, I feel with photography, that it gives people the chance to have their own take on it as well.

For artists like Norton, a contemporary art practice is distinguished from a traditional one, at least in part, by the relative openness of the stories, themes or issues explored in artworks created. Norton feels that her 'traditional' painting practice, which utilises specific motifs and forms taught to her by her Elders, is best utilised to communicate specific stories or lessons that can only be read or interpreted in a single, culturally specific way. Conversely, the artist's photographic practice, though drawing on traditional knowledge and telling 'old stories', employs techniques and tools (digital photography and digital manipulation via Photoshop) that render her photographic works less didactic than her paintings in terms of their meanings as inferred by audiences.

Norton participated in Orana Arts' Left Field Project, which sought to pair emerging Orana artists with established 'urban artists' in a mentorship that would allow the emerging artists to develop, produce and exhibit a series of new works. Norton, who was paired with photographer and film maker *rea*, created the *Rebirth* series, a collection of images that explored the Gamilaroi belief that, as Norton explained, '...once you pass away...you go back into the land and it is rejuvenated and your spirit resides there'. Norton created black and white photographic portraits of friends and family, and then using Photoshop combined these portraits with vivid coloured images she had taken of native flora from her Country, in effect filling the forms of her human subjects with a particular flower or plant. For example, *Rebirth*

*(Buddy)*,<sup>4</sup> a work from the series, depicts a young man, his naked chest, arms, neck and head emerging from an unrelieved black background. The man's body is almost overflowing with the bright filaments of a red bottlebrush that seem to explode, like fireworks, from the centre of the work. The *Rebirth* works were well received when they were displayed as part of the Left Field exhibition. Although for Norton this series was directly concerned with her knowledge and learning as a Gamilaroi woman she also attributed the success of the works to their having a certain universal appeal. 'The thing I've realised', she explained, 'talking over and over to people about my works, is that I think I make it familiar because there's faces, there's places that people know, I try to have an element that people can connect to'. The contemporary form of Norton's photographic works renders them, for the artist and her audience, less prescriptive, more open in terms of meaning and message, than her painted works, meaning that they can be read and interpreted in diverse ways. With the *Rebirth* series in particular, something in the images, perhaps the use of human bodies or native plants and flowers, meant that audiences connected them to their own experiences and feelings, regardless of their cultural background or knowledge. It was not that Norton intended specifically to make works exploring universal themes, rather the media utilised and images represented facilitated diverse readings from various audience members in ways that her traditional paintings are unable to do.

While Norton's works explore particular culturally specific ideas and issues in ways that allow for a broader interpretation of them, other artists saw their contemporary art practice as a forum for exploring themes or issues that were broadly relatable to all audience members because they have a kind of universal appeal. As Michael Philp explained:

...for me these stories aren't just Aboriginal, yes there is an Aboriginal element in them, but they are human stories. About two people in love, you know, you don't have to be Aboriginal to be in love...Life, death, birth, the universal stories. And I didn't get a lot of them real old traditional stories passed on to me about Dreamtime stories. So they weren't so much that relevant for me, these stories were. You could call them contemporary stories if you want, you could say he's a contemporary artist but they are human stories and so I want to continue that narrative about human stories.

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<sup>4</sup> Paris Norton, 2013, *Rebirth (Buddy)*, digital photograph, dimensions unknown.



Figure 5.1. Paris Norton, 2013, *Rebirth (Buddy)*, digital photograph, dimensions unknown. Courtesy of the artist ©Paris Norton.

Beyond this, research participants felt that urban and contemporary works permit, more than traditional ones, for the exploration and representation of highly personal and often emotionally charged subject matter. Veteran artist and designer, Robyn Caughlan articulated this view in speaking about her own art practice. Describing the work she makes as ‘...very contemporary’, Caughlan explained that she considered herself to be a storyteller, exploring and representing particular stories through her work. I asked her to describe the kind of stories she told and she responded with the following:

Well some of them are pretty to the heart, you know, and I can get a little bit political, subtly, very nicely, but I get my message across from stories of my life course. I’m in the process of doing what I call my Frida Kahlo, I’ve got to get them done before I leave the planet. So they are all pretty raw and one lot is; when I was a little girl of three my father had his way with me, when I was five he up and died, thank God I was finally set free! And then it goes on you see like my father and the little girl, they are all in monotones, just brown and a beige creamy colour and then you see the hand, there is the heart broken and the man and the little girl and they are not quite touching...

Caughlan considers her work contemporary not only because of the unique visual language she utilises, but also because her artworks represent personal stories and experiences. Caughlan’s

comments neatly illustrate the notion, implicit in several artists' usage of the terms contemporary and urban, that while traditional artworks are dedicated to the representation of cultural stories (conceived of as representative of collective knowledge and of shared ways of knowing and being), contemporary works allow for the expression of personal, singular and unique experiences.

It might seem contradictory that contemporary or urban works simultaneously facilitate broad readings or universal interpretations, and yet also enable the telling of highly personal experiences, such as the biographical stories described by Caughlan. However, there is a single conviction that underlies the assessment of contemporary and urban art as both more universal *and* more personal than traditional works; namely that contemporary or urban works canvas an extensive range of issues and ideas including, and beyond, what artists see as the highly specific, culturally localised meanings embedded and represented in works they identify as traditional. Thus, while contemporary and urban works are influenced and guided, even highly saturated, by cultural knowledge, for artists, the use of their own personal visual lexicon, rather than one directly handed on from their Elders and cultural teachers, enables the telling of stories that are highly personal or highly general. In other words, while, as will be explored in the following sections of this chapter, contemporary and urban artworks are often understood as being made in order to maintain culture and connect to traditional knowledge, artists conceptualise such works as being distinct from traditional art practices, which are seen as more didactic in terms of content and, sometimes, form.

Related to the notion that urban and contemporary art may canvas a practically limitless number of subjects including both universal and personal issues, is the association of urban and contemporary art with artistic and aesthetic uniqueness and originality. Here, urban and contemporary artists are believed, by participants, to create work that is not confined to the use of particular making techniques or visual forms. Rather they are perceived as artistically free, able to draw upon broad artistic and cultural sources, as well as utilise various media, to create works that address manifold issues. As Mirree Bayliss observed of her own art practice:

I think that what makes me contemporary is that I have worked and grown myself through the public and from the feedback of what other people say. I wasn't really taught a specific way to paint, maybe that is the difference between, I guess they call them urban Aboriginal artists as well. Where they learn more about things that are individual to them, the Western Desert artists, they learn in a way that everything is passed on from the generations, how they paint and everything.

For some participants, being a contemporary artist explicitly means making work that embodies and represents themselves and their own experience of the world. Here an artist's

practice is not only unique in a visual sense, it is literally individual, an extension and physical manifestation of the artist. Natalie Bateman articulated this view in the following exchange:

**Natalie Bateman (NB):** ...as my son's dad would say, you are painting your Dreaming now, you're not painting your ancestor's past, you are not painting the future, what you are painting now is your Dreaming, so you are leaving your mark now. So that is how I see it...My dad keeps saying to me just remember be unique and be different and unique, like don't do what everyone else is doing and it stuck with me.

**Priya Vaughan (PV):** That make sense because then you're painting what you're feeling and seeing.

**NB:** Yes, I'm painting me.

### **Authentic Expressions**

In discussing the kind of artworks local artists create, Alicia Leggett, the Executive Officer and Regional Arts Development Officer for Orana Arts, bemoaned the number of dot paintings being created. She stated:

...it's very frustrating for me because here I was being the art connoisseur, snobby critic, saying oh for god sake another dot painting...[then] you see works by Karla Dickens or Adam Hill [Blak Douglas] and you are just like wow, you are so relatable, you're really expressing views that needs to be said.

Here, Leggett expresses an oft-repeated attitude, regarding urban and contemporary Aboriginal artists working in NSW, that the artworks they produce are real or authentic. For participants like Leggett, this authenticity is expressed both by the visual uniqueness, or originality, of urban works and by the kinds of themes and issues they canvass. For Leggett, Dickens and Douglas are exciting and engaging artists because they make work that is 'pertinent' because, rather than merely being decorative or aesthetically pleasing, it articulates '...views that needs to be said'.

This touches on another core aspect that defines, for participants, contemporary and urban art, namely that such works have a thematic focus that is both embedded in, and engaged with, the socio-political milieu of Australia today. The association of urban art with social and political critique – especially regarding historical injustices perpetrated by European settlers – is also articulated in art historical and other literature on urban artists.<sup>5</sup> This association was also articulated by research participants who saw contemporary and urban artwork as often

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Kean (2011: 152-155), Croft (2011: 152), Sutton et al. (1988: 203-204), Neale (2000a: 267-277), McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278-280), McLean (2016: 209-222).

reflecting the experiences of Aboriginal people living in the present. This includes the representation and exploration of uncomfortable or confrontational issues such as racial prejudice, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual and other violence, and Indigenous sovereignty.

By their willingness to tackle social and political issues, urban and contemporary artists are also understood to be unafraid to cause, in their audiences, discomfort, anger or pain, in order to communicate a particular message. Here, contemporary and urban artists are understood as being less concerned with the production of beautiful or decorative works, than with the communication of a particular story or message. As Jason Wing stated at the Day of Dialogue, an event held at the Western Plains Cultural Centre in conjunction with Orana Arts:

...my interpretation is that urban Aboriginal art does not get the respect and credibility that it deserves because the market for Aboriginal art is decorative to match the drapes in your apartment. And it's not confrontational and I think the majority of the world likes non-confrontational works (Left Field Project 2013).

Beyond this, for Leggett and other arts workers uncomfortable with local artists producing dot or X-ray paintings, contemporary and urban art, as typified by the work of Karla Dickens or Blak Douglas, is also felt to be authentic because it does not rely on visual forms or methods associated with the art practice of Aboriginal groups outside of NSW. Artists like Douglas and Dickens make work that reflects their experience of being Aboriginal people in NSW and, more than this, do so using their own particular visual lexicon – thus for Leggett and others, their work is, both visually and thematically, *of* NSW.

The conviction that contemporary and urban art produced by Aboriginal artists has an aura of visual and thematic authenticity has been vocally, sometimes provocatively, articulated by artists associated with the Brisbane-based art collective ProppaNOW, particularly by Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell. Ah Kee, for example, discussing the art practice of city-based Aboriginal artists, noted:

The only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people, they're the only ones that behave autonomously. We're the only ones whose lives aren't wholly...determined by white construction...Now what happens in the deserts and remote communities is that people create art and they try to live their lives in a way that correlates to this romanticised idea and it's a white construction...(Moore 2006: 3).

Nicholas Thomas has posited that there are two contending hierarchies operating to confer value on Aboriginal art. The first identifies value as '...unambiguously grounded in tribal spirituality' while the second '...embraces the critique of "essentialist" national, ethnic or

native identities...it disparages work that exhibits distinctive tribal identity, and instead advocates hybridity' (1999: 198). Ah Kee's statements can be seen as falling into this latter hierarchy of value.

In many ways Ah Kee's attitude stands as a kind of extreme iteration of that articulated by Leggett and others. For Ah Kee, urban artists are making work that is authentic in the sense that their creative practice is understood to be autonomous: not directed by the desires of non-Indigenous art advisors. Here, part of the authenticity of urban and contemporary art is their makers' apparent commitment to expressing themselves in unique ways that reflect their inner landscape, or their daily realities, rather than catering to the fads, desires or whims of art advisors, art consumers or other representatives of the art market. On one hand this assessment of urban art can be understood as in keeping with the western notion that individuality, as expressed as an unwavering commitment to self-expression, is what distinguishes someone as authentic. As Richard Handler explains, '...the part, unit, or individual asserting itself against the rest of the world as a locus of ultimate meaning and reality underlines modern notions of authenticity' (1986: 3). This conception of the urban artist as authentic, due to the genuineness of their individual expression, also resonates strongly with the western conception of the artist, as opposed to the artisan or craftsman, as a genius whose compulsion to create in their own unique ways never wavers even in the face of attempted intervention, or derision.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Ah Kee's simultaneous criticism of desert artists and endorsement of urban ones, while undoubtedly framing artistic autonomy as an authentic quality, ultimately presents personal or social autonomy as authentic also. Urban artists are, for Ah Kee, making authentic work because they are politically, socially and personally free from colonial pressures, or 'white constructions'. Here, making contemporary or urban art is connected with decolonisation, particularly with Indigenous peoples representing themselves on their own terms.

Ah Kee's ideas were mentioned by some research participants who felt sympathetic with his view, although tended not to subscribe to the idea that desert artists were making inauthentic work. Tess Allas, for example, discussed Ah Kee's ideas noting:

...what he's talking about there is, you know, today we're going to paint with these colours and here's the palette...mostly that's a white construction in those centres...So how can that be a truly authentic piece of Aboriginal art?...I remember being in an ABC studio one day when [Ah

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<sup>6</sup> Parker and Pollock assert that the modern definition of the artist denotes a '...special kind of person...[who is] strange, different, exotic, imaginative, eccentric, creative, unconventional, alone' (1981: 82). See also, Barker et al. (1999) for a discussion regarding the historical roots of this conception of the artist.

Kee was being interviewed]...he was saying if we're going to see art from the desert and it's going to be about their true lives then why aren't we seeing dialysis Dreaming paintings?

### **Tradition in Contemporary and Urban Art**

Despite much of what defines contemporary and urban art appearing to be its opposition to art practices perceived as traditional, comments from participants on the subject indicate that the distinction between contemporary and traditional art work is never total. Indeed, the fact that contemporary and urban art are often discussed in ways that position them as traditional to NSW, in the sense that they are part of the state's visual heritage, undermines any easy distinction between the urban and contemporary, and the traditional. Further, as illustrated in Chapter 4, artists such as Jonathan Jones and Reko Rennie, who identify, or are received by critics, as *contemporary artists* utilise so-called traditional forms, such as south eastern designs, as part of their contemporary art practice.

Although participants made a point of distinguishing between contemporary/urban and traditional practices, it did not follow that stories, knowledge, law or particular visual forms understood by artists as part of their traditional heritage, were absent from the urban or contemporary works they created. For example, as already observed, Paris Norton conceives of her photographic and painting practices as distinct from one another, in the sense that the former is contemporary and the latter is traditional, and yet Norton also emphasises the connection between these two practices. Photography is, for Norton, a contemporary way of expressing traditional knowledge and of practicing and maintaining her culture. Comments articulated by Norton and other artists illustrate that there is often a strong relationship between the contemporary and the traditional in art making. In other words, to borrow an observation from artist Tony Albert, the pervading art-world division between 'TradAb' and 'RadAb' is not so clearly demarcated (McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2008: 289).

### **South Eastern Designs and Urban and Contemporary Art as NSW Heritage: An Open**

#### **Conclusion**

This chapter, and Chapter 4, have focused on the description of 'traditions' associated, for participants, with art making in NSW. These traditions are of interest due to their significance to participants and also – in view of the dramatically different lengths of time over which they have been practiced – because they elucidate the manner in which tradition is envisioned in the context of Aboriginal art making in NSW. South eastern designs are understood as traditional to NSW because of their production prior to British settlement. Likewise, urban and contemporary art has also achieved the status of a tradition, despite often being defined, in opposition, to artworks utilising ancient techniques, motifs and meanings. Urban art and



contemporary art are traditional not because they are ancient (as south eastern designs are regarded) but because they are seen as having been pioneered in the south east, by south eastern artists and, therefore, lending themselves to the expression of south eastern concerns and experiences.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the tensions associated with the use of south eastern designs, and of those related to the use of dots in NSW (to be explored in Chapter 6), it is interesting that contemporary and urban art has been accepted as a valid iteration of Aboriginal art from NSW by artists, arts workers and others. There were no reports of discomfort from Aboriginal community members over the creation of contemporary or urban artworks, nor of art workers trying to dissuade artists from making urban or contemporary works. Ironically, given pre-contact visual traditions are valued in the art market and elsewhere, it appears that in the context of NSW their use is far more contested and complicated than the creation of contemporary or urban works, which, though often felt to articulate important cultural ideas or stories (maintained for thousands of years), are typically conceptualised as non-traditional in form. Perhaps the relative newness of contemporary or urban art practices, and their strong association with the birth of a pan-Aboriginal rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s, makes the creation of contemporary or urban works less loaded than the production of traditional work (i.e. those originating prior to British contact). Indeed, the (albeit slow) critical and commercial embrace of contemporary and urban work, and the simultaneous critical non-interest (in the sphere of the fine art market) in dot paintings produced in NSW, may well be linked to popular notions regarding Aboriginality in NSW. That is, given the pervasiveness of the perception that Aboriginal people from NSW barely survived British colonisation, and that those who did do not have access to their culture as it was enacted prior to settlement, it is little wonder that Aboriginal artists making work featuring *traditional* visual forms (like dots) are subject to scrutiny regarding the appropriateness of their use. After all, a person perceived to be non-traditional or acculturated should not, by definition, be producing traditional cultural products. If contemporary and urban art is regarded to be non-traditional (by the market, art critics or curators) then it is, therefore, excused from evaluation in terms of the authenticity of the tradition it embodies or perpetuates. The relative authenticity (as comprehended by participants) of urban and contemporary art, south eastern design and dot painting, will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

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<sup>7</sup> The conceptualisation of tradition amongst participants, and the association this has to related concepts like authenticity, and cultural continuity, will be explored in detail in Chapter 7.



## Chapter 6 Dot Painting from NSW

*'The way he paints...[it is] very modern-contemporary dot painting and it is quite heavily detailed...there is so much of the story that is in the painting and it just encapsulates you when you look at it'* – Kim Moffitt on the work of her husband, Darren Moffitt (Personal Communication 2014)

### **Icons of Aboriginality**

Much has been written about Aboriginal dot painting, a style pioneered by Papunya Tula artists in the 1970s, and which subsequently became a central element of the art practice of many Indigenous communities in the Central and Western Deserts of Australia.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by the dabbed dots that feature in ceremonial body painting and sand drawings, dots were, in the early years of the Papunya Tula art movement, used to surround, enhance and adorn the symbols that were the central feature of paintings produced (Benjamin 2009: 22-23, Myers 2002: 67-68). Over time dots became the central, dominant feature of desert paintings, utilised to represent, embody and evoke the great power of the ancestors whose deeds, Countries and teachings are represented in such paintings (Myers 2002: 68). Indeed, as John Carty notes, with particular reference to art produced in Balgo, in the early years of the movement dots 'became the iconic referent for desert art. Dots indexed the "Aboriginality" (read: authenticity) of the art form...' because, for audiences, they *stood for* the stories, religious law and traditional knowledge embodied within a painting (2012: 12, see also Biddle 2003: 68). However, as time went on and, Carty argues, consumer desire for authentic Aboriginality was surpassed by 'connoisseurship:...the demonstrable authorship, the style, of the individual Aboriginal artist...dots became the story of contemporary painting' (2012: 12). In other words, dots, once understood as icons of Aboriginality because of the symbolic content they adorned, surrounded or masked, are now icons in and of themselves – not because they are referents to particular culturally specific expressions of Aboriginality, but because they themselves embody and represent this Aboriginality.

Such is the commercial and critical success of dot painting, that as Geczy observes, 'the dot can be understood as the stylistic *sine qua non* of...[Aboriginal art]', thus, dots have come to represent not only the desert art movement but Aboriginal art as a whole (2013: 164-165). As a result, in the popular imagination it is expected that an Aboriginal artist will produce

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<sup>1</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that there is no space here for a nuanced analysis of dot art as practiced across various desert regions. For expediency I will necessarily be generalising about diverse dot practices.

paintings featuring dots, regardless of where that artist is from (Gilchrist and Albert 2011: 38, McDonald 2011).<sup>2</sup>

In view of the iconic status of dots, it is unsurprising that a significant number of participants utilise dotting as part of their art practice, often as their central art making technique. While there is much literature examining dot painting as practiced in the Central and Western Deserts of Australia (see for example, Myers 2002), there was very little in the literature on Aboriginal art from NSW which could have prepared me for the frequency with which dot painting is practiced by Aboriginal artists in the state. Only Johnson, Allas and Fishers' report on the 'Storylines' project made mention of the extensive use of dots by artists working south of the Rowley Line (2009/2010: 27). That said, references to dot painting in NSW do appear in literature on art produced in the state. Here the focus tends to be on how dot painting in NSW speaks to the huge commercial popularity of art from Papunya Tula and elsewhere, and to the way dots have come to represent, in the popular imagination, Aboriginal art and culture (Cowlshaw 2012: 401, Everett 2010: 232). Elsewhere, descriptions of dot use in particular local milieus in NSW, such as in Wilcannia (Gibson 2013), focus on intra-community discomfort and tension generated by those who feel that dots are not authentic expressions of local Aboriginal culture.<sup>3</sup> While these references to dots are useful, these texts give little space to consideration of what artists who use dots say about this practice, with scholars typically assuming that dots act as general referents to Aboriginality.<sup>4</sup> In view of the relative lack of engagement, in academic and other literature, around Aboriginal art from NSW (especially when compared to the material available on desert art), it is understandable that the abovementioned authors should wish to focus on artistic movements, techniques and styles unique to the regions in NSW under consideration. However, it is my belief that an exploration and analysis of dot painting, as practiced in NSW, does not signify capitulation to the assumption that dot painting is *the* Aboriginal art practice. Nor does dedicated analysis of dotting in NSW amount to anything like a re-treading of literature on desert dots. In view of this, this chapter attempts to take a step beyond the assessment of dots articulated in the above mentioned literature, and in those texts that position dots from NSW as inauthentic or

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<sup>2</sup> If I had any doubts about the popular conflation of dot painting with Aboriginal art in general, these were quelled when I acted as a tutor for an undergraduate art history course on contemporary Aboriginal art in 2015. At the end of the course a number of students (the classes were largely populated by art history majors) stated that they had loved being exposed to a broad range of Aboriginal art forms and styles as they had previously thought that Aboriginal art was, in the words of one student, 'basically dot painting'. If a group of engaged and knowledgeable students of art history could have held such a perception it seems unsurprising that the wider public would also.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Gibson (2013: 207-208).

<sup>4</sup> An exception here is Everett (2010) who focuses extensively on the (re)invention of culture as actively undertaken by the 'Gwalan' (see also Everett 2009). Everett makes only a passing reference to the role that dot painting plays in these activities, however her analysis of other facets of this (re)invention is detailed and nuanced and, thus, much can be inferred about dot painting in this context.

culturally void.<sup>5</sup> Rather, what follows is an attempt to pay proper and due attention to dot painting in NSW, to pay attention to why some artists use dots, why some artists don't, and to consider how dot paintings are understood and evaluated by the artists who create them.

### **NSW Dots: Forms, Styles and Themes**

The majority of dot paintings I observed while speaking to artists across NSW are best described as reminiscent, though distinct from, dot paintings created by desert artists.<sup>6</sup> While the dots themselves may look similar to those painted by desert artists, dot paintings in NSW tend not to feature those symbols, icons or pictographs that, at least in the early years of the dot painting movement, characterised work produced by Papunya artists (Benjamin 2009: 31-32). Further, dots are typically applied precisely and evenly, with very few artists deploying the organic, rough and irregular dots made famous by artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Edwards 2013: 116). Only a small number of participants utilised dots to paint in ways which echo either the highly abstracted, expressive manner of painters such as Tommy Watson, or the superfine dot paintings made famous by artists like Kathleen Petyarre, forms that are, presently, so critically and commercially acclaimed (see for example, AIAM100 2015). Indeed, the works of NSW dot painters seemingly have more in common, in terms of visual aesthetics, with dot paintings produced by desert artists in the early 1970s, such as Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, rather than those produced in the present, due primarily to their use of dots to surround and adorn particular representational forms.<sup>7</sup>

Artists in NSW utilise dots in various ways, though primarily they are deployed as a kind of decorative filler, which surround and sometimes also form part of representational depictions of native and other animals, human and ancestral figures, abstract signs or symbols, or features of Country. Here, animals, objects and landscape tend to be rendered in a highly stylised, two dimensional form with contrasting or graded colours used to create depth, scale and a sense of movement. Take for example Darren Moffitt's 'Turtle Tracks', an acyclic painting on canvas depicting, in bird's-eye view, newly hatched sea turtles making their way across a sandy beach to the ocean.<sup>8</sup> The beach, ocean, waves, seafoam and tracks of the turtles are

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Douglas (2014).

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that there are artists practicing in NSW who paint what I have been calling desert dots because they come from desert Country and thus have a specific cultural right to do so. For example, Sam Juparulla Wickman, a painter and glass artist, is an Arrernte, Pitjantatjarra, Luritja, and Yankuntjatjarra man born in Alice Springs, who now lives in Albury. Wickman paints on canvas and makes glass pieces using traditional designs taught to him by peers, kin and mentors. These works depict landscapes, Dreaming stories and cultural business that Wickman has an inherited cultural right to paint, mandated by his Elders.

<sup>7</sup> See Morphy (1998: 294) for a clear overview of dominant aesthetic and thematic developments in the Papunya Tula art movement.

<sup>8</sup> Darren Moffitt, 2009, *Turtle Tracks*, acrylic on stretched canvas, dimensions unknown.

constituted by clearly defined, evenly spaced, intricately painted dots. The sand of the beach is formed of wavy bands of dots, painted in contrasting organic dotted lines of ochre and dark orange, with each band outlined by a single line of black dots, implying sand dunes, or the hilly topography of the beach. The sea is similarly formed of dotted bands painted largely in aquamarine, pale yellow and black. The gently undulating lines of these dots give a sense of languorous movement, evoking waves lapping the shore. Here dots are the central feature of the work and the turtles, which are not painted with dots, are therefore highly visible on the canvas despite their small size.



Figure 6.1. Darren Moffitt, 2009, *Turtle Tracks* [detail], acrylic on stretched canvas, dimensions unknown. Photo credit: Darren Moffitt. Courtesy of the artist. ©Darren Moffitt.

Dots are also sometimes used by artists as the key feature of an artwork, and are therefore not combined with any representational or other depictions of animals etc. Here dots are painted in patterns to create certain optical effects such as a sense of movement, particular textures, or a sense of depth. Take for example, Natalie Bateman's 'Faded', an acrylic painting on canvas that utilises dots of different sizes painted in red, white, yellow and brown on a black background.<sup>9</sup> The lines of dots appear to rise and fall in waves across the canvas. Bateman describes the work as representing the ocean tide lapping up onto the sand and '...leaving a wet colour image' with its foam.

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<sup>9</sup> Natalie Bateman, date unknown, *Faded*, acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown.



Figure 6.2. Natalie Bateman, date unknown, *Faded*, acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown. Image credit: Natalie Bateman. Courtesy of the artist. ©Natalie Bateman.

Dots, like other art making techniques, are commonly utilised by artists in NSW to represent their Country, and the specific cultural, spiritual, familial and personal systems of knowledge, and ontological understanding, embedded in this Country. This constitutes another commonality between desert dots and those painted in NSW. Eddy Harris, for example, who paints the Country surrounding and encompassing the town of Wilcannia, in the far west of NSW, uses dotting to represent and preserve the knowledge handed on to him by his Elders, and other family members. As he explained, '[my teachers were] the older people, they never actually put the brush in your hand, it is what they said in the past. And looking at the scenery it is important to paint those sites because it is like a map. It is important to our culture and keeping it alive and the more we can paint those stories and stuff about the land, for the future, it would be great'.

### **Why Artists use Dots**

Many participants use dots, typically as a central design element in their paintings. In explaining their art practice and the visual language they utilise, these artists spoke about dots and why they used them, with many citing motivations akin to those expressed by Aboriginal artists *not* using dots.<sup>10</sup> For example, dot paintings are created so that the artist can express their feelings, keep culture alive, feel connected to their family and Country, or for relaxation. The reasons that artists choose dots to fulfil these motivations as opposed to other artistic techniques and forms are manifold. At base, however, it appears that many artists who use dots see them as inherently Indigenous; a mark-making technique they deploy specifically so

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<sup>10</sup> This topic is explored below.

they can create recognisable 'Aboriginal art'.<sup>11</sup> Here dots are conceptualised as part of a visual tool kit that the artist has a cultural, personal and familial right to access because they are Aboriginal.<sup>12</sup> In other words, artists understand dots – as a design element, and an icon of Aboriginal art – as a kind of pan-Aboriginal cultural property or tradition, which though born out of a specific cultural and geographic location is broadly meaningful to, and accessible by, all Aboriginal people. This attitude is expressed in the following statement taken from the autobiography of artist Robyn Caughlan. Caughlan, describing the excitement she felt upon being told, at the age of thirty, by her birth mother, that she was Aboriginal, states:

I left Mum Cook's the next day and when I got home I was busting a gut to tell everyone. And I did!...[I told my] art teacher, about being Aboriginal...She encouraged me to explore new angles on my art, particularly the use of pointillism. It sounds like a fancy art word but it just means that you paint with dots. Something inside me had always yearned to use this style of painting but I knew it was a traditional method used by the Aboriginal people from Central Australia and I never felt I had the right to use it. Now I felt I could and it took my art to a new level (Caughlan and Foster 2012: 206).

For Caughlan, the revelation that she was a Dharug and Darkinjung woman had a profoundly positive impact on her sense of self, sense of community and family and, perhaps most deeply, on her emotional well-being (Caughlan and Foster 2012: 205-206). More than this, as Caughlan describes, learning of her Indigenous heritage had a strong impact on her art practice. Encouraged by her teacher, Caughlan began to experiment with dotting, a form she felt able to use because of her newly discovered Aboriginality. Although Caughlan acknowledges that dotting is a 'traditional method' from Central Australia, she ultimately felt able to use dots in light of her Aboriginal heritage (Caughlan and Foster 2012: 206).

Caughlan's comments about dots, specifically those addressing the way her relationship with dots changed after she learned about her Indigenous heritage, raise interesting questions regarding the way Aboriginal artists from NSW conceptualise dots, and *how* dots signify when being utilised away from the specific cultural and geographical milieus in which the dot movement originated. For example, what is it about dots, as a visual form, painting technique and cultural symbol, that enables artists from NSW with no particular connection to the Central and Western Deserts, to feel an affinity with, and a desire to use dots, even as they acknowledge that they are the traditional property of particular Indigenous groups to which

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<sup>11</sup> This observation echoes that made by Johnson, Allas and Fisher in their report on Aboriginal art created south of the Rowley Line (2009/2010: 27).

<sup>12</sup> Dots can be understood as perhaps the most popular of the various stylistic forms at the disposal of Aboriginal artists who feel they have inherited this 'tool kit'. Other popular forms include south eastern designs and X-ray painting (as popularised by bark painters across Arnhem Land).



they do not belong? Further, Caughlan's attraction and connection to this visual motif begs the question: what is it about dots which make them so artistically and emotionally meaningful for so many of the artists who utilise them? This emotional significance deserves consideration as many participants expressed a strong emotional connection to dots and described them as important to themselves, their family and community. This emotional significance often leads artists to conceptualise their use of dots as intrinsically, self-evidently, right and valid. Perhaps the most telling expression of this intrinsic *correctness* was when artists discussed their use of dots without any defensiveness, not feeling the need to explain or justify their right or authority to use this visual form.<sup>13</sup>

As Caughlan's comments illustrate, the conviction that it is both culturally appropriate and, more than this, emotionally *right* that artists use dots is not undermined by recognition that dots were not, prior to European contact, part of the visual heritage of an artist's language or cultural group, or were not practiced in the region in which they grew up or currently reside. The following observation by painter Darren Moffitt illustrates this sentiment. Moffitt was inspired to start painting after purchasing a dot painting from Lindsay, a relative from the Sydney suburb of La Perouse. Both Moffitt and his wife Kim grew up in La Perouse, but now live in Albury. When I spoke to the artist he reflected on the way his connection to this suburb manifests in his painting and this led him to discuss his use of dots, which are a central feature of his detailed, large scale works. As Moffitt explained:

I...try to find a bit more about my background and where I am from and try to make that connection and I guess it all just comes back to the coast. Because I really found painting the coastal creatures just sort of made sense, I don't know where the dots come from...Well Lindsay's painting was all dots, and nobody has actually taught me how to paint, so I don't know, the dots were just a good therapy thing. I don't think that dots are linked to Botany Bay or where we're from. I know they used to do a lot of rock carving on the sandstone but I don't know if there was any original art work that went around that area. But also my grandfather who came to the mission, he was part of the Stolen Generation and I don't think we actually know where he was really from, so I know it is in the blood but I don't know where it actually comes from, I don't know why I am so good at it, I just really can't explain it.

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<sup>13</sup> The prevalence of this kind of attitude meant that initially I felt it would not be appropriate to write about dots in NSW beyond discussing them as a visual element of some of the works produced in the state. I felt that focusing on dots in particular would make them appear to be aberrant or unusual, which is clearly not how those artists who create dot paintings feel about them. I changed my mind about this when I started speaking with arts workers and gallery staff, who as will be discussed, often had a strong reaction to works by local artists that featured dots. It became clear to me that the issues, assumptions, expectations and tensions that surround the use of dots in NSW are reflective of the top level issues, expectations and tensions that seem to accompany the production of 'Aboriginal art' in NSW. In other words, dots act a bit like a microcosm that can help to illuminate issues pertinent to the broader analysis of Aboriginal art being made in NSW.

Though Moffitt can't explain exactly why he feels compelled to paint dots, nor why he is skilled at doing so, this does not diminish his feeling that his desire and ability to paint dots is 'in his blood', part of him on a deep and intrinsic level. Further, for artists such as Moffitt, using dots does not render the artworks they create less Wiradjuri, Bundjalung or Koori, than those featuring south eastern designs. This thoroughly localised quality is further enhanced because artists frequently utilise dots to depict the physical features of their Country, their ancestors and their Dreaming. Thus, dots are used to depict and evoke locations, stories or religious ontologies that are strongly rooted in, and connected to, the artist's physical place and cultural and social space (Tilley 1994: 10) in NSW.

But to return to the questions prompted by consideration of comments from Caughlan, given the cultural, emotional and artistic significance of dots for many of the artists with whom I spoke, how best are we to conceptualise dots, as utilised in NSW? In order to understand how dots operate in this context let us consider the following explanations, offered by participants, as to why they do, and do not, use dots.

### **Dots as Traditional**

For those artists who learnt dot painting from their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunties, Elders or other community members, dot painting is, in a very straightforward sense, a part of their cultural heritage and a tradition they feel proud to keep alive. For example, Dennis Golding, a young artist who paints vibrant paintings that feature dots, explained that both his grandmother and mother are artists, and from the age of three, his mother began to teach him to paint using dots. Beyond influencing the visual style of the artist's paintings, Golding's family have also shaped the content of his painted works. As Golding explained, 'my Nan is an Elder at the Block [in Redfern, Sydney] and growing up she's always told us Dreamtime stories so I've memorised those and put that into paintings. So I'm inspired by my culture and that's how I've made my art practice today'. Though Golding enjoys experimenting with different media and artistic forms, including installation, he continues to paint in the style taught to him by his mum with the two frequently sharing ideas or discussing their respective art practices.<sup>14</sup> Upon hearing about this aspect of Golding's artistic education, I remarked that it was as if he'd undertaken an artistic apprenticeship with his family. To this, Golding offered the following rejoinder:

It felt like it was a training process for me, you know...because Mum, it's the same thing for her, she started painting at a young age and she went to the same primary school and that's when –

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of our meeting Golding was undertaking a degree at UNSW Art & Design which afforded him opportunity to experiment with a variety of artistic genres.

still around her culture and her people – that’s how she was influenced as well. So it’s kind of like going down generation to generation and I love that.

This response explicitly demonstrates the way dot painting is, for some artists operating in NSW, a central element of their visual heritage, a heritage passed down and handed on between generations.

While the dots painted by Dennis Golding can be understood as traditional because he inherited them from his mother, a small group of participants describe dots as traditional, in a broader sense. These artists see dots as part of the visual language of Indigenous groups living in the region, now known as NSW, prior to the British settlement of Australia. Here, artists, usually seeking to disrupt the narrative that dots are exclusively the provenance of desert artists, point out that, since before British settlement, dots have been employed by various communities and cultural groups across NSW as a design element in body painting, the decoration of ceremonial and mundane objects, and other art practices. Artists refer to their own cultural knowledge, the historical record and material culture held in museum collections in Australia, and abroad, as evidence for this claim.<sup>15</sup> In pointing to these instances of historical dotting, artists are asserting their cultural authority and cultural right to create dot paintings and, simultaneously, disassociating the dots they utilise from those popularised by desert artists. Here, artists expressed frustration that desert dots are valorised as authentic expressions of traditional visual culture, while dots produced in NSW are often derided as being non-traditional or merely read as ersatz desert dots. Discussion of this sometimes led participants to point out that Papunya Tula artists had only started painting on boards in the 1970s, and to ask if, in view of this, it was fair to call this dot painting traditional, while labelling their own dot painting practice non-traditional. This is not to say that artists were negative about desert dot painting, rather such comments express their frustration at evaluations, made by critical and commercial audiences who they conceptualised as non-Indigenous, about the relative merits of desert art, and art produced in NSW. That these artists had received criticism from such audiences regarding dot use while, in other parts of Australia, dots are lauded, led them to feel that the devaluation of NSW dot painting was arbitrary and unjust.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Shield E077861 #1 in the Australian Museum collection (Australian Museum 2015) and Shield Oc.1808 in the British Museum collection (Osbourne and Simpkin 2015: 201).



Figure 6.3. Shield, 19th C (before 1862), Made in: Shoalhaven (Attributed to Shoalhaven region, NSW), wood, natural pigment. British Museum. Oc.1808 ©Trustees of the British Museum.

Elsewhere, artists are aware of the popular conception of the provenance of dots but do not consider this problematic. Some mentioned having been given in-person permission to paint with dots by desert artists,<sup>16</sup> while one artist explained that she had read a text advising that all Aboriginal people had the right to use dots.<sup>17</sup> Other artists were less concerned with this kind of formal permission. Take for example the following exchange between Wilcannia-based artist Eddy Harris and West Darling Aboriginal Arts Officer, Kathy Graham.

**Kathy Graham (KG):** Do you find people are critical of dot paintings because it is not from this area?

**Eddy Harris (EH):** Yeah.

**KG:** So what is your answer to that?

**EH:** If you are going to bring something beautiful out onto canvas, as long as you get it out and someone appreciates that, I think it is a good thing...But yeah, we get that, I got that when I first started...You get used to it, even on your culture stuff...well it is not an easy ride, put it that way, there are always knockers in the community...I always say well hang on I haven't got the problem, they've got the problem...

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<sup>16</sup> There are many instances where 'urban' Aboriginal artists have been given permission to utilise specific cultural designs by individuals and communities in remote areas. For example, Lin Onus was adopted by Yolgnu Elder Jack Wunuwun and thus gained leave to use specific rarrk designs (McLean 2016: 144). Non-Aboriginal artist Tim Johnson also gained permission to use dot and other designs from Aboriginal community members (Gallois 2017: 184).

<sup>17</sup> This artist could not recall exactly where she had read this directive, we both attempted to seek out the text but to no avail.

As this exchange illustrates, for Harris, the ‘original’ cultural origin of dots is less important than the affirmative outcome that his artworks have on himself and his audiences. Further, as described above, Harris uses dots to depict Bakandji Country, and thus, for the artist, though dots are from ‘elsewhere’, they are deployed in the service of creating Bakandji cultural products.<sup>18</sup> Beyond this, Harris also sees art making, including dot painting, as a force that can have broad ranging positive impacts for his community at Wilcannia. Indeed, the artist was, at the time of our interview, working as a facilitator and art teacher for a work-for-the-dole scheme facilitated by the Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation (MPREC) for Aboriginal residents in Wilcannia.<sup>19</sup> Aside from enabling participants to increase their artistic skills and access welfare payments, Harris also described the scheme as enabling him to help promote the art of Aboriginal people from Wilcannia to a wider audience. For example, in 2014 Harris organised, in partnership with Pine Street Gallery, the City of Sydney, Wilcannia Central School, and Murdi Paaki, an exhibition in Sydney of art produced by artists from Wilcannia including work-for-the-dole participants. Some participating artists accompanied the exhibition to Sydney and took part in public programming supporting the show. Many artists were able to make sales, and Harris and others involved felt that the show was a success. Subsequent local exhibitions, including an exhibition held in Broken Hill facilitated by West Darling Arts, have also taken place (2015). Many of the painted works exhibited in these shows, including those by Harris, featured dots. Here, many of the artists Harris mentors are painting with dots not just to ‘bring something beautiful out onto the canvas’ but also so they can earn a living, enhance their creative skills and connect with audiences in, and beyond, Wilcannia.

### **Dots as Contemporary**

As demonstrated above, many artists explain their use of dots as guided or informed by tradition, be it cultural, familial or a broader, pan-Aboriginal tradition. Elsewhere, however, other artists conceptualise their use of dots as one of the elements that make their works contemporary. Indeed, frequently, artists who described dots as a tradition to which they have access also described their art works – and the way they deployed dots – as contemporary.<sup>20</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 5, here the term contemporary has various meanings, including,

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<sup>18</sup> Bakandji is Eddie Harris’ preferred spelling of Barkindji.

<sup>19</sup> The scheme can be understood as a relative of a similar program operating under the Federal Government’s Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program. This CDEP operated in Wilcannia in the years prior to the Howard government’s roll-back of the program and, according to Gibson, participants would work for two or three days a week and receive what she describes as ‘top ups’ of their welfare allowances (2010: 158). Work undertaken included art making, building projects, civic maintenance projects, or participation in a women’s sewing circle (Gibson 2008c: 296).

<sup>20</sup> It’s worth noting that the artists with whom I spoke did not necessarily see contemporary and traditional as binary opposites, indeed many commonly identified the two as existing in a kind of connected, interrelated continuum. However, it is the case that artists commonly made a definitive distinction between contemporary and traditional art forms. These ideas are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

straightforwardly, that the artists are practicing art making in the present. Primarily, however, artists used the term contemporary in order to distinguish their work from 'traditional' Aboriginal art, which they described as depicting handed-on, often sacred, cultural knowledge that only Elders, and other culturally knowledgeable individuals, have the right to portray. Artists described their dot paintings as contemporary because they do not depict Dreaming stories, cultural business, signs or symbols connected to ritual, or other cultural practices. In some instances artists did not attempt to represent this kind of content because they had not undertaken any cultural learning with Elders and so did not feel that they had the right or cultural authority to do so. Artists who had undertaken this cultural education explained that when they are older, or become Elders themselves, they may well undertake the creation of traditional works, but that at present they were either disinclined or not emotionally ready to do so. As Natalie Bateman explained, 'we grew up with stories and there are like traditional stories and I guess I'm not ready to do that stuff yet. Until I'm told properly, because you can't paint your stories until you've been given them by an Elder, so I don't paint my stories yet'.<sup>21</sup>

Other artists classified their dotted works as contemporary because they understood the issues, themes or stories depicted in them as explicitly contemporary in nature. For example, Kevin Butler, who makes works in a style he calls a 'cross between traditional dot painting and contemporary', uses what he describes as traditional-type dots but in order to, among other things, comment on and represent what he defined as 'social issues involving Aboriginal people, things like black deaths in custody, the Stolen Generations, racism, drug and alcohol abuse...'. Similarly, other artists classify their dot painting as contemporary because they use dots to depict personal and biographical issues and stories, such as particular personal experiences.

### **Dots and Art Education**

In a report produced as part of 'Storylines', an extensive research project which investigated art produced by Aboriginal artists in 'settled' Australia, researchers Johnson, Allas and Fisher state that a high number of the artists who participated in their research had undertaken art-related study at TAFE. The researchers found that a selection of these artists were '...producing work which was derivative of, or sought to emulate, the "dot-dot" style of the Central Desert, and tended to paint images of native animals or landscapes decorated with dots' (2009/2010: 27). In view of this, and of comments coming from research participants, Johnson, Allas and Fisher concluded that TAFE teachers had likely encouraged their Aboriginal students to utilise

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<sup>21</sup> Bateman does not exclusively use dots, in fact when we met she explained that she was starting to avoid dots completely unless asked to use them for a commissioned work, both because she found them too labour intensive and time consuming and because she was interested in exploring other visual forms.

those artistic styles and techniques ‘...most clearly associated with “Indigenous art” as it is popularly recognised’ (2009/2010: 27). The connection, observed by Johnson, Allas and Fisher, between certain types of art education and the utilisation of dots resonates in the context of my own research. Artists utilising dots often acknowledged that they learned to do so at primary school, high school or TAFE.<sup>22</sup>

Some artists who painted with dots had completed fine arts degrees at university. It appears that these artists were not directed, or specifically encouraged, to create dot-paintings by teachers at university. Rather it was accepted that dots were a technique these artists wished to utilise and thus teachers provided artistic tutelage in order to extend and improve their dot-centred practice. Further, several participants who were involved in community-arts work observed that many of their students paint with dots because they were taught to do so when they undertook Aboriginal art programs in prison.

Those artists using dots who had not undertaken any formal arts education and who considered themselves self-taught explained that they had learned about dot painting in various ways including, most commonly, watching their friends paint and by studying dot paintings in books, magazines and online. As Reginald Walker, a painter based in West Dubbo, observed when I asked him how he’d learnt to paint, ‘I pretty much looked around and talked to people and looked on the internet’.

Having been taught as part of a formal education, or having learned independently to paint with dots, some artists continue to consistently, and exclusively, deploy dots when making art. However, this is not always the case. Some participants reported that while they had initially used dots as part of their art practice they had subsequently transitioned away from doing so for various reasons, including because they were interested in developing a unique visual language, or because they had become uncomfortable using the technique upon learning of issues associated with cultural appropriation. Here, artists often explained that their dot painting had been a necessary step in their artistic development. As Amala Groom noted, ‘I got a lot of shit from people in my class [at Eora College, Sydney] because they were like why are you painting desert style paintings?...That was the thing, I needed to do it to get where I am...I’m sure that everyone goes through a teething period...’.

The connection between certain types of formal and self-directed arts education and dot painting stands as a testament to the incredible popularity of desert dot painting and to the plethora of images of dot paintings available online, in print and in popular media. This

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<sup>22</sup> TAFE has played a central role in encouraging and facilitating Aboriginal artists from NSW to establish, develop and expand their practice (including, and beyond, dot painting). See for example, Johnson et al. (2009/2010: 25), Page et al. (2011: 18), Croft (2007: 286), Jones and Peacock (2013: 5).

connection also confirms the assertion that dot painting has become conflated, or at least strongly associated, with Aboriginal art as a whole.

### **Dots and the Market**

In contradiction of the expectations of various arts workers and gallery staff who tend to attribute the use of dots to a desire to court consumers by satisfying their expectations surrounding the aesthetic form of Aboriginal art, most artists who discussed their use of dots did not mention the market. This is perhaps unsurprising because, as will be demonstrated in Chapters 8 and 9, artists from NSW who paint with dots sometimes have a contested relationship with the art market. This said, some artists with whom I spoke did explain that they create dot paintings because of consumer demand for such works. For example, Wiradjuri painter Mirree Bayliss told me that she is aware of negative attitudes towards dot paintings created in NSW, and so doesn't always utilise dots in her work. However, when a buyer expresses interest in dot paintings she is able to show them a store of such works, or is able to paint using dots if the buyer commissions her to do so. Elsewhere artists described experimenting with the kinds of dots they painted, in terms of size, shape, density and colour, and also the kinds of images these dots adorn and surround, with a view to finding visual forms popular with consumers. It should be noted that, outside of fine art commercial gallery spaces, dot paintings created by NSW artists were often appreciated by audiences and commercially successful.

### **Why Artists Don't use Dots**

Although dot painting is popular among artists working across NSW, many participants explained that they had specifically chosen not to use dots in their art practice due to issues associated with cultural appropriation, and their own cultural and artistic identity. Primarily these artists explained that they were concerned about the ethical implications of using dots, with many concluding that, as artists from NSW, they did not have the cultural right to use a visual form so strongly associated with central Australia.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes ethical concerns regarding cultural rights associated with dots were also accompanied by a related desire to make art that represented and explored the artist's own Dreaming, Country, identity and life experiences. Here, dots were felt to be inappropriate because they were not part of an artist's cultural heritage, and were, therefore, an inadequate means of representing and expressing this heritage. As painter, print-maker and installation artist, Frances Belle Parker explained:

Whilst being at uni and studying, I guess I started my journey into developing my own kind of art. And it was about; I don't just want to do dots, dots aren't really my story, I don't have a

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<sup>23</sup> Gibson reports similar attitudes from some Barkindji artists working in Wilcannia (2013: 208).



connection to them here on the east coast of NSW. I don't have a problem with artists from here who do use dots, but whilst in uni we learnt about misappropriation of Aboriginal art and how Aboriginal artists themselves can play a role in that...So it was about just identifying my story, the story I was going to tell through my art...So for me I wanted to document the story of my homeland, my mother's Country, my mum's-mum's Country and I guess kind of stake a claim to the land, the Yaegl landscape.

Parker has decided not to use dots because she wants to deploy a unique artistic language relevant to, and reflective of, her relationship to, depiction of, and sovereignty over Yaegl Country. In contrast, other artists in NSW choose not to utilise dots because they represent a kind of artistic security blanket, which is too commonplace and widely used to facilitate innovative or meaningful creative expression. As ceramist Penny Evans explained:

I think there is a safety in it, there's a safety of identity and that's what is expected, and it's the stereotype, you know. And there's a legitimacy to it too because of the body art that was done in this local area, it was all dabbing and there is a sort of a dot, there is a connection to that in a way. But a lot of it's been really informed by Papunya and Central Desert sort of stuff too. That has colonised over here.

Beyond this, some artists who have actively decided not to employ dots have done so because they see this visual motif as incompatible with their art practice and their identity as an artist. Consider, for example, the following exchange between myself and Nyree Reynolds:

**Priya Vaughan (PV):** ...do you want to be known as a contemporary artist?

**Nyree Reynolds (NR):** Yes, yes. Because when I work with people I always say it is a dot free zone.

**PV:** You don't identify with it?

**NR:** Not with dots.

**PV:** Because this [indicating NR's portfolio] is your way of painting?

**NR:** Yes and people always say do you do dot painting? The answer is no.

Here, Reynolds affirms that she is a contemporary artist and, as such, does not utilise dots, which are a 'traditional' visual motif that she does not have a personal, cultural or artistic connection with.

Various participants who are employed as arts workers, or as gallery and museum staff, expressed an aversion to dot paintings produced in NSW. Here, negative attitudes about dots echoed the sentiments described by artists, particularly the conviction that the use of dots is

akin to cultural theft. Further, some arts workers and gallery staff saw dots – when used by artists from NSW – as a kind of generic Aboriginal kitsch that belonged to the realm of tourist art, rather than ‘proper’, culturally authentic fine art.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ironic, Knowing and Playful Deployment of Dots**

Given that dots can be understood as a kind of symbolic referent to the Aboriginal art movement as a whole, it is unsurprising that they are frequently used by artists wishing to explore or represent their Aboriginal cultural identity. By the same token, artists who spoke directly about their decision not to use dots in their art practice explained that their choice to avoid this visual motif was also linked to the dominance, in the popular and critical imagination, of desert dot painting. Thus, while some artists in NSW choose to either use, or avoid, dots due to their iconic status, a small minority depict dots in their artworks as a means of exploring, undermining or subverting this status. Here, artists utilise dots knowingly, playfully and often ironically in order to, for example, comment on the predominance of dot painting in the Aboriginal art market or to undermine the expectations of audiences who conceptualise dot painting and Aboriginal art as synonymous. For example, in 2014 Blak Douglas presented a series of works titled ‘JOIN THE DOTS’ at The Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative gallery. These works feature oversized, brightly coloured dots which constitute the silhouettes of various symbols, such as a question mark or boomerang. These symbols were hung in particular sequences, like pictographs, in order to spell-out questions such as ‘What percentage of Aboriginal are you?’ or ‘Where are the real Aborigines?’.<sup>25</sup> Of his use of dots in this series Douglas made the following comment:

For seventeen years now I’ve witnessed en masse, the continued claim by a variety of urban Aboriginal artists that they paint “traditional style”...“Dot Art” has become prostituted to the point of becoming farcical...There is simply no excuse to continually present the concept of painting colourful dot patterns to the rest of the world as “traditional Aboriginal” art...so, in this exhibition I’ve married two types of stereotypes to create the simplest naïve narrative. Through reworking these pieces...and using oversized dots (like braille for the blind), I’ve portrayed four general questions that have been directed toward myself consistently over the past decade (Douglas 2014).

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<sup>24</sup> It’s interesting to note that the arts workers who most vocally expressed distaste for dots were non-Indigenous. Indigenous arts workers tended to have a more permissive attitude to dots, even if they were interested in encouraging local artists to utilise others motifs.

<sup>25</sup> Blak Douglas, 2014, *What percentage of Aboriginal are you?*, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 100 x 200 cm (triptych). Black Douglas, 2014, *Where are the real Aborigines?*, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 150 x 150 cm.



Figure 6.4. Blak Douglas, 2014, *What percentage of Aboriginal are you?*, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 100 x 200 cm (triptych). Image credit: Blak Douglas. Courtesy of the artist. ©Blak Douglas.



Figure 6.5. Blak Douglas, 2014, *Where are the real Aborigines?*, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Image credit: Blak Douglas. Courtesy of the artist. ©Blak Douglas.

Here, Douglas employs dots to satirise and express distaste for what he sees as the appropriation of dots by urban Aboriginal artists whose visual ‘cultural tradition’ does not, historically, involve the use of dotting. Further, dots – perhaps the ultimate visual stereotype of Aboriginal art – are here utilised to highlight, via their depiction of offensive questions posed to the artist, stereotypes that seem to prevail in the public imagination about Aboriginality. In the work ‘What percentage Aboriginal are you?’ a visual cliché evokes a social stereotype: that it is possible and/or meaningful to quantify Aboriginality in terms of numerical percentages. While Douglas’ artist statement makes clear that his employment of dots is ironic, the visual form of the dots used also makes this clear. Douglas’ dots could not be mistaken for desert dots; they are large, perfectly formed and uniform in size and shape. Further, there is none of the over dotting present in works by artists from Papunya Tula, Balgo or elsewhere. Indeed, the dots utilised by Douglas are strongly reminiscent of the Ben-Day dots mimicked by Roy Lichtenstein in his pop art comic book appropriations (Gyure 2000: 158). Presented with titles such as ‘What percentage Aboriginal are you?’ at Boomalli (a renowned Aboriginal art gallery) by an artist who is publicly identified as Aboriginal, the ‘JOIN THE DOTS’

series unsettles expectations regarding the presence of dots in art made by an Aboriginal artist, while simultaneously making a statement about those expectations.

Elsewhere, Indigenous artists working in NSW deploy dots in ways that invoke the iconic status of dot painting without satirising this status. For example, Daniel Boyd has produced a series of 'dot paintings' that reproduce historical photographs taken by colonial settlers or missionaries in Australia and Vanuatu. These paintings are composed of patterns of precise, finely painted dots. These dots act as a patina that both forms and obscures the figures and scenery rendered by the artist. Boyd's dots are both resonant with, and visually distinct from, those painted by desert artists. Usually painted in black and white, or sepia, the images formed and concealed by the dots are realistic and detailed, thus, while there is a clear evocation of desert dots, the paintings also seem reminiscent of pointillist works, such as those created by Georges Seurat. In this way, as Wayne Tunnicliffe, Head Australian Curator at the Art Gallery of NSW, observed, 'the dotting [on these works is] reminiscent of various historical and recent sources in both western and Aboriginal art' (Briggs 2014). Boyd has described the dots he paints as representing the particular cultural ways of knowing and seeing that shape the way each person understands and interprets the world. As Boyd observed, with particular reference to his work 'Untitled',<sup>26</sup> 'my recent work is about the trajectory of information and how it passes back and forth over time and between cultures...My use of dots references the idea of the cultural lens and the fact that we all have different points of view' (Briggs 2014). In view of this statement Boyd's use of dots can be interpreted as meaningful in several ways. Firstly, dots, as icons of Aboriginal cultural expression, can be understood as acting to insert Australian Aboriginal, and indeed other Indigenous peoples, into the locales depicted in Boyd's work. That is, the dots which are awash in Boyd's canvases can be understood as signifiers of Aboriginality, their simultaneous covering and constituting of the images painted by the artist, an act of peopling landscapes conceived of, by colonialists, as *terra nullius*. However, while Boyd's dots clearly have a kind of resonance with, or relationship to, desert dotting (Forrest 2013), Boyd's identification of the dots as a cultural lens illustrates that, here, dots are endowed with an expanded meaning and significance. Instead of simply standing for a specific cultural group, such as the Kudjila/Gangalu people to whom Boyd belongs, or even for Aboriginal people as a whole, Boyd uses dots to symbolise, on a broad level, culture as the ontological 'lens' that shapes the way individuals view, and subsequently make sense of, the world in which they live.

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Boyd, 2014, *Untitled*, oil, pastel, archival glue on canvas, 315 x 224 cm (stretcher). NB. This work won the 2014 BVLGARI Art Award.

Boyd, like Douglas, utilises dots in ways that specifically and knowingly riff on the popularity of dot painting, as made famous by Indigenous artists from the desert. While other artists from NSW work with dots because they see them as an intrinsically Aboriginal form of mark making, the motivations of artists such as Boyd and Douglas are different. Douglas, for example, employs dots in his art practice specifically to interrogate the use of dots by artists he sees as urban. Boyd's dots, on the other hand, achieve a kind of double action where they stand for both Indigenous culture and cultural understandings on a broader level. In both instances the artists leverage the expectations, carried by audiences viewing the works of two artists who are critically lauded as Aboriginal, in order to communicate specific messages that undermine, as in Douglas' work, or expand, as with Boyd's, expectations about both Aboriginal art and the significance, appearance and meaning of dots (McGregor and Perkins 2014).

### **Dots or Dots?: What and How Dots Mean in NSW**

In an article penned for *Broadsheet* magazine, artist and art historian Adam Geczy explores the use and significance of dots by Aboriginal artists. Remarking on accusations of cultural appropriation levelled at non-Indigenous artists, such as Del Kathryn Barton, who have included dots in their artworks, Geczy concedes that:

...here could be mounted the objection that the dots in this picture [Barton's 'hugo'<sup>27</sup>] were "just dots" much as Freud famously stated that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar". Of course, there is no precise delineation. It would be absurd, for example to accuse an artist known for the use of dots, such as Yayoi Kusama, on these grounds were she to exhibit again in Australia (2012: 164).<sup>28</sup>

In other words, in some instances dots are just dots – a neutral, empty or open design element – as opposed to spiritually and socially significant cultural property, as with the dots painted by Western Desert and other artists. This observation by Geczy helps to extract a particular nuance of meaning central to an understanding of dots, as painted in NSW: their simultaneous connection to, and detachment from, those dots made famous by Aboriginal artists from the Western Desert and elsewhere.

While it may be true that some artists from NSW use dots specifically to emulate and affiliate themselves with Western Desert and other Aboriginal art movements, most participants do

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<sup>27</sup> Del Katherine Barton, 2013, *hugo*, watercolour, gouache and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 180 cm.

<sup>28</sup> Geczy goes on to argue that Barton, unlike Kusama – a Japanese artist based in Tokyo – should know better than to utilise dots because she is an Australian artist and should be aware of issues and sensitivities around the appropriation of Aboriginal aesthetic modes (2012: 164). Thus, for Geczy the context in which an artist is working impacts upon whether a dot is a *dot*, or not.

not conceptualise their dot painting practice in this way.<sup>29</sup> Rather, dots used by this latter group of artists can be described, as Geczy observed, as *just* dots, in the sense that they are not explicitly linked to desert dot paintings but have a specific, localised significance. The simultaneous connection to and detachment from desert dots, of those dots painted by Aboriginal artists in NSW, is illustrated by, and also explains, the way artists like Robyn Caughlan, are able to both acknowledge the specific cultural locale from which dots originated and, also, have a highly personal connection to, and understanding of, what dots mean.

What all this points to is that dots, as deployed by participants, signify more than the specific cultural locales from which they originated. More than merely an artistic technique, dots are a symbol that stand for specific cultural places and practices and yet also, at least in NSW, represent and mean much more than this. As symbols, dots have expanded and extended and as a result their meaning has become generalised or open. In this way, I have found it useful to think of dots in NSW as a kind of 'floating signifier', a term first mooted by Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987: 63) and later popularised, and contested, by linguists, and others, such as Roland Barthes (1977: 38-39).<sup>30</sup> Lévi-Strauss posited the notion of a floating signifier in an introductory essay to the works of Marcel Mauss, noting with regards to the term *mana*, "It is a signifier in the pure state", thus apt to be charged with any symbolic content...' (Mehlman 1972: 23). Thus, a floating signifier is a signifier which '...absorbs rather than emits meaning' (Buchanan 2010), which is open enough, or even ambiguous enough, to accommodate diverse meanings as projected, read into, or understood by those viewing them. Thus, dots, as akin to floating signifiers, can be understood to connote Aboriginality on a broad level (due to their original connection with desert dots), but not in a restrictive or particular way. Hence, dots can accommodate meanings specific to particular communities, families, language groups or persons and can, therefore, stand as Wiradjuri, Bundjalung, Barkindji, Dhurug or other symbols.

Also of use here is Cowlshaw's work on 'Aboriginal Culture' as a master signifier. Cowlshaw, exploring the relationship the ideology of multiculturalism has to Aboriginal cultures, asserts that Aboriginal people in the south east of Australia, and other urban and regional areas, have been encouraged, by mechanisms of the liberal democratic state (such as policy), to learn

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<sup>29</sup> Arguably, it is artists like Douglas, who use dots in order to establish a kind of dialogue about and with desert dots, who are making dot paintings with an eye to Western Desert and other dot-based art movements.

<sup>30</sup> Due to considerations of space I am side-stepping engagement with the arguments and critiques which have shaped much of the discussion about floating signifiers in the field of linguistics, many of which centre around the relationship between the signifier and the signified (see Chandler 2007: 79) as they are not relevant to this investigation of dots. A signifier is 'the concretely perceptible component of a sign, as distinct from its conceptual meaning (the signified)' (Baldick 2015).

about, and identify with, a kind of broad, even generic, 'Aboriginal Culture' (2012: 400-403). This 'Culture' is understood by Cowlshaw as merely one among the many that constitute the multicultural state (2012: 402). Thus 'Aboriginal Culture' as a master signifier, absorbs various elements from particular Indigenous cultural groups, such as painting styles, certain dances and particular words. In becoming incorporated into this master signifier these elements become dislodged from, or only loosely connected to, the specific localised cultural, socio-political and geographical anchors from which they originated (2012: 405). Cowlshaw asserts that this top level 'Aboriginal Culture' is utilised by the state in order to '...form a stable symbolic order within Australia's national ideological apparatus to refer to and encompass Indigenous people and their attributes' (2012: 405). Thus, the promotion and incorporation of 'Aboriginal Culture', as a master signifier that is utilised and operates within this 'ideological apparatus' renders, for example, the totemic system, dot painting or Dreaming stories about the Rainbow Serpent, as indicators of '...the presence of Aboriginal culture...', rather than symbols with their own '...specific meanings...' (2012: 405).

While this master signifier can be understood as a product of government ideology and policy, Cowlshaw also asserts that – outside of state institutions (such as schools) – communities, families and individuals with '...varied, sometimes tenuous, or even non-existent relationships with Aboriginal traditions' (2012: 406), are also embracing, utilising and fashioning their own '...public "Aboriginal Culture"...', which, like that sanctioned by the state, uses signs, symbols, actions and meanings gleaned from different Indigenous cultural groups from across Australia (2012: 402). Cowlshaw's contention that 'Aboriginal Culture' is a product of state ideology and agenda, rather than, say, community-led or individual engagements with Aboriginality, does not have a particularly strong resonance with my own fieldwork. Nevertheless, her identification of certain cultural symbols and activities achieving a symbolic value that is larger than, and detached from, originating locales, is certainly relevant to the analysis of dots in NSW.

Thus, employing both the concept of the floating signifier, and Cowlshaw's notion of 'Aboriginal Culture' as master signifier, we might understand the use of dots as one of various activities, that have come to broadly connote 'Aboriginal Culture' (as master signifier), but which are also open enough (as in floating signifiers) to be engaged with, and understood, in diverse, sometimes highly personal, ways. Put another way, the influence of 'Aboriginal Culture' helps to explain why artists across NSW, without familial or direct cultural connection to desert regions from which dots apparently originate, feel a strong connection to dots and utilise them as part of their creative practice. However, positioning dots as floating signifiers

helps to explain why dots, as a painting technique and visual symbol, are able to accommodate diverse culturally, and personally, significant – and specific – meanings.

In order to clearly illustrate the way dots are able to operate as a kind of floating signifier (which are an element of the master signifier of ‘Aboriginal Culture’), let us consider the art practice of Gumbaygan man Bevan Skinner, an artist-potter who participated in my research.<sup>31</sup> Skinner, who works out of Grafton, frequently adorns his clay vessels with his *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* design (*Stars of the Valley* in the Gumbaynggirr language) (Morelli 2015).<sup>32</sup> The design, his most popular with audiences and consumers, involves typically white, though sometimes yellow, dots painted on a black background. The dots are uniform in shape and evenly distributed, though painted close together in lines that follow the contours of the vase, bowl or pot they adorn. The dots featured in *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* are distinct from those used by Western Desert and other artists, and their adornment of what Skinner calls ‘...classical shaped...common pots’, also sets them apart from the wildly popular acrylic dot paintings on canvas produced in the Western Desert. While Skinner acknowledges that dots, along with other design elements like linear patterns, are all part of the visual tool kit available to Aboriginal artists creating, what he calls, ‘Indigenous art’, the dots in his *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* do not, for the artist, have an explicit relationship with dots from the desert. That is, while *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* is, for Skinner, unambiguously Aboriginal, the Aboriginality of this dot design is not derived from the inherent Indigeneity of dots (as popularised and made recognisable by desert artists) but by his own Aboriginal heritage. As Skinner explained, in response to my asking if his cultural heritage informs his art practice:

I think it just naturally goes into it from being an Aboriginal person. And as we know these dots and stripes and little motifs, stick figures, all relate to...Indigenous art. You can tell Indigenous art to a certain extent, plus I have seen Indigenous art done by non-Indigenous people too, you couldn't pick it whether a white or a non-Indigenous or Indigenous person had done it...[but] I think to myself well it is not Aboriginal art if it is not done by an Aboriginal person and I don't think that I'm discriminating there.

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<sup>31</sup> At the time of writing Skinner is taking a break from art making.

<sup>32</sup> Prior to 2013 this design was called *Birraals of the Wuluurr* (*Stars of the Valley*), after which Skinner changed the name.





Figure 6.6. A selection of Bevan Skinner's pots (in the collection of Grafton Regional Gallery), 2014, image by the author. All artworks ©Bevan Skinner.

Like Frances Belle Parker (and other artists described in Chapter 2), Skinner understands Aboriginal art as art created by an Aboriginal person, thus his dot designs are Aboriginal, not because dots are inherently Indigenous and using dots means an Aboriginal artist creates Aboriginal art, *but* because he, as an Aboriginal person, renders them so.<sup>33</sup> Further, Skinner's dots are distinguished from those created by other artists discussed here, as well as those produced by desert artists, because of their meaning, as articulated by the artist. While artists such as Golding or Caughlan position dots as signifying, respectively, family traditions or Aboriginal mark making, Skinner's dots have their own personal significance. As the artist explained:

Stars of the Valley...represents people when they die. My mother died when I was nine and I was a nine-year-old kid and I am looking out at the stars at night thinking I wish that I could see her one more time...So it's a work about people passing on, and to me they are just in heaven, and even with the recent passing of my father, to me he is in heaven.<sup>34</sup>

Here Skinner's dotted designs have a deeply personal meaning for the artist, one that is both unique to his art practice and tells a story specific to his life and family. Skinner acknowledges that the design is likely popular because of broader associations audience members have regarding looking at a starry sky at night. As he explained, 'I think everyone interprets them differently...They could be a thing about love, if you like someone you're looking up at the stars at night thinking of them...or something good has happened, looking at the stars and feeling

<sup>33</sup> While this distinction might seem finicky, it is important, not least because it illustrates the way participants, pace the observations of scholars such as Gibson (2013: 125 & 297), Macdonald (2001: 176), Cowlishaw (2011: 171), have a strong sense of their Indigeneity, one that is not undermined by assumptions, coming from the non-Indigenous mainstream (as expressed by state policy etc.) that position them as lacking authentic Aboriginality. Skinner is Aboriginal, thus he has the cultural knowledge and authority to create Aboriginal art.

<sup>34</sup> See also Skinner and McBean (2013).

good, refreshed, relaxed'.<sup>35</sup> For Skinner, *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* is a design that has a deeply personal significance and yet can accommodate, due to its representation of the stars above the Clarence Valley, a number of meanings as attributed by audiences and consumers viewing his work.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Skinner's use of dots as a key design element in his work cannot be reduced to a desire to reproduce desert dot designs.



Figure 6.7. Bevan Skinner, 2008, *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* (originally titled *Birraals of the Waluurr*), earthenware clay and glazes, 39 x 27 cm. Image credit: Ian Hobbs. Courtesy of the artist. © Bevan Skinner.

### **Dots Signifying Aboriginalities: A Conclusion**

Consideration of the aesthetic form and symbolic meaning of Skinner's *Winda-bin Waluurrundi* and of the dot designs utilised by other artists mentioned in this chapter reveal that Aboriginal artists working across NSW use dots in diverse and distinct ways, and do so to express a broad variety of ideas, messages and concepts. Indeed, dots, as created by artists in NSW, are able to accommodate various meanings, and fulfil diverse functions; for Dennis Golding dots form the cornerstone of a visual tradition handed on to him by his maternal family; Darren Moffitt started painting dots because they were a 'good therapy'; Natalie Bateman's dots are part of what makes her art practice contemporary; Blak Douglas deploys dots to unsettle popular expectations about Aboriginal art, etc. Thus dots, like floating signifiers, accommodate a variety of meanings and, therefore, need not only stand as a referent to desert dot art practices, pace the assumption of some arts workers and gallery staff. This is not to say, as illustrated by discussion of Robyn Caughlan's relationship to dots,

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<sup>35</sup> Skinner's comments about the universality of looking up at the stars has a strong resonance with those made by Yolngu artist Gulumbu Yunupingu regarding her expressive bark paintings of the celestial universe. Yunupingu stated of these works, 'this design came from when I saw the stars in the universe and that is what came to me – lots of stars...The meaning of this I discovered. It occurred to my mind. I saw the universe, this place, the earth, the people and the stars and thought, "we are just like the stars. All gathered close together, we are really as one, like the stars". We are so many living together on the earth and the land, the sea and the sky are a continuum. Like one. These stars are for us to see if we wish, wherever we are...' (Perkins 2010: 263).

<sup>36</sup> Grafton, the artist's home, is situated in the Clarence Valley.

that the renown of desert dots does not account for, or have a relationship to, the presence of dots in the work of artists from NSW. Indeed dots are, without a doubt, meaningful to many Aboriginal artists practicing in NSW because of their inextricable association with Aboriginal art making and, by extension, Aboriginal culture. It is just that this association is not the sum total of the meaning attached to, and expressed by, dots. In Cowlshaw's parlance dots are an element, or expression, of the master signifier 'Aboriginal Culture'. However, at least in the context of art making in NSW, this does not mean that dots stand only for a broad or generic iteration of Aboriginality, rather dots accommodate various expressions and experiences of Aboriginality.

Thus, dots are an Indigenous symbol, but the Indigeneity of this symbol, while arguably constituted, at least initially, by the iconic quality of desert dots, is not reducible to this iconic status. Thus, the Indigeneity of the dots rendered by artists in NSW is constituted in diverse ways. For example, for Dennis Golding part of what makes dots an Aboriginal symbol is that they are a traditional element of his family's art making practice, whereas for Bevan Skinner, dots are 'Indigenous' because he, an Aboriginal man, paints them. Hence, dots as symbols of Indigenous culture for many of the artists who use them, are not necessarily dependent on external referents (like their presence in desert art) to render them Indigenous.

In view of this, it is clear that participants utilise dots for various reasons, chief among them because they represent a distinctly Aboriginal form of mark-making. The assessment, as expressed by various arts workers dubious about dot use, that artists painting with dots in NSW are, at best, blithely reproducing desert dots in order to qualify as Aboriginal artists or, at worst, cynically courting consumer interest by cashing in on market enthusiasm for dot paintings, is clearly undermined by the diversity of meanings associated with dots and the various ways in which the Aboriginality of dots is constituted.



## Chapter 7 Tradition, Authenticity and Culture

*‘The only definition of “Authentic Aboriginal art” that we regard as defensible is...it is art made by Aboriginal people’ – Sutton, Jones and Hemming (1988: 205)*

### **South Eastern Designs, Dots, and Urban and Contemporary Art**

The previous three chapters described types of art being produced by artists working in NSW. This chapter seeks to pick up the key thematic strands arising across these chapters to consider how participants think about tradition, authenticity and culture as they relate to art making. It is the contention of this chapter that participants’ discussions regarding south eastern designs, urban and contemporary art, and dot painting in NSW affirm – if indeed such an affirmation is still required – that it is problematic to conceptualise culture and cultural traditions as entities that are inherently static and eroded by change. Participants were quick to articulate that such a vision of culture did not resonate with their understanding of their culture. This is not to say that cultural continuity and tradition – as something with longevity which is handed down over time – is unimportant for participants. Artists who were critical of a static view of culture often pointed out that their own innovative, original or unique art practice had a continuity – be it in terms of media used, ideas canvassed, or forms represented – with art produced by artists and ancestors who preceded them. Further, many artists spoke about the traditions to which their work did, and did not, belong. This illustrates that a vision of culture as agile and adaptable does not undermine the importance of cultural continuity or traditional practices for participants. It also demonstrates that participants do not consider relatively new cultural forms or traditions as inauthentic, or disconnected from the past.

In view of this, what follows is a consideration of the way tradition, culture, and cultural authenticity – as they pertain to artmaking – are understood and navigated by participants, and how this understanding affirms scholarly visions of culture and tradition as dynamic, organic and evolving. This chapter will consider the way participants conceive of tradition, particularly how specific art forms qualify as traditional. This qualification both depends upon, and also transcends, notions of tradition that are linked to time and antiquity. The importance of cultural difference, cultural boundaries and cultural continuity will also be explored.

### **Participant Use of Tradition**

Simon Bronner, in addressing the various meanings attributable to tradition – something handed on across generations, or something that imbues a particular ‘...story or custom...a precedent given the force of repeated practice...[or] knowledge whose official source cannot be verified but is widely held...’ (1998: 10) – ultimately concludes that the term accommodates various meanings. This results in a kind of ‘conceptual softness’ meaning that tradition can

'...appear imprecise, inconsistent, and infuriatingly elusive' to those seeking to objectively define it (1998: 10). This elasticity of meaning was in evidence when participants referred to tradition. The term was used frequently and deployed by different participants in various ways. Therefore, before continuing it is worth taking a moment to clarify the different – though often related – meanings associated with the term tradition, as it was used by participants during fieldwork.

Tradition was often used by participants to refer to art practices related to ancient cultural knowledge. In this usage, traditional art practices are conceptualised as being linked to religious or spiritual beliefs, Country, or ritual practices and responsibilities (see for example Natalie Bateman's description of traditional artworks in Chapter 6). Tradition was also used to refer to art practices understood as part of the visual heritage of NSW, regardless of their age, as in the case of south eastern designs or urban and contemporary art. Here tradition denotes something akin to heritage that artists in NSW have inherited the right to use.

Tradition was also used to indicate certain Aboriginal visual art practices originating from *outside* of NSW. Jordon Ardler's employment of the term in the following statement typifies this kind of usage: 'I'm not traditional. I'm from here...Northern Territory kind of stuff [is traditional]'. Here, traditional denotes works created by artists – such as those from Papunya Tula, Utopia, East Kimberly or Arnhem Land – that have achieved critical and commercial acclaim and which arguably typifies Aboriginal art in the popular imagination. Thus tradition can also denote certain aesthetic qualities present in their work, or the work of others. These aesthetic qualities are typically reminiscent of those in evidence in dot paintings created in the early years of the Papunya Tula movement, in that they describe works featuring particular sets of abstract symbols that can be 'read' by those who are culturally knowledgeable, and may also feature dots. The term was also used in reference to stylised representations of animals and people similar to those appearing in bark paintings produced in Arnhem Land. The use of a 'natural' colour palette, akin to that produced by the use of ochres, was also described as being traditional. Consider, for example, painter David Collins' use of the term in the following exchange:

**David Collins (DC):** I like bright colours, I like everything bright, I've done a few paintings in the traditional colours and everybody loves them but they are not bright...

**Priya Vaughan:** So by traditional colours you mean like browns and oranges?

**DC:** Yes, the white, the yellow, the browns, the earth colours. 'Cause I was born in Wentworth, so I should use those earthy colours.

Because of the location of the Country on which these artists work, this use of the term traditional also implies a certain level of geographic remoteness and, therefore, a non-city-based lifestyle. It's important to note that artists who describe their art practice as non-traditional (in a geographic sense, in that it is unlike art produced in remote Australia) do not necessarily consider their work to be without traditional qualities. For example, Ardler spoke with me about her involvement with renowned shellworker, and fellow La Perouse resident, Esme Timbery, and described taking up shellwork (alongside her painting and design practice) as a way to keep this traditional La Perouse art practice alive and vital. Thus, tradition can hold different meanings simultaneously.

Another use of the term tradition positioned it as the opposite of contemporary, urban, or modern in a temporal and stylistic sense. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, here the term was used to address the perceived difference, in terms of the media utilised or subjects represented, between traditional and contemporary/urban/modern works. As discussed by various scholars, tradition and modernity (and other iterations of modernity such as contemporaneity) have long been imagined in scholarship, and elsewhere, as dichotomous; the latter embodying progress, change, development and growth, and the former signifying the antithesis of these. While this idea has ideological and conceptual currency, in reality the distinction, and opposition, between the traditional and the modern is far from clear cut (Gusfield 1967: 351, Germond-Duret 2016: 1545, Yadgar 2013: 451, Hirtz 2003: 887-889). As Ardler's connection to traditional practices from La Perouse, and her identification as a non-traditional artist suggests, the conceptual clarity and real-world murkiness of oppositional conceptions of tradition and modernity is certainly at play for participants.

### **Conceptualising Tradition and Culture**

Consideration of the production of, and discussion regarding, contemporary and urban art, or the use of dots and south eastern designs in NSW, illustrates that tradition is an important concept for participants. It is also a concept that is important to, and which guides the actions of, arts professionals who are involved in the production or circulation of art in the state. As was suggested in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, time – as an authenticating agent – plays a role in the way tradition is understood by most participants. Here, tradition, as a definitional concept, has a direct relationship to notions of historical time, with a tradition often connoting something that has been enacted, for a significant, even innumerable, period of time. The enthusiasm expressed by research participants, and government bodies, for south eastern designs – due to their visual uniqueness and their connection to the pre-settlement past – demonstrates the power of time (and timelessness) to validate certain actions or practices as authentic traditions. This understanding of a tradition, as something enacted over time, correlates with

classical western – and subsequently anthropological – conceptions of the term (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 273-274).

Elsewhere, however, ancientness is not a pre-requisite for art practices considered traditional, as in the case of urban and contemporary art. Like south eastern designs, the traditional status of urban and contemporary art is associated with the persistence of these forms over time, although in this case the period is relatively short. As outlined previously, having initially been decried, in some quarters, as inauthentic or un-Aboriginal, urban art has, over the past four decades, become – due to a shift in critical, commercial, and to some extent, popular attitudes – an accepted form of Australian Aboriginal art, strongly associated and identified with NSW and the south east (Kleinert and Koch 2012: 1). Contemporary art, as a latter day iteration of urban art, has been accorded this same status.<sup>1</sup> The fact that urban, and later contemporary, art first flourished in the south east and are, as a result strongly associated with artists and organisations (like Boomalli) operating out of the region, also affirms these art types as traditional to NSW.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in short, south eastern designs are traditional as a result of their ancientness (and because they originated prior to the colonisation of Australia) and urban and contemporary art are traditional because they are styles which were pioneered, and practiced for almost forty years, by south eastern artists.

All this illustrates – as does the conceptualisation by some artists of their dot painting as traditional – that while time plays a role in rendering a particular thing, or practice, a tradition, the span of time required for something to become traditional is variable. For example, Dennis Golding, whose dot paintings were discussed in Chapter 6, referred to his work as traditional because he inherited it from his mother.<sup>3</sup> Warwick Keen, on the other hand, described his south eastern designs as contemporary takes on a visual tradition that originated prior to British invasion. Golding's artistic tradition has been established over a period of around 25 years (the time period he and his mum have been maintaining this tradition) while Keen makes work continuous with a tradition maintained for thousands of years (Briggs and Jackson 2011: 2). What is important to acknowledge is that in both these instances the practices described as traditional are highly meaningful, and deeply important to the artists who utilise them regardless of the length of time they have existed.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, the analysis of urban and contemporary art in McCulloch and McCulloch Childs (2008: 278-291).

<sup>2</sup> I'm thinking here of artists like Lin Onus, Michael Riley, Robert Campbell Junior, Tracey Moffitt, Brenda Croft, Bronwyn Bancroft, Harry Wedge etc.

<sup>3</sup> Golding's conception of his dot painting as traditional due to it being handed down from his mother resonates with Carty's observation that the stylistic innovations of artists in Balgo have become '...sedimented as culture or tradition through processes of intergenerational transmission' (2011: 22).



### **Invention: Connections and Shortcomings**

There is a resonance between this variable validation period for tradition and *invention of tradition* scholarship. Rather than interpret dots, south eastern designs, or urban and contemporary art via the invention of tradition rubric as typified by Hobsbawm and Ranger's collection (1984), it is more fruitful to consider these cultural products in terms of scholarship on the invention of culture as pioneered by Wagner (1981), and elaborated upon by the likes of Clifford (1988, 2013) and Linnekin (1992). Before exploring this latter approach, it is first worth briefly considering the work on invention pioneered by Hobsbawm and Ranger.

Scholars in Hobsbawm and Ranger's high-profile edited collection *The Invention of Tradition* (1984), explore particular traditions, conceptualised as cultural practices that have been contrived in order to '...inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition...[and] where possible...attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past' (Hobsbawm 1984: 6). In this scholarship traditions are cast as invented in the sense that they are self-consciously and reflexively constituted, evoking a sense of continuity by overt alignment with a specific historical past and through repetitious ritual or symbolic practice. Traditions are defined in contrast to customs. While tradition is reflexive, self-conscious, actively created and the providence of '...pseudo-communities (nations, countries)' (Jolly 1992: 52), customs are natural, unconscious (though not unchanging) and occur in natural communities like those in evidence in '...so called "traditional" societies' (Hobsbawm 1984: 6, see also Jolly and Thomas 1992: 241).

Margaret Jolly's seminal critique of this strand of invention scholarship illustrates that texts such as Hobsbawm and Ranger's are haunted by the '...persistent spectre of inauthenticity' (Jolly 1992: 49). Jolly argues that implicit in distinctions between natural custom (handed down organically across time, the result of just living) and contrived tradition ('...culture as a reified symbol of a way of life...', the result of the grandiloquence of nationalists and politicians) are various assumptions and value-judgements (1992: 49). Focusing on invention scholarship concerned with the Pacific, Jolly seeks to challenge this distinction, '...first because a notion of true tradition entails a way of seeing Pacific cultures as unitary essences; second because it concords with a view of Pacific peoples as...without history before the West brought "social change"...and third because it equates unself-consciousness with authenticity...' (1992: 49).<sup>4</sup>

Considering certain cultural products from NSW – such as south eastern designs or urban art – in light of this branch of invention scholarship can have the effect of highlighting both their political power, and the way their makers deploy them to ideological ends. For example, the

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<sup>4</sup> Other critiques of this strand of invention literature are presented by Linnekin (1983, 1992), Jolly and Thomas (1992), Sahlins (1994), Briggs (1996), Otto and Pedersen (2005).

south eastern design revivals described in Chapter 4 can certainly be understood as part of a strategic push to identify and foster a unique visual language for Aboriginal NSW. Further, in calling their urban art practice traditional, artists are certainly making a political statement by seeking to undermine the assumption that Aboriginal people in NSW are acculturated and have no access to the traditions of their ancestors. While it is important to acknowledge the political efficacy of certain cultural forms, it is – as Jolly and others have observed – deeply problematic to assume that the presence of politics renders something invented or non-traditional, and that cultural products that are utilised in strategic, political action are dichotomous to non-political, non-reflexive cultural products. Further, there are profound political motivations associated with speaking about, and creating, art identified as traditional. As Myers observes, declaring oneself in possession of tradition is to make ‘...a claim of survival, persistence, and connection to a past’ (2004: 249).<sup>5</sup> However, this political power does not diminish the personal, cultural and emotional importance of these traditions for artists. As was demonstrated in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, making artworks utilising traditional forms – be they dots, or south eastern designs – is often an extremely significant, even emotional, action for participants, a point to which we will return.

In view of this, it is more fruitful to consider the art types explored in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 in terms of the theories presented by Wagner and others regarding the invented nature of *all cultures* and *all cultural products*. Wagner ‘...asserted the dynamic, real-time production of culture as a universal human activity, a corollary of the symbolic faculty’ (Linnekin 1992: 253). Thus, in every-day and interpersonal ways culture is invented via ‘...the continuing manipulation of symbols to create new meanings’ (Jolly and Thomas 1992: 242). As Wagner summarised:

Invention, then, *is* culture...All meaningful expression, and therefore all experience and understanding, is a kind of invention, and invention requires a communicational base in shared conventions if it is to be meaningful – that is if it is to allow us to relate what we do, say, and feel to others, and to the world of meanings that we share with them (1981: 334).

This cultural invention can be gradual, or dynamic, reflective of dramatic change, or of steady transitions. As Clifford observes, with reference to Articulation Theory (a relative of Wagner’s theory of culture), ‘...not everyone is equally on the move’ in terms of cultural change (2013: 63).

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Geczy has observed, for many Aboriginal artists (and the audiences consuming their work) the creation of art is conceptualised as an inherently political act, an assertion of cultural survival in defiance of public expectations that Aboriginal people have lost touch with their culture (2013: 165, see also McLean 2011: 20).

In this vision of culture, tradition ‘...as a self-conscious category...is inevitably “invented”’ but this is not invention ‘...out of whole cloth’, but rather, ‘...the selection of what constitutes tradition is always made in the present; the content of the past...modified and redefined according to a modern significance’ (Linnekin 1983: 241). This view unsettles the assumption that culture is ‘...a thing-like bundle of traits amenable to scientific description...’ and instead recasts it as ‘...symbolically produced or “constructed” in the present’ (Linnekin 1992: 250-251). In view of this conception of culture and cultural tradition, the relatively short time period over which certain visual arts practices identified as traditional by participants – such as NSW dot painting or urban art – have been established is *unremarkable*; merely a particular example of the way in which all cultural products are produced, or operate.

### **Tradition, Culture and Authenticity**

As highlighted in the description of dot painting in NSW in Chapter 6, that a work is felt to be traditional by an artist doesn’t mean that it will be accorded this same status by arts professionals, or even other artists. In the case of dot painting in particular, even if an artist considers their practice to be an expression of their family heritage, many arts professionals are resistant to the idea that this renders dot paintings traditional. In this case, because dots are typically considered to be the heritage of artists from regions outside of the south east, artists from NSW (even when they had a strong emotional and cultural connection to dots) are felt to not have the proper cultural rights or authority to practice with them. In other words, while time might – for artists – transform certain practices into traditions, other factors – such as where these practices originated, or the background of the artist – may come into play when arts professionals and others assess their status as a tradition. This indicates, on the one hand, that artists feel that their, and their families’, creative practices have a kind of generative power that produces culture, and can establish particular creative practices as traditions. Here, culture is something innate to the artist that can physically manifest when an artwork is created.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the response of arts workers and some artists to dot paintings in NSW indicates that they often require cultural products to be externally validated before they are willing to consider them traditional. For example, south eastern designs can be understood as having been authenticated by museum collections and by written and illustrated material created by early settlers and others. Similarly, urban and contemporary art has been endorsed as culturally and aesthetically authentic, both critically and commercially. Briggs has asserted that often scholars utilising Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *invention* approach, while positioning

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in Chapter 2 regarding how artists conceptualise Aboriginal art.

their work as undermining western hegemonic discourse (1996: 435), are ultimately expanding and valorising ‘...scholarly control over the discourses of others...’ by positioning the historian, or anthropologist, as the ultimate arbiter of authenticity, rather than the *other* who actually practices, experiences and feels a connection to the culture under scrutiny (1996: 462-464). While arts professionals and others who were critical of dot-use did not always overtly articulate ‘invention’-type rhetoric in their evaluation of traditions as inauthentic, their criticism of dots has a resonance with Briggs’ observation. Specifically, there is a resonance in terms of their unwillingness to give due attention to the *experience* and *feelings* of those artists painting with dots when evaluating their value or traditional quality. Other factors are at play, which render these feelings and experiences, less compelling.

It is tempting to gloss this dismissal of dots as simply reflective of colonial-type thinking about the nature of indigenous peoples and cultures. Post-colonial and other scholars have described this thinking as follows: in order to be regarded as authentic and genuine, indigenous peoples must embody and practice cultural traditions that are apparently timeless and unchanging.<sup>7</sup> Any changes, and this has been particularly well documented in the arena of visual arts, prompt assertions, especially when colonial forms and modes of art making have been utilised, that the changing culture has become acculturated or degraded.<sup>8</sup> This betrays a double-standard in terms of how the culture of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples are imagined. As Marshal Sahlins neatly summarises, ‘...when...[non-indigenous peoples] change it’s called progress, but when...[indigenous peoples] do...it’s...adulteration, a *loss* of their culture’ (1999b: ii, emphasis original). Accompanying this double-standard is a kind of fetish for virgin indigeneity that is unsullied by the taint of the non-indigenous. Renato Rosaldo has called this ‘imperialist nostalgia’ whereby ‘colonial agents’ and others ‘...mourn the passing of what they themselves...’ actively worked to alter. This ‘...nostalgia uses a pose of “innocent yearning” both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination’ (1989: 108). For those who hold such essentialist views, dots from NSW signify acculturation, as it is possible to trace their origin and practice as originating *elsewhere*.

### **Authenticity Anxieties**

I think it’s likely that this essentialist vision of culture and cultural traditions lies at the heart of a minority of participants’ objections to dots in NSW. However, in view of comments from participants and of the ready acceptance of contemporary and urban art forms (which are patently non-traditional in a conception of culture as unchanging), it is clear that, for the majority of participants who feel negative or ambivalent about dots, these feelings arise as a

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Clifford (1988: 5), Macdonald (2001: 186), Phillips and Steiner (1999: 10).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Phillips (1998: 156-158), Nugent (2005: 85).

result of concerns about authenticity, which are not solely reducible to essentialist views of culture or Aboriginal people.

Here it is important to acknowledge that participants who expressed negative views about dots, especially those who work as arts professional, care deeply about, and are passionate advocates for, art produced by the artists with whom they work. Therefore, anxieties about the authenticity of dot paintings produced in NSW arise from recognition of the inherent worth of art produced in the state, rather than from doubts about its merits.

Authenticity is, much like tradition, a term that accommodates various connotations. As Dimitrios Theodossopoulos summarises, 'the concept...encompasses diverse sets of meaning that range from genuineness and originality to accuracy and truthfulness' (2013: 339). George Newman and Rosanna Smith (2016), in reviewing typologies of authenticity appearing in literature produced across various disciplines, suggest a meta-typology of authenticity. These are, Historical Authenticity (related to an object's 'unique spatiotemporal history' (2016: 612)); Categorical Authenticity (expectations regarding the qualities or dimensions of the category of the thing being evaluated); Value Authenticity (assessments relating to the motivations and nature of a person producing the thing being evaluated); and Self Authenticity (linked to how the person judging authenticity feels when engaging with the thing being appraised) (2016: 612-613). In seeking to get a clear sense of the types of judgements made by participants regarding the authenticity of dots, and other visual forms produced in NSW, it is worthwhile considering Historical Authenticity and Value Authenticity.<sup>9</sup>

Historical Authenticity is explicitly concerned with the history and quality of the object being assessed as authentic. Encompassing Denis Dutton's concept of Nominal Authenticity, Historical Authenticity relates to evaluations regarding '...the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object', for example the provenance or authorship of a work of art (Dutton 2005: 259). Determinations about this kind of authenticity are usually '...binary in nature (is it *the thing* or not?)' and are founded on the assumption that '...authenticity is something that can be verified via an objective, external source (e.g., notes of provenance and expert evaluation)' (Newman and Smith 2016: 612, emphasis original).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> There is also an argument to be made for these judgements being linked to Categorical Authenticity, as it relates to perceptions regarding what Aboriginal art as a category of things *is*. One might also argue that Self Authenticity is relevant here too. For example, one could posit that certain Aboriginal artworks are accorded authenticity because they make consumers feel connected to a country that, as non-Indigenous people, they feel a desire to consolidate and affirm. This idea has a resonance with Thomas' writing on Settler Primitivism: the appropriation of indigenous cultural tropes to form settler identity (1999: 8-12).

<sup>10</sup> Arguably this focus on tracing apparently objective histories connects judgements about Historical Authenticity to evaluations regarding natural customs versus invented traditions.

Historical Authenticity is in evidence in various comments from participants including those involving: the defence or derision of dots in NSW in terms of tracing the geographical, historical and cultural *origins* of dot-painting; description of south eastern designs as an authentic NSW tradition because of their presence in pre- and early colonial material records; and discussion of the south east as the birthplace of urban Aboriginal art, or of Sydney as a hub for contemporary art production. In each of these examples, history, temporality and geo-spatiality are evoked in the evaluation of the authenticity of the art type under consideration.<sup>11</sup>

Historical Authenticity is, in some respects, dependent on those essentialised ideas about culture and tradition described above. After all, Historical Authenticity involves tracing linear histories relating to the production of works over time, and on evaluations regarding particular productions as inauthentic if they are *out of proper place or time*. However, these authenticity judgements are not wholly reducible to essentialised conceptions about culture and tradition. For example, concerns about the Historical Authenticity of dots in NSW are frequently related to a belief in the importance of honouring cultural rights and authorities, cultural protocols, and laws or ethical codes associated with copyright and ownership. For example, arts workers were often concerned about artists in NSW contravening norms regarding who has a cultural right or the moral authority to paint with dots. This signifies more than an obsession with provenance, or a view of tradition as static, and demonstrates a concern with equity and for attending to various cultural norms and sensitivities.

Value Authenticity relates less to the tangible dimensions or formal values of a thing under consideration (although they are relevant), and more to the agent or group who produced it. Newman and Smith argue that Value Authenticity ‘...invokes normative considerations, e.g., the extent to which someone is intrinsically motivated and eschews greed, or the extent to which someone’s behaviour embodies the values of a particular culture’ (2016: 613). Dutton, in discussing Expressive Authenticity (which is encompassed by Value Authenticity), describes the foci of these kinds of authenticity judgements. They are, for example, concerned with the following: evaluating if the artwork is a reflection of ‘committed, personal expression, being true...to one’s artistic self, rather than true to an historical tradition...’ (2005: 267); detecting if

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<sup>11</sup> Beyond this, the valorisation of south eastern designs by arts professionals and the simultaneous degradation of dots on the grounds that the former is ‘traditional’ and the latter is not, demonstrates how – on a broad level – the past, particularly the ancient past, is central to popular understandings of tradition and authenticity, especially with regards to indigenous and other cultural products (Brumann 1999: 11, Kleinert 1994: 9, Thomas 1994: 30).

an artwork reflects particular personal or social values (2005: 270-271); or evaluating the motivations of the artist as they pertain to their intended audience (2005: 269).<sup>12</sup>

Value Authenticity can be detected when participants discussed, for example: eschewing dots because they saw them as part of Aboriginal art orthodoxy; the originality and innovation inherent in contemporary or urban Aboriginal art as opposed to the imitative nature of work done by 'traditional' artists; and, the integrity of contemporary artists in creating works that address political issues and are not merely decorative or created to court consumer interest. Here judgements are made about the commitment of artists to their artistic vision, the originality and innovation inherent in particular artworks, and the motivations that prompt artists to make and sell work. Like Historical Authenticity, Value Authenticity may depend on an essentialist view of tradition as the result of invariant reproduction of custom, and as something antithetical to innovation or change. However, it may also relate to convictions regarding how the artist, as an ideal-type, is conceptualised (e.g. as an innovator, a cultural person, a creative genius, a rebel, a truth-teller etc.).<sup>13</sup>

In acknowledging the role anxieties around authenticity play, we can see that the convictions, experiences and feelings of artists regarding, for example, their right to create artworks featuring dots, are often not taken into account when individuals assess the authenticity or traditional quality of particular forms. These may be subsumed by prevailing ideologies regarding not only conceptions of culture and cultural traditions, but also by the way various cultural protocols or legal proscriptions are navigated, or by how the role of the artist is envisioned.

### **Authenticity: Distinguishing Between Culture and Tradition**

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 illustrated that the traditional nature of certain art forms may be part of the reason they are perceived as authentic by artists and arts professionals. However it is important to note that an art practice or visual style does not need to be traditional in order for it to be valued as an authentic cultural product. Indeed, as explored in Chapter 5, many artists who self-identify as contemporary remarked that they are not interested in the production of traditional art but, nevertheless, produce works which are guided by, and are expressions of, their culture and cultural knowledge. Consider the following comment from artist Alison Williams. Williams was discussing the expectations non-Aboriginal audiences bring to their engagement with Aboriginal art:

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<sup>12</sup> Dutton argues that while this type of Authenticity judgement is articulated across western philosophical traditions, such as existential philosophy (2005: 267), it is also found in non-western contexts, such as in Papua New Guinea (2005: 271-272).

<sup>13</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, the conviction that urban or contemporary artists create authentic work because of the 'realness' of their individual expression was articulated by various participants.

I just find it interesting how people perceive Aboriginal culture, and what their expectations are. Should I be painting an old traditional story in an old traditional way? I'm free to express however I like, if anything the only thing that I feel governed by is things to do with my culture as far as what elements of the story I might tell, if there is something I'm not supposed to be telling or if there is a symbol I shouldn't paint. I'm very mindful of those sorts of things, more so than what anyone expects of me.

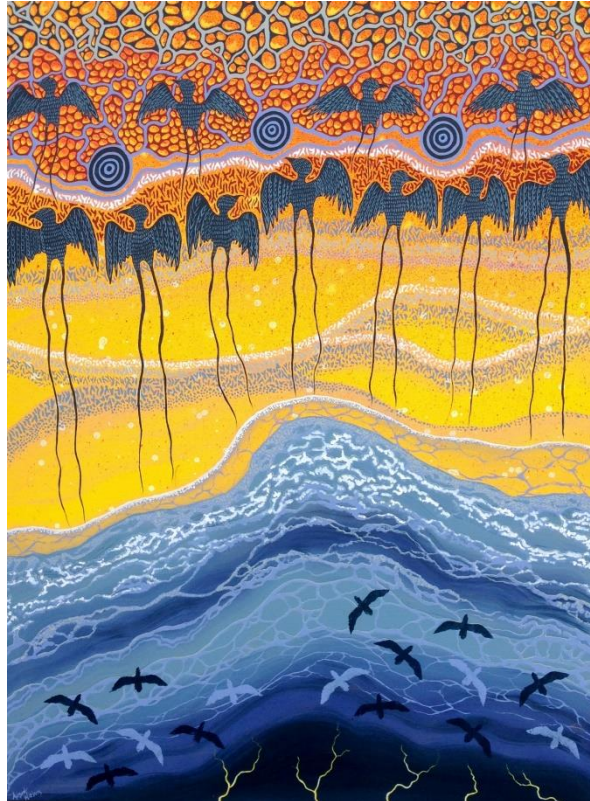


Figure 7.1. Alison Williams, date unknown, *Mutton bird coast*, acrylic on canvas, dimensions unknown. Image credit: Alison Williams. Courtesy of the artist. ©Alison Williams.

Williams, who works across different types of media and experiments with various visual styles, does not feel compelled to create works in what she calls a 'traditional way'; instead Williams feels free to create work in any visual style she decides to experiment with. While the artist is free from constraints in terms of the style of her artworks, she *is* guided by her culture, producing work that she, and her community, consider culturally appropriate. Williams' works are cultural products in the sense that their creation is governed by cultural norms. Here, art practices do not need to be traditional in order to be cultural, nor is tradition a prerequisite when an artwork is considered an authentic expression of culture.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A similar attitude to the cultural and aesthetic authenticity and value of non-traditional art practices is evident when one examines the history of urban art in NSW. Michael Riley's short film *Boomalli: Five Koorie Artists* (1988) features interviews with five of the founding members of Boomalli. Each artist talks about their art practice and its relationship to their Aboriginal cultural heritage, often with reference to criticism they have received because of assumptions that they are, as city-based, urban artists, not properly Aboriginal. Various artists assert their right to create work in ways that are non-traditional while also identifying themselves as Aboriginal artists. Bronwyn Bancroft states, for example, 'I don't



This reaffirms that it is important to make an analytical distinction between culture and tradition. Bronner provides a useful description of this distinction:

...tradition, especially when referred to in the plural...[carries] the connotation of practices of a society, while culture...[suggests an] encompassing idea of the society. There is an implication that one can grasp traditions, participate in them, [and] invoke them, more easily than the abstraction of culture' (1998: 11).

This distinction resonates with comments made by artists in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 regarding their status as cultural, but not traditional, artists; they make work that is imbued with cultural significance, but this work is not an iteration of a traditional practice or ritual.<sup>15</sup> That participants understand their cultural products as authentic, even if they are not traditional, endorses Macdonald's observation that tradition and authenticity:

...when reified, become mutually interlocked in a dangerous circle of interdependence and therefore offer little in the way of explaining how transformative processes actually operate within Aboriginal socialities...it is a mistake to think that notions of continuity can only be linked to inelastic frameworks of traditionality (2001: 190).

### **Cultural Continuity and Change**

The authenticity, as perceived by various participants, of urban art, or dot paintings illustrate that not all art forms require an aura of tradition for them to be valued as authentic cultural or aesthetic products. Indeed, as described in Chapter 5, for some artists, so called traditional works created in art centres are seen as anything but authentic (see for example Ah Kee in Moore 2006: 3). This requires acknowledgement that, as articulated in Chapter 2, for some artists, often those who are resistant to being classified as Aboriginal artists, art making is not an explicitly cultural activity. Such artists might make work that is strongly informed by their experience of being an Aboriginal person, or might address issues or themes relevant for Aboriginal people. However, this does not necessarily render their work, for them, 'Aboriginal art' or, more pertinent to this discussion, an Aboriginal cultural product that contributes to maintaining a shared culture. For other artists, art making *is* explicitly associated with the

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think there is much of a link between my work and traditional Aboriginal art because traditional Aboriginal art is based on ritual, ceremony and the linking of natural and spiritual philosophies, and I don't really do that with my work...And I also think it's a very compromising thing for an Aboriginal artist to think that they have to use traditional Aboriginal art to feel that they are valid, that's a really big problem and something we often come up against' (Riley 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Gibson has observed that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have a strong sense of their own identity as Aboriginal, or Barkindji, people and yet, they often simultaneously declare that they do not *have* culture. Gibson explains that because culture requires, in the public discourse, 'externalised tangible demonstration' many in Wilcannia '...struggle to possess this thing which has been "lost"' (2013: 57). This separation between Aboriginality and culture seems to me to be the result of the popular conflation of culture (Aboriginality) with tradition (envisioned as unchanging and inflexible) and, in turn, of tradition with authenticity or authentic culture.

production of culture and it is to these artists, and their conceptualisation of cultural continuity, that we now turn.

The narratives articulated by participants, which ostensibly position their contemporary or *non-traditional* artistic products as *traditional* or culturally continuous, illustrate that a tradition, or indeed culture as a whole, is not understood by artists and others, as static or unchanging. Indeed, culture was referred to by artists in ways that suggest that it is considered, by them, to be flexible, adaptive and often broadly constituted. Thus, artistic continuity, as a marker of the maintenance of a particular culture, need not be the literal reproduction of a specific practice, visual method or form, over time. Rather, the continuity of cultural practice may be maintained laterally, obliquely, creatively, symbolically or via radical innovation. Indeed, a work may be considered, by the artist, to be wholly original or contemporary and yet also contain some resonance, a trace of continuity, with art practices enacted in the past. More than this, as was demonstrated in the discussion on potter Bevan Skinner in Chapter 6, an object may be understood as an Aboriginal cultural product, due simply to the fact that an Aboriginal person created it. Here, culture is understood as something embodied by, and therefore expressed in, the products created by a person.

While understanding, protecting and practicing culture in ways overtly continuous with the actions of ancestors is often important for artists, both in their daily lives and in their art practice, this does not preclude new, original or innovative ways of making art from qualifying as Aboriginal also. The attitudes of these artists validate, in some ways, Sahlins' approach to cultural change; in response to invention of tradition literature, he asserts that a continuous culture is never an immobile one, and that, indeed '*...the strongest continuity may consist in the logic of cultural change*' (1994: 415, emphasis original). Sahlins' assertion is that cultures – and by extension cultural traditions – are not static, bounded and all-binding but are entities in a process of constant evolution. In Sahlins' analysis, culture is a structuring agent, the key that renders the map of life comprehensible and via which events are interpreted and reconciled. Thus, any given tradition is invented '*...in the specific terms of the people who construct [it]...*' (1994: 409). Therefore, as Macdonald summarises, for Sahlins '*...it is in the way that a people change that they maintain their wholeness, their distinctiveness...*' (Macdonald 2001: 191, emphasis original).

While the structuralist bent of Sahlins' work both does, and does not, reflect the way culture operates for participants, his notion that cultures change in ways that confirm and maintain their uniqueness certainly resonates. Take for example the following statement made by Nathan Peckham, a painter and digital artist working in Dubbo:

This was my big epiphany: Aboriginal art was always whatever they could find; the colours are what they are because they were the colours that were available. Around here we have a lot of yellow and red ochre and a lot of the paintings were predominantly that, we used to trade it, that was a commodity. So the brushes that we used depended on the region and it was because of the material, the grasses and trees and plants that they could craft into their paintbrushes and whatever. Now we have the bright colours, I remember when I worked with the art gallery and it was said, it is not really Aboriginal art because you are using all these bright colours. But that's what we can get our hands on at the moment, so if anything it's closer to Aboriginal art than you think because, for me, what makes it Aboriginal art is not so much the story that it tells but the way it was created, the processes of finding the materials, which reflects more about the ingenuity behind the art and the beauty of the art.



Figure 7.2. Nathan Peckham, date unknown, *My Dreamscape*, digital image, dimensions unknown. Image credit: Nathan Peckham. Courtesy of the artist. ©Nathan Peckham.

Peckham's attitude was echoed by many artists, often with regards to the materials or tools they utilised in their art making. For example, Wilcannia man and prolific wood carver, Wadi Harris spoke about his commitment to teaching young people and others in the community about the carving tradition he maintains: 'I said to the kids and those I've been teaching, I carve by hand but you don't have to do that, you can use a machine. There are modern ways you can make these things and still have that connection to where they come from'. Here, culture changes in a culturally specific way, so that it still has 'that connection' to that which preceded it. In other words, cultural continuity involves change and, therefore, change does not erode culture.

### **Culture and Structure**

Otto and Pedersen have argued that Sahlins' focus on the structuring nature of culture leads him to ignore that people can be aware of the way culture structures their actions and thus choose to subvert or act outside cultural norms (2005: 21). This observation is particularly

appropriate to this discussion because artists in NSW demonstrate a reflexive understanding of the way culture shapes a person's approach to the world around them. This understanding may well be the result of artists' fluent cross-cultural literacy; their ability to navigate and operate within and outside the cultural norms of both their Aboriginal culture(s) and the majority culture of non-Indigenous Australia. This cross-cultural proficiency was demonstrated in numerous, often small, ways during interviews, but was particularly clear when artists *translated*, for me, the meaning of certain actions, relationships or events that they felt I might interpret differently from them because I am a white woman. For example, several artists spoke about the influence on their creative practice of what I would classify as their extended family – aunts, uncles or first and second cousins. Concerned that I would not understand the intimacy they felt with these family members, several artists described what 'immediate family' designated in their culture. For example, Nathan Peckham clarified, when discussing a work he had made about his aunt who had recently died, '...with Aboriginal families, aunts are like mothers, you are always a step closer to your relatives'.

While this cross-cultural knowledge of artists waters down the strong, top-down analysis of culture implicit in Sahlins' analysis, it does not undermine, in a totalising way, the structuring power of culture. As outlined in the above discussion on the generative power of art making, artists talk about the production and maintenance of culture in ways that illustrate they have been profoundly shaped by their culture in terms of their world view, approach to art-making and sense of self. They also, especially if they consider themselves to be cultural artists, position themselves as actively producing and sustaining culture. Thus, put in the parlance of debates regarding the structuring power of culture, for artists culture is simultaneously something that *structures* their lives and which is also dependent on the *agency* of individuals for its maintenance. There is a resonance here with Structuration theory, which was conceived by Anthony Giddens (1984) as a means of reconciling *structure vs. agency* debates. Here, Giddens sought to acknowledge that:

...though we are caught up in a world not of our own making (a world that tells us where to be, what to do and what to say), we also create that world through our own actions and thoughts. People are agents; their agency creates the structures; the structures constrain and enable agency. No one way causal arrow, no beginning or ending (Bender 1998: 36).

### **The Literal and the Lateral**

All this illustrates that while essentialist perceptions regarding tradition – and the elements that constitute, or violate, this category concept – might seem to preclude the notion that a clay pot adorned with evenly spaced dots (as created by Bevan Skinner), or a computer generated 'painting' produced in Photoshop (as made by Nathan Peckham), could be

continuous with art made by the ancestors of these artists 100, 1000 or 10,000 years ago, many research participants understand culture in ways that make this kind of continuity not only possible, but self-evident. For some of the arts professionals who work with these artists this continuity is difficult to detect, affirming the power and influence of those essentialist perceptions. This aside, the dotting practice of artists like Darren Moffitt or Dennis Golding, the contemporary photographic practice of Paris Norton, or the use of south eastern designs by Warwick Keen, provide clear examples of the way particular art practices can accommodate and embody continuity in ways that are both literal and lateral.



Figure 7.3. Nathan Peckham, date unknown, *Bohra*, digital image, dimensions unknown. Image credit: Nathan Peckham. Courtesy of the artist. ©Nathan Peckham. The artist explained that he used an original acrylic on canvas and then reworked it digitally to create this work.

These observations about culture and change are validated by certain literature on Aboriginal art production in the south east. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the cultural meaning and importance of artworks that have historically been labelled as acculturated, touristic, or non-traditional, has been a strong theme in literature produced on First Nations art practices since the late 1980s. Consideration of this literature demonstrates that art forms previously classified as non-traditional, acculturated or un-Aboriginal are capable of being imbued with, and embodying, cultural meanings, understandings and knowledge. Kleinert, for example, addresses the ways in which the creation of tourist art at Bill Onus' *Aboriginal Enterprises* (in Victoria, Australia) acted as a means of cultural maintenance via which artists could continue to practice, or feel in touch with, particular cultural traditions in the face of '...the national goal of assimilation' (2010a: 175).

### **Pride Not Shame**

As is evident in the way artists conceptualise cultural continuity, change – as expressed via innovation, experimentation, or the use of 'new' aesthetic styles or media – was not a source

of distress or shame for participants. While tradition and a connection to the past is clearly important to artists, change – either radical or subtle – doesn't signify disconnection from the past, or loss of culture. As photographer Cassandra Jones explained, 'our culture, despite what some think, is not fixed, not all Aboriginal people are in the bush, the majority of Aboriginal people live in the cities, and culture is dynamic and ever changing and there's new political things that people want to say'.

The attitudes of artists like Jones provide a clear counterpoint to the observations of scholars such as Gibson, Cowlshaw and Povinelli who have asserted that many Aboriginal people in the south east, and beyond, have taken on a '...white view of themselves as lacking "real" Aboriginal culture...' (Gibson 2008a: 295) if their lives, and appearance, differ from popular representations of traditional Indigeneity celebrated by the Australian state.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that these attitudes do not exist in NSW, however in the context of this research, they were not articulated.<sup>17</sup> Rather, artists were aware of the 'white-view' described by these scholars and were keen to actively and loudly refute it, especially with regards to the notion there was no proper cultural art work produced in NSW. Perhaps these attitudes were not articulated because artists were often directly involved in the creation of cultural products, thus in making culture did not feel they were culturally impoverished. Therefore, at least as concerns research participants, the shame, fear and anxiety described by the likes of Cowlshaw or Povinelli appear to be an overstatement and perhaps a reproduction of the 'fatal impact' view of colonialism that '...exaggerate[s] colonial power, diminishing the extent to which colonial histories were shaped by Indigenous resistance and accommodation' (Thomas 1994: 15).

It's worth acknowledging that although feelings of shame about not having culture were not articulated by participants, expressions of pain and anger about personal, familial and cultural loss, were. In our discussions artists spoke knowledgeably and emotionally about the cultural meanings and functions they saw their art as embodying and fulfilling on both a social and political level. However, accompanying these narratives of cultural competency, practice and pride, were those which acknowledged and discussed destruction, devastation and bereavement. These stories were not necessarily strident or totalising, sometimes they were merely footnotes to the biography of an artist, or to an explanation of their art practice, nevertheless they were articulated. For example, artists discussed being part of the Stolen Generations, their family's forcible removal from Country, their experience of racial prejudice or abuse, or the lack of autonomy they had growing up on a mission. In other words, the

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<sup>16</sup> See Gibson (2008a: 295), Macdonald (2001: 176), Cowlshaw (2011: 171), Povinelli (2002: 6).

<sup>17</sup> For example, Gibson has written at length about how her research collaborators in Wilcannia experience pain and anxiety regarding their knowledge and practice of traditional culture. Of particular concern was that they could not speak the Barkindji language (see for example 2013: 125 & 297).

violence, repression and loss that Aboriginal people have endured in the years following British colonisation continues to resonate with, and matter to, many participants: it is one of the central subjects about which they make work; it may be part of what drives their art practice; it plays a role in shaping their political and social outlook; and is part of their understanding of themselves and their community and family.

### **Change and Cultural Boundaries**

In acknowledging that participants see change as an unremarkable element of the living culture to which they belong, it is important also to stress that this does not mean that this living culture is not seen as being fundamentally bounded and demarcated. The importance of cultural boundaries is worthy of consideration in view of the strong interest that scholars from the humanities have taken in moving away from theorising cultures in essentialist terms. There has been, since the 1980s, an ongoing debate regarding approaches to theorising and representing different cultures and how they interact (Hinkson and Smith 2005: 157). Typically, exploration of interactions between different cultural groups have been conceptualised as the meeting, or coming together, of two distinct, stable, separate cultures (Sullivan 2005: 183). Gupta and Ferguson note that such explorations tend to utilise a spatial metaphor, thus conceptualising the dialogic relations between 'distinct' and 'separated' cultures (1992: 14) who may meet and interact but are, ultimately, divided by, as Sullivan puts it, a '...problematic space between them' (2005: 183). According to critics, this *spatial* approach depends on a dated conception of culture as inherently stable and bounded, and does not leave any room for acknowledgment that apparently homogenous cultures are frequently characterised, and sustained by, tension, fission and fragmentation (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 13-14, Myers 2004: 251). In response to this kind of thinking certain scholars have attempted to move away from representing the intercultural as the *interface* between cultures existing in separately demarcated domains. Instead the focus has been on situating difference in the context of a unified, single, social field, in which any differentiation is relationally constituted (Hinkson and Smith 2005: 158, see also Weiner 2006: 17-18, Merlan 2005: 169).

In view of the influence of this approach to theorising culture (and cultures meeting) it is important to acknowledge that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal research participants spoke about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture in ways that affirmed the strong boundaries between them. Firm divisions between Aboriginal and other cultures were not only present, they were ideologically important (Morphy and Morphy 2013: 639, Gibson 2008a: 296).<sup>18</sup> As was described in Chapter 2, artists often spoke about having an identity dependent on multiple

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<sup>18</sup> This would seem to endorse Sahlins' wry assertion that 'conscious and conspicuous boundary-making has been increasing around the world in inverse relation to anthropological notions of its significance' (Sahlins 1999a: 414, see also Brumann 1999: 11).

cultures, or resulting from cultural mixing. For example, Jason Wing is comfortable identifying as simultaneously Aboriginal, Chinese and Australian. Despite the interest in representing and exploring their multiple cultural heritages and their mixes, artists envisioned these heritages as being distinct from one another (as evidenced by the fact they list them at all when defining their identity). Artists spoke of learning a particular artistic skill from the Aboriginal side of their family, or of planning to explore their Scottish heritage in a particular art work. In all these instances Yuin, Darug or Yaegl culture was distinguished as unique to, and separate from, other cultures, even those with which participants identified. Thus, while artists often saw culture as fluid and changeable, these changes were understood as internal to the culture being changed. Therefore, for participants, while change may expand and amend the parameter of a culture (a parameter encompassing the most loosely defined of coalitions), it will never dissolve its boundaries. Here, even when artists belong to multiple cultures, these cultures are understood as being as distinct from each other, even as they meet and combine to constitute the artist. Thus, many artists comfortably make work from the space *between* and *across* cultures which Sullivan identified as *problematic* (2005: 183).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated the ways tradition, authenticity, culture, and cultural continuity are understood by participants, focusing particularly on the expansive and broadly constituted nature of tradition and cultural continuity as they operate in NSW. This affirms the relevance of scholarship advocating for a view of culture as capable of change while retaining its continuity. The following chapters will consider the ways in which artworks produced by participants (as objects imbued with culture, tradition, authenticity, contemporaneity etc.) are perceived and understood as they circulate in the art market.



## Chapter 8 Conceptualising the Market

*'Artists produce what the distribution system can and will carry. It is not that nothing else can be produced. Other artists, willing to forego the possibilities of support and exposure characteristic of a particular art world, do produce other kinds of work. But the system will ordinarily not distribute those works, and such artists will be failures, unknowns, or the nuclei of new worlds that grow up around what the more conventional system does not handle' –*  
Becker (2008: 129)

### **Market Spheres: How and Where Artists Sell Their Work**

This chapter, and the following, will consider the sale of works, by artists, in the art market. While Chapter 9 will examine how artists conceptualise their interaction with the market, and will propose that such market interactions are significant to artists in various ways, this chapter will be devoted to describing the art market in which research participants are engaged. Specifically, it will outline the norms, protocols and narratives that are produced by, and govern, an artist's engagement with the market.

In preceding chapters, the art market has been referred to as a single entity which encompasses all transactions involving the circulation of art. However, during fieldwork it was evident that participants engage with what can broadly be called the Aboriginal art market at different levels and in distinct ways. These levels are defined by various factors including where objects are offered for sale, the prices they command, and how they are marketed. I would like to propose that it is productive to conceptualise these levels of engagement as a set of interconnected spheres that, as a whole, constitute the market in which artists are engaged. These spheres are loosely defined; they overlap and shift, with artists able to sell their works in different spheres over time, or in some instances, in various spheres simultaneously.

These spheres are a useful analytical contrivance because they allow for the description of the various norms which govern the sale of particular types of work in certain price brackets, to specific sets of consumers engaged in the purchase of Aboriginal art from NSW.<sup>1</sup> Broadly, the Aboriginal art market in NSW can be imagined in terms of three spheres: the word-of-mouth, retail, and fine art spheres.<sup>2</sup> These spheres are demarcated by the following: prices

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Sillitoe has described economic spheres as '...a heuristic device to further an understanding of the political economic implications...of limitations on transactions' (2006: 2). The economic spheres explored here are also offered as a heuristic device.

<sup>2</sup> While I have specifically designated one of these spheres the 'retail sphere' it is important to note that the term retail denotes a broad array of commercial enterprises including those that exist outside of the 'retail sphere'. The commercial art galleries described in the 'fine art sphere' are no less retail outlets than the shops or markets described in the 'retail sphere'. What distinguishes those enterprises

commanded, media and aesthetic form, sales venue, the artists' level of direct exposure to commercial transactions, the means via which the work is commercially promoted, and the levels of fiscal and legal regulation the sphere is subject to. A fourth sphere – the online sphere – could also have been included here; a number of participants sell their work almost exclusively online, some in an informal manner, and others via web-based businesses with dedicated maintenance and updating. However, given that the internet is utilised in each of the three above mentioned spheres it will not be discussed as a discrete sphere.

### **Classificatory Schema**

Literature relating to indigenous art markets has tended to utilise various demarcations when classifying artworks offered for sale, including the geographic location in which an artist operates, and the attendant aesthetic style and artistic content this is supposed to connote, as exemplified by the distinction between urban and tribal art, or contemporary and traditional art (Chapman 2006: 219-220, Gibson 2013: 54). Elsewhere distinctions are made between ethnographic objects, or artefacts, and fine art.<sup>3</sup> In other instances works are classified in terms of art type, typically evaluated in terms of how a work is produced and who the intended consumer of this work is. Common classificatory terms include fine art or tourist art, with the former denoting one-of-a-kind works created by an artist and the latter, mass-produced works created by a craftsperson or labourer (see for example Acker et al. 2013: 7).

Despite the wide use of these pre-existing systems of classification, they are not reproduced here in order to avoid the baggage that often dogs their deployment. Undeniably there is an intuitive and functional worth to many of these modes of classification. Deeming an art object as, for example, *fine* or *touristic* is, at the very least, evocative; these are common sense categories that are easy, at least for those with some familiarity with western art history, to relate to. Apart from this common-sense value, there are also practical imperatives for utilising such descriptors. For example, Altman has argued for the importance of distinguishing between tourist and fine art objects in order to effectively market works for sale (1990: 7).

While the practical or descriptive usefulness of such categories is not in dispute, these classificatory systems become problematic when the ostensibly objective categories they rest upon are conflated with subjective evaluations related to artistic integrity or cultural

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described in the 'retail sphere' from those described in the 'fine art' sphere is the explicitly commercial nature of the former sphere.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between artefact and artwork is not commonly used in contemporary anthropological and art historical texts exploring Australian Indigenous art practice. However it appears that art market stakeholders continue to employ the distinction (see for example Morphy 2007: 191-192). In international contexts Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander art, regardless of form or style, is often presented as artefact or ethnographic object, as opposed to fine art (Wilson-Anastasios 2012: 22, see also Morphy 2007: 180-181).

authenticity. This kind of conflation is evident in various texts utilising the categories of tourist and fine art to distinguish between types of indigenous arts. Here, a common assumption is that art created for the tourist market is inherently culturally, aesthetically and artistically degraded (Phillips 1998: x).<sup>4</sup> Value judgements relating to the cultural authenticity and cultural integrity of art objects can also be found embedded in other common classificatory systems such as those dependent on the binary of urban/traditional art.<sup>5</sup> Further, I have avoided using binary classifications such as tourist/fine or contemporary/traditional because they are often far too slippery to be practically useful.<sup>6</sup> After all, Australian art history is littered with objects that have, over time, been variously classified as artefact, tourist object, fine artwork, or contemporary and traditional.<sup>7</sup>

In view of the difficulties associated with the classification of artworks offered for sale I have attempted instead to present my analysis of the art market by categorising and describing the various milieus in which artworks are offered for sale. Each of these market spheres accommodate specific kinds of artwork, priced in specific ranges and valued in different ways by makers, sellers and consumers. While this might place items in these spheres in a hierarchy in terms of monetary value, it does not place them in a hierarchy in terms of cultural, spiritual, personal, aesthetic or artistic value.

It is worth acknowledging that the anthropology of economics has long utilised the metaphor of spheres to discuss various discrete levels via which classes of objects, goods or beings are traded. Paul Bohannan's writing on the Tiv economy is perhaps the most influential work to explore spheres of trade, although Malinowski's work on the Kula might be understood as an

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<sup>4</sup> Graburn's introduction to 'Ethnic and Tourist Arts...' (1976) is a good example of this kind of assumption. Graburn classifies souvenirs, made by indigenous and other peoples, as both an aesthetic category of thing, intended to appeal to base consumer desire, and also a moral category of thing, one so culturally impoverished and so vulgarly identified with commercial transactions that it is morally without merit and, like 'pornokitsch', merely intended to satiate the consumer, by meeting – but not surpassing, populist expectations (1976: 5-6). Volli describes 'pornokitsch' as a 'negation' of both the '...human qualities of love and sex' and of the qualities of pornography itself, 'whose crudeness, realism and, to a great extent sexuality, it removes by means of constant and systematic use of euphemistic techniques' (1968: 224).

<sup>5</sup> For example, various scholars have explored the way urban or contemporary art has historically been conceptualised as being opposite to authentic, culturally continuous traditional or tribal arts created in remote desert regions. Designating this urban art as antithetical to traditional (authentic) art meant that, logically, urban art was conceptualised as inauthentic (Perkins 2011: 104, Morphy 1998: 380, Kleinert and Koch 2012: 3-4). Others have explored the division of Indigenous cultural products into the categories of art and artefact. See for example, Wilson-Anastasios on the marketing of Aboriginal art as ethnographic material (2012: 22-24).

<sup>6</sup> While I do use the terms 'tourist' and 'fine art' to discuss the spheres I am proposing here, it is not my intention that they should be understood as mutually exclusive.

<sup>7</sup> Shellwork created by women at La Perouse (Sydney) is a prime example of this kind of object. Since the 1880s shellwork has transitioned from popular, but acculturated, souvenir to tourist kitsch, and in the present is now hailed as fine art. Shellwork is presently analysed as both contemporary *and* traditional. See Allas et al. (2015), Freeman (1997), Nash (2009), Nugent (2011).

intellectual precursor (Sillitoe 2006: 2-5). The Tiv's economic spheres utilised by Bohannan are predicated on the function, and moral meaning, of items offered for trade and the way this moral significance precludes the commensuration of certain classes of objects with one another (Bohannan 1955: 64). While the spheres I am proposing are not demarcated by the moral meaning of objects being traded, the way artists and consumers think about the works being sold *is* significant and, for artists, their own feelings on this subject may well lead them to engage in one sphere over another.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, what follows is an outline of the three markets sphere through which Aboriginal artists in NSW sell their work.

### **Word-of-Mouth Sphere**

Darren Moffitt, an occasional painter based in Albury, has often sold work to family, friends and colleagues through word-of-mouth connections. He works full-time at an Indigenous health organisation and paints to relax and for enjoyment. He does not depend on the sale of work to make a living. This said, Moffitt's work has proved very popular amongst his friends, family and colleagues. As he explained, 'I've got a few paintings which are still hanging about that have been hard to sell but most of the other stuff doesn't really hang around too much'. The artist was recuperating in hospital after sustaining an injury at work when his wife, Kim, suggested that he try painting. He found the process restful and relaxing and started to create works in earnest. Those finished paintings not hung up on the walls of the family home were stashed by Moffitt under his and Kim's bed. Kim, who is a passionate advocate for her husband's work, was responsible for generating the first of his sales. As Moffitt explained:

I ended up with probably a small collection of maybe six or seven pieces...under the bed. And then...we had people over and had a barbecue and I was standing there looking after the barbecue then I noticed that there was no one around. I came into the house...they were all in my bedroom with all of my artworks spread over the bed...so that's where I made my first sale.

Moffitt does not paint regularly, making art when time constraints related to work and family life allow, sometimes working on a single painting for many months. While the artist continues to sell work to family, friends and by referral from those who have purchased his work in the past, he also exhibits and sells work through exhibitions in Albury and Wodonga, facilitated by Murray Arts, the local regional arts organisation. Moffitt, who for many years worked for the Army, has also undertaken several high-profile commissions for the Australian Defence Force, including images used for in-house publications and a large-scale painting commissioned to

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the spheres described by Bohannan are governed by the rules of trade, that is, the exchange of goods, rather than the exchange of money for goods (1955). While the exchange of goods and services for artworks does occur in NSW, generally speaking, the spheres I am proposing operate via the use of money in the procurement of art objects.

honour ‘...involvement and service in the Royal Australian Navy by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ (Moffitt 2012b). Although Moffitt is proud of these achievements and appreciative of the sales he has made over the years, he is reluctant to pursue art making in a full time capacity. As he explained:

I am hoping to keep it as a little niche hobby on the side that is good pocket money...I might have a little thing that I can do when I retire. At the moment I don't have the time, if I really wanted to turn it into a full-blown business I would need to put the time and effort into it. But I really don't think I could paint just to make money. I couldn't turn it into a production line and just paint for the sake of selling it. I still enjoy it and I don't want to get to the point where I don't enjoy painting anymore so I'm happy the way things are...

Moffitt's experience of engaging with the market typifies the level of engagement that I have dubbed the word-of-mouth sphere, a sphere characterised by informal or ad-hoc market engagements between artists and consumers. Here, artists produce works that are purchased by family, friends, friends-of-friends and via word-of-mouth recommendations. Typically an artist sells or gifts a work to a friend or family member, who puts the work on display in their home or office. The artist is then approached by a consumer who, having seen the original work on display, wishes to purchase a piece like it. Depending on the desires of the consumer, the artist will either produce a work in an agreed-upon vein (as a commissioned work), or will offer works that they have already created for purchase. Word-of-mouth referrals can provide a steady income for artists. However, given that those engaging in this market activity typically rely on full-time or part-time employment for an income, if the word-of-mouth market generates too much work related to art making, artists may experience this as stressful, overwhelming and unmanageable.

### **Prices**

Works circulated in this sphere command various prices, though typically works are priced lower than equivalent items (in terms of style, size and media) purchased through galleries and other retail outlets. This is because these works are not subject to the commission fee required by retail enterprises, and also because artists are frequently selling works to consumers with whom they have a pre-existing, sometimes close, relationship. Due to personal connection with consumers, artists frequently sell their paintings at 'mates-rates', discounting their prices, sometimes to an absolute minimum rate, so they can cover materials used, but little else. The price of an artwork is established, in many instances, especially when a work has been commissioned, via negotiation between customer and artist. This means that artists are able to respond and adapt, with a greater degree of flexibility than in a retail enterprise, to the price boundaries of a consumer. Artworks circulated in this sphere tend to be priced anywhere

between the high tens (typically \$50+ for a small painting) to the mid to high hundreds. Very large works may be priced in the low thousands, though usually only if the work has been created by an experienced artist with some renown. Artworks may also be traded for services or goods instead of purchased with cash. Darren Moffitt, for example, told me that he had traded a painting in exchange for IT help to build the website he showcases his artworks on (Moffitt 2012a).<sup>9</sup>

### **Styles and Media**

Artists who participate exclusively in this sphere typically make and sell paintings, although their art practice may incorporate other media. The stylistic nature of these works is diverse, however painters frequently utilise dots, or other stylistic devices, such as X-ray representations of animals or humans, which are highly identified with Aboriginal art. Works are often figurative and stylised depicting local native animals, their Country, Dreaming stories, or personal stories. Other works are abstract and involve repetitive patterns and optical illusions. Artists do not use a restricted palette, but deploy a broad spectrum of colours. That the majority of artists who participated in this market sphere create works that utilise dots and other Aboriginal-identified aesthetic tropes is significant. The frequency of dot usage in this sphere indicates their general popularity among artists working in NSW. Further, as will be explored, the prevalence of dot, X-ray and other Aboriginal-identified paintings circulating here is indicative of the unwillingness of many fine art galleries to sell paintings featuring these forms if the artist does not come from the Central, Western and Northern Desert regions of Australia.

### **Engagement with Consumers**

Artists who sell work via this word-of-mouth sphere, if they undertake proactive marketing at all, use forums that are free or low cost in order to promote their work. Social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram are utilised to share work to a network of friends, family members and admirers (who artists may or may not know offline). Unlike artists operating in other spheres, artists who sell work via this sphere frequently use their personal social media profiles, which are often not publicly accessible, to circulate work, rather than creating professional profiles that are available for public viewing. Some artists also have their own websites that they maintain with varying degrees of regularity.

While the sale of works in other market spheres often occurs in a physical space dedicated to the facilitation of such exchanges, artists operating in the word-of-mouth sphere conduct

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<sup>9</sup> In some instances artists who sell their works via other market spheres also engage in trade. For example, Blak Douglas is an ardent collector of Aboriginal artwork and likes to trade his artwork with artists he admires in order to collect their work.

commercial transactions in non-commercial places. Thus, the physical sale of artworks takes place in the artist's home (as typified by potential customers pulling artworks out from under Darren Moffitt's bed), their workplace, the home of the consumer, or in a public place. It is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of artists trading in the word-of-mouth-sphere live in regional and remote areas of NSW – such as Dubbo, the far South Coast, or Albury – which do not have the kind of formal, regulated fine-art market present in locations such as Sydney. In lieu of local access to this kind of market, artists who are not able, or inclined, to undertake the work involved in engaging with the fine-art market in, for example, Sydney, make do with sales facilitated by word-of-mouth referrals.

### **Narratives**

Artists who feel uncomfortable about the commodification of their artwork and who are not dependent on the sale of their art to make a living, specifically opt to engage in word-of-mouth market engagements. As Cassandra Jones, a young photographer based in Sydney, explained when I asked her about how she sells her work, 'I just started doing it [making art] for myself. I do [sell work], I've got a website and I've got stuff up for sale on that...I've just sold to family and friends, not really just trying to sell, sell, sell. That's not what I'm about'. Here, the word-of-mouth sphere is felt to be less intimidating and easier to enter than other spheres, particularly because it does not require the artist to engage with a dealer or retailer. In this way, artists are able to retain a greater level of control over the sale of their work and are free to produce, price and sell their work in a manner they feel comfortable, having only to accommodate the consumer with whom they are negotiating. Indeed, the one-on-one engagement between artist and consumer that characterises commercial interactions in this sphere also adds to its appeal for artists who are wary about their artworks becoming commercial products in the market. Thus, artists who feel uncomfortable or ambivalent about commodification of their artwork frame the personal, face-to-face negotiation and exchange that takes place in this sphere as distinct to other types of art market exchange, because it allows their artworks to remain as *their* artworks (which are highly personalised) rather than depersonalised commodities. This attitude is exemplified in the following comment from Natalie Bateman, a painter, ceramicist and print maker based in Dalmeny on the South Coast of NSW. I asked Bateman about how she typically sold her work, and she responded:

Word-of-mouth is the go...I just did a commission for this lady...She said, I went to my friend's house and I saw your mullet in the dilly bag and oh my god it's just drop-dead stunning, the way it was framed, the way the light was on it. She said I want one...So I think that's mainly how I've sold my work. Then you get to have a relationship with people that buy them too, which is good.

Here, the sale of work is understood as a kind of personal exchange that takes place directly, and without mediation, between the artist and the consumer (a friend, family member, or friend-of-a-friend) who admires their work. This type of sale is distinct from that which takes place in, for example, the retail sphere where the artist's work is sold, often by a third party (such as the shop or gallery owner), to a consumer who the artist is unlikely to ever meet and whose motivations for purchase they are unlikely to discover. In this situation the artist is ultimately physically absent and their artwork is purchased in the same way as any other commodity, via the exchange of money between two people who need not be known to each other. For artists who feel trepidation about the commodification of their work, exchanges in the word-of-mouth sphere are personal exchanges rather than commercial ones: the artist meets the consumer, speaks with them about the work, they agree upon a price, and the artist hands their work to the consumer. After this initial exchange, in some instances, the artist may even get to see their work again, in the home of the consumer, and thus witness the consumer and others appreciating it. Indeed, several artists described the pleasure they experienced seeing their work in the homes of the purchaser.

Here, the intimate, interpersonal nature of the commercial transactions taking place render the word-of-mouth market sphere as a kind of non-market. That is, the artwork remains an artwork rather than becoming a commodity as the work is physically given, by the artist, to a known person. Thus the actual moment of sale is, for artists, downplayed and the interpersonal nature of the engagement is emphasised. There is an almost Marxian dynamic at play here, whereby the conceptualisation of the word-of-mouth market sphere as a kind of *non-market* market means that artists feel they are not subject to the same alienation from the product of their labour as artists who engage with more formal, regulated market spheres where artworks are produced en masse and sold to anonymous consumers (Marx [1959] 2009: 29, Morrison 2006: 122). The sale of the individual artwork, to an individual consumer, via ad-hoc, interpersonal negotiation means that, for artists, the artwork retains its artwork-ness rather than becoming, at the moment of sale, a commodity (Kopytoff 1986: 76).

### **Regulations and Numbers**

The word-of-mouth sphere is largely free of external systems of regulation. Artworks are often purchased via cash-in-hand exchanges, traded, or sold for 'mates-rates'. Further, unlike in the retail and fine art spheres, artists (as the party selling work) are not obliged to adhere to any of the mandatory codes of practice that govern retail businesses, or voluntary ethical codes of sale, such as the Indigenous Art Code.<sup>10</sup> Just over 22% of the artists I spoke with sold work

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<sup>10</sup> Though given that the Indigenous Art Code is intended to curtail carpet-bagging and other exploitative practices associated with the sale of Aboriginal art by third parties, this is not particularly significant.



regularly through this market sphere.<sup>11</sup> Given my method of finding and contacting potential participants for this research – searching online, consulting exhibition catalogues, asking for recommendations from arts workers, gallery staff and other artists – this percentage figure is significant because it indicates that a sizable number of artists, who can be said to have at least a modest public profile, sell their work via the word-of-mouth sphere regularly.<sup>12</sup> Given that the word-of-mouth sphere is the ideal market space for artists not willing or able to participate in the public promotion required to sell their work in other spheres, it is likely that there are numerous artists operating across NSW who sell their work in accordance with norms outlined here and who have not been identified via the research process because they do not maintain a public profile.

### **Retail Sphere**

Planet Corroboree is located on one of the main commercial streets in the heart of Byron Bay. The shop is moderately sized, light-filled, and crammed full of brightly coloured paintings, sculptures of various sizes, knick-knacks, jewellery, books, DVDs, t-shirts and other items relating to Aboriginal art and culture. Items are arranged on tables, shelves and racks, with paintings filling all available wall space. On the day I visited, visitors to the store took their time browsing, drifting between displays and examining objects, turning racks filled with post-cards or flicking through books. Becci Zillig, a non-Indigenous artist and the store's co-owner, sat behind the counter and explained the events that led to Planet Corroboree opening in 2002:

My children's father is a local Bundjalung man and when we were together he used to make amazing didgeridoos with carvings on them and we tried to sell them in Sydney. We'd go down there and the people in the shops were such sharks. They didn't have any respect and they didn't really care and they just wanted something for nothing, it was just really hard. I saw this space advertised in the local paper because they were renovating the whole building, and I thought wow that's a great idea and so we put together a submission...we started off selling stuff on consignment<sup>13</sup> but it was a bit too hard, we probably wouldn't have survived, so we had to just start investing in buying things and we made our range bigger, with more affordable things, so people could come in and spend \$20.

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<sup>11</sup> The percentages reported regarding artists' participation in the three market sphere sum to more than 100% as artists often operate across more than one sphere. It's also worth noting that since fieldwork was undertaken, various artists have reported changes in their engagement with the market, thus these numbers should be taken as provisional only.

<sup>12</sup> The unregulated nature of the word-of-mouth sphere means that it is difficult to get a sense of how many artworks, produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW, are sold via this sphere, nor is it possible to access statistical material – such as that discussed in Chapter 1 – that indicates the revenue generated by such sales.

<sup>13</sup> Consignment denotes the sale of goods by 'an agent' who 'does not normally pay for the goods until they are sold and does not own them, although usually has possession of them'. After a sale, the agent pays the supplier for the cost of the goods, minus any handling or commission fees, or any other expenses (Law and Owen 2010: 103).



**Figure 8.1. Inside Planet Corroboree, Byron Bay. Image credit: Planet Corroboree. Courtesy of Becci Zillig. ©Becci Zillig/Planet Corroboree.**

Indeed Planet Corroboree stocks a broad range of works with various prices, from painted boomerangs for \$9.50 up to a large scale acrylic painting (122 cm x 92 cm) by a Bundjalung artist, depicting a goanna for \$890. Zillig describes the works offered for sale at Planet Corroboree as art made for retail, 'for us it's basically artists that are making a living out of their art, it's not high-end collectors stuff'. Zillig has worked hard to build positive, long term relationships with local artists from whom she sources her stock, paying them fairly and not inflating prices in the shop front, as she stated '[there is] none of that art where you know that the artist isn't being paid much and it's got some ridiculous price on it. That's not our business; there are plenty of those around.' Local artists who sell their work at Planet Corroboree describe the shop's proprietors as ethical, supportive and fair. After operating the store for over a decade, Zillig is confident about which kind of works are popular with buyers and advises artists accordingly. Customers are mostly interested in purchasing art made by local artists, particularly works that tell local cultural stories or depict the local landscape or native animals, especially sea creatures. As well as work produced by local artists, the store stocks work from an art centre in Alice Springs, but, as Zillig observes, 'this stuff here, which is more desert style, it hasn't been selling, maybe because people might expect to be buying that in the desert, not here'.

Planet Corroboree operates in the retail sphere, a sphere that encompasses the sale of works offered to consumers in an explicitly commerce-driven context. All market spheres are ultimately structured to facilitate commerce, however, as demonstrated above, each sphere is partially defined by a specific narrative that conceptualises that market in a particular way. Thus, the word-of-mouth sphere is conceived as almost a non-market, while the retail sphere is seen explicitly as a market space that exists to facilitate sales. This is largely because commercial transactions in this sphere take place at locales existing wholly in order to enable sales, such as art fairs, gift and souvenir shops, tourist information centres, auction events and

regularly scheduled, or one-off, markets. Further, while consumers may certainly enter a retail space in order to window-shop, this activity is distinct from the perusal of items in the home of an artist or, indeed, at an exhibition in a commercial or public gallery. Works of art presented in this sphere are marked, by their very presence in retail spaces, as items for purchase, rather than as items displayed to be appreciated by an audience who are not, overtly, positioned as consumers. Further, while artworks presented for sale in fine art galleries are typically displayed in ways that down play their commodity status, a point to which we will return, artworks in the retail sphere are presented to consumers in particular ways. For example, artworks are typically displayed with a visible price tag and are purposefully arranged in configurations, often alongside other items presented for sale, intended to heighten the appeal of the artwork for consumers.

### **Prices**

Unless sales are taking place in the less formal locale of a market, the prices of artworks sold through the retail sphere are typically fixed and non-negotiable unless a consumer is purchasing a number of works and the retailer offers a discount. The prices attached to works sold in the retail sphere are highly variable, ranging from items sold for a few dollars, up to a few thousand. Several factors influence the price assigned to a work, including size, media, style, the artist's popularity and the place it is being sold. Thus, works sold at market stalls will tend to be priced lower than equivalent items being sold at a shop or art fair. For example, in 2015 Esme Timbery, a renowned La Perouse shellworker, was selling her work at the Blak Markets, which are held monthly on Bare Island in La Perouse. At this stall a pair of shellworked booties cost \$50. By contrast, at the same time the MCA's gallery shop was selling several of Timbery's shellwork booties, each of which were presented in a frame. The booties were roughly the same size and style as those for sale at the Blak Markets but each pair cost \$250 which, even with the inclusion of the frame, is a significant increase in price.

The difference in pricing between works sold at a market, and those offered at a retail store, reflect the protocol surrounding the sale of work in each location. For example, works sold through retail organisations are typically subject to a 20-50% commission, which often results in works being priced higher than when they are sold directly by the artist. Another factor affecting price is the available methods of payment. For example, mobile EFTPOS machines can be prohibitively expensive for sole traders or those who only occasionally sell work, thus the pricing of works sold at impermanent sale sites such as markets may require consideration of the amount of cash a consumer is likely to be carrying on them, or is able to withdraw from an ATM.

The geographic location where items are sold also affects price. For example, several artists described their consideration of the 'Sydney factor' when pricing a work intended for sale in that city. Aleisha Lonsdale, artist and Aboriginal Arts Development Officer for Arts OutWest, advises artists selling in Sydney to increase the cost of their work, as they will be able to command far higher prices than when selling in Bathurst, Orange or at other regional locations. As she explained:

We all increased our prices when we went down to the markets [held as part of Corroboree Sydney]. [The artists] had baskets for \$20 and they rang me...because they put on their own prices...and they were saying our prices are so low compared to everyone else's, do you think it would be okay if we put them up? And I said if you want to do it, then do it!...when the String Theory exhibition was on [at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney] they had those little woven bags...and they had \$99 on them!

### **Engagement with Consumers**

While artists selling work in the word-of-mouth sphere typically deal directly with consumers in a person-to-person capacity, the level at which artists engage directly with consumers is variable in the retail sphere. Artists who operate their own market stalls or run their own retail businesses communicate directly to potential consumers about their works. While the price and content of an artwork in the retail sphere is unlikely to be subject to the same level of negotiation as in the word-of-mouth sphere, artists who sell their works in-person do tend to deal with their customers in ways similar to those operating in the word-of-mouth sphere. For example, at the Blak Markets I observed artists engaging with consumers in particular ways. If a potential consumer showed interest in a particular work, or in their display generally, then artists would typically engage with this consumer by speaking to them about their artworks in ways that explained or expanded upon their meaning. For example, two artists, a mother and daughter team from the South Coast of NSW, who were selling fibre work objects such as woven animals and baskets, spoke extensively to a customer about their weaving practice. The customer purchased a medium sized woven fish for \$60. The artists explained that their weaving style had been practiced by their ancestors and that, in making the works they presented for sale, they were keeping this traditional and ancient weaving practice alive.

This kind of discussion serves to deepen a consumer's understanding of the work they are considering purchasing. It also serves to emphasise the status of the artwork under discussion as culturally significant. Indeed discussion about the cultural significance of the woven fish sold by these artists can be seen as a kind of authenticating statement which affirms that the consumer would be purchasing a 'genuinely' Aboriginal artwork in terms of the popular assumptions that constitute this classification (i.e. that an artwork is constructed utilising

cultural knowledge practiced in, and handed on from, the deep past). While authentication may well be part of the artist's intention, it is too reductive to see this as the only function of such statements. While working to secure a sale must undoubtedly be at play when an artist engages a potential consumer in this way, statements such as those made by the creators of the woven fish act to assert the value of their work, not only in order to justify the monetary sum assigned, but to make visible the cultural, historical and personal value of the work, which may not be immediately apparent to a casual observer.

The two artists at the Blak Markets emphasised the cultural significance of their weaving practice and their role in assuring that this practice will persist into the future. Such conversations also make a consumer aware of an artist's expertise and mastery of these weaving practices. Discussing these issues with consumers serves to add meaning and portent to the work under consideration; what was, at first glance, a woven fish that appealed aesthetically to a consumer, is now a cultural object, something which simultaneously embodies, symbolises and maintains the culture the artist is part of. Purchasing this work means not only that the consumer will come to own this cultural object but that they will be supporting the artists in their goal of continuing to maintain and protect the culture the work embodies. Thus, those values (cultural, personal and historical) that can be seen to constitute works presented for sale in the retail sphere are often discussed by artists when engaging potential consumers. These values may be invoked to make sense of the monetary price attached to a work and yet, as I will argue in Chapter 9, the process of assigning a price that adequately reflects values conceptualised as discrete from financial value, is not always simple.

While artists who sell their works at sites like markets are able to engage directly with consumers and potential consumers, artists who rely upon a third party to sell their works do not frequently get the chance to relate directly to customers. Operators of retail outlets such as souvenir, gift and art shops, who purchase artworks and sell them on, or who exhibit them at their outlet and take a commission once they are sold, engage with consumers in-lieu of the artist. Retailers may explain the meaning of a work, or the process via which it was created to interested buyers as part of the process of facilitating a sale. For example, while I was speaking to Becci Zillig at Planet Corroboree, a young woman who identified herself as a tourist purchased a small wooden boomerang. Zillig, addressing myself and the woman, described the work thus, 'this one...comes from a lady called Charlene, and she has burnt the designs into this, she is from Yamba. That's where my sons are from, that is their land. Here is a photo of them, they are teenagers now. So she would be one of their Aunties'. Zillig's story, like that of the artists at the Blak Markets, serves to deepen a consumer's appreciation of the work being purchased and, also, personalises that object.

### **Autonomy and Collaboration**

It has been argued that cross-cultural engagement and collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is facilitated by the creation, sale and exhibition of Aboriginal art.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of cross-cultural collaboration can be observed in the context of the retail sphere, with non-Indigenous retailers carrying artworks made by Aboriginal artists and actively working to facilitate their sale. Some have conceptualised this collaboration as (ideally) positive and mutually supportive (Glowczewski 2011: 10, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2006: 8) and in retail spaces such as Planet Corroboree this is certainly the case. Elsewhere non-Indigenous circulation of Indigenous art works is more contentious with artists bemoaning the lack of Aboriginal-owned, and operated, retail and gallery spaces, and wishing for greater autonomy in the retail market.

Retailers market art goods via websites, social media, television, magazine and radio advertisement. Artists who wish to sell their work in the retail sphere also undertake promotion of their work. This typically involves making contact with retailers and circulating a portfolio of work, with a view to getting the retailer to carry their artworks. If works are taken on consignment a commission fee will also be negotiated. If works are sold in this way then retailers and artists often work together to assign prices. While the artist may be called upon to initially suggest a sale price, retailers make suggestions to adjust these prices if they feel the artist has under-priced or over-priced, a work.

### **Styles and Media**

The retail sphere accommodates the sale of a diverse range of works including dot, X-ray and other paintings, iconic Aboriginal cultural products such as boomerangs and didgeridoos (decorated with poker-work patterns, painted, or left blank), prints, sculptures, fibre work, woodwork, and functional or wearable art objects such as hand-painted scarves, jewellery, baskets, bowls, vases and t-shirts.

The aesthetic form of art objects sold via the retail sphere may be shaped by their maker's dependence on that sphere for income. Artists who rely on the sale of their works through retail outlets to make a living need frequent sales, and must produce new artworks in line with consumer demand. Here, time becomes a key factor when an artist plans their work; firstly, the artist must be able to produce a given number of works to sell within a particular time frame and, secondly, the labour time needed to produce a particular work must be adequately covered by the sale of the work. Financial recompense for the labour time is particularly important if artworks are modestly priced, particularly if an artist must relinquish a

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, (Altman 2005: 1, Glowczewski 2011: 10, McCulloch and McCulloch Childs 2006: 8, Anderson 2000: 427).

commission fee. In view of these time demands, artists may choose to make works they can produce quickly by, for example, using a simplified design, making small works, painting with a quick drying paint, or by using reusable stencils. As Mark Cora, a painter and carver,<sup>15</sup> explained:

[The retail outlet has] got to get the \$20 they gave me, and then \$20 for paying their bills, and \$20 for their profit. So when I paint something I know I'm going to sell it to them for \$20 and they are going to sell it for \$60, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it. So I've got designs that are very simple that don't take a lot of time. There are a lot of artists who can't paint like that, so they might take lots of time just to finish a painting. So there is a bit of training involved but also the understanding that there is no use spending a lot of time on something if you only get \$20.

### **Legalities and Geographies**

The retail sphere is far more regulated than the word-of-mouth sphere. Commercial retail enterprises such as gift or souvenir shops are subject to legal conventions such as those outlined in the Competition and Consumer Act 2010 and other fair trading regulations (Department of Industry Innovation and Science 2015). Market stall holders are also obligated to adhere to certain federal and state regulations relating to fair trade, although given the impermanent nature of some markets, these regulations may be difficult to monitor and enforce. Retailers who sell Aboriginal art may also commit to abide by the Indigenous Art Code.<sup>16</sup>

The retail sphere is in operation across the state of NSW, but is most frequently engaged with in urban and regional centres such as Sydney, Byron Bay, Broken Hill, Grafton, Lismore and Dubbo. These are locations where there is a sustained demand, from consumers such as tourists, for Aboriginal art objects. Around 25% of participants regularly sell work in the retail sphere.

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<sup>15</sup> Cora is also the Indigenous Arts Development Officer at Arts Northern Rivers, based in Alstonville.

<sup>16</sup> The Indigenous Art Code is not legally enforceable and its administrators have almost no ability to force compliance, except by expelling a dealer from Code membership (Indigenous Art Code 2015).



Figure 8.2. The opening of *Lawful & Permissible*, 2014, featuring the works of Amala Groom and Blak Douglas. Image by the author. All artworks © the artists.

### Fine Art Sphere

*Lawful & Permissible* opened at the Damien Minton Gallery in Redfern on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2014. Attendance at the small gallery space was such that patrons spilled out onto the footpath, drinking complimentary booze, smoking and talking. Those inside the gallery stood in clumps or wove around the room attempting to view works on display through the scrum of people. The exhibition showcased the work of Amala Groom and Blak Douglas. Flyers circulated to promote the exhibition described it as ‘a creative response to the proposed draft Freedom of Speech (repeal of s. 18c) Bill 2014’ (Damien Minton Gallery 2014). Groom’s works, including several large pop-art style paintings, text-based works and two installations,<sup>17</sup> engaged overtly with the proposed repeal.<sup>18</sup> Douglas’ works, which included a series of painted boards with black plastic baby dolls affixed to them, were less directly concerned with the repeal and focused more broadly on issues such as racial prejudice and discrimination against Indigenous peoples. Works were displayed on the white walls of the gallery with one sculptural work and an installation placed away from the walls at opposite ends of the gallery. Prices were not displayed next to artworks, but a room sheet, listing the names, dimensions and prices of work was available at the gallery’s entrance. Cheryl Orr, Indigenous Legal Professional of the Year (2014), opened the exhibition and Douglas and Groom gave speeches contextualising their

<sup>17</sup> Including one of the crowd favourites, an untitled work which featured a pyramidal, supermarket style display of toilet rolls on which the first page of a submission regarding the proposed changes had been printed. Groom’s background in, and experiences with, national and international political advocacy had highlighted for her that government interest in submissions was tokenistic and that they were likely to either shelve, ‘or wipe their ass on them’. Thus, she printed the rolls of toilet paper so that at least this act would be ‘comfortable’.

<sup>18</sup> The proposed repeal was subsequently discarded by the Abbott government (Aston 2014).



work denouncing the proposed repeal. NITV, SBS World News, and other media carried stories about the exhibition in the days following the opening (see for example, Callinan 2014).<sup>19</sup>



Figure 8.3. Installation view of Amala Groom's pyramid of toilet rolls in the *Lawful & Permissible* exhibition, held at the Damien Minton Gallery, 8-12 July 2014. Image Credit: Shayne Johnson. Courtesy of the artist. ©Amala Groom.

### Status, Presentation and Value

*Lawful & Permissible* exemplifies events orchestrated, and methods of display deployed, in order to sell artworks in the fine art sphere. While often encompassing the sale of goods that are similar to those circulated in the retail sphere, the fine art sphere is distinguished by certain curatorial actions which serve to mask the commercial imperatives that underpin them. Here, artworks are presented unambiguously as *fine art*. According to Ian Chilvers, the term *fine art*, '...came into use in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe the 'higher' non-utilitarian arts, as opposed to applied or decorative arts' (2004).<sup>20</sup> As Morphy has argued, the types of works admitted to the category of fine art are always shifting, with certain artworks (and consequently certain types of artists) being included, and excluded, over time. While the characteristics that cause an artwork to be categorised as fine art are changeable, the meaning

<sup>19</sup> *Lawful & Permissible* was among the last exhibitions held at the Damien Minton Gallery, which closed shortly after.

<sup>20</sup> *Fine art* can be understood as a relative to the renaissance term 'liberal arts', which was '...applied to pursuits that were considered primarily as exercises of the mind rather than of practical skill and craftsmanship. The concept of a distinction between "liberal" (worthy of a free man: Lat., homo liber) and "vulgar" arts goes back to classical antiquity...' (Chilvers 2009, see also Morphy 2007: xi-xii).

denoted by the category remains stable with the term signifying high-quality, high-value art of superior aesthetic and cultural value, to be enjoyed and appreciated by connoisseurs (Morphy 2007: xii).

The fine art status of objects presented for sale in this sphere is simultaneously communicated and confirmed by the manner in which artworks are exhibited, and discussed, by those selling them (typically dealers working in commercial galleries). While these galleries may retain a storeroom of works from artists that can be shown to interested consumers, they tend to utilise the exhibition format in order to promote the work of particular artists. Exhibitions, which are usually on display for shortish intervals, often around four weeks, are curated and promoted in a manner akin to exhibitions presented in public galleries. For example, exhibitions are given a title that is used, alongside an image of a particular artwork included in the show (the hero image), to promote the event. Further, works in the exhibition are often unified by a particular theme or by the use of a particular medium, and this unifying element is explored in media promoting the exhibition (such as advertisements, flyers, newsletters etc.). The galleries in which such exhibitions are displayed are typically highly neutral, open spaces, with white or grey walls, intended to allow artworks full focus. Artworks are mounted on the wall, set on plinths or on the floor, or placed in glass display cases, and strategically lit.

Artworks may be accompanied by wall plaques listing their title, media and dimensions. Didactic written material may also be present on such wall plaques, though it is more likely that an overarching statement about the exhibition as a whole will be displayed, or made available to viewers. Such statements use art-historical language to analyse, explain and endorse the works on display. Exhibitions are launched at an opening where the artist, curator or other relevant person will speak about the artworks displayed. Food and drink, usually a selection of canapes and wine or champagne, is provided to attendees. As with public exhibitions, those attending are expected to behave in certain ways, such as to look at, but not touch or handle, objects. Further, exhibitions are ostensibly presented as being for public consumption, with most galleries having, like other retail operations, an open-door policy meaning interested members of the public may enter and peruse works on display. Thus, such exhibitions are presented in ways explicitly affiliated with the display of fine art in public art institutions. Works are presented *physically* (in terms of the way they are placed in a gallery space) and *intellectually* (via the written and verbal communication produced for the exhibition) as fine art objects.

### **Veiling Commerce**

As in a public art gallery, artworks on display are rarely discussed in ways that explicitly position them as commodities with monetary prices attached. Indeed, the manner in which

works are exhibited and discussed serves to veil the fact that exhibitions ultimately serve to facilitate the sale of works. As in the word-of-mouth sphere, objects circulated in the fine art sphere are rarely discussed, in advertising or other material produced by galleries, as commodities.<sup>21</sup> Here, the emphasis on the aesthetic quality of the works serves to constantly position objects in the gallery as pieces of art, rather than as commodities for sale.<sup>22</sup> The obscuring of the commercial imperatives underpinning the exhibition of works at such galleries is perhaps best illustrated by the visibility – or lack thereof – of the prices of artworks. While wall plaques will occasionally list the cost of a work, prices are usually not displayed near artworks. Typically, a price sheet will be made available to those visiting the gallery, sometimes only upon application. Further, gallery websites will rarely display prices next to artworks presented online, with those interested in buying a work being encouraged to ‘make an enquiry’ to ascertain costs, via phone or email.<sup>23</sup> In some instances the wall space next to an artwork will be marked with a circular red sticker if it has been sold. In these instances the ‘red dot’ stands as the only overt indication that the exhibition space is a commercial one.

While stressing the fine art status of art objects circulated in this sphere serves to downplay the commodity status of an artwork, it also serves to bolster the value and prestige of the artwork. As Kopytoff has observed, fine art objects are frequently conceptualised as being priceless, their value so vast as to be irreducible to a crude cash price. This apparent pricelessness is paradoxically confirmed by a vast price tag. As Kopytoff clarifies, ‘...the “objective” pricelessness of the Picasso can only be unambiguously confirmed to us by its immense market price’ (1986: 82, see also Velthuis 2003: 204-205). Thus, in positioning an artwork presented for sale as fine art, rather than art-commodity, the dealer emphasises the monetary worth of the object, and may be able to command a higher price than an equivalent item sold in a retail store or directly by the artist. Indeed, the very presence of an item in a commercial gallery would seem to confirm its fine art status and distinguish it – in terms of aesthetic and artistic worth, and price – from artworks sold elsewhere. Further, that an art dealer, popularly understood by dint of their occupation as a connoisseur, deemed an artwork worthy of display also confers value (Ashford 2012: 51).

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<sup>21</sup> There are resonances here with Coslor’s work on the high-end, fine art markets in New York and London. Coslor notes that in these markets, unease regarding the interaction between money and art is countered by various narratives and actions that ‘...maintain the boundaries...’ conceptualised as existing between the art world and the financial world (2010: 210).

<sup>22</sup> As we shall see in the following chapter, artworks are frequently positioned, in literature produced by art historians and art critics, as the antithesis of commodities.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Sullivan + Strumph (2015a). Some galleries do provide pricing information online, see for example Coe-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery (2015).

## Media and Forms

Items circulated in the fine art sphere include photographs, paintings, prints, sculptures, drawings, assemblages of found and other material, fibre work and wood work. As in other spheres, aesthetic styles are diverse, however artists from NSW who create works using dots, and other iconic Aboriginal motifs and designs from the Western and Central Desert areas, are generally not present. The Dunghutti-Ngaku Aboriginal Art Gallery (South Kempsey), Kew-Y-Ahn Art Gallery (Hartley), and Boomalli (Sydney) are an exception to this norm and include dot paintings in their exhibitions. The inclusion of NSW dot paintings at these spaces speaks to the popularity of dotting among Aboriginal artists in the state and, also, of the community-oriented nature of these organisations.<sup>24</sup>

While the aesthetic quality of works circulated in this sphere is diverse, works presented here are typically united by high quality production, in terms of materials used and their presentation, including being professionally framed. They are also united by the documentation that is produced as a by-product of their sale. Professional protocols associated with documenting the provenance of artworks, as well as the practice of collecting supplementary written material, such as an artist statement or information about the media, dimensions and creation date of an artwork, means that, typically, artworks circulated in this sphere are accompanied by written and photographic material intended to document their creation, meaning and sale. This material will usually be made available to consumers purchasing specific works, with copies being retained by dealer and artist.

## Prices

The price of works varies greatly in this sphere depending on media, size, the gallery in which a work is sold, and the renown or popularity of the artist. For example, I observed etchings, other prints and small paintings priced for around \$200 in commercial fine art galleries and art markets, however, this typically constituted the lowest price bracket for works circulated in this sphere. Artworks sold in the fine art sphere are generally priced in the mid to high hundreds, the thousands and even, if the artist is particularly prominent, the hundred-thousands. Here, more than in any other sphere, the renown or popularity of an artist influences the price applied to works.

Consider, for example, the price of Amala Groom's works in the *Lawful & Permissible* exhibition described above. Groom's works included several large scale acrylic paintings on canvas (ranging from 110 x 76 cm to 124 x 156 cm) which were priced between \$1,000 and

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<sup>24</sup> Art works featuring dots that were used to ironic, conceptual or playful ends were an exception to this rule, and did appear in fine art galleries. See discussion of the work of Blak Douglas and Daniel Boyd in Chapter 6.

\$1,500. Groom's works, which all utilised text, made overt comments about the evocation of freedom of speech to mask racial and other prejudice. Groom had, at the time, been practicing art for only a few years, and although she had already had a small solo exhibition, *Lawful & Permissible* was one of the first exhibitions to feature a large number of her works. Her paintings were relatively low in price, in view of their size and their presence in a well-regarded private gallery in central Sydney. The price of these works can be seen to reflect Groom's status as an emerging artist and a relative new-comer to the art scene in Sydney. By contrast, in April 2015, Tony Albert's solo exhibition 'Thou Didst Let Fall' was launched at Sullivan + Strumph (Zetland, Sydney). Albert is a high profile, successful artist, whose work appears in the collection of many public institutions in Australia, and who has exhibited extensively across Australia and abroad (Sullivan + Strumph 2015b). The year prior to the exhibition Albert won both the Basil Sellers Art Prize (Ross 2014), and the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) (Taylor 2014). These prestigious, high profile art awards both carry significant monetary prizes, meaning that combined, Albert was awarded \$150,000. The 'Thou Didst Let Fall' exhibition was launched to coincide with the unveiling of Albert's *YININMADYEMI Thou didst let fall*, a large scale public work installed in Sydney's Hyde Park, adjacent to the Hyde Park War Memorial. The work, which commemorates Indigenous Australian soldiers who served with the Australian Defence Force (City Art 2015), received a good deal of media attention when it was officially unveiled (see for example, Kembrey 2015). The exhibition at Sullivan + Strumpf included several acrylic paintings on canvas, installation works and sculptural assemblages featuring the 'Aboriginalia' for which Albert has become renowned (Cooks 2011: 3). Works were thematically concerned with the notion of *camouflage*, specifically the erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's involvement with, and sacrifice for, military and other conflicts (Sullivan + Strumpf 2015).

Works included in this exhibition were priced between \$22,000 (for a 102 x 122.5 cm acrylic on canvas) up to \$125,000 (for a monumental 161 x 550 x 11 cm wall mounted assemblage). The relatively high prices attached to these works can be understood as reflective not only of the artistic quality attributed to them by those pricing the works, but also of the renown and art historical significance of the artist who made them. Here, Albert's high profile, bolstered by his success with recent prestigious art prizes and by the unveiling of his public work at Hyde Park, influenced the price attributed to works offered for sale. Thus Albert, as a renowned, established artist, was able to command a higher price for artworks presented for sale than Groom, even though the materials used, size and content of the works produced by both Groom and Albert are broadly comparable.

## **Operation and Marketing**

While the kinds of artwork sold in the fine art sphere, and the prices at which they are offered for sale, are not necessarily drastically different from works circulated in the retail sphere, consumer access to works presented in commercial galleries is distinct. Commercial galleries, as mentioned above, are usually open to the public in ways akin to other retail enterprises (that is, they have regular opening hours and a shop-front etc.), however these gallery spaces are not presented – in terms of the way they are advertised, or branded – in the same way as other retail outlets. Galleries are advertised via art industry specific websites or magazines such as *Art Collector*, rather than more broadly accessible media such as newspapers, or on radio or television. Further, given that commercial galleries showcase works for sale via the exhibition format, they look physically different from retail outlets. In view of this, it is fair to assume that, typically, consumers are those who have purposefully sought out art to purchase or who have a professional or personal interest in fine art. Here, sales are much less likely to be the result of walk-in trade than in the retail sphere. Indeed, dealers often have a portfolio of collectors to whom they regularly sell work and often circulate promotional material, regarding artists they may have previously invested in, directly to them. Further, public and other museum and gallery institutions often purchase works from dealers, rather than directly from artists, though this is not always the case.

## **Art Talk**

Artists who sell work in this sphere reported having to engage with consumers at exhibition openings and other events held to facilitate the sale of their work. The tenor of these engagements varies, with artists participating in Q&A style artist talks, or circulating at an exhibition opening in order to speak with consumers one-on-one. As potter Bevan Skinner explained:

At galleries and openings I try to be bright eyed and bushy tailed...and in the right frame of mind and mood for the public or the audience or whatever you want to say...They ask about the making process...They ask a range of things. You just hear the same questions over and over.

Lorraine Gibson has noted that successful artists from Wilcannia, such as Badger Bates, have, over the years, learned about the kinds of conversational gambits that are expected of them at exhibition openings (Gibson 2013: 98-99). Similarly, emerging artists with whom I spoke frequently recounted that they had to learn how to do 'art talk' at exhibition openings in order to communicate to potential consumers in ways that met their expectations. Artists reported that potential consumers are interested in hearing about what their works mean and what stories they tell, while others are interested in technical details, including how a work was

made. Although such conversations may facilitate the sale of a work, just as they do in the retail sphere, it appears that artists rarely use these interactions with potential consumers to directly or overtly convince them to buy works. Artists may talk about what a work means, or its creation, but will not try and talk a person into buying a work. Further, the actual process of purchasing a work is facilitated by gallery staff, not the artist.

### **Laws, Locale and Numbers**

Around 73% of participants reported selling their work in the fine art sphere, however only 41% of those artists reported doing so exclusively. The fine art sphere tends to operate in metropolitan regions in NSW, such as Sydney. The sphere is also in operation in certain regional hubs, particularly those with a relatively wealthy population, such as Byron Bay. Works circulated in this sphere are subject to the same high levels of legislative regulation as vendors operating in the retail sphere. As in the retail sphere, dealers and gallerists may elect to voluntarily adhere to ethical codes of practice, such as the Indigenous Art Code. Indeed, in the wake of extensive media reportage of ‘carpet-bagging’ and other dubious resale practices undertaken by art dealers, there is arguably a greater level of consumer consciousness regarding the ethical procurement of Aboriginal art, thus a stronger imperative for dealers to declare, publicly, their adherence to such codes of practice.<sup>25</sup> Further, as in retail stores, art galleries sell work on consignment and earn a commission that is typically 20% to 50% of the sale price, or they purchase and sell-on artworks directly from artists.

### **The Market as Meaningful: A Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that artists engage with what can broadly be called the Aboriginal art market in different and distinct ways, although artists may operate across more than one sphere simultaneously. The analogy of three discrete, though interconnected, market spheres – word-of-mouth, retail and fine art – has been utilised to describe the particular norms and modes of operation that govern and characterise these different levels of engagement. What description of these spheres makes clear is that the sale of art generates – for artists, vendors, and consumers – more than just the exchange of artworks for cash, although this is, of course, central. Indeed, the sale of work produces, and is simultaneously made possible by, narratives articulated by stakeholders involved in trade and consumption, which seek to individualise and make meaningful those artworks offered for sale, even when

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<sup>25</sup> Jessica Booth has argued, in relation to research undertaken at three Australian Aboriginal art fairs, ‘that many buyers claim provenance to be important to their purchase choices (either in terms of its financial or intrinsic value or as an assurance of agent ethics) but that some agents feel buyers over-claim this interest, in terms of their actual purchase behaviour’ (2014: 185). Further, Booth’s research illustrated that the majority of surveyed buyers were ‘unaware of the Indigenous Art Code’s existence or, if they were aware, did not utilise it when making purchase choices’ (2014: 185).

the commodity status of a work is not in contention, as in the retail sphere. Here, the process of selling an artwork is simultaneously a process of establishing, articulating and understanding the financial, cultural, personal and artistic value and meaning of that work. Thus, the sale of artworks should be understood as a meaning-making activity, which, like the planning and making of an artwork, clarifies for the artist, and others, what an artwork means, embodies, or represents. It is to the meaning of the market, for artists and other stakeholders, that the following chapter turns.



## Chapter 9 Meaningful Action: Selling Work

*'Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing'*

– Oscar Wilde ([1891] 2011: 53)

### **Introduction: Hostile Worlds**

Since the Romantic era, the relationship between art and the economic market has often been conceptualised as uneasy: a necessary but fraught association that requires delicate mediation lest the corrosive force of commerce undermine the noble imperatives that drive the artist to create (Coslor 2010: 213-214). Here, the art world is envisioned as a sphere apart, a realm that should be free of the crass commercialism of the economic market and be populated by artists who are motivated by an unbridled need to create, rather than by financial incentives. This perspective, dubbed the *hostile worlds view*, holds that it is possible for art, and by extension, artists, to be degraded by engagement with the market.<sup>1</sup> In the context of Australia, a hostile worlds view has accompanied the Aboriginal art movement since its emergence in the 1970s, with some expressing distress at the apparent commodification of the sacred, sometimes secret, knowledge depicted in artworks made for trade.<sup>2</sup> A formulation evolved whereby the production of works for sale was equated with devolution of the cultural authenticity of these works (Morphy 1998: 289-291). While a more nuanced view of the sale of art tends to prevail in the present, the hostile worlds view persists.<sup>3</sup> Take for example the following statement from Waldemar Januszczak's review of the Royal Academy's 'Australia' exhibition, shown in London in 2013. Disparaging about many works included in the show, of the Aboriginal art Januszczak declared:

...there are dull canvas approximations, knocked out in reduced dimensions, by a host of repetitive Aborigine [sic] artists making a buck. Out of a tremendous indigenous tradition, fired and inspired by an enormous natural landscape, the Australian art world has managed to create what amounts to a market in decorative rugs. Opening the show with a selection of these spotty meanderings, and discussing them in dramatically hallowed terms, cannot disguise the fact that in most cases the great art of the Aborigines has been turned into tourist tat (2013: np).

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<sup>1</sup> See Coslor (2010) and Velthuis (2003, 2012) for a detailed analysis of this view and of how it is negotiated by artists and dealers in various art market milieus.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Greer (1997), Rothwell (2013).

<sup>3</sup> There are various scholarly works which contain nuanced analyses of the economic processes in which contemporary and historical Aboriginal art objects have been implicated. These include works focusing on art from the south east (see Kleinert 1994, 2010a, Nugent 2005, 2011, 2012, Nash 2009, Gibson 2013) and from elsewhere in Australia (see Altman 2005, Carty 2011, Morphy 2007, Myers 2002, Taylor 2008).

Januszczak, in accusing artists of making work expressly for sale, is declaring their work artistically and aesthetically void. To the critic these paintings are dull and ersatz, and, therefore, could not be the result of a passionate, inspired, artistic outpouring, nor could they be culturally important: if the muse did not kiss these artists on the brow, then it follows that these works were made for the market, and the market – as a degraded and degrading place – does not want genius, it just wants the decorative; here a synonym for vacuous.

In speaking with artists working across NSW it has become clear that their relationships to the art market are more complex and multifaceted than is allowed for by the hostile worlds approach.<sup>4</sup> While artists certainly express a hostile worlds-type discomfort in the face of assertions that their work is created *only* so that they can make money, they also demonstrate, in their engagement with the market, that selling work is a significant and meaningful process, one that is not discrete from, or destructive to, the cultural, personal and spiritual motivations that drive them to make art. In contradiction of critics like Januszczak, making works intended for sale does not mean, for artists, that these works are culturally or aesthetically impoverished. Here the attribution of a monetary value to an artwork does not erode the cultural or personal values embedded in the work, rather it may act to symbolise or enhance them.

### **Making Meaning in the Market**

The preceding chapters have illustrated, among other things, that the process of imagining, designing, discussing, creating and completing an artwork is, for participants, meaningful. Meaningful in the sense that this is a process full of meaning, and also that an artwork has meaning for artists in specific, but diverse ways. For example, art making can be culturally and personally significant, an expression of identity, an articulation of a specific message, a means of political activism, or a way to maintain and renew culture. It is the contention of this chapter that the process of making an artwork is not complete when the painter puts down their brush, or the sculptor, their chisel. Rather, an artwork continues to be made when it is presented for exhibition or sale. That is, if we understand art making as a process of meaning making, then the manner in which an artwork is significant, for the person who created it, continues to be constituted during the process of its circulation to an audience. Put another way, when a work is offered for sale these actions are meaningful and can add to, or amend, both how the artist understands an artwork and also how they feel about making work generally. Thus, in order to understand an artist's motivation for making, their intention when

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<sup>4</sup> They are also more complicated than allowed for by cultural economists who tend to treat art objects as simply another 'type' of commodity, which, though subject to distinct valuation processes, can be unproblematically rendered commensurable (see for example Grampp 1989).

creating a work, and their understanding of what a work means, it is important to pay attention to what happens after the material creation of that work is completed.

Further, if we can indulge in the analytical conceit that an artwork continues to be made, in the mind of its maker, when it is circulated through sale, then it becomes more difficult to lapse into the modernist division of the category of 'art' from that of the 'market' (Myers 2006: 275) and, consequently, easier to understand the circulation of an artwork as an action that is, for artists, personally, culturally, emotionally, *and* financially significant (Altman 2006: 9). Such a conceit also allows us to recognise, as John Carty has argued, that the economic processes in which artworks become embroiled are not necessarily distinct to, or separate from, cultural, religious or personal processes at play when works are created. Rather, these realms are interconnected and co-constituting (Carty 2011: 13).

This chapter will examine the way artists conceptualise, experience and navigate the market by considering the following: artists' attitudes about, and levels of engagement with, the market; the way value is represented and negotiated through the pricing of artworks; contending with consumer expectations; and the various meanings artists attribute to the sale process. This will illustrate that the sale of work is a meaningful process which contributes to an artist's sense of the meaning and value of their works.

### **Artists and the Market: Attitudes, Understandings and Making a Living**

In speaking with artists about their practice, our discussions inevitably turned to issues regarding the sale of work. For many artists, pricing, marketing and selling work is, as Wiradjuri painter Nyree Reynolds quipped, their '...least favourite part of being an artist'. The difficulties are manifold: accessing consumers, pricing both adequately and accurately, managing demand, and catering to prevailing market taste. Anxiety often centres on the skills, training and experience seemingly required to navigate the market successfully, and while most artists confidently declare their artistic competence they readily admit that being a skilled artist does not make them a skilled business person. In acknowledgement of this, some artists have completed business and marketing qualifications in order to be able to efficiently run their own art businesses. Others take advantage of training sessions, facilitated by regional arts organisations, in order to learn about the art market, business and marketing platforms, as well as copyright and trademark laws. Other participants explained that rather than undertaking formal training, their knowledge and ability to operate in the market is experiential, acquired through their on-going engagement with consumers, dealers and others.

For some, anxiety and stress related to engaging with the market is associated with the conviction that, as Aboriginal artists working in NSW, they are unfairly disadvantaged by

commercial preoccupation with, and valorisation of, Aboriginal art produced outside the state. The conviction here is that the commercial and critical success of dot and bark painting has resulted in a strong conflation, in the commercial and public imagination, of these specific types of artwork with Aboriginal art as a whole. These feelings of marginalisation and disadvantage can be understood as reflective of the uncomfortable historical relationship that the art market has had with work produced by Aboriginal artists in NSW (as described in Chapter 1). It can also be seen as an enunciation of a narrative of protest against this commercial non-engagement that was first articulated by urban artists in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> While there is evidence of increased commercial and critical interest in Aboriginal art produced in NSW (see Chapter 1), the narrative that south eastern art is not properly valued by the art market, persists. Richard Bell's notion that Aboriginal art is 'a white thing' (2012: 31) was often mentioned to me by artists in our discussion of the art market. Similarly the ideas expressed by Boomalli members, during the 1980s and 1990s, regarding the colonial presumption that south eastern artistic expression is inauthentic, were also raised. This illustrates the profound influence of pioneer urban artists in terms of shaping discussion, criticism, and analysis of art produced in the south east. It also demonstrates that participants are knowledgeable about the history of market engagement with art from NSW and, that in their present day engagements with the market, elements of this history – such as consumer expectations regarding what Aboriginal art should look like – continue to resonate.

Beyond this, artists occasionally expressed frustration with market processes because of their perceived incompatibility with cultural norms and considerations. Take for example, the following experience recounted to me by Amala Groom, whose *Lawful & Permissible* exhibition was discussed in Chapter 8. Groom creates works that are executed across a broad range of media and have an overt social and political bent, often exploring the legacy of colonial settlement in Australia. For Groom, art making is 'the performance of her cultural sovereignty'. As she explained, 'it's about being able to communicate with people. You can write a submission, do a speech, present a paper at the UN, attend a protest or you can make art'. Groom's art practice is both intuitive and research-based. In the initial stages of the art creation process the artist is committed to 'following her feelings' and taking ideas and 'running with them' as they come to her. Groom explains that this manner of working is reflective of her commitment to '...letting my *miwi*<sup>6</sup> drive my life as opposed to my intellect...essentially it's just being in tune with where the Old People<sup>7</sup> want you to go'. Indeed, for the last eleven years, Groom has been actively engaged in formal cultural, ceremony and

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<sup>5</sup> See for example reports on the founding members of Boomalli (J. Jones 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Miwi* is the Wiradjuri word for spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Groom uses 'Old People' to refer to her Ancestors.

'lore/business' in order to, as she described, 'open myself up to channelling stories from my Old People'. After the concept for an artwork is conceived Groom rigorously researches and interrogates this idea as part of the process of producing the work.

In 2014 Groom was introduced, by a friend and fellow artist, to a high profile commercial gallery owner. The gallery owner asked her to contribute a work for a group show in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists were asked to represent conflicts in the frontier wars. These works were offered for sale via the exhibition. Groom created *Yindyamarra Roll*, a wooden honour roll, like those displayed in RSL clubs.<sup>8</sup> The work pays tribute to Aboriginal warriors who died fighting in frontier wars, and memorialises the numerous massacres that occurred at this time. *Yindyamarra Roll* proved a favourite on the exhibition's opening night with many attendees, including fellow exhibiting artists, predicting greatness for Groom. The following morning the artist awoke feeling sick and stressed. The Old People spoke to her and told her that she was the custodian – the guardian and keeper – of the story *Yindyamarra Roll* told and, as a result, she was duty bound to protect and circulate its message. As Groom explained, 'I was told it was not the right time for the work to be sold. I had been through enough ceremony business to know that if I went against this then I would get sick, and bad things would happen'. Immediately, Groom rang the gallery owner and explained the situation, concluding that she no longer wished to offer the work for sale. The gallery owner was furious, as he'd already received an expression of interest for the work. When Groom refused to change her stance, he declared he'd never work with her again. After learning of Groom's decision, several of the artist's colleagues – Aboriginal men and women – encouraged her to sell *Yindyamarra Roll*. When she refused to back down, these colleagues accused her of being amateurish in her attitude to the art market. Although distressed at having angered the gallery owner, Groom remained staunch about her decision. As she explained:

I wasn't being brave. It's straightforward, if I do not follow the lore/law the way that the Old People and my Elder-teachers have passed it down to me, I will get sick, bad things will happen and I will not be given any more stories. This would amount to banishment of my cultural responsibilities. The sharing and carrying of stories is the purpose of my life, if this is taken from me I may as well be dead if I can no longer do that. The only thing in my life that matters to me is following the lore/law. This will always come first, irrespective of how it is perceived by others.

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<sup>8</sup> Amala Groom, 2014, *Yindyamarra Roll*, acrylic on wood, 125 x 152 x 4 cm.

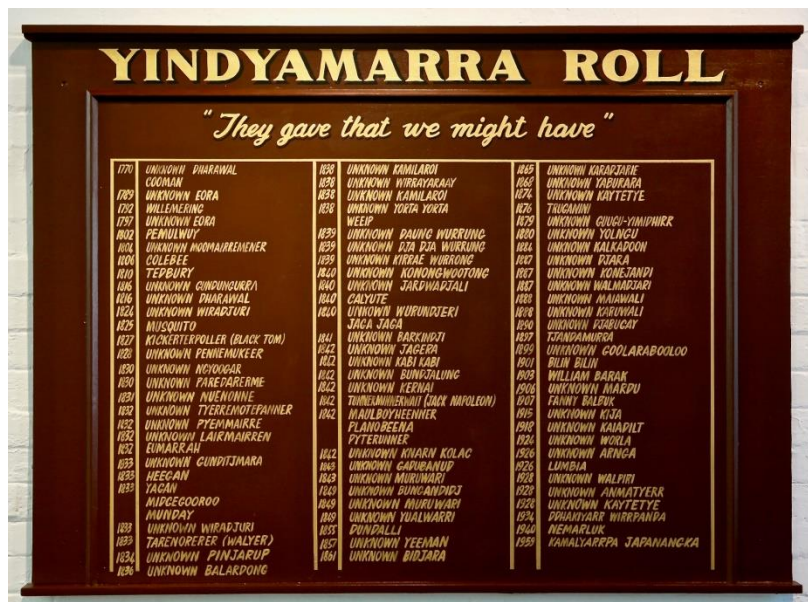


Figure 9.1. Amala Groom, 2014, *Yindyamarra Roll*, acrylic on wood, 125 x 152 x 4 cm. Image Credit: Elizabeth Warning. Courtesy of the artist. ©Amala Groom.

Groom continued to explain her position to the gallery owner, and over the course of a week she managed to tamp down his anger. At the instruction of her Old People, she presented him with an artwork that explored her relationship to her Ancestors, intended as a peace offering. The artist was equally patient with colleagues who had criticised her decision not to sell the work, but she felt that their response was indicative not of professionalism but of how colonised they were. As Groom stated, ‘I attempted to articulate to them my cultural responsibilities under the lore/law and they did not understand or value this’. As a result she felt that that they were privileging the norms of the art market over those of Aboriginal culture and therefore demonstrating their inability to fully grasp what it was like ‘living in two worlds’. Ultimately, for Groom, market norms associated with offering works for sale proved incompatible with the imperative to listen to the directives of her Old People, and to the duty she had, as the keeper of the story of *Yindyamarra Roll*. Further, Groom wondered if she would have faced the same resistance to her decision not to sell the work if she had been an artist from outside NSW. She stated:

...would people have responded in the same way if they saw me as a so-called “traditional artist” from, say, Arnhem Land and I had pulled the painting for cultural reasons? Sure the gallerist would probably still have been annoyed but at least the community would have understood.<sup>9</sup>

Groom’s experience demonstrates the friction that occurs when market mechanisms are perceived, by artists, as being at odds with cultural norms and protocols.

<sup>9</sup> Related issues linked to public and professional expectations regarding the behaviour and art-practice of artists operating in NSW will be explored in greater detail below.

### **Levels of Market Engagement**

While, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, artists participate in the art market at specific levels, described as market spheres, they engage with these spheres at different frequencies, selling work in a full-time, part-time, casual or sporadic capacity. As outlined, only a very small portion of participants make art full-time, with most practicing part-time or casually, often because making a living from the sale of work is so difficult.<sup>10</sup> Artists engaged with the retail market explained that the relatively low price normally placed on their artworks meant that they would need to produce an impossibly high number of such works in order to earn a living wage. Likewise, artists whose works were sold in the fine art sphere and were usually priced highly, explained that often the market did not facilitate the steady and regular sale of their works because they are luxury items.

### **Part-Time, Casual and Sporadic**

In view of the challenges associated with producing and selling work in a full time capacity, most artists practicing part-time or casually expressed relief at being able to maintain a certain level of distance from the art market either because they found this market stressful or difficult to navigate, or because they felt it was distasteful to make art only to generate money (in keeping with the hostile worlds narrative). In the latter case, the prevailing attitude about the sale of art tended to manifest in an artist's denial of a desire to make money from their work, though the tenor of this denial was varied. Several artists emphatically disavowed their interest in making money from their art when questions about the art market arose. Here the common refrain was: 'it is not about money'. For example, after expressing surprise about being paid an artist's fee for participating in a show at Blacktown Art Centre, photographer Darren Bell noted, '...those things, to be perfectly honest, don't enter my brain. Selling my work doesn't enter my brain because...I'm just happy for people to see them. I know that might sound like bullshit but it's not'.

Other part-time or casual artists, rather than definitively disassociating themselves from a desire to earn money, explained that they prefer to rely on their 'day job' to make a living. This decision was often explained as being preferable to full-time art practice because it ensured that the great pleasure the artist derived from making art was not diminished. Here, financial

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<sup>10</sup> As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, one of the resources I utilised to identify potential participants was Regional Arts Network. This approach, combined with the relatively small number of full-time 'fine art' Aboriginal artists operating in NSW, meant that the majority of participating artists were part-time rather than full-time artists. These part-time artists engage with the art world, particularly the market, at various levels, including in the fine-art, retail and word-of-mouth spheres. The diverse mixture of participants allowed for detailed engagement with these diverse art market spheres; however it has meant that this thesis does not have a dedicated focus on high, or fine-art, nor on the practices of 'blue-chip' artists.

gain from the sale of art was described as the 'cherry on top' of art making. Sometimes, this preference for relying on a day job for income is associated with distrust or dislike of mainstream market norms associated with the sale of art works, with participants expressing annoyance or frustration at having to cede to market procedures associated with dealer commissions or pricing protocols. Those who do not wish to make such concessions often sell their work in the word-of-mouth spheres, where they can control the way their work is circulated. Thus, having full or part-time employment outside of art making means there is less financial pressure on the artist to capitulate to market norms that they find disagreeable. This frees up an artist to price and sell – or not sell – their works as they see fit. Here, as Howard Becker observes, artists working part-time may experience a sense of liberation at not having to adhere to the rules governing distribution networks (2008: 97). However, not all part-time or casual artists are satisfied with having to work a day job. For example, Frances Belle Parker, an established Yaegl artist based in Maclean who works part-time in the education sector, explained that she sincerely wished it was easier to generate a steady income from her art: 'I still have that dream that one day I won't need a job to pay the bills, a mundane job to go to everyday and I will just be able to make a living out of my art. I guess you need to believe that'.

Artists who practice art part-time or casually typically have full-time day jobs. Some are employed in positions related to the visual arts including working as visual art teachers, regional arts workers, curators or gallery staff, or as freelance art tutors teaching in prisons or community organisations. Other artists reported working in the public sector, usually in positions related to public health, welfare or education. Participants working day jobs often lamented having only limited time to make art, reporting that they often craved the mental and physical space required to immerse themselves deeply in their practice.

### **Full-Time**

Only nine participants worked as artists in a full-time capacity.<sup>11</sup> These artists largely circulated their work via the fine art sphere, although some operated in the retail sphere. Full-time artists operating in the fine-art sphere are typically represented by a gallery and may have additional professional support in the form of a studio manager. However, some artists do work independently, without permanent gallery representation. Full-time artists earn their income from the sale of their work to private collectors and public institutions, via the licencing of images of their work, prize money resulting from success in art competitions, and scholarships or other funding acquired from public organisations, such as Arts NSW, or from philanthropic institutions or individuals. Artists may also receive financial support from long-term buyers of

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<sup>11</sup> This number has shifted since I undertook fieldwork. This affirms, if such an affirmation was still needed, that the *ethnographic present* is a 'literary device' rather than a reflection of reality (Hastrup 1990: 45).



their work or other supporters, although this occurs only infrequently. For example, in 2013 it was reported that, a number of years previously, Tony Albert had ‘acquired a private patron, who backs him financially and helps him make the right connections at home and overseas’ (Jefferson 2013). Full-time artists typically operate out of a studio, usually a space separate from where they live, which they attend daily.

Attitudes regarding the art market held by full-time artists are far more pragmatic than those expressed by part-time or casual artists. Full-time artists clearly acknowledge the importance of selling their work without the defensiveness or anxiety articulated by other artists. Here, engagement with the market was often positioned as a necessary evil that allows artists to keep producing art, and thus, to achieve other goals – such as educating audiences, or preserving and protecting cultural practices – that artists position as discrete from their financial needs.

### **Market Meanings #1: Artworks as, and Beyond, Commodities**

Consideration of the attitudes expressed, and narratives articulated, by artists about the art market illustrate, in a very straightforward way, that the sale of work is, for artists, a meaningful action. That is, interaction with the art market leads artists to conceptualise their artworks, and their art practice, in particular ways. For example, the regular and structured sale of work leads full-time artists to conceptualise their creative productions as a kind of self-sustaining labour from which they are able to earn a living and, thus, live to make work for another day. Here, artworks offered for sale are understood as both products of the artists’ creative labour and, also, the means via which they are able to continue to devote themselves, full-time, to such productions. For full-time artists, artworks – when they enter the market – are understood as items that they can utilise for financial ends. Conversely, for those artists who are unwilling, or unable, to engage regularly with the art market, the production of art objects is rarely described as work, and such objects rarely discussed in monetary or financial terms.

In view of this, one might assert that the sale of an artwork shapes, or creates conflict regarding, the meaning of that artwork, in the mind of an artist, because the market turns the artwork offered for sale into a commodity from which the artist can generate an income (Kopytoff 1986: 64). This seems particularly evident when artists experience discomfort about the commodity status of their artworks and, in response to this, purposefully choose to sell their work in market spaces such as the word-of-mouth sphere, where artworks are most unproblematically understood and discussed as non-commodities, even as they are sold to consumers for money. This assertion – that the market renders artworks as commodities – is both correct, and too reductive to stand without qualification.

While artists may well understand their artworks as commodities when they are offered for sale, they are rarely talked about by artists as *only* commodities. As the distancing narratives articulated by artists in order to qualify their motivations for selling work illustrate, engagement with the market leads artists to describe their artworks in ways which emphasise the elements or characteristics of these artworks that distinguish them from straightforwardly commensurable commodities. In being confronted by the market for commodities, the artist – due to a hostile world's attitude, or their individual experience of making a work – is compelled to articulate, describe and define the various meanings of this work, including, and beyond, its status as a commodity. Similarly, the artist also articulates their own manifold motivations for making and selling a work, which – due to the multidimensional significance of the artwork – both include, and cannot be reduced to, the desire to make money from the sale of their artwork. Further, when artists discuss their engagement with the market, they rarely describe a sale transaction as *only* the exchange of an object for money. Such transactions are often positioned as also an exchange of ideas, or of cultural knowledge. Indeed, as shall be explored in the following sections, the various values and meanings embodied, for an artist, in an artwork, remain both present and significant, when an artwork is circulated in the market.

### **Prices: Indicators of Value**

A central challenge to artists intending to sell their work, especially if they are inexperienced in this arena, is the process of discerning the value of their work in terms of a monetary price. Indeed, in discussing challenges associated with the sale of work, artists commonly talked about how opaque the market can seem, particularly the norms surrounding the pricing of works, which can be difficult to divine without the aid of a mentor such as a fellow artist, dealer, or gallery or shop owner. Stuart Plattner has observed that, in the arena of the art market, artists, dealers and collectors all work to establish personal, trust-based relationships with one another in order to feel assured that the amount requested, and subsequently paid for an artwork, is fair, reasonable and correctly reflects the value of the work (1996: 12-17).<sup>12</sup> Plattner's assertion that consensus about price and value in the art market relies on interpersonal relationships, resonates in the context of the Aboriginal art market in NSW, with participants explaining that they rely on the guidance of professionals they respect or admire to help them price their work.

While artists who sell their work through retailers and dealers are required to negotiate and operate around established market norms, such as those relating to dealer commissions, artists who utilise the word-of-mouth sphere devise their own pricing norms and mechanisms.

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<sup>12</sup> Plattner's assertions about the market are based on ethnographic research conducted in St Louis, USA, in the 1990s.

The following anecdote from Darren Moffitt, whose art practice is described in Chapters 6 and 8, nicely illustrates the kinds of value-determination systems created by artists working in this informal market sphere. In discussing how he goes about selling his work, Moffitt explained that when he began painting he was a stranger to the art market and the world of retail. Therefore, after establishing a base hourly rate with which he felt comfortable, Moffitt devised an ingenious dots-per-minute equation for working out how to price works or give quotes for commissions. As he explained:

I just got a little bit of canvas and I just did some dots and I measured the surface area I covered and did some calculations. I worked out if I was just going to do that it would take me X amount of time to do a certain sized canvas and on top of that if I had to do other details on it, I'd work out how long it would take for me to do, say, the crab...and just kind of add that on.

Regardless of the sphere of market in which work is sold, artists typically framed the pricing of art in terms of striking a balance between costing a work at a level which ensures they are adequately reimbursed for their creative exertions, while also guaranteeing, as far as possible, that a work will sell. Quite aside from difficulties associated with the process of decoding the customs and norms of a particular market, striking this balance between adequate recompense for labour and increasing likelihood of sale is far from straightforward. A central difficulty is associated with the process of quantifying labour and assigning it value. Some artists, such as Moffitt, take an approach whereby labour determines worth and, thus, there is a direct correlation between the amount of work undertaken and the price of the finished piece. Here, labour is physical activity: stretching and priming canvas, mixing paints, applying base shades, adding dots or lines, painting animal figures etc. Moffitt does not charge for non-physical labour activities, such as mental processing or conceptualising a piece, which other artists factor into the price of a work. Indeed for those individuals who work exclusively as conceptual artists and thus utilise found, ready-made or purchased objects in their work, labour is primarily a matter of mental cogitation. An idea or concept for an installation or work might be devised over the course of many years or likewise be the matter of a moment. Here, the price of a work is unlikely to be established by per hour labour calculations. Instead, cost is devised by assigning a price value to the quality of the idea and the merit of its execution. This process is far more subjective than the relatively straightforward time-labour calculations of artists like Moffitt.

Various scholars have explored the way difficult-to-quantify elements embodied in an artwork, such as concept, subject, and aesthetic quality – elements that ultimately confirm the skill of the artist – come to impact upon its price (Velthuis 2003: 181). Plattner, for example, notes that many investors seeking to buy fine or high art are driven by a desire to own works that

can ‘...give the knowledgeable a “transcendental” aesthetic experience that can change the way the viewer looks at reality’ (1996: 7). Thus, as Velthuis observes, the price placed on a particular art work acts as a signifier intended to convey the ‘...quality of the artwork or the status of the artist...’ (2003: 181).

It is not necessarily the case that participants have trouble assessing the ‘transcendental’, aesthetic, or intellectual merit of their works, nor assigning a price they feel appropriately reimburses both the labour expended in its creation and the difficult-to-quantify elements which confer value. Conflict may arise, however, if the assigned price restricts the likelihood, or prevents completely, the sale of a work. Several Aboriginal arts officers and gallery directors explained to me that artists often price their works higher when they have a particular spiritual, personal or aesthetic connection to them. Jann Kesby, director of the not-for-profit Dunghutti-Ngaku Aboriginal Art Gallery in South Kempsey, works with local and regional artists to prepare and exhibit their works. The pricing of works is a collaborative process, with Kesby preferring not to challenge the price placed on works by artists. However, she explained that on occasion she finds herself having to negotiate around price:

...my other approach to the artist is, if they are still really attached to the work and it’s very precious to them we will leave it at the price they want. However, I say do you want to sell the work? Okay what is your bottom? What would you be happy with? And I try to talk to them – how long did it take you to paint it? Let’s have a look at the canvas...I might say, let’s try it at that and then in a month, you get on to me and see if it hasn’t sold, then we will relook at the price and I’ll bring it down.

Finding a price that satisfies the requirements of both the artist and consumer is often the duty of a dealer or gallery owner, whose experience of market trends and norms can be utilised when establishing monetary value. While some artists are happy to heed the advice of such industry professionals, others are less willing to preference the whims of the market, or tastes of consumers, above their own understanding of a work’s value. The following exchange between myself and Penny Evans, a ceramicist based in Lismore, illustrates the vexation expressed by some artists when the value of their work is not adequately translated into sale price, or is undermined or eroded by market norms, like dealer commissions:

**Penny Evans (PE):** I don’t actually put my stuff out there as an individual; I let people come to me. I don’t put myself out there in galleries particularly; I’m not interested in that. At my age, with the amount of work I’ve done, giving a gallery 30% to 50%, I’m not interested and I feel ripped off. I don’t expect to survive off my artworks; I have other jobs that I do now and my work is precious to me, so I will make it and sell it to individuals who I meet if they contact me, and not give a gallery a fucking percentage. With the ceramics, people want it cheap, they don’t

understand what's gone into it and the fact that I've been in that process for many years and they are valuable to me...when I'm ready to sell works I'll release them and sell them for the price that I want.

**Priya Vaughan (PV):** So you are in control of the process?

**PE:** I'm very independent with it and I know that I'm never going to make a huge fortune out of it but I'm in control of the process and I'm not giving anyone else a percentage.

**PV:** So, it's a frustration to labour away and then to feel like you've lost control?

**PE:** Yes, because it's a lifetime. It's a lifetime that brings you to the point of each piece...it is cumulative.<sup>13</sup>

For Evans the value of an artwork lies not only in its material dimensions, but also in the many years of practice, experimentation and learning that led to its creation. The work is valuable in and of itself, but is rendered more valuable because it stands as a testament to Evans' long career as an artist. Ultimately, for artists such as Evans, it is more important to honour the historic and emotional value of a work, and assign monetary price accordingly, than to defer to market whims, even if this means materially damaging the frequency at which works are sold and, consequently, relying on a day job for a regular income.



**Figure 9.2.** Four ceramic Burial Poles created by Penny Evans (2017, ceramics, dimensions variable). At the time of writing three poles were on display at the Grafton Regional Gallery as part of Evan's solo exhibition *YiiY – A Method to Decolonise*. The poles were created by Evans as a memorial piece for a close friend's funeral. Image credit: Penny Evans. Courtesy of the artist. ©Penny Evans.

### Reconciling and Representing Values

Penny Evans' experience speaks directly to an issue faced by artists attempting to attribute adequate prices to their works: the difficulty of reconciling the different values embodied in them. Evans is comfortable with the way she prices her work, and with the way she sells work

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<sup>13</sup> Evans has since set up her own webstore via which she sells her work directly to buyers (Evans 2016).

to the public (on her own terms and to her own timetable, rather than that of a dealer) because she has been able to make the prices she assigns works commensurate with the historical, cultural, and personal values embedded in these works. In other words, the monetary value Evans attributes to her work is felt, by her, to adequately reflect both the physical labour time and the aesthetic merit of each piece, but also, the less immediately tangible and quantifiable values present in the work. As the exchange quoted above illustrates, one such value is the cumulative artistic and life experiences that lead her to the creation of a work. Another value discussed by Evans is the role art-making has played in the artist's process of decolonising herself. As Evans has written, each of her artworks '...is a "site" or location of my life experience and is an external manifestation of my coming into myself through a process of decolonising' (2008). I asked Evans about this process and she explained:

...it's just been a slow process and journey of healing and education...I really had to educate myself about the history of this country and the history of NSW and the fact that we are the first colonised, you know, the first waves came in...so many people died at the time and then it fanned out up into Kamilaroi Country and up this way. And the ramifications of that for my family, and what they did to survive. That is, they went into denial around their Aboriginality and they tried to pass for white...the short film I've recently made is about my grandmother and her sister applying talcum powder to their face to cover up, to try and pass for white.<sup>14</sup>

For Evans, the process of making a work is also a process of considering, interrogating or engaging with the legacy of the colonisation of Australia, and of actively working to embrace her Aboriginality, thus shedding pre-conceptions, attitudes, or fears regarding her own cultural identity, which she carries as a result of the colonial process. It is this highly personal and deeply significant process that Evans seeks to honour and acknowledge by selling her work on her own terms. Evans' experiences show that the values and meanings embodied, for an artist, in a particular artwork, remain present rather than being undermined or obliterated, as critics like Januszczak might assume, when that artwork is circulated in the market. Indeed, the non-monetary values that artists like Evans seek to honour in their dealings with the market, are, evidently, also important to consumers and other art market stakeholders.

It has been observed by various scholars that Aboriginal art objects have consistently been conceptualised by academics, critics and those operating in the art market, as cultural products, items that represent, embody and evoke particular facets of Indigenous culture relating, for example, to religious beliefs and knowledge systems (see for example Gibson 2013: 64). This reading of art as an expression of culture goes some way to explaining the

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<sup>14</sup> Evans primarily makes ceramics, however she also produces works on paper and has recently started making short films.

conviction, expressed by some critics, that the commodification of Aboriginal art is essentially damaging, because it denotes the commodification (and, thus exploitation) of sacred cultural knowledge. This aside, the association of art with culture means that both artists and consumers often frame the consumption of Aboriginal art as the consumption of culture also (Gibson 2013: 64). Here, those buying Aboriginal art are interested in the cultural elements understood to be embodied in art objects, and these cultural elements confer value, prestige and merit to these objects. As the 'cultural talk' undertaken by artists at the Blak Markets in La Perouse (described in Chapter 8) illustrates, the cultural meanings and values that are simultaneously embedded in an artwork, and also make the creation of that work possible, are of interest to consumers, adding value to a work, and sometimes justifying or qualifying the monetary price assigned to it. This said, despite consumer, critical and academic interest in the cultural qualities of Indigenous artworks, and the role that the discussion of these qualities plays in the promotion of artworks for sale, tensions regarding the monetary worth of these qualities remain.

A vignette from Myers' *Painting Culture...* illustrates this point. One of the former art advisors at Papunya Tula recounts that he asked an artist to suggest a price for a large painting he had brought to the art centre. The artist suggested \$1000, a very high price at the time, but the advisor accepted. A week later, another artist brought another painting to the art advisor and suggested that this work might also be worth \$1000. The advisor answered, 'sorry, but I can't pay the same', to which the artist answered, 'same dreaming; got the same power'. In recounting this event the advisor concluded, 'he saw it [the two paintings] as the same. We always had tremendous difficulty with this, I mean basically we sold them on size' (Myers 2002: 192). Myers' anecdote demonstrates the way various cultural understandings of value meet, and are negotiated, when an artwork is appraised in terms of monetary value. What is also demonstrated, is that there is a clear hierarchy in terms of the way different cultural values are translated into monetary price (see also Morphy 2005: 19). Despite the spiritual power present in the second painting, formal art market valuation mechanisms – such as consideration of media used, size of work, aesthetic quality, the supply of similar works, renown of the artist – are the ultimate arbiters of the monetary price assigned to the work under consideration. While any, or all, of these valuation mechanisms may directly be connected to, and express, the cultural, personal and spiritual elements that make an artwork valuable to an artist, these elements, on their own, are unlikely to result in a dealer or retailer placing a higher price on the work than is indicated by its physical form and appearance.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Regarding the physical manifestations of 'cultural' qualities in artworks, Morphy has written extensively about the way Yolgnu artists paint works in such a way as to make them appear to 'shimmer brilliantly'. This process of painting is seen, by the Yolgnu, as 'adding ancestral power'.

Thus, as Altman argues, with reference to Myers' vignette, ultimately 'the market overrides local valuations...' (2005: 12).<sup>16</sup> This observation resonates with the experiences of participants, such as Penny Evans, whose disinclination to engage with formal market spheres relates directly to the way artworks are valued in these spheres. Despite the personal and historical significance of Evans' artworks, retailers and consumers, in the words of the artist, 'want it cheap', because Evans primarily creates ceramic vessels, items which consumers expect to pay less for than a painting or sculpture.

### **Market Meanings #2: Pricing and Value**

Consideration of the processes surrounding the pricing of artworks demonstrates that the sale of work confers, confirms or unsettles values and meanings embedded and embodied, for the artist, in an artwork.<sup>17</sup> On a very basic level the price assigned to an artwork confers value upon it, indicating monetary worth and implying that a work merits consumption, although this is a value contingent upon the sale of a work. In this way, as Velthuis has observed, the prices assigned to artworks have both a literal and symbolic significance that is meaningful to artists, retailers and consumers. These stakeholders may understand a price as signifying the level of aesthetic and artistic merit of a work, the renown of the artist, or the collectability of the artwork, and of others made by its creator (2003: 181). In this way, the procedures surrounding the pricing of artworks are indicative of the way the sale of art is a meaningful action for artists and a part of the process via which the meanings and values embedded in that artwork are consolidated. Thus, the pricing of work can be understood as being part of a kind of cyclical confirmation of worth whereby the formal, aesthetic and more elusive values of an artwork are symbolised and articulated by a price. In turn, this price communicates, confirms or amends those values it is intended to signify, sometimes to the dismay of artists who may feel this price undermines the significance and meanings embodied in an artwork.

### **Taste and Consumer Expectations**

Penny Evans' refusal to capitulate to pricing norms leads us to another challenge artists encounter in the creation of their work: contending with market trends and consumer tastes. In discussing the process of selling work with research participants, I often asked artists how much attention they pay to market trends when making works they intended to sell. Perhaps

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<sup>16</sup> Altman argues that artists 'bear' the overriding of their valuation systems by devising particular strategies relating to their art practice such as by modifying the size and content of their work (just as Mark Cora does when painting for the retail market (see Chapter 8), in order to cater to or engage with the market.

<sup>17</sup> There are strong resonances here with Nancy Munn's observations regarding value creation as occurring via socio-cultural acts and practices (1986: 8-16). Morphy, applying Munn's observations to his analysis of art and value creation, summarises Munn's central argument: 'in essence value creation processes in art are ones in which value is produced or located in objects in the context of social action and through socialisation into regimes of value associated with objects' (2005: 21).



predictably, given the influence of hostile worlds type rhetoric, most artists denied that current trends or fads in the market impact on the work they make. A few artists explained that catering to such trends would diminish the integrity of their work, while others felt that the market is too capricious to second guess, and that ultimately it is easier and safer to make your own work without trying to pre-empt fads or trends.

Those artists who professed an interest in catering to market demands or capitalising on trends, all rely solely on the sale of their art to make a living and each created work explicitly for sale in the retail or fine art spheres. These artists often have a direct relationship with the market, in that they are likely to be directly involved with the sale of their work – either because they operate their own gallery, or sell their work in-person at markets, fairs, and other events. This up-close relationship means that artists are able to directly monitor and assess which of their works are selling, and why. As a result, these artists have an experimental, speculative art practice that involves trialling and testing different kind of works in the arena of the market. This experimentation manifests in different ways. For example, Mirree Bayliss, who sells her work via two self-managed webstores, has developed a range of aesthetic modes of practice, which she utilises to exercise as broad a market reach as possible.<sup>18</sup> As she explained:

I actually paint four different styles. So this dots style I paint in, but there is also a style that I paint with layers of paint in the background...and there is also a style that I paint that has just materials from Country and I paint the animals over the top...and there is one more style where I mainly paint mandalas...So they [consumers] say, we don't like the animals or the dots Mirree, then I say okay that's fine because I have these...

While Bayliss experiments with the aesthetic elements of her work, Cootamundra-based painter, David Collins, maintains a consistent visual style and, instead, experiments with materials. Collins paints not only on canvas or board, but also on other objects such as placemats, key-holders, wine-bottle holders and coasters. He explained that not only does he enjoy painting 'off-canvas', but that it is his goal to present his art on various household goods in order to find which ones sell best. As he explained, 'I've had a few tissue boxes and they are good sellers...so then you buy six of the wooden [tissue] boxes and then they are sitting in there [Collins' Gallery]...so it is really what sells is what I really aim for'.

Aside from contending with market trends, artists frequently explained that they are often required to negotiate consumer expectations regarding the nature, form and content of Aboriginal art. Several artists, many of whom are based in Sydney, described instances when

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<sup>18</sup> Bayliss' two webstores are *Artworks by Mirree* (2017a) and *Dreams of Creation* (2017b).

they were required to 'educate' consumers about their art and their cultural heritage, in order to counter a mismatch between a buyer's expectation of Aboriginal art and the artworks being presented by the artist. For example, Dennis Golding, whose work was described in Chapter 6, noted that he is sometimes required to explain that his work is Aboriginal art, just not the Aboriginal art the potential customer was expecting. As Golding explained:

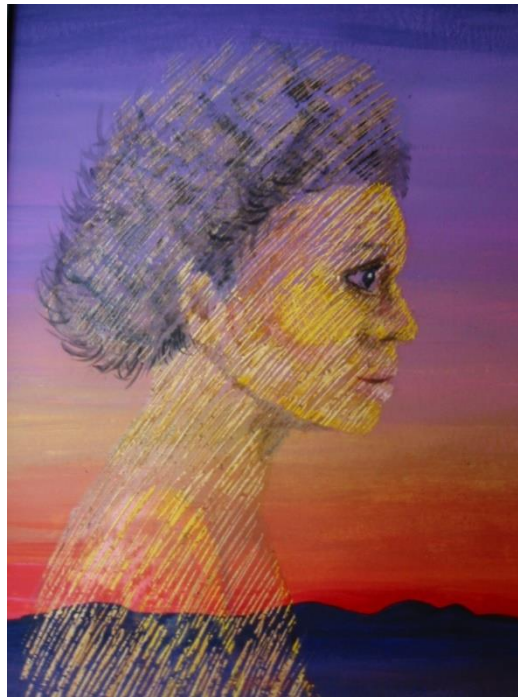
They've seen a lot of Aboriginal art, especially...Western Australian or Northern Territory artworks. So when they come to some of our exhibitions down here in Sydney, they've always said, "oh this is really different to how it is in western or north-western Australia". And that's what I've said to them, you know, NSW is a kind of urban and contemporary area...I've always had to explain myself...The first time I had an artwork in an exhibition, I think I was about 18. And I remember there was one lady that came up and said, "so this is not the traditional type of art". I was kind of stunned because this is what I grew up with, it's my tradition, even if that does look a little contemporary or urban compared to the other traditional art in Northern or Western Australia.

For some artists the kind of expectation management undertaken by Golding proves too challenging or confronting. Jordon Ardler, a young Dharawal painter and designer, is one such artist. Ardler's dot paintings depict, interpret and express her profound connection to the coastal Country around La Perouse. When discussing the process of exhibiting, Ardler stated that she prefers to show her work to her community, rather than to the general public:

I like it to be [shown] in the community...I tried to get my work in Aboriginal art galleries but they never accept it, because I'm not traditional. I'm from here [Sydney] and it is Northern Territory kind of stuff [they want]...I'd rather stick to the community...It's not really [about] what we're doing, it's how they [art dealers] want to sell stuff. They reckon that the whiter people would only buy it if they see a traditional Aboriginal person. That's why I like to stay in my community because they know they are getting the real stuff.

Ardler's comment illustrates that sometimes artists have to contend with consumer expectations regarding not only what Aboriginal art should look like, but how they, as Aboriginal artists, should appear and act. Participants dealing with these expectations are often angered and distressed by attitudes expressed by consumers about their physical appearance. For example, Nyree Reynolds explained that she was invited, by one of her long-term patrons, to participate in a group show in Germany. Reynolds' work frequently focuses on the experience of the Stolen Generations and her paintings typically depict school-aged girls, often in uniforms, amidst the arid landscape of Wiradjuri Country. Several such images were shown in Germany, alongside the works of other Aboriginal artists, including high-profile desert painters such as Minnie Pwerle. Reynolds flew to Germany to attend the opening of the

exhibition and I asked her about the experience. 'Attending, well that was good' she said, 'but because I haven't got dark skin it was awful, in some ways. One bloke sat there, a German fella saying, "you're not Aboriginal". I said, aren't I? Why not? And he said, "you do not have the colour". I said that's fine, that's fine, but I am'. Ultimately Reynolds felt that, because she did not look as the German attendees expected, her artworks, and her attendance at the opening, were not fully appreciated. As she concluded, 'I know that if I had had dark skin they would have made much more of my visit...It happens in Australia too and it's horrible'.



**Figure 9.3. Nyree Reynolds, 2001, *I am Woman*, mixed media, dimensions unknown. Image credit: Nyree Reynolds. Courtesy of the artist. ©Nyree Reynolds. The artist wrote the following text to accompany and explain the work: 'I am Woman, I am the merging of black culture and of white,/ I am the embodiment of the Ancient Knowledge of both./ I love and respect the many part of who I am, who I was and who I will be./ My Truth is we are all part of the One, and the One is the same for all cultures.'**

### **Education and Outreach**

The experiences of Reynolds, Golding and Ardler are by no means unique, with various participants recounting similar encounters with consumers. This indicates that for artists who interact directly with consumers, dealing with expectations regarding the nature of Aboriginal art, and, sometimes by extension, the 'nature' of Aboriginal artists, is a central part of selling their artwork. As a result, some artists consider encounters with consumers as opportunities to unsettle popular stereotypical preconceptions about Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people. For example, Frances Belle Parker and I spent some time discussing issues relating to how Aboriginal art should be defined. Parker explained that she had only occasionally found herself confronted by a consumer or audience member who felt that her work did not fit into their definition of Aboriginal art. When this did occur, Parker took the opportunity to try to educate this person about Aboriginal art. As she explained:

I guess that it is just about educating people about what is Aboriginal art and what is acceptable. And I don't expect the general public to know much about Aboriginal art, if anything at all...and I don't get offended if people see one of my paintings and they say well that's not Aboriginal art...if there are some people who obviously don't get it, I just think okay they obviously can't be educated, they are not ready.

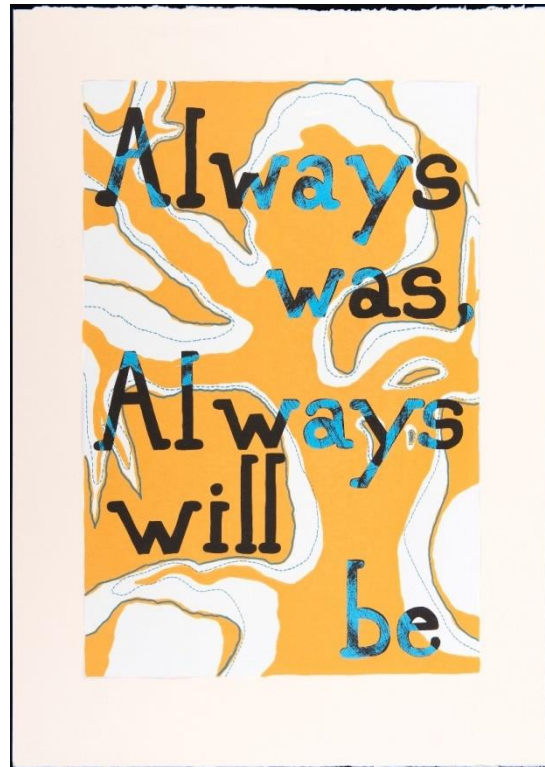


Figure 9.4. Frances Belle Parker, 2013, *Always*, screen-print on archival paper, 70 x 50 cm. Image credit: Frances Belle Parker. Courtesy of the artist. ©Frances Belle Parker.

Likewise, Mirree Bayliss utilises her webstores as a platform to assert her cultural identity to those consumers who assume that Aboriginal artists must look, and live, in certain ways. For example, Bayliss' *Dreams of Creation* website includes a dedicated 'authenticity' page. Here the artist has uploaded a letter by a high profile member of the Aboriginal community in Dubbo, her hometown, that affirms that Bayliss is accepted by this community as being of Aboriginal descent. Further, in the 'about the artist' section of the website the following statement appears: 'Mirree is a contemporary painter from Australia, a modern day Aboriginal artist from the Wiradjuri tribal area of NSW. Her heritage comes from her father, getting her white skin from the European side of her mother's family, she is the whitest one in her Aboriginal family' (Bayliss 2015). This statement speaks directly to the assumption that Aboriginal people must, as a requirement, have a certain skin colour. After graduating from university, where she studied fine art, Bayliss set about pursuing her Wiradjuri education. She explained, 'I actually did all my traditional ceremonies, I wanted to experience everything possible there was about my culture, so through an Elder I did all my women's ceremonies and that was a huge thing'. These experiences had a profound impact on the artist, personally and

artistically, as she explained, ‘my work changed a lot, to most people who look at me I’m very fair, I look like any other person but actually it is something I feel so deep inside myself.’ Thus, Bayliss’ website works to frame the way consumers should think about her artwork, and her identity as a contemporary Wiradjuri painter.



Figure 9.5. Mirree Bayliss, date unknown, *Crocodile Dreaming Power*, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm. Image credit: Mirree Bayliss. Courtesy of the artist. ©Mirree Bayliss.



Figure 9.6. Mirree Bayliss, date unknown, *Eagle Spirit Dreaming*, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm. Image credit: Mirree Bayliss. Courtesy of the artist. ©Mirree Bayliss.

### Market Meanings #3: Engaging with Consumers

The experiences of artists such as Nyree Reynolds and Mirree Bayliss indicate yet another way in which the sale of work is meaningful for artists, because it engenders engagement with, and scrutiny and feedback from, consumers. Here, interaction with consumers impacts on artists in different ways, with full time artists such as Bayliss or David Collins entering into a kind of dialogue with consumers and, thus, responding to their expectations and desires directly by experimenting with artistic forms. Other artists may choose to circulate their works in specific

ways in order to avoid having to confront consumer expectations. For Jordon Ardler this means selling her work to her community who, in her words, 'know they are getting the real stuff'.

For those artists who continue to engage with the broader art market but explicitly choose *not* to modify their art practice to accommodate audience expectations, interactions with consumers may lead them to conceptualise their engagement with the market in particular, and distinct, ways. For example, they may see the sale of work as offering an opportunity to educate consumers about Aboriginal art and Aboriginal artists, as Frances Belle Parker does. Thus, engaging with consumer expectations leads artists to conceptualise the sale of their work in ways that both include, and extend beyond, the generation of income. In other words, for artists, the process of selling work facilitates, due to interaction with consumers, multiple outcomes alongside earning them an income.

### **The Market and Motivations for Making: Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the way engagement with the market is a meaningful and significant action for artists, one which shapes the way they think about the art objects they create, and in some instances, the ways in which they practice art making. While the previous sections of this chapter have illustrated the way interactions with the market, the pricing of work and encounters with consumers contributes to, or modifies, artists' understandings of the works they offer for sale, this section turns, by way of conclusion, to the non-financial outcomes that the sale of work fulfils for artists. Consideration of these outcomes, illustrates, again, that the sale of work is meaningful for artists in various ways.

As demonstrated in this chapter, and in Chapter 8, in discussing the art market artists may be derisive, or at least downplay, the importance of making money from their art. However, they also acknowledge – to a greater or lesser degree – that they do desire and need to sell their work. While this desire is clearly linked to a need to make a living from their art practice, artists also articulate other, non-financial, motivations for offering their works for sale. For example, as described above, the sale of work can be understood as a means via which artists educate consumers about Aboriginal art and identity. Similarly, other artists see the sale of their work as a means of propagating political or social messages and thus facilitating consumer engagement with a particular issue.

For example, in 2017, responding to news that Chanel had begun marketing a \$1930 branded boomerang as a fashion accessory,<sup>19</sup> Amala Groom was inspired to create *Totes Appropes*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the ABC's report on the story: 'Chanel's \$2,000 boomerang sparks complaints and confusion from Indigenous Australians' (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Amala Groom, 2017, *Totes Appropes*, canvas, ink, edition of 100, 40 x 35 x 10 cm (handle 2.5 x 60 cm).

Seeking to ‘...draw attention to the inequalities that exist in the legal protections for multinational corporations and companies vs First Nations arts and cultures’ (Groom 2017c), Groom made a limited-edition run of 100 canvas tote bags featuring an image of two Chanel boomerangs, complete with the brand logo, and the text ‘Totes Appropes’ in the Chanel font. For the artist, the sale of these bags was central to her goal of drawing attention to corporate appropriation of Aboriginal culture. As she stated in the artist statement addressing the work, ‘wearing this tote continues this conversation in advocating and supporting First Nations cultures to see cultural appropriation banned worldwide’ (Groom 2017c). Here the circulation and sale of an artwork is an extension of the political act signified by the creation of the work. An association between the sale of art and the education and engagement of consumers is certainly not unique to artists in NSW. Morphy, for example, writes that Yolgnu people in North-East Arnhem Land have long been engaged in the production and sale of artworks. These works embody, evoke and maintain Yolgnu culture and law and, from the first, their sale was part of a conscious and strategic decision by the community to engage with wider Australia. As Morphy writes, ‘they saw the sale of art to outsiders as an economic opportunity but also as a means of asserting the value of their cultural production in the arenas of the encompassing society’ (2007: xv). Thus, for Groom, as with Yolgnu artists, the market becomes the terrain on which a campaign for hearts and minds is fought and in which activism (as art) takes place.



**Figure 9.7. Amala Groom, 2017, *Totes Appropes*, canvas, ink, edition of 100, 40 x 35 x 10cm (handle 2.5 x 60 cm). Image credit: Nerida Bourne. Courtesy of the artist. ©Amala Groom.**

Erica Coslor’s research into the fine art markets in London and New York demonstrates that some artists working in this milieu express distress or derision in instances when they perceive that the relationship between the commercial market and the art world is not being adequately mediated (2010: 219). According to Coslor, the hostile world views expressed by these artists does not manifest as blanket antagonism toward the market. Rather, the biggest

concern is that people may not act *properly* in their engagement with the market (2010: 219). As Coslor notes, 'instead of opposition to the market, this view comprised of a set of ethical and moral guidelines for how to behave in the art market, with the knowledge that improper behaviour...could damage reputations and long-term price levels.' (2010: 219). These guidelines ultimately manifest as market norms associated with pricing protocol and time elapsed before the resale of work (2010: 219-220). In the context of NSW, while economic norms certainly mediate an artist's engagement with the market, the narratives described above about motivations for making have a similar mediating effect. Couching the sale of artwork in terms of seemingly non-economic reasons to produce and sell work, disrupts a direct connection between art making and art sale, thus rendering the two actions discrete from one another. In view of media coverage and public interest in 'scandals' relating to the production and sale of Aboriginal art – which typically equate inauthenticity and cultural erosion with the en masse sale of art – it is easy to see why the artists might wish to acquit themselves of the suggestion that their sale of work is merely cynical cultural racketeering. That said, the assumption that artists are merely 'covering' themselves in referring to the sale of work in the context of non-economic drives to make, disregards the genuine and deeply-felt emotional impact affected by art practice. Indeed, diverse drives to create coexist without complication for almost all participants. Here, economic and seemingly non-economic motivations do not just coexist, they affirm one another.

### **Affirmation of Diverse Motivations**

While some artists discuss the sale of work in terms of a desire to engage with and educate consumers, others describe the sale of work as affirming, and endorsing, the non-financial motivations that drive them to create work. While a hostile world's view of the art market might render a desire to make money and a desire to, say, affirm cultural survival as mutually exclusive, many artists are able to accommodate and reconcile these dual desires. On a very simple level, the sale of an artwork signifies a complement to, and appreciation of, the artist's skill. As Natalie Bateman, a painter and printmaker from Dalmeny, explained, when people purchase her works to display in their homes, especially when she has experienced doubt about the quality and value of that work, she feels incredibly gratified and takes it as a mandate to keep making. For other artists a sale may confirm the validity of the artist's desire to communicate a political, social, or cultural message. For example, Jason Wing explained that because his works are not decorative and don't 'match the drapes', he feels that people who buy his work are supporting and endorsing him in his quest to utilise art as a means to explore political issues. As Wing clarified:



...it's always flattering [when you make a sale], every time it happens I get blown away. People are handing over money which is hard to get, even if you are rich or poor it's still hard to hand over money for what generally is a luxury item...But it's amazing to think that [works that tell] such a personal story [could sell].

Gibson has written that for Barkindji artists working in Wilcannia there is a strong correlation between the sale of art and affirmations of cultural validity. As she explains, '[in Wilcannia] cultural and economic motives are not mutually exclusive. For those who sell their art, a sale signals a successful assertion of identity as well as its monetary value' (2013: 202). Some of the artists with whom I have spoken, also align the production and sale of their work with maintaining and affirming their own – or their mob's – connection to culture. Consider, for example, the assertion, recounted in the previous chapter, made by the mother and daughter duo from the Blak Markets, that in selling fibre work they were acting as guardians of an ancient craft and ensuring that this facet of their culture survives. Here, the sale of work is a means of declaring to those viewing and buying it, that their culture has persisted and thrived, in defiance of colonising processes. In some instances the declaration of survival and continuity is more personal, with art practice facilitating access to, and expression of, personal cultural identity. This is certainly the case for Kevin Butler, a painter and muralist based in the Illawarra. Butler, one of the Stolen Generations, was removed from his family in Nambucca Heads as a young child and grew up in Sydney. Always aware of his Aboriginal heritage, in 1988 at the age of 26, Butler took up painting as a means of connecting to, experiencing and exploring his Aboriginality. Since then Butler has worked largely as a commissioned artist, creating works for schools, religious institutions and public museums. Some commissioned works draw directly on his experience of being removed from his family, while others focus on themes surrounding reconciliation and community unity. For Butler, this art practice is a healing one, a means of affirming and maintaining his cultural identity and salving the breach created by removal from his Aboriginal family. The experience of Butler and other artists demonstrates that the desire to, or the act of, selling work does not undermine or cancel out other desires fulfilled by creating art.

That the sale of work can act to affirm or endorse motivations for making that are positioned, by artists, as non-financial, illustrates once again the role that interactions with the art market play in 'making' an artwork for artists. Rather than diluting or undermining the cultural, spiritual, personal, and artistic power of an artwork, as assumed by hostile worlds rhetoric, the market can be experienced, by artists, as affirming of these. The meaningful nature of the art market, as outlined in this chapter, indicates that a thorough analysis of an artist's creative practice must take into account the actions and processes contributing to the physical

production of an artwork while *also* considering the actions that artists take in order to sell or circulate their work after its creation.

## Conclusion: Aboriginal Art in NSW

*'We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time'* – T.S. Eliot 'Little Gidding' (1943: 36)

### **Artists, Artworks, NSW**

The foundational aim of this thesis was to document and analyse present day Aboriginal art in NSW. It aimed to consider the kinds of artworks being created, the reason for their creation, and how they are circulated to audiences and consumers, in order to address a gap in literature coming from art history and the anthropology of art. In addressing this aim I spoke with 65 participants from 11 regions in NSW, attended numerous exhibitions, lectures and workshops, and conducted primary analysis of various data sets including census material from the ABS, auction sales data from the Australian Art Sales Digest, and 11 years' worth of Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize catalogues.

There is a conviction, articulated by participants and found in scholarship, that academic, commercial, and other types of non-engagement with Aboriginal people and cultural products from the south east is the result of an abiding conviction that there are no 'real' Aboriginal people living in this region.<sup>1</sup> This thesis follows the work of scholars such as Kleinert (1994), Nugent (2005), Gibson (2013), Nash (2009), and Everett (2010) in exploring the falsity of this perception, its historical enunciation, and its on-going legacy. Addressing this authenticity issue and undertaking the research that informed this thesis, has affirmed that Aboriginal art and artists in NSW deserve the same breadth and depth of engagement in evidence in literature on Aboriginal art produced elsewhere in Australia, such as the Central and Western Deserts and Arnhem Land. As will be suggested in the description of directions for future research, this project covers only a portion of topics and issues evoked by consideration of Aboriginal art produced in NSW. In other words, there is no good reason for the aforementioned gap in the literature to remain. This is affirmed by a number of key research findings, to be explored below. These findings both correlate with and differ from those in evidence across relevant literature.

### **Findings, Implications and Connections to Previous Research**

This thesis has shown that Aboriginal artists in NSW have a strong sense of the negative perceptions, outlined above, that cast them as cultureless and inauthentic. This is due, in part, to the influence of pioneering urban artists – such as those associated with Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative – who used their work to identify and challenge this position. It is also the

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion in introduction and Chapter 1.

result of participant experience in the world: be it exposure to media or popular culture, or one-on-one interactions with consumers and audience members who have, either unknowingly implied, or overtly suggested, that participants are not properly Aboriginal. The reasons for this conviction vary but are often associated with the way an artist looks, how they act, and the nature and content of their work. For artists these encounters are infuriating and hurtful, but can also, in some cases, be a springboard for dialogue and action. The impact of such perceptions on participants correlates with the position articulated by NSW-focused scholars such as Gibson (2008a), Cowlshaw (2011) and Macdonald (2001) that the 'white view' of Aboriginality is felt by, and impacts upon, Aboriginal people in various communities across NSW. However, the related assertion that this 'view' has been 'taken on' and is now expressed by Aboriginal people was not in evidence amongst the artists who participated in this research. This was perhaps because many participants understood their art practice as a cultural activity, and thus saw themselves as producing culture.

This said, the negative perceptions of Aboriginal NSW, and the south east, operate as a catalyst and a challenge for artists, curators, arts workers and government bodies in the state. Thus, artists, in addressing this issue directly in their work, or by simply creating work in the first place, reproduce, seek to interrogate, reflect upon and unsettle such perceptions. Similarly, arts workers, curators and those working for government bodies, such as Create NSW (formerly Arts NSW), champion visual forms and media they believe to be uniquely of NSW. This happens in local milieus – as with the *Carved Up...By Design* project (see Chapter 4) – and at a state-wide level – as with *Corroboree Sydney*, a festival curated by Hetti Perkins.<sup>2</sup> As this thesis has sought to illustrate in its engagement with the diverse artworks produced in NSW, it is also worth acknowledging that it is an over-simplification to reduce NSW artistic output to a reaction against colonial hang-ups about who qualifies as authentically Aboriginal. The artistic products of artists both encompass, and surpass, this topic.

As a result of stereotypes regarding Aboriginal people from the south east, and in response to essentialist notions of Aboriginality and cultural identity, participating artists use art making to represent, explore and constitute their identities. Cultural identity and Aboriginality are imagined and understood by participants in diverse ways and are the products of an artist's personal, familial, community and cultural experiences, and also of a thinking and knowing engagement with the media, politics, academic scholarship, and with various national, local, personal and art histories. Here, participants use their art practice to define and enact their identity (as described in Chapter 2). Further, artists may seek to represent and explore their

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<sup>2</sup> Corroboree Sydney ran in 2013 and 2014 after which, due to a 'funding dispute between organisers and the NSW Government' (Taylor 2015) it was discontinued. The festival sought to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture nationally, with a special focus on art and culture from NSW.

Aboriginal and other cultural identities in their work, and yet, feel ambivalent or negative about being designated an Aboriginal artist making Aboriginal art. This affirms, again, the diverse ways that participants conceptualise their personal, cultural and professional identities. The diverse ways Aboriginal identities are understood by participants correlates with the findings of scholars such as Riphagen and Yamanouchi. These authors show that amongst Aboriginal people in NSW generally (Yamanouchi 2012), and artists in the south east in particular (Riphagen 2013), ethnic, personal or artistic identities are diversely constituted. In view of how frequently identity is explored in artworks, and is used by art critics and curators as a frame via which to interpret art from NSW and the south east, identity can be called a NSW motif.

Consideration of Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize data and the art practice of participants demonstrates that artists in NSW are producing a multiplicity of different forms, concerned with various themes. Analysis of these key themes affirms that Aboriginal artists in NSW have distinct artistic concerns and interests, such as exploring and representing identity politics or socio-political issues affecting Aboriginal people in NSW. Importantly, this analysis also demonstrates that particular themes or subjects – such as Country, or the history and legacy of colonialism – are as central to the practice of Aboriginal artists in NSW as they are to those working beyond the state.

Fieldwork revealed the significance of two styles or genres of art (urban and contemporary art) and two visual forms in NSW (south eastern designs and dots). Although these genres and forms can be glossed as being perceived as traditional and authentic by various participants, this status is partial and contested, the result of diverse conceptions regarding the meaning of terms like authenticity, tradition and creative expression. Exploration of the narratives and actions that accompany the creation and appraisal of artworks featuring dots and south eastern designs, or which are classified as urban or contemporary, reveals that artists in NSW conceive of cultural heritage and tradition in diverse ways, which both correlate with, and unsettle, classical conceptions of tradition as related to deep time, or timelessness. Further, consideration of these art forms and genres illustrates that art making for participants is often deeply bound up with culture and cultural business, and that culture is, for most artists, something that involves innovation, creativity and change. As was illustrated by Kleinert, art works need not be literal reproductions of ancient forms in order to be utilised in culture making and maintenance (2010a).

Discussions with participants regarding the sale of their works reveal that the market for Aboriginal art accommodates different spheres that are demarcated by, for example, price and the tenor of artist engagement with consumers. This illustrates that artists engage with the

market at various levels across their careers, and that glossing the art market as involving only the trade in fine art ignores this diversity. In other words, the market spheres described in this thesis are rendered invisible if the art market is conceptualised as exclusively concerned with the consumption of fine art. Further, engagement with the art market – while potentially stressful – is also significant for artists in terms of the ways in which they imagine, create, and understand their artworks. The sale of works also enables artists to circulate ideas, messages and stories they have explored or represented in their work.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

On a broad level, the findings of this thesis illustrate that art making is meaningful. It is meaningful in the sense that it is significant and important for participants on a personal, familial, cultural and creative level. It is also meaningful in the sense that art objects become imbued – for their makers – with a range of meanings associated with the ideas and issues they are seeking to represent and explore as they make works. Importantly this meaning is not eroded by engagement in *worlds*, such as the art market, which have been perceived as antithetical to culture. In other words, it isn't analytically fruitful to ignore the impact and significance of an artist's engagement (or non-engagement) with the market, as doing so disregards a meaningful and constitutive facet of an artist's practice.

Findings regarding authentic, traditional and culturally continuous visual forms and genres throw up challenges regarding the language used to describe and define Aboriginal art. For example, a new language of art criticism and interpretation is required to move beyond the binaries of remote/urban, traditional/contemporary, touristic/authentic etc. This research demonstrates that such terms are much too important, loaded, frequently utilised, and amorphous to be either discarded or clumped together in overly simplistic dichotomies. Further, these findings demonstrate that although – as Sahlins (1999a: 414) and Brumann (1999: 11) have pointed out – anthropologists continue to interrogate and challenge the use and application of terms like tradition and authenticity, these terms are important for participants, even as they accommodate a broad range of meanings. This makes abandoning these concepts difficult to justify. The challenge, then, is to find a way of retaining and using these concepts while also acknowledging that they accommodate a broad range of meanings and are constantly being made and remade in the present.

Similarly, the diversity and nuances of meanings embedded, both implicitly and explicitly, in discussions of identity – particularly those linked to artistic identity – highlight tensions and difficulties related to the classification of artists and their artistic products. In conceiving of this research I imagined working with, and writing about, Aboriginal artists making art in NSW. In recruiting participants I explicitly sought to find interested Aboriginal artists interested in

taking part in this project. When I met and spoke with these artists, and read the work of scholars such as Riphagen (2013), I found that the designation of *Aboriginal artist* – which I had not interrogated or examined prior to commencing this research – was far from universally accepted or uncontested.

This illustrates that categories such as *Aboriginal artist*, that researchers – and those they write about – use in order to make sense of the world, are often partial, unstable and imprecise. The meaning and applicability of the designations *Aboriginal art* and *Aboriginal artist*, are not always clear, and can change over time. In the context of this research, I sought to acknowledge this by describing the tensions that surrounded assumptions about the professional identity of Aboriginal people making art in NSW. However, this acknowledgement and engagement *still* took place in the context of a thesis focused on Aboriginal art (and artists) in NSW. Thus, two partial and, for some, problematic definitional categories – *Aboriginal art* and *Aboriginal artist* – were retained. A very different thesis, likely with altered aims and concerns, could have been built in the wake of my abandoning these categories. Although it too would have had to accommodate diversity of experience, and acknowledge the imprecision of categories and definitions.

Finally, as examined in the discussion below, these research findings suggest that further engagement with Aboriginal art from NSW will be enriching for art historical and anthropological scholarship concerned with Aboriginal and Australian art. More broadly, these findings affirm the conviction, implicit in an anthropology of material culture (Miller 2010: 153), that examination of the *things* produced and consumed by individuals and communities, reveals much about how humans engage with, interpret, and move through the world.

### **Future Directions for Research**

On a fundamental level this research has aimed to explore, and engage with, art produced by Aboriginal artists working in NSW. Fulfilment of this aim has necessitated a focus on a specific set of themes and issues, but has also identified several arenas that could fruitfully be explored in future research. These are outlined below.

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, while accessible data about secondary sales of Aboriginal art associated with NSW exists, data regarding the primary market for Aboriginal art made in NSW is not readily available. Research investigating the types of NSW artworks sold in the art market and the revenue generated from these sales would assist in evaluations regarding commercial and consumer engagement with Aboriginal art from the state. In view of participant perceptions regarding the predominance of desert art works in the market, such research would also provide an indication regarding the relative popularity of NSW art

compared to that produced beyond the state. This research would also be useful to government and community organisations, and industry peak bodies, in terms of the allocation of resources and the development of promotional or supportive strategies.

A related area of research might focus on patterns of funding for Aboriginal arts in NSW by state and federal government bodies, such as Create NSW, the Department of Communications and the Arts, or the Australia Council, and other non-government organisations such as the Ian Potter Foundation. It would be worthwhile to focus particularly on the support that was provided for, and later withdrawn from, high profile Indigenous cultural events, such as *Corroboree Sydney* and the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Art Prize, which sought to celebrate, and garner interest in, Aboriginal art from NSW. This research would identify the types of arts projects and organisations in operation in NSW over time, and also give an indication of the projects and art practices that have been supported, and evaluated as worthy, by government and other institutions. In Chapter 4 I suggested that south eastern designs have been embraced by arts organisations and other institutions because they are perceived to be authentically *of* NSW. Future research would provide further information regarding other artistic forms or practices perceived as valid and authentic by government and other institutions and which are valorised by their funding.

A subject gestured at, but not interrogated in, this thesis, are the continuities and discontinuities – in terms of approaches to art making, popular visual forms, attitudes to culture, identity, authenticity and tradition etc. – between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists working in NSW (and more broadly the south east), and those operating in other regions across Australia. The themes and topics canvassed in this thesis could be utilised as a framework for comparative research across particular states, territories or regions. However, first, the use of geographical designations as frames for analysis would need to be interrogated and explored. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the use here of NSW as a scoping and framing device is the result of, and a response to, the particular socio-political histories that have played out in the place now known as NSW. Thus, whether similar geographical scoping or framing could be applied elsewhere remains to be seen.

Although the circulation of artworks in the art market is addressed in detail in this thesis, another vital area of circulation – exhibition – is not. Although artists' experiences of exhibiting are referred to in passing, a detailed, systematic review of curatorial approaches to the exhibition and display of Aboriginal art from NSW has not been undertaken. Future research could profitably be undertaken on the treatment of artworks by artists from NSW in the Australian exhibition context. Investigations regarding the way curators interpret works from NSW, and how this contrasts or correlates with broader approaches to the interpretation of



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, would help to elucidate the nature of art institution and curatorial engagement with art from NSW. It would be worthwhile considering interpretative changes as they have occurred over time by analysing, for example, curatorial approaches utilised in each of the National Gallery of Australia's Indigenous Art Triennial exhibitions. A connected branch of research could focus on the reception of the artworks of NSW Aboriginal artists in international art settings, including consideration of the presence, or absence, of ethnically-centred interpretations of NSW artists' works in these contexts. Further, detailed appraisal of trends or dominant narratives in art criticism of art from NSW also represents a fruitful vein for further research, as does the exploration of the intentions, ideas and approaches of Aboriginal art curators and critics working in NSW.

### **Paying Attention: A Conclusion**

I opened this thesis with an anecdote about Tony Albert's *Pay Attention*, a work that rapt me when I first saw it and which has stayed vividly with me ever since. In concluding this chapter, I want to return once again to *Pay Attention* and to reflect briefly on the impact and power of this work, and that of the many other artworks I saw in the process of researching this thesis.

Albert's installation ordered its viewer to pay attention. It was a command that resonated with the aims of this thesis and one I invoked like a kind of mantra as I spoke with participants, transcribed interviews, analysed data, and slowly wrote this text. Indeed, Albert's work did what great art so often does: it stayed with me, intrigued me, and made me think. However, the effect of Albert's work was not unique. The reality is that, in the process of researching this thesis – in meeting artists, arts workers, curators, and other arts professional, in travelling many thousands of kilometres and discussing, considering – and yes – paying attention to Aboriginal art produced in NSW – I had the great fortune to see many artworks that engaged, challenged and moved me. These works were variously humble, ambitious, distressing, challenging, funny, satirical, beautiful, easy to connect with, and abstruse. In a very direct way these works, and the things that their makers said about them, have moulded and directed the content of this research. In less easily definable ways, seeing these works, and discussing them with the artists who made them and the arts professionals who critique and champion them, has impacted upon and changed me for the better. Here, thinking and feeling things about the art I saw, and talking these thoughts and feelings through with participants, colleagues, friends and family, helped me to get a sense of the diversity of experiences that inform participants' art making. It also helped me understand the long history of Indigenous art making in the state now known as NSW; the complex history and legacy of colonialism and its relationship to the visual arts; the critical and creative engagements with Australian history, politics, media, art and pop culture that feed into the practice of artists in NSW; the cultural knowledge and

learning artists seek to represent and share in their work; and the great diversity and dynamism of art forms made in NSW.

All this is to say that paying attention was, for want of a less clichéd word, enriching. This enrichment is available, offered openly by Aboriginal artists working in NSW, and accessible via galleries, markets, shops, catalogues, books, and websites, for any person interested in thinking and feeling about art, and of course, paying attention.

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