

**"Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella":  
A study of art and Aboriginality  
in south east Australia 1900-1980**

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## **7 Urban initiatives**

### **i. Introduction**

When Aborigines moved to Melbourne in the late 1930s they gained some degree of freedom but they were still disadvantaged and experienced racial discrimination. The leadership provided by Bill Onus and others alleviated this situation by forging a new sense of identity and cohesion. Onus had a highly developed awareness of his own Aboriginality. Through the entrepreneurial activities he initiated in theatre and art, in the post-war period, he offered Aborigines employment and training and he fostered a new sense of cultural pride. Onus empowered south eastern Aborigines by selectively incorporating from the art of remote communities. As a cross-cultural mediator, he actively negotiated new relationships with the majority culture and, in some cases, altered their prevailing attitudes. His activities have been criticised as a commoditization of Aboriginal culture but this response fails to acknowledge that his initiatives laid the foundation for an urban Aboriginal art movement.

From the late 1930s, increasing numbers of Aborigines settled in Melbourne.<sup>1</sup> Hoping to escape economic depression, racial prejudice and repressive government policies, many Aborigines walked off the last remaining government stations at Lake Tyers and Cummeragunga and they left their fringe camps on the periphery of country towns to move to Melbourne. Formerly, police had forcibly returned Aborigines found camping on the banks of the Yarra river or the South Melbourne beach; now their presence was tolerated as wartime labour shortages created vacancies in soap and munition factories.<sup>2</sup> In Melbourne they formed enclaves in the inner-city suburbs of Fitzroy and Preston, mixing within a small, relatively closed community of kin and friends. When Dianne Barwick wrote in 1963, she found Melbourne

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<sup>1</sup> In tracing the history of this diaspora Barwick puts the Aboriginal population of Melbourne at 600 in 1949. Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," 32-35.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview 28 August 1991; Fred Bull, Interview, 6 September 1992.

communities maintained continuity with their regional domains and with kin but she also saw evidence of considerable division between communities and a lack of leadership.<sup>3</sup> In such a bleak era of upheaval, there is no doubt these elements existed, but it would be unfortunate if, in emphasising these problems, we were to lose sight of the new urban alliances forged at this time.<sup>4</sup> The pivotal influence of the Indian-Mauritian teacher, Thomas Shadrach James, is evident in the group of ex-Cummeragunga residents at the forefront of the Melbourne community: William Cooper, who formed the Australian Aboriginal League, the singer and activist, Margaret Tucker, Pastor Doug Nicholls, founder of the Fitzroy Church of Christ, Jack and George Patten and Eric and Bill Onus.<sup>5</sup> Arising out of their leadership, the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League was formed in 1957.

At this time the status of Aborigines was in flux. Urban leaders continued to fight for Aboriginal equality: they lobbied the government, mounted public protests and staged walk-outs from reserves but they despaired of achieving their goal of Aboriginal equality. In 1949, William Ferguson stood (unsuccessfully) for Federal parliament.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, the Second World War brought Aborigines throughout Australia into contact with a range of new experiences. When Aborigines served with the armed forces or found employment in munition factories they gained some equality and benefited from improved living standards. Their situation deteriorated however in the

<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, Barwick modified her position considerably. She, like Beckett, may have been influenced by a 'culture of poverty' approach which prevailed in the 1960s. Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," p. 321, 336-7: see also, Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Aboriginal Community," pp. 277-280.

<sup>4</sup> Biographies from this era highlight the dilemmas Aborigines confronted but leadership is evident. See for example, Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, Mavis Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug, The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls: Aboriginal Leader* (1965, rev. ed. Adelaide: Rigby, 1975); Andrew Markus, (ed.) *Blood From a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League*, Monash Publications in History 2, (Clayton: Monash University, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Nicholls (1906-1988) worked in the pastoral industry and gained fame as an athlete and footballer. He founded the Fitzroy Church of Christ in 1943, became president of the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League and adviser to the Victorian Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs. He was knighted in 1972 and became Governor of South Australia in 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, pp. 158-169.

post-war period with a return to discrimination when Aborigines found themselves in competition with European migrants and disadvantaged by a lack of education and skills. Few Aborigines had a trade; the majority worked as unskilled labour in factories, wharves, the tramways board and as laundry assistants in hospitals and waitresses. But Aborigines refused to accept this loss of status, partly because their war-time experiences had contributed toward a changed outlook. In the egalitarian ethos which had temporarily prevailed during the war, Aborigines realised that other, alternative relationships with non-Aborigines were possible. When Aborigines met Afro-American and Maori troops on leave, they gained a new sense of international solidarity with other ethnic minorities. This interaction escalated in the post war period.<sup>7</sup> Doug Nicholls ensured that visiting American celebrities such as William Warfield, Tod Duncan, Winifred Atwell and Harry Belafonte met Melbourne Aborigines at his Fitzroy Church.<sup>8</sup> Through the work of Moral Rearmament, Aborigines met Cree Indians visiting Melbourne and Harold Blair and Margaret Tucker had the opportunity to represent their people in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Onus played a key role in the transformations which occurred amongst Melbourne Aborigines during these critical decades.<sup>10</sup> He was an entrepreneur who had always used the production of artefacts to mediate with

<sup>7</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, pp. 172, 175-198.

<sup>10</sup> William (Bill) Onus was born at Moama in 1906 and worked with his father in the pastoral industry. He married and had two daughters, Isobel and Christine but his wife was tragically drowned. In 1934 Onus worked as a prospector in Bega before moving to Sydney where he met William Ferguson. Onus established a Moree branch of the Aborigines' Progressive Association, worked as Secretary to the Council for Aboriginal Citizens Rights within the Labour Party and organised dances for the All Aboriginal Football Club. After the war, he joined his parents in Melbourne and married a Scotswoman, Mary Kelly, in 1947. Their son Lin was born the following year. In 1949, Onus like Nicholls, considered standing for parliament but he was aware of party factions. The same year he was invited to America by Walt Disney but banned from entry. Onus subsequently served as president of the Australian Aborigines' League (later the Australian Aboriginal League), the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League and as a Justice of the Peace before his death in 1968. Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, pp. 85, 135, 163; Lin Onus, Interviews, 5 August, 1991 and 23 March 1992.

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mainstream Australian culture. Onus was famous as a champion boomerang thrower, renowned for his public demonstrations at Koala Park in Sydney, Station Pier and St Kilda beach in Melbourne and, most notably, at the Sir Colin Mackenzie Sanctuary in Healesville on land formerly part of the Coranderk reserve. In addition to his work as a wharf tally clerk, Onus traded in Aboriginal art and crafts from his home at 33 Terry Street, Deepdene. Aboriginal leaders in the Melbourne community regularly took advantage of every venue offered to them to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal cause. When, as president of the Australian Aboriginal League, Onus spoke at the opening of an exhibition by the social realist James Wigley in 1947, he began to establish friendships with artists from the wider community which would assist the next generation of Aboriginal artists.<sup>11</sup> (Plate 73)

## **ii An Aboriginal Moomba.**

In April 1949, the Australian Aborigines League staged Corroboree at Wirths Olympia—a variety concert with an all-Aboriginal cast which aimed to heighten Aboriginal solidarity and promote the Aboriginal cause. (Plate 74) By the late 1940s, after a decade of political activism, Onus realised that individual Aborigines such as Reg Saunders, Albert Namatjira, Robert Tudawali—star of the film Jedda—and the singer Harold Blair, who had achieved success in their own field had the potential to change public attitudes towards Aborigines. In the program for Corroboree Season 1949 Onus stated that "For many years we have endeavoured to obtain full citizen rights for all aborigines throughout Australia, yet our pleas have been left unanswered." Onus was "convinced that the best way of [Aborigines] getting recognition is to present them culturally to the public."<sup>12</sup> His strategy acknowledged that Aboriginal culture could operate as a catalyst for change.

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<sup>11</sup> A portrait of Bill Onus by Noel Counihan in the Onus archives suggests the friendship between Onus and the social realists extended beyond this single event.

<sup>12</sup> "Seeking Abo. 'Stars' in QLD," unmarked cutting, Australian Aboriginal League, Press Book, Moomba 1951, (hereafter AAL Press Book).

Billed as a "weird, wild [and] picturesque" event, Corroboree presented an evening of "tribal ritual dances, boomerang throwing, fire lighting, roping, whipcracking, [a] gum leaf band, choir, comedians, vocalists and other novelties."<sup>13</sup> Corroboree was definitely not the re-presentation of Aborigines' tribal past that advertising implied! The breadth of the program indicates that Aborigines selectively amalgamated aspects from their past hunter-gatherer lifestyle with skills from the pastoral industry and an appreciation for popular culture.<sup>14</sup> The previous century, the anthropologist A. W. Howitt had repeatedly commented upon the quality of mime, dance and song evident in the rituals he recorded.<sup>15</sup> Now concerts fulfilled a central role in Aboriginal communities: they were "a new kind of corroboree, a new kind of communal gathering."<sup>16</sup> In addition to the Lake Tyers Minstrels who toured in the 1920s, William Ferguson mounted concerts in Sydney to raise money for the Aborigines' Progressive Association, Margaret Tucker's Minstrel Singers from Cummeragunga performed for Murray River tourists during the depression and her concerts in Melbourne raised funds for Aborigines.<sup>17</sup> Later, concerts were held at Belgrave where Bill Onus had erected a stage at the back of his firm, 'Aboriginal Enterprises'. Concerts were integral to an Aboriginal way of life, they provided a dynamic link with the past, they offered a means of economic security and they raised the cultural, social and political consciousness of Aboriginal communities. Now, they underwent transformation to emerge as professional entertainment.

<sup>13</sup> Corroboree Season 1949, Wirth's Olympia 16 -23 April, 1949. An all Aboriginal cast included usherettes and a chorus line together with Bill Bargo, Edgar Bux, Pete Davis, Tom Foster, George Hill, May Lovett, Joyce McKinnon, Ted (Chook) Mullett and his gum leaf band, Eric Onus, Joan and Allen Saunders, James Scott and Mervyn Williams.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, pp. 163, 170-1; Clark, *Pastor Doug*, pp. 27-38.

<sup>15</sup> Howitt, *Native Tribes of South-east Australia*, pp. 423-4, 532, 534.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, pp. 27, 64.

In 1951, when plans were announced for the celebration of the Centenary of Victoria and Jubilee of the Commonwealth, Melbourne Aborigines were incensed to find they had been totally excluded.<sup>18</sup> As president of the Australian Aborigines' League, Doug Nicholls kept up a barrage of criticism until the Melbourne City Council acquiesced and agreed to provide the League with £2000, together with the services of a director, Irene Mitchell of the Little Theatre (now St Martin's), a script writer, Jean Campbell, and a set designer, Dres Hardingham.<sup>19</sup> Drawing upon skills and expertise within the community, An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark was written, rehearsed and went into production at the Princess Theatre within three weeks. (Plate 75) Although Onus hired some performers from Cherbourg Mission, Queensland and some of the cast came from New South Wales and South Australia, the majority were Melbourne Aborigines. The key to the success of An Aboriginal Moomba, lay in the fact that Irene Mitchell saw herself as a facilitator whose role was to assist the cast with their production. The fact that the cast presented her with a poker-worked boomerang as a token of their esteem at the close of the production suggests that their collaboration was successful. (Plate 76) Subsequently Mitchell was invited to contribute a foreword to Ronald Morgan's 1952 publication, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and its Aboriginal People*.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, pp. 153-7; Aborigines Might Play Before King," *The Sun*, 25 June 1951.

<sup>19</sup> An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark was staged at the Princess Theatre, 23-27 June 1951. The cast of about fifty included: Dulcie Pitt (Georgia Lee) from the Torres Strait Islands and Jacob Chirnside, Harry Emerson, Johnny Watters and Jack Cumbo from Cherbourg Mission. Melbourne Aborigines included Bill and Eric Onus, Wynne Onus, Margaret Tucker, Mervyn Williams, Doug and Gladys Nicholls, Lillian Nicholls, Harold Blair, George Daisy, Reg Lawrence, Jack Gray, Norman Macdonald, Eddie Jackson, Elley Bennett, Larry Leady, Peter Davis, Dick Cobbo, Jack Cobbo Snr, Stanley Nerang, Oscar Collins, Merle Davis, Winifred Douglas, Ivy Bucks, Melvina Cooper, Joyce McKinnon, Con Edwards, Eileen Young, Charlie Williams. From Lake Tyers came James Scott, Fred Foster Tom Walters and Foster Moffatt and from Lake Condah, Tommy Lovett. Geraldine and Evelyn Briggs came from Shepparton. The boxers, Jack Hassen, Alfie Clay and Elley Bennet and Alan & Joan Saunders from Sydney.

Today, Aborigines recall vividly the self esteem and cultural solidarity which An Aboriginal Moomba generated.<sup>20</sup> For the first time, Aboriginal performers received award wages but these economic gains were only one aspect of a more generally heightened self perception.<sup>21</sup> Recontextualising An Aboriginal Moomba into an earlier political era, Lin Onus remarks,

. . . I remember as a kid listening to people talk about it and it was the most amazing shot in the arm . . . There were all these other things happening as well, like Aboriginal servicemen had come home from war but found whilst they were equal elsewhere they weren't back at home . . . People's political involvement was much stronger then than it is now and I think there was a much tighter community bond so that the whole Moomba thing was so extraordinarily positive and it really gave people something to be proud of and when I listen to the older people who were there. . . it keeps coming through time and time again. We did this ourselves and it was great.<sup>22</sup>

The Melbourne community asserted their power and identity when they named the concert Moomba—a celebratory word from their own private language which meant 'camp concert' or, 'lets get together and have fun.'<sup>23</sup> The fact that MOOMBA appears embossed in gold on the Australian Aboriginal League Press Book of 1951 suggests it originally conveyed further political connotations. (Plate 77)

Moomba subsequently generated a range of meanings as it traversed across private and public constructions of ethnicity to enter public discourse. In 1954, Bill Onus gave the name to Melbourne City Council's new Autumn Festival—such a gift narrowed the gap between colonisers and colonised by giving status to Aborigines and establishing relationships of indebtedness.<sup>24</sup> A

<sup>20</sup> Iris Lovett-Gardner, Interview, 18 March 1992.

<sup>21</sup> The wage of £12 per week was paid partly as an allowance of 10/- per day. MacCannell's critique of staged spectacles by indigenous people suggests indigenous complicity in the commoditization of their culture outweighs the value of any economic gains which may accrue. His pessimistic interpretation fails to acknowledge the importance of wages as an index of political equality. cf. MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, pp. 18, 28-9.

<sup>22</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 23 March 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 155; Lin Onus, Interview, 23 March 1992; Doug Nicholls, (Swan Hill), Interview, 10 March, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Melbourne City Council Archives, Minutes Book for 12 May 1954; Memorandum to accompany Report No 1, 31 May 1954. For similar reasons Onus provided a service which



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decade later—and a year after the death of Bill Onus—scholars publicly questioned the authenticity of the word Moomba.<sup>25</sup> Stung into retaliation by the imputation that the illegitimacy of the word, Moomba was associated with his father's 'half-caste' status, Lin Onus undercut these accusations by declaring Moomba a hoax. Initially, Moomba represented a private code meaningful to members of the Aboriginal community. Aborigines were further empowered when it entered public discourse. When Lin Onus responded to the slur cast upon his father's reputation, he represented the viewpoint of a later, more politically radical generation. Casting Moomba as a hoax regained control over a south eastern heritage.

The autonomy Mitchell gave Aborigines was the key to the success of An Aboriginal Moomba. Mitchell made few directorial decisions but two she did implement, signal changing attitudes towards Aborigines. She claims the set design was her idea. As Mitchell recalls,

I had a lovely idea for that. I was a great fan of Albert Namatjira's ([and he was] the obvious person to ask but he didn't want to come down so I said to [the committee members, Doug Nicholls and Bill Onus], 'Well could you ask him if he would allow me to choose one of his designs'? and he said 'Yes.' and so I chose *The Monoliths [of the Legendary Euro, Palm Paddock]*.<sup>26</sup> (Plate 78)

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supplied Aboriginal names for use by the wider community. Letters, Maureen Stirling to W. Onus, 19 December 1960 and Pat Bedson to W. Onus, 12 December, 1960. Onus archives.

<sup>25</sup> Lorna Lippman, Letter to *The Age*, 6 December 1969 pointed out that 'Moom' means 'backside' in south-east languages. Hence, in one response, Lin Onus suggested that the name coined by his father referred to fact that "the guys were sitting on their backsides as far as Aboriginal affairs are concerned." Lin Onus quoted by Keith Dunstan, *Moomba: The First Twenty Years*, (Melbourne: Sun News Pictorial, 1969), p. 5. Another interpretation appears in a letter to the editor, drafted by James Davidson and signed by Lin Onus, *The Age*, 11 December 1969. (Both letters reproduced in Appendix 2.3).

Scholarship continues to support the 'hoax' theory. Joan Hughes, *Australian Words and their Origins* based on the Australian National Dictionary, (ed.) W. S. Ransom (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 341; B. J. Blake, *Australian Aboriginal Language* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1981), p. 84; Luise Hercus, *The Languages of Victoria ; a Late Survey*, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 17, Linguistic Series, No. 6, Part 11, p. 416.

<sup>26</sup> Irene Mitchell, (Melbourne) Interview, 9 September 1992; This painting was reproduced in Charles Mountford, *The Art of Albert Namatjira* (1942, Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1949), unpagged.

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Given the logistics involved it was probably not surprising that Namatjira declined to take up Mitchell's invitation—although the program cited Melbourne's winter climate as the reason. Her selection would also have met with acceptance from local Aborigines who regarded Albert Namatjira as a hero—a symbol of individual success and evidence that discrimination and racism could be overcome. Since Namatjira's watercolour landscapes of his Aranda country appropriated Western landscape codes, he represented a bridge to the future. But at no point does Mitchell seem to have considered the possibility that the local community might have had the expertise to produce a set design. As a 'full-blood' artist from a remote community, Albert Namatjira gained status for the production.

The second directorial decision taken by Mitchell divided the program into two discrete sections: 'The Past' and 'The Present.' Determined to give recognition to Melbourne's Aboriginal community, Mitchell added her own sub-title, 'Out of the Dark'—a trope which unfortunately implied that Aborigines were exiting a dark and 'primitive' past. Mitchell, however, intended the metaphor of darkness to refer to the absence of recognition for south east Aborigines and Aborigines read the division in this positive sense. Indeed the separation into past and present appears to have acted as a catalyst for a more heightened sense of Aboriginality: it offered a new historical perspective which allowed the past to be read as dynamic and accessible. Doug Nicholls later admitted,

We began to realise. . . that we should be proud of our Aboriginal culture—that we should remember we were a great people. I told them, 'We've been missing out because we've lost the interests of our own hearts—we've disgraced ourselves by not holding onto it. Instead of teaching ourselves about ourselves, we've been studying whites.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Clark, *Pastor Doug*, p. 157.

Dulcie Pitt, the female lead, exemplified how selected elements from the past could be meshed with contemporary incorporations to assert cultural difference. In the first half of the program, which dramatised the myth of Toolaba the chief, played by Jacob Chirnside from Cherbourg and the journey taken by his son Birwain, played by Harold Blair, Dulcie Pitt played Birwain's wife, Nerida. In the second half of the program Aborigines aimed to show how they had maintained "their inherent characteristics of courage, endurance and imagination [whilst they] adapted themselves to the new customs and culture of the white people."<sup>28</sup> Signifying 'The Present,' Pitt performed cabaret songs under her stage name of Georgia Lee and a bracket of Torres Strait Islander songs from her world-renowned repertoire.<sup>29</sup>

The packed audiences signalled their rapturous response to An Aboriginal Moomba by coo-eeing the cast at the end of the concert.<sup>30</sup> Critics, however, were generally more ambivalent: unanimous in their praise for 'The Past' and their condemnation of 'The Present,' as an "incongruous and pathetic intrusion" which left the audience impatiently waiting for the finale. In their praise for 'The Past', critics acknowledged that the dancing, mime and song were performed "with utmost simplicity, with a rhythm and a naturalness of miming" which far outclassed previous attempts by the Australian ballet to mimic Aboriginal dance.<sup>31</sup> Recognising a contemporary Aboriginal presence therefore raised the question of an authentic Australian identity: critics pointed out that Australian children were more familiar with St George and Pocahontas than Aboriginal legends.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless primitivist stereotypes

<sup>28</sup> An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark, Program, unpag.

<sup>29</sup> Unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book.

<sup>30</sup> "White Men Coo-ee Blacks at Aboriginal Concert," *The Sun*, 25 June 1951, p. 9; In a recent analysis Paul Carter argues 'coo-ee' was a sign of sociability and a physical expression of presence for Aborigines whereas non-Aborigines use the word when they are lost in the bush. Used in this context, coo-ee perhaps signified a desire for dialogue. Paul Carter, *The Sound Inbetween: Voice, Space, Performance* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press and New Endeavour Press, 1992) pp. 26-51.

<sup>31</sup> "Moomba," *The Bulletin*, 4 July 1951, AAL Press Book.

<sup>32</sup> Frank Doherty, "Stage: 'Moomba Took us by Storm,'" *The Argus*, 30 June 1951.

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influenced their judgments: the mythical narrative which gave structure to 'The Past' distanced Aborigines in time and space from contemporary Melbourne and rendered Aboriginal culture available for exploitation as an exotic spectacle. One enraptured commentator captured the atmosphere precisely, "[w]hen the fire was rekindled with fire sticks. . .and Mr Onus sent boomerangs hurtling around the auditorium and, finally swallowed flares in the eerie atmosphere. . . the excitement was intense."<sup>33</sup>

When critics so categorically dismissed the second half of the program from consideration, they refused to concede a contemporary Aboriginal presence in the settled south east.<sup>34</sup> It was not that critics sought visual authenticity; indeed hybridity characterised the entire performance given that the cast performed in a combination of kangaroo skins, hula skirts and evening dress! Rather, it was that 'The Present' undercut discourses of primitivism and demanded recognition that Aborigines were part of a modern colonial context. In retrospect, Mitchell herself admitted that "[t]he first act was a grand success but the second was not so very happy-making as the influence of the U. S. A. had cast its spell."<sup>35</sup> Her remark makes it clear that professional members of the theatre world judged contemporary representations of Aboriginality against their own concern for a virile and authentic Australian culture. Anna Vroland's 1951 publication, *Their Music Has Roots*, may well have tried to rebut this criticism. These debates were irrelevant, all cultures selectively incorporate from others and reinterpret and transform these appropriations according to their own world view. Emerging from this debate there is a sense in which primitivism enshrined traditional Aboriginal culture as an elitist, high art transmitted as a canon of values from one generation to another: by

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<sup>33</sup> "Native Moomba an Exciting Show," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book.

<sup>34</sup> "Native Moomba an Exciting Show,," "Stage. . .Frank Doherty: Superb Show by Natives" unmarked cuttings in the AAL Press Book. Frank Doherty, "Stage: Moomba Took us by Storm," *The Argus*, 30 June 1951.

<sup>35</sup> Irene Mitchell, "Moomba or Out of the Dark," typewritten manuscript, 1951, Copy in the author's possession, p. 2.

contrast, contemporary Aboriginal culture was evaluated against the radical changes of the modern world where these canons seemed to be threatened by popular culture.

Despite critics' misgivings, An Aboriginal Moomba was hailed as an authentic expression of a new national identity. In the euphoria which followed, country, interstate and international tours were mooted, together with a Royal performance in London.<sup>36</sup> None of these dreams were realised: instead, a revival of John Anthill's ballet Corroboree commemorated the 1954 Royal Visit.<sup>37</sup>

A survival paradigm underlay this rapturous response. As the entrepreneur Garnett H Carroll and Daryl Lindsay, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria commented,

In Moomba there is something completely Australian . . . Its character is composed of the purely aboriginal in literature, dancing and singing and must be preserved in its entirety. The aboriginal culture can be used and expressed through the theatrical medium. It is something we must give the world before our native peoples die out. . . 'Moomba' has excited people beyond anything we've ever known previously in the world of theatre. To us it is a national duty to send this work abroad Its nature and effect are international.<sup>38</sup>

A broader political position recognised the tokenism present in this response. Gordon Williams writing for *The Australasian Post* pointed out,

Moomba will bring to the thoughtful more than a pang of regret [because it is not enough to] wear Moomba as a badge of encouragement of national culture.

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<sup>36</sup> "King and Queen will see Their Show," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book; "Aborigines Might Play Before King," *The Sun*, 25 June 1961; "Aussies May Visit London in Moomba Show," *The Sun*, 30 June 1952.

<sup>37</sup> John Anthill composed Corroboree in 1939 and it was first performed in Sydney in 1946. At the invitation of the Australia Council, Beth Dean staged the revival on 6 February 1954 at the Tivoli theatre in Sydney. At the time, she was unaware of any Aboriginal concerts staged in Melbourne. Beth Dean, tel. conv. 23 November 1993.

<sup>38</sup> King and Queen will see Their Show," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Cuttings Book.

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It would be finer still if we wore it as a pledge of our ability, and our will to give the thousands of under privileged and still scorned Australian Aborigines, a more human deal.<sup>39</sup>

His response quite correctly identified the inverse relationship entailed in the appropriation of Aboriginal culture and the reality of racial discrimination. The danger was, of course, that such pessimism could operate negatively to erase the real achievements of An Aboriginal Moomba. Despite these contradictory reactions, the essential point was that spectacles operated in a space outside the parameters of everyday life where Aborigines might effect change.

### iii 'Aboriginal Enterprises'

In the mid 1950s, Onus opened an outlet for Aboriginal arts and crafts at Belgrave, in foothills of the Dandenong Ranges. The funding for this venture came from compensation Onus received from injuries sustained in a major traffic accident which left Onus an invalid for almost a year; afterwards, he needed to establish an alternative means of income. Perhaps Onus hoped to emulate the outlet for Aboriginal art and craft established in the post-war period at La Perouse in Sydney; Melbourne Aborigines lacked a central focus for their community.

Successful outlets for Aboriginal art and craft require a diverse and complex blend of skills and abilities and Onus drew upon several decades of experience. He made an astute choice of site. The Dandenong Ranges housed a cluster of tourist attractions including the Sir Colin Mackenzie Wildlife Sanctuary at Healesville—where Onus had formerly given demonstrations of boomerang throwing—and the sanctuary which housed the Aboriginal sculptures of William Ricketts with whom Onus was friends.<sup>40</sup> (Plate 79) The nearby State Forest provided Aboriginal Enterprises with access to

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon Williams, "Moomba a Challenge," *The Australasian Post*, 19 July 1951, pp. 8-10.

<sup>40</sup> The pottery and sculptures of William Ricketts, 1900-1993, expressed a spiritual affinity with Aboriginal people but his realist style and populist approach marginalised Ricketts from the art world. For a recent re-evaluation see Peter Brady, *Whitefella Dreaming*, (forthcoming).

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raw materials: it also situated Aborigines in a pristine, preserved environment which engendered strong associations. The influence which this natural environment had on local, national and international tourists is evident in the response of the American *Christian Science Monitor* which described how '[t]he factory is set in one of the most beautiful pockets of the lovely Dandenongs, against Sherbrooke Forest, where the remarkable lyre bird still lives out his largely mysterious life cycle."<sup>41</sup>

Like most contemporary outlets for Aboriginal art and crafts, the range of goods marketed by Aboriginal Enterprises ranged from unique fine art objects such as bark paintings and artefacts, to textiles, furniture, ceramics and tourist souvenirs (now sometimes referred to as airport art or ethno-kitsch). These small, cheap, often functional articles included artefacts, ash trays, key rings, book ends, platters and stationery. (Plates 80-82) Even today, with an existing fine art market for Aboriginal art, such tourist souvenirs represent half the profit of most outlets for Aboriginal art and craft.<sup>42</sup> In the 1950s, when a fine art market was just emerging, a different bias prevailed: tourist souvenirs represented the bulk of sales for Aboriginal Enterprises.

Onus marketed a range of boomerangs which appealed to a diversity of buyers. Production incorporated three different materials; the best quality were made from blackwood, red wattle or red gum and later, South Australian gidgee. Onus himself preferred large willow boomerangs for his indoor demonstrations. Selecting the wood required expertise and Onus worked with a small team to find the roots and elbows necessary to produce high quality

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<sup>41</sup> "Australian Seeks Boomerang Boom," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22 October 1955, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Altman, *The Aboriginal Art and Crafts Industry*, pp. 23, 98-99. By the late 1950s, bark paintings from Milingimbi and Yirrkala (Fig. 1) became available through James Davidson of Pacific and Aboriginal Art and Ruth McNicholl at the Argus Gallery.

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boomerangs which would not split and fracture when thrown.<sup>43</sup> Economic viability prevailed and Onus no longer hand crafted boomerangs but had them manufactured with a band-saw, sander and buff-wheel. (Plate 83) A second type of boomerang was produced from a red plastic insulating fibre which was tough, flexible and virtually indestructible.<sup>44</sup> Onus used these boomerangs for his outdoor demonstrations because they had a tremendous flight path. Aboriginal Enterprises also produced small, light, plywood boomerangs suitable for children. Designs in pokerwork and ochre coloured lacquers ranged from the simple to the intricate. High quality boomerangs, which represented half the output, sold for £5-6 and plywood boomerangs for 6/- and 12/-. (Plates 84 & 85) Each boomerang came supplied with an instructional pamphlet.

Even if the emphasis Onus placed upon boomerangs derived from his own skills and expertise, modern technology ensured boomerangs were economically viable. They also met with a ready market, as demonstrated above, boomerangs are a unique, if ubiquitous, symbol of national identity. This production range allowed Onus to produce thousands of boomerangs for a local, national and international export market, but other Aboriginal artefacts were marginalised in the process. On a few occasions, Onus stocked baskets made by an elderly relative, Mary Smith of Healesville. At the time, he drew journalist's attention to the local reeds, the kangaroo shin bone needle and the labour required for each basket.<sup>45</sup> But such hand-crafted artefacts could not compete in an industry where wholesalers demanded mass production and the opportunity to develop an Aboriginal women's cultural heritage was passed by.

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<sup>43</sup> This information on the production of boomerangs is drawn from Paula O'Dare, letter to the author, 21 January, 1992, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> John G. Mason, "Australian Portrait (7): Maker of Plastic Boomerangs," *The Junior Age*, 27 June 1947, p. 2; "Boom in Boomerangs," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book.

<sup>45</sup> Paula O'Dare, Interview, 16 October 1991: Herschell Hurst. "He Tells the Tales of his Own People," *The Australian Home Beautiful*, November 1955, pp. 25-26.



When a visiting Aboriginal artist decorated a boomerang for Onus in his own individual style, the artefact was transformed into a unique art object. (Plate 86) The Nyungar artist, Revel Cooper (1934-1983) grew up on the Carrolup Native Settlement situated about 117 miles south of Perth.<sup>46</sup> (Fig 1) As a result of music and art lessons from Mr and Mrs Noel White, Carrolup children gained renown and their work was exhibited in Perth in 1948 and overseas in 1950. The Native Welfare Department, however, refused to recognise their creative achievements and the settlement was eventually disbanded.<sup>47</sup> Earlier drawings and paintings by Cooper reproduced in the 1952 publication by Mary Durack Miller and Florence Rutter, *Child Artists of the Australian Bush*, reveal an eclectic range of styles including two dimensional animals and realistic figures and landscapes. Some artefacts which Cooper drew painstakingly reproduced old engraved patterns: others are quite cursorily decorated. (Plate 87) By contrast with these early drawings, the boomerang Cooper produced for Onus in the 1950s, displays a mature, unified style. The large, profiled fish and animals either end, the row of distorted dancing figures in the centre and two sets of broad, dotted bands conform to the balanced symmetry characteristic of Aboriginal art traditions. The contrasts which emerge in chapter 8 between this earlier example of Cooper's work and his subsequent artistic career suggest that Cooper benefited personally and artistically from his brief association with Onus.

<sup>46</sup> Carrolup Native Settlement (later Marribank Farm School) 1915-1922, 1940-1951 was a government institution for Aboriginal orphans and children who had been forcibly removed from their families. Cooper left Carrolup at the age of fourteen and worked as a railway fettler before living in Sydney and Melbourne. He served sentences at Geelong and Fremantle 1961-1970 before returning to live in Victoria where he died in tragic circumstances. Miller and Rutter, *Child Artists of the Australian Bush*; Muriel Wieck, "The Past Meets the Present," *Milady*, Vol. 2, No. 13, July 1949, pp. 44-45.

<sup>47</sup> For a recent re-evaluation of what has become known as the Bush Landscape School of the South-East see John E. Stanton, *Innovative Aboriginal Art of Western Australia*, The University of Western Australia Anthropology Research Museum, Occasional Paper No 1, 1988, pp. 22-23, Nos. 54-60; John E. Stanton, *Nyungah Landscapes: Aboriginal Artists of the South-West: the Heritage of Carrolup, Western Australia*, The University of Western Australia, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, Occasional Paper, No 3, 1992; *Nyungar Art from the South-West Region of Western Australia*, Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation, W. A. no date.

For many, such evident links between commerce and culture remain an anathema. From both an ethnographic and modernist viewpoint, an Aboriginal art industry apparently represents a commoditization of culture and a capitulation to market forces. But the value of Aboriginal Enterprises can only be determined by considering the transformative effect which its cultural production may have had on the wider community and its Aboriginal employees. In the first instance, undifferentiated and generalised concepts of 'the public' fail to adequately describe the breadth of activities which Onus initiated. In addition to the outlet at Belgrave, Onus opened two further branches at Narbethong in Victoria and Port Augusta in South Australia which were slightly less successful.<sup>48</sup> Onus toured constantly: within Victoria, interstate and once to New Zealand. On tour he visited schools, sold at agricultural shows, in department stores and at special events such as Home Shows, the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne and Scout Jamborees. It is unacceptable, then, to denigrate the level of mass production which Onus maintained when this output fulfilled an educational role. It needs to be recalled that, until 1960, Victorian Education Department School texts represented Aborigines as remnants of a 'stone-age' people doomed to extinction. When Onus spoke about Aboriginal culture and gave demonstrations of boomerang throwing, he overturned these unquestioned assumptions to show that Victorian Aborigines were part of a vibrant culture. Onus kept the letter one Melburnian wrote acknowledging that,

this country belonged to the Aboriginal before white man took over. I would like also to say how we enjoyed [your] demonstration of boomerang throwing and that it won't be long before white man gives your people a fairer deal in this vast country of ours.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Eric Onus managed the Narbethong branch.

<sup>49</sup> M. Eustace, Letter to Bill Onus, January 1963, Lin Onus archives.

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Onus did not wait for members of the mainstream culture to approach him, rather, he took Aboriginal culture to different sectors of Australian society. Some evidence exists to suggest that he was able to effect changes in public attitudes.

Aborigines employed by Bill Onus also acknowledge the role he played within the community and as an inter-cultural mediator. When Margaret Tucker visited Belgrave as a guest artist for Sunday concerts, she loved to see Onus performing.

We loved the shop . . . Bill would give an exhibition of boomerang throwing. He was an artist at this, and would throw the boomerang high in the air, soaring over the tops of huge gum trees, and then step forward to catch it as it approached him. It would come right into his outstretched hand. We Aborigines would never tire of watching. He loved his art and would delight the visiting tourists and celebrities he invited by telling them interesting tales of each article and how our people used them.<sup>50</sup>

Bill Onus worked on the philosophy that, "If you see anybody in the gutter you don't go down with them, you pull them up"; he used Aboriginal Enterprises to give employment to as many Aborigines as possible.<sup>51</sup> Aboriginal Enterprises represented a form of cottage industry: Aborigines worked collaboratively contributing to the production as manufacturers, demonstrators, designers or sales people.<sup>52</sup> An atmosphere of fun and comradeship pervaded the workshop enlivened by visits from Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe in their off season and Sunday concerts. Aboriginal Enterprises was part of a network which maintained the personal relationships which bound Aborigines together.

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<sup>50</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> Iris Lovett-Gardner, Interview, 18 March, 1992.

<sup>52</sup> Some of the Aborigines employed at Aboriginal Enterprises were: the Onus children, Isobel and her son Warren, Lin, Eric Onus, his wife Wynn and their daughters, Verna and Judith, Bill Onus' nephews, Joe, Bruce, Dennis and John McGuinness, Teddy Austin, the four sons of Alf (Knocker) Williams; Harry, 1927-1991, Kevin, b. 1937, Mervyn and Rodney b. 1947 and later Harold Blair. From the Lake Condah community came Iris Lovett-Gardner, an employee for seven years, her husband Ted, brother John, brother-in-law, Tommy Day and cousin Ted Lovett. Tommy Cusack came from Alice Springs.

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Onus was a role model who gave Aborigines a new pride in their culture and a personal direction to their lives. The patterns of socialisation he developed in an urban context went some way toward mitigating the hardship and difficulties Aborigines experienced. Although Aborigines gained considerable freedom when they left reserves, they still experienced racial discrimination. At primary school, Aboriginal children fought against an institutionalised racism which stereotyped all Aborigines as 'Stone Age' hunter-gatherers.<sup>53</sup> The Kurnai elder, Albert Mullett, who lived in Melbourne as a young boy during the 1940s recalls

I was a little boy in Melbourne in 1939-41. I would wag it from George St [Fitzroy, State School] out to the Esplanade, [St Kilda] where Bill Onus sold artefacts. I spent the day with him, learning how to make boomerangs and I felt honoured to go and get boomerangs which didn't return and Bill Onus would show then why it happened.<sup>54</sup>

When Mullett truanted to be with Onus and learn about the production of artefacts, he acknowledged Onus' authority and knowledge; the actions of both, represented an active resistance to assimilation. The respect which Mullett showed for Onus is a key to the way Aborigines maintained allegiance to their own people. In Melbourne, as at Lake Tyers, the production and display of boomerangs represented a means of cultural renewal.

Onus' nephew, Bruce McGuinness, of Wiradjuri/Ngunnawal descent, grew up ashamed of the Jacky Jacky stereotype which surrounded Aborigines and alienated from mainstream Australian society. Like many other Aborigines, he began work at 13 and claims to have had 30 jobs before he was 18,

on the wharves, in a circus, in a boxing troupe, picking hops, apples, grapes, and beans, and cutting timber . . . [but] 'The circus appealed to me most, because we were all cast in the same mould. We were misfits. There were a lot of Maoris, and if anyone came at name-calling, they got

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<sup>53</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 5 September, 1991; Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," pp. 212-3.

<sup>54</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 7 September 1992.

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the short end of the stick because the Maoris and Aboriginals stuck together'.<sup>55</sup>

Onus, however, persuaded him to stop roaming all over the country and join him making boomerangs and other artifacts at Belgrave. 'Uncle Bill was so proud of being an aboriginal, it was wonderful. . . [he] was a highly intelligent man, and he got me interested in aboriginal clubs and civil rights movements.'<sup>56</sup>

At Aboriginal Enterprises, where employees worked together in a cottage industry situation, these patterns of socialisation were further enhanced. Bindi Williams, whose father, Harry, worked for Onus, recalls there were always quite a few children about.

I used to get out there when I wagged school. I always wanted to be there: it was a magnet for me as child. I didn't have a great deal of interest in school. Everyone who got out there got involved in everything. It was a time when we were getting back in touch with our identity and, in a cultural sense we [children] shared these discussions.<sup>57</sup>

These recollections bear out the close correlation which exists between the cultural spaces of carnivals and circuses and the touristic displays staged by Aborigines—all of which occurred outside the boundaries of legitimate society.

Onus extended his influence nationally when he toured interstate. The Nyungar artist, Alma Toomath (b. 1940) who worked for Onus from 1960-1963, began drawing at Carrolup. (Plate 88) At that time, art performed a cathartic role: she recalls drawing constantly in charcoal and pencil as "a means of coping with the loneliness of being separated from my parents."<sup>58</sup> After leaving

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<sup>55</sup> "A Stranger in His Own Land," *The Herald Weekend Magazine*, 12 December 1970, pp. 27-28.

<sup>56</sup> "A Stranger in His Own Land," *The Herald Weekend Magazine*, 12 December, 1970, pp. 26-28.

<sup>57</sup> Bindi Williams, tel. conv. 29 June 1993.

<sup>58</sup> After leaving Carrolup, Alma Toomath, (nee Cluttabut or Cuttabut) transferred to Roelands Interdenominational Mission. Although Toomath trained as a nurses aid and worked in hospitals, factories and hotels she remained unemployed. In 1960 she lived in a beach shack at Scarborough with friends from Roeland, her brother Grady, Marjorie and Margaret Newell and Mary MacIntosh. When Toomath returned to Perth in the mid-1960s she completed a bridging course at WAIT (later Curtin University) and a Diploma of Art at Claremont Technical School 1975-1979. Alma Toomath, Interview, 19 August 1992.

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school, Toomath worked in various situations: in hospitals, factories and hotels, but found it difficult to gain employment until she met Onus demonstrating boomerangs on the waterfront at Scarborough, a Perth suburb. Onus saw her drawings and invited her to return to Victoria and work at Aboriginal Enterprises. Toomath recalls, Onus

used to look after me like his own kid. . . He was just a wonderful person. He used to make things stick in your head. It was his forcefulness in me made me go and study so he never died really. . . he was a bloke who gave you determination and a good cultural way and in those negative times he made you think positively.<sup>59</sup>

The assured sense of Aboriginality Onus transmitted and the training he provided, continued to influence his proteges who went on to explore different avenues of artistic expression. After she returned to Perth, Alma Toomath trained as a sculptor. Following the model established by Onus, Harry Williams supported a family of ten through the workshops and outlets he established for Aboriginal art and craft at Brighton and Camberwell.<sup>60</sup> In 1962, Williams starred with Doris Simpson in the twelve-part ABC television series, Alcheringa, compered by Bill Onus. Filmed at Lake Tyers, this series retrieved the past by re-creating the hunter-gather lifestyle of an Aboriginal family in the south east—a popular theme which educated the public, but one which did little to undercut prevailing constructions of Aboriginality.<sup>61</sup>

Lin Onus is a key figure in the emergence of an urban Aboriginal art movement in Melbourne in the 1970s. (see chapter 8) He grew up imbued with his father's values, he shared in the production of artefacts and gained a grounding in skills at Aboriginal Enterprises. As with many Aboriginal children, he left school at fourteen to escape racial discrimination and the

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<sup>59</sup> Alma Toomath, Interview, 19 August, 1992.

<sup>60</sup> "The Confident Family," *The Sun*, 30 April 1976, p. 7; Bindi Williams, tel. conv. 29 June 1993.

<sup>61</sup> A copy of the twelve episodes in the Alcheringa series, directed by Frank Few, is held by AIATSIS, Canberra. The series won the John Murray Award for documentary of the year but it is a sign of Aborigines' political status that the cast remain anonymous.

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stereotyped constructions of Aboriginality which permeated the education system. The apprenticeship he completed as a motor mechanic typified the social strata to which the majority society relegated Aborigines. A career as an artist circumvented these restrictions. Not surprisingly, the first landscapes Lin Onus painted as a teenager, were sold through Aboriginal Enterprises.<sup>62</sup>

#### **iv Appropriation in context**

Bill Onus was adamant he wanted an all-Aboriginal staff but found it impossible to locate sufficient Aborigines with the necessary skills and expertise. A century of acculturation had largely broken down the informal structures of artistic training in Aboriginal communities: nor had they been replaced by institutions.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, at any one time, about half the employees at Aboriginal Enterprises were drawn from the wider community. These employees worked in different capacities and contexts: some assisted with the production of artefacts in the small workshop at the rear of the firm, others preferred to operate from their homes on a piece-work basis.<sup>64</sup> Many of the artists who painted blank boomerangs and platters for Aboriginal Enterprises were European women migrants living on farms in the Dandenongs, who drew upon a Western tradition of craftsmanship. Aboriginal Enterprises also bought on commission from several potters; Allan Lowe, who had used Aboriginal motifs since the early 1930s, his son Jon, who gave pottery demonstrations on Sundays and the author Ron Edwards contributed briefly. The English artist, Noel Chandler, who painted under the pseudonym 'Murrawan' at the suggestion of Bill Onus, gave painting demonstrations when

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<sup>62</sup> For a brief period after his father's death, Lin operated Aboriginal Enterprises on a wholesale basis.

<sup>63</sup> Luke Taylor, "The Same but Different: Social Reproduction and Innovation in the Art of the Kunwinjku of Western Arnhem Land," Ph D Thesis, ANU, 1987," pp. 126-140 describes how apprentices in north-west Arnhem Land learn bark painting by way of schools established around master painters to whom apprentices are related genealogically and ritually. cf. the discussion of institutional training in Altman, *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry*, pp. 266-267.

<sup>64</sup> In addition to those mentioned in the text, Jack Elliott from Scotland, Susan Kerry, Gwen McCarthy, Esme Allen and Jeanette Gunn worked for Aboriginal Enterprises.

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Aboriginal Enterprises went on tour. These were "always a very popular draw card, and resulted in good sales."<sup>65</sup> (Plates 89 & 91)

By far the most significant contributor amongst the non-Aborigines was Paula O'Dare (b.1923) whose association with Onus extended from the 1940s to the 1960s.<sup>66</sup> O'Dare's training and experience typified an earlier era, in as much as she bridged the gap which now tends to separate commercial and fine art. Although she trained as a screen-printer, O'Dare knew Joy Hester, Albert Tucker and Josl Bergner and through them she became a member of the Communist Party. O'Dare's involvement with Aboriginal Enterprises was of a political nature: today, she believes it was the racism and segregation she witnessed during a holiday at Peak Hill, New South Wales which predisposed her to working for Onus. By the 1940s, an interest in Aboriginal art had begun to replace earlier influences from Egyptian art and European folk art. It is evidence of the relative isolation in which artists worked at this time that O'Dare says she was unaware of other artists working in the field, with the exception of the Melbourne screen-printer, Frances Burke. A lecture and film by the amateur anthropologist, Charles Mountford, inspired her to read *Brown Men and Red Sand* and *Art, Myth and Symbolism* together with *Adam in Ochre* by Colin Simpson. Restricted by a lack of material on Aboriginal art, O'Dare made contact with Onus who gave her advice and began to act as her distributor. With the establishment of Aboriginal Enterprises, O'Dare became his permanent designer.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Paula O'Dare, Letter to the author, 28 October 1992.

<sup>66</sup> Initially O'Dare wanted to emulate her sister Sylvia Harrap who attended the National Gallery School; instead she was forced to attend the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy. Afterwards O'Dare trained as a silk screen designer with Vida Turner then with Tubby Grant and Joan Porter whose firms adapted English textile designs for printing in Japan and subsequent resale in Australia. At this time, O'Dare shared a flat in the artists' quarter of Little Collins Street with her sister, Sylvia Harrap, and Joy Hester. Between 1949-1952, Geoff Kerry, Ambrose and Phyl Dyson and O'Dare established the Guild Studios, a commercial art firm which aimed for a definite Australian style.

<sup>67</sup> Paula O'Dare, Interview, 16 October 1991.



Aboriginal Enterprises was a busy organisation which needed O'Dare's rare blend of skills. Even today, many outlets for Aboriginal art and craft employ non-Aboriginal advisers.<sup>68</sup> O'Dare liked working with Aborigines. As an artist, O'Dare designed screen printed fabrics and she completed murals at the Hotel Lonsdale and elsewhere. O'Dare trained young artists including Alma Toomath and Harry Williams and she arranged for deliveries to piece workers living in the Dandenongs.<sup>69</sup> On the frequent occasions when Onus was absent on tour, O'Dare managed the firm. Even so, the situation at Aboriginal Enterprises raises a number of provocative issues. Aboriginal Enterprises was an outlet for Aboriginal art and craft owned by an Aborigine, where Aborigines and non-Aborigines collaborated in production. Inevitably, this situation raises issues of authenticity, appropriation and Aboriginality—questions which can only be addressed through an understanding of the philosophies Onus and O'Dare articulated, the range of production and the public response this generated. Aboriginal Enterprises must be evaluated as part of an emerging urban Aboriginal art.

Appropriation is viewed ambivalently today but in the 1950s, it was seen in a different context by Aborigines. In an era of prevailing racism, before Aboriginal citizenship, appropriation represented a compliment—it reflected an interest and admiration for Aboriginal culture on the part of the wider community. Aborigines valued the support they received from artists like Margaret Preston, Byram Mansell and O'Dare. Lin Onus recalls,

In those days you needed any support you could get . . . It was an entirely different debate then and if anything I had the impression that Aboriginal people were quite happy for this to take place because it legitimised their work and if white people were prepared to go to this sort of trouble in some way this proved that Aboriginal art was good or Aboriginality was

<sup>68</sup> Altman, *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry*, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Paula O'Dare, Interview, 16 October 1991: "Dos and Don'ts on the Didgeridoo," *The Australasian Post*, 27 January 1966, p. 19.

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good so I don't think people were the slightest bit offended by this process but more pleased to see it happen.<sup>70</sup>

Lin's response offers a reinterpretation of appropriation by relocating it within the conditions of historical struggle in which Aborigines lived.

Although Aborigines viewed appropriation constructively Onus was concerned with the accuracy of these reinterpretations. His misgivings were that,

Aboriginal art is becoming prostituted. . . Some goods are being sold bearing designs claimed to be aboriginal art but they are simply what designers consider it to be like.<sup>71</sup>

The terminology Onus used implied a moral issue. Onus considered artists expressed their respect and dignity toward Aboriginal culture when they copied designs accurately. But it was the aesthetic ideologies of modernism which drove debate amongst mainstream artists. Alexandra (Nan) Mackenzie of Annan fabrics took pride in the fact that Aboriginal art was merely the raw material for her own original, imaginative designs whereas O'Dare placed importance on the original design and its meanings within Aboriginal culture.<sup>72</sup> This is further evidence of the point made in earlier discussion: that a plurality of primitivisms operated among artists. The observation was made then—in relation to Percy Leason—that discourses of primitivism are not static but open to constant reinterpretation. Just as Preston, notably, altered her attitudes towards Aboriginal culture as she gained more knowledge, so O'Dare changed direction in the course of her employment at Aboriginal Enterprises: initially drawn to the decorative qualities of Aboriginal art, subsequently it was the symbolic meaning of Aboriginal motifs which became important.

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<sup>70</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 5 August 1991.

<sup>71</sup> "Native Art Had Found World Market," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book; "Stone Age Legends in Modern Design: He Tells the Tales of His Own People," *The Australian Home Beautiful*, November 1955, pp. 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> " 'Monty' Liked the Fabric," *The Australian Home Beautiful*, November 1955. p. 29.

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Not surprisingly Onus actively supported O'Dare's interest in Aboriginal art by financially assisting her to visit Central Australia—then becoming popular as a major tourist destination. Prior to the opening of Aboriginal Enterprises, O'Dare travelled first to Adelaide, where she sought advice from Charles Mountford. She then joined the first camping expedition to Ayers Rock, mounted by Tuit's and spent a week drawing cave paintings before visiting Mountford on her return to Melbourne. Why did Onus encourage O'Dare to research the art of remote communities, to selectively incorporate their styles and motifs into the artefacts produced at Aboriginal Enterprises? Several possible reasons are suggested by James Bell's work with the La Perouse community in 1967. As an anthropologist Bell comments on the community's interest in the past—and he becomes implicated himself in their desires.

Their interest in this past is based on a curiosity concerning their origin and ancestors, but others who engage in the tourist trade are also interested in it because of the economic advantages such knowledge affords. As tourists inspect their curios, the Aborigines offer them information or answer their questions on different features of the past life to encourage sales. Informants asked me to get them some 'real blackfeller' designs which they could copy onto their curios to make them look more authentic and wanted full details as to their meaning. I also supplied photographs of 'real blackfellers' which they took with them to 'the loop' to lend atmosphere to their curio stalls.<sup>73</sup>

There are many parallels in time and place between the La Perouse community and Aboriginal Enterprises. It is apparent that Aborigines in the cities were acutely aware of the destruction to their Aboriginal heritage and actively sought to replace this by drawing upon various sources. Tourism created an added incentive, in Bell's evidence this commercial exchange is a catalyst rather than a destructive force. The parallels between these two urban communities is further heightened when one contrasts their interest in researching the past and the art of remote communities, with the images of

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<sup>73</sup> Bell. "The La Perouse Aborigines," pp. 128-9. "The loop" refers to the tram terminus at La Perouse where Aborigines sold their goods.

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indigenous flora and fauna and national identity which predominate in rural communities.

The fact that non-Aboriginal artists like Paula O'Dare and Murrawan (Noel Chandler) painted in an Aboriginal style does not seem to have perturbed other Aboriginal employees. In Alma Toomath's opinion, Noel Chandler "knew a lot about Aboriginal culture and did it because he wanted to see the old boy [Bill Onus] get on."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, O'Dare makes the distinction that

I wouldn't do this for my own purposes. I did it for that project. I would never live with myself if I did it for myself. I did it for Bill. . . It was promoting Aboriginal culture.<sup>75</sup> . . . What we were about was more than just a business enterprise, there was a bond between the Koories and Gubs: a strong feeling of teamwork and family.<sup>76</sup>

The assumption is often made that when indigenous art comes into conjunction with the tourist industry it suffers a loss of cultural integrity. The evidence from Aboriginal Enterprises suggests to the contrary, that artists from the wider community shared a sense of commitment with Aborigines that was not precluded by commercialism.<sup>77</sup>

As an employee of Bill Onus, O'Dare gained a heightened awareness of racial discrimination: "People found it really offensive [that I was] working for an Aboriginal."<sup>78</sup> Earlier, when Garnett Carroll and Daryl Lindsay lent their support to An Aboriginal Moomba they had invoked settler nationalist myths based on a survival paradigm which presumed Aboriginal culture was doomed to extinction. Interviews which O'Dare gave to the media rejected these primitivisms: instead she upheld what she saw as the egalitarian and socialist values in Aboriginal culture and stressed the importance of their

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<sup>74</sup> Alma Toomath, Interview, 19 August 1992.

<sup>75</sup> Paula O' Dare, Interview, 16 October 1991.

<sup>76</sup> Paula O' Dare, letter to the author, 21 January 1992, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> cf. Brenda Factor, "Marketing an Australian Identity," *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991, pp. 20-26.

<sup>78</sup> Paula O'Dare, Interview, 16 October 1991.

attachment to land. O'Dare rebutted prevailing stereotypes of the Aborigine as noble savage to argue the political issue of equal opportunities.<sup>79</sup> O'Dare utilised the publicity which Aboriginal Enterprises generated as a forum through which to publicise her political position on Aboriginal culture.

Inevitably, O'Dare's selective incorporations from the art of remote communities underwent radical transformations. A multiplicity of factors mediate appropriations, an artists' individual perception, their skills, the technologies available and the range of commodities produced. O'Dare's favourite motif was the fashionable (if atypical image) of the *Four Running Women*. These graceful, delicate Mimi figures were first reproduced in the catalogue for the 1951 Jubilee exhibition of Primitive Art curated by Leonhard Adam, then in Mountford's *Art, Myth and Symbolism* and then as bunting for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne.<sup>80</sup> In practical terms, however, the style of O'Dare's designs varied considerably. Textile designs such as *Churinga* bear a striking resemblance to the contemporary work of Frances Burke—evidence that any artists' perception is culturally coded. (Plate 90) When journalists interpreted these stark, abstract compositions as the perfect compliment to the modern interior, they saw a juxtaposition between the primitive and the modern: the production of Aboriginal Enterprises represented an "ancient art in [a] modern style."<sup>81</sup> In an interview with Bill Onus, one journalist observed,

the public had a genuine liking for Aboriginal handicraft which had never been seen outside of a museum. [Onus replied] 'The Australian Aborigine may lack European culture but he has much to offer in

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Auld, "Curtains Can Talk," *The New Idea*, 24 April 1957, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> *The Jubilee Exhibition of Primitive Art*, Organised by the Plastic Arts Committee for the Commonwealth Jubilee Celebrations, 1951, p. 17; Charles P. Mountford, *Art, Myth and Symbolism*, Vol. 1 of the *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1956), p. 115, Fig 13; Howard Morphy. "Audiences for Art," In *Australians : A Historical Library from 1939*, (eds.), A. Curthoys, A. W. Martin and T. Rowse, (Sydney: Fairfax Syme Weldon Associates, 1987), pp. 167-175, p. 169 reproduces the bunting.

<sup>81</sup> "Aborigines' Ancient Art in Modern Style," *The Herald*, 8 August 1955.

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craftwork of his own design. . .It's a complete break away from the traditional designs and patterns we get from overseas—maybe that's why the public likes it.'<sup>82</sup>

As with An Aboriginal Moomba, Aboriginal Enterprises challenged existing constructions for Aboriginality as a traditional, static culture associated with the past and museums. An urban Aboriginal art recontextualised Aboriginal culture.

### **v Market responses**

Although the Aboriginal art industry is, like any other, influenced by the market response, Aboriginal Enterprises was particularly vulnerable. Onus floated the venture from his own capital, without the support of government funding, nor with a well developed fine art market. In addition to their own range of production, Aboriginal Enterprises stocked bark paintings and the landscape paintings of Ronald Bull. (see chapter 8) On Sundays, when the weather permitted, James Davidson of the Pacific and Aboriginal Art Gallery exhibited watercolours from the Hermannsburg School outside the shop.

More than most contemporary outlets, Aboriginal Enterprises relied upon the tourist industry and, to an extent, had to respond to public taste in order to survive. As one of the first outlets for Aboriginal art and craft, Aboriginal Enterprises had to negotiate the relatively unexplored terrain which lay between Aboriginal cultures and the wider community, to find points of commonality. O'Dare recalls her first attempts at quality control;

in those early days customers flocked in and bought anything, some of which was stock that was rather awful that had been bought in. Initially I erred on the other side by painting items with what I thought was artistically good, more abstract work, and soon found the customers wanted easily recognisable Australian fauna, i. e. kangaroos, emus, etc.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Peter Reid, "Oldest Becomes the Latest: Full Circle in the Flight of a Boomerang," unmarked cutting, AAL Press Book.

<sup>83</sup> Paula O'Dare, Letter to the author, 21 January 1992.

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It is significant that O'Dare's experience as a professionally trained artist working with Aboriginal Enterprises parallel precisely those of Pastor Albrecht at the Hermannsburg Mission. When he tried to establish a souvenir industry in the 1930s, Albrecht found,

the first pieces where we used the old engravings of tjuringas as a design did not sell. But then one of the natives started working with freehand drawings of local animals, palms which appealed and sold well.<sup>84</sup>

Doubtless O'Dare was partly influenced by a modernist primitivism which admired Aboriginal art for its apparent simplicity, balance and expressive distortions. But O'Dare, like Albrecht, was also influenced by the emphasis which anthropologists placed upon the relationship held to exist between abstraction and the arena of the secret-sacred. This bias is apparent in the writings of Spencer and Gillen, for example, who underplay the presence of realism and allocate it to a secular context.<sup>85</sup> To an informed audience, influenced by modernist aesthetics and with some knowledge of ethnography, abstraction signalled authenticity but to the general public, steeped in Western artistic traditions framed around the presumption that art aimed to represent the real world, iconicity was imperative for their aesthetic appreciation and understanding.

It follows that the correlation between abstraction and authenticity is a construction understood by an informed audience, but not one necessarily accessible to the general public. Erik Cohen argues authenticity is "an eminently modern value whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence."<sup>86</sup> The concept of authenticity

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<sup>84</sup> Finke River Mission Station Annual report for 1934, p. 2 quoted by Burn and Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask," in *The Heritage of Namatjira*, p. 258.

<sup>85</sup> It is generally recognised that considerably more realism and public art exists in the art of the central desert than formerly thought. The abovementioned research of Luke Taylor has shown that realism can encode meanings in open and closed contexts.

<sup>86</sup> Cohen. "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism," p. 373.

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articulates the modern experience of alienation as individuals withdraw from the external world to seek an internal reality. But Cohen has questioned whether these broad philosophical understandings should be used uncritically in analyses of the tourist industry, earlier discussion revealed that authenticity is a socially constructed negotiable concept. Whilst authenticity has become increasingly important to professional museum curators whose role it is to ascribe value and provenance to objects of primitive art, Cohen points out that members of the public may experience authenticity in a variety of ways—or not at all.

As at Lake Tyers, the public who visited Aboriginal Enterprises included recreational tourists who sought a diversion from their usual lifestyle. The black velvet portraits and stationery by the non-Aboriginal artist Murrawan (Noel Chandler) (Plates 82, 89 & 91) and the platters by Harry Williams (Plate 92) reflected their popular taste. A former employee of Bill Onus, the folk and craft historian, Ron Edwards, now disparages the cultural production of Aboriginal Enterprises as inauthentic accusing Onus of deliberately misleading tourists about the authenticity of designs and artefacts.

Bill was a great showman and also a great salesman. He would look the tourist straight in the eye and tell him that 'these boomerangs are made by my people', and suggest that they were created out in some distant desert camp. . . The designs that were painted on the boomerangs were not genuine Aboriginal ones but rather Aboriginal type designs which had been devised, secondhand, from the works of such white artists as Margaret Preston . . . None of the designs used by us made any attempt at geographical accuracy nor did anyone else creating the variety of goods sold by Aboriginal Enterprises. Almost without exception the traditional motifs were drawn from work created in the Northern Territory, and from Arnhem land in particular. At no time did we, or any of Bill's other artists, attempt to create work based on the style of art practiced by the long vanished local tribes, or by any other Victorian Aboriginals. Looking back on it this seems odd in view of the fact that one of Alan Lowe's most treasured possessions was a bark painting created by a tribal elder [William Barak] who acted as spokesman for the group who exchanged the site of Melbourne to Batman for a mixed bag of blankets and trinkets.



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I think the reason we did not seek out any local motifs was simply because they would not have sold to the public of that time.<sup>87</sup>

Edwards' purist position, removes Aboriginal art from its colonial context where it operates as a sign of indigenous and non-indigenous identity to deny authenticity to Bill Onus and the other Aborigines working at Aboriginal Enterprises. Given the discrimination and dispersal experienced by Aborigines in settled Australia, it would have been surprising if south eastern Aborigines were aware of the diversity of their artistic heritage. Edwards quite correctly identified market forces as a factor. Significantly, local patrons who purchased art from Aborigines living in the rural regions of Gippsland and the Murray-Darling basin seem to have tolerated a greater level of heterogeneity than the national and international tourists in Melbourne who were more aware of the growing status attached to Arnhem Land bark paintings. To a degree, they already expected art from Aboriginal Enterprises to conform to these stereotypes. Onus did not deliberately dupe a gullible public, as Edwards suggests. Rather, his tactics played to their expectations and undercut their popular constructions of Aboriginality. It is incorrect to cast the black velvet portraits of Aboriginal children produced by Murrawan (Noel Chandler) as ethnokitsch: they were not a sign of cultural disintegration, merely a temporary phase in the emergence of a contemporary Aboriginal art.

Paradoxically, the appreciation for Murrawan's portraits of Aboriginal children confirmed public perceptions of Aboriginal culture as 'primitive' and child-like. This supposition is verified by the immense popularity of the nesting tables which O'Dare decorated with the legend of Buppa Piebi taken from an illustration in Colin Simpson's *Adam in Ochre*.<sup>88</sup> (Plate 93) The table is a classic 1950s design supported on three tapering legs, but the ubiquitous

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<sup>87</sup> Ron Edwards, "The Black Man's Burden," Oral history transcript recorded by Wendy Lowenstein for the National Library. Copy in the author's possession supplied by Ron Edwards.

<sup>88</sup> Colin Simpson, *Adam in Ochre*, (1951, 3rd ed. Sydney: Halstead Press, 1954), pp. 105-6.

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'kidney' has been converted into a boomerang shape. On the table top, O'Dare painted the Oenpelli legend of the rotund and diminutive Buppa Piebi who walks in waterholes at night catching fish with his spear. The legend was also inscribed around the edge of the table,

'Bibrr Bibrr' says Buppa Piebi as he walks through the waterhole catching all the fish. But Margi, the man of magic seizes Buppa's mela bag and says 'Go from here Buppa Piebi and leave some fish for my people '

Buppa Piebi's popularity is manifest in a range of products: the boomerang table (which appears in several episodes of *Alcheringa*) and various textile designs. Although popular, Buppa Piebi, exemplified the gap which separated Aborigines from mainstream Australian culture.

Despite O'Dare's valiant efforts, publicity for Aboriginal Enterprises was always located in the women's pages of daily newspapers or in women's magazines. This location demonstrated the way a patriarchal society feminised and marginalised Aboriginal culture. In discussing the wares produced by Aboriginal Enterprises, journalists adopted the same chatty, disingenuous tone one associates with Preston's early advocacy for the appropriation of Aboriginal art. One journalist suggested the boomerang-shaped coffee tables "in blonde wood with colourful aboriginal figures and legends etched around the rim [and] milkmaid stools decorated with gay Aboriginal drawing" were eminently suitable for the nursery.<sup>89</sup> In one sense this media response drew upon a popular primitivism which associated boomerangs with a past, hunter-gatherer society. But it also emasculated Aboriginal culture through a nature/culture paradigm which displaced Aboriginal art from the masculine arena of culture to situate it within a feminine sphere. This context inevitably associated Aboriginal Enterprises with the

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<sup>89</sup> Reid, "Oldest Becomes the Latest,"

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apparently inconsequential concerns of women and the domestic world of interior decoration.

Today, Lin Onus exhibits some ambivalence toward the noble savage stereotypes which were part of the production of Aboriginal Enterprises. In explanation, he distinguishes between an earlier historical era and a contemporary expression of Aboriginality.

I suppose it was a reflection of the '60s. Don't forget that at the time of my father's death Aboriginal people had only been allowed citizenship of Australia for one year.<sup>90</sup> It was inherent (sic) that we would always be a race of manual labourers. . . For the artist, the only role model of that era was Albert Namatjira; indeed to introduce any element of Aboriginality into one's work would have rendered it both unfashionable and unsaleable.<sup>91</sup>

Speaking in hindsight, from a more radical position of Aboriginality, Onus implies that the popular production of Aboriginal Enterprises by O'Dare, 'Murrawan' and Harry Williams lacked any conscious expression of Aboriginality. To recover meaning and value for these objects, we need to understand more fully the sources they drew upon and the context in which production occurred. As discussed above, artists drew upon non-Aboriginal sources: O'Dare used the image of Buppa Piebi from Colin Simpson's *Adam in Ochre*, Murrawan (Noel Chandler) probably drew upon photographic sources for his children's portraits whilst his Christmas card and the platter by Williams undoubtedly reinterpret the contemporary cartoonist Eric Jolliffe. In each case the codes inscribed in the original imagery re-emerge in their work. The critical difference is, of course, that O'Dare and Chandler were members of the majority culture whereas Harry Williams was a Wiradjuri Aborigine, one of the four sons of Alf 'Knocker' Williams employed by Onus.

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<sup>90</sup> Peter Davis, "In Touch With an Artist's Aboriginality," *The Canberra Times*, 7 July 1990, B5.

<sup>91</sup> Lin Onus, "Language and Lasers," In *The Land, The City: The Emergence of Urban Aboriginal Art*, *Art Monthly Australia Supplement*, Summer 1990, pp. 14-15, 19, p. 15.

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The cartoons of Jolliffe, incorporated both romanticism and caricature.<sup>92</sup> Jolliffe admired tribal Aborigines when he met them in Arnhem Land during and after the war and he sincerely believed that his cartoons were replacing earlier stereotypes of Aboriginal fringe dwellers established by Stan Cross. Inevitably Jolliffe's own values encoded a further set of stereotypes: exaggerated features tend to caricaturise Aborigines, tribal life is not treated with dignity and women are presented as sexualised and provocative objects. The pamphlet published by the activist, William Ferguson in 1938 as part of the National Day of Mourning, which claimed citizen rights for Aborigines, identified the role which such Jacky Jacky cartoons played in covertly maintaining racism.<sup>93</sup>

Williams' appropriation of Jolliffe might be interpreted as a sign of his assimilation. A more constructive reading would argue that Williams borrowed from the artistic means to hand in the popular press to learn new techniques and skills for the organisation of pictorial space. In what is a provisional process, Williams replays back to a non-Aboriginal audience, a reinterpretation of Jolliffe. In so doing he gains control over this imagery by incorporating its humour into an Aboriginal world view. Jolliffe's humour is still widely enjoyed among the Aboriginal community. As Mikhail Bakhtin noted in his study of Rabelais, laughter embodies three aspects: universalism, freedom and the representation of people's unofficial truth through a victory over fear.<sup>94</sup> The parallels evident between the Lake Tyers' political protest song, "Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella" and the imagery used by Harry Williams,

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<sup>92</sup> Eric Jolliffe emigrated from England as a child and worked in the pastoral industry before studying at Sydney Technical College. His cartoons appear in *The Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly*, *Pix* and *The Sun*. During the war, Jolliffe came into contact with Arnhem Land Aborigines and afterwards portraits and cartoons of Aborigines became a major theme. Eric Jolliffe, de Berg Tapes, 790-791, National Library of Australia.

<sup>93</sup> Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom*, pp. 59, 198.

<sup>94</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*, tran. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 87-95.

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suggest similar tactics operated in rural and urban Aboriginal communities. Appropriating popular imagery is a powerful means of grasping hold of reality.

## **vi Conclusion**

This study owes a considerable debt to Barwick's early work on Melbourne Aborigines. Hers was the first study to demonstrate the dynamism of urban Aboriginal life. At the same time, Barwick highlighted the dilemma faced by Aborigines within assimilation. Aborigines wanted to undercut prevailing Jacky Jacky stereotypes and "show those gabas what dark people can do," but in Barwick's opinion, Aborigines had no living cultural traditions; they lacked any unequivocal cultural markers and strong leadership.<sup>95</sup>

No member of this population can earn a living as a practitioner of some traditional art or craft. Unlike Negroes or Maoris, the Australian Aborigines have no art or music greatly valued by whites. But in recent years some Melbourne people have been able to exploit their 'colour'; if not their cultural heritage, by appearing as extras in television films, by selling boomerangs to tourists, and by appearing in night clubs and carnivals as singers or hula dancers. Many find this new appreciation extremely gratifying.<sup>96</sup>

The bleak pessimism which pervades this passage stems from the definitions of culture Barwick employs. The concept of tradition imposes a stasis against which industrialisation and commercialisation emerge as potentially contaminating forces which threaten authenticity. Barwick considers when boomerangs are painted, rather than hand-carved, when designs are appropriated from museums, when artefacts and carved emu eggs decorate homes or are used in tourist displays, this is evidence of inauthenticity rather than a continuing Aboriginality.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," p. 322-326.

<sup>96</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," p. 339. This quotation is reproduced with permission from Richard Barwick.

<sup>97</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," p. 323-4.

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In subsequent research Barwick radically modified her position, acknowledging cross-cultural interaction as a sign of social transformations. But even today, the issues raised by the production of commodities by indigenous people for exchange with tourists raises questions of authenticity, tradition and Aboriginality. This research based upon historical documents and oral history found evidence of cohesion and creativity amongst the Melbourne community but one cannot deny that there were individuals, groups and communities who may have expressed their concern and sought to distance themselves from these developments. Indeed Barwick cites evidence that Aborigines were embarrassed by the inauthenticity of corroborees performed for the 1959 Moomba festival. She reports Aborigines as saying, "it doesn't mean anything, it is just mumbling. It is a shame gabas think this (is) our real dancing."<sup>98</sup> In a period of disruption, Aborigines were in a process of retrieving their history and negotiating an urban existence. The parallels which emerged however between Aboriginal Enterprises and the La Perouse community revealed that neither had capitulated to market responses. Rather, each "developed aesthetic and commercial standards for their work that [we]re both triggered and autonomous of the tourist response."<sup>99</sup>

Within the Melbourne community, Bill Onus, together with other leaders, emerged as a powerful advocate for his people. Onus was a role model for Aborigines, an entrepreneur and an inter-cultural mediator who recognised that politics, culture and economics were not autonomous realms but integrated and overlapping spheres of power. He communicated his pride and assurance as an Aborigine to his people and to the wider community. As a role model, Onus altered Aborigine's self perception by bringing them together socially in the production of theatre and art in ways which made use

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<sup>98</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," p. 324.

<sup>99</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 5.

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of their existing skills whilst offering training and employment. Above all, these activities maintained Aborigine's autonomy and resisted pressure to assimilate. To regain power for urban Aborigines, Onus encouraged the selective incorporation of styles and motifs from remote communities and his sophisticated and assured sense of his own Aboriginality allowed him to collaborate with artists from the wider community and gain their assistance for the political cause of Aboriginal equality.

## **8 Sites of Aboriginality**

### **i Introduction**

This chapter considers the emergence of an urban Aboriginal art from another perspective—that of the second generation of Aborigines living in Melbourne whose independent practice negotiated a further set of transformations. The framework for this consideration is the nexus between land, as the basis of an emerging Aboriginality, and the city as the site of modernity. Studies have shown that Melbourne Aborigines maintained their relations with regional domains and kin but these understandings remain generalised, homogeneous and static, and demonstrate the need for more dynamic and individualised conceptualisations of Aboriginality that reflect the diversity of Aboriginal experiences in cities. The assumption that the city represents a site of progress in the modern world is examined against the evidence of Aborigines in Melbourne in the 1960s and 1970s. The central focus here is the Wiradjuri artist, Ronald Bull, (1943-1979) (Plate 94) who, with Albert Namatjira, the leader of the Hermannsburg School and the Nyungar artist, Revel Cooper, were role models for Lin Onus. Although Aborigines continued to experience racial discrimination and oppression they articulated new relationships with land and, in various ways they gained access to the professional art world. Despite the ambiguous response their work received, these artists must be seen as appropriating from the landscape traditions of the majority culture to concretise representations of Aboriginality which regained control over their contemporary reality.

As discussed above, representations of Aboriginality emerge from those relationships with kin and the regional domain which are part of the lived experience of individuals. In response to colonialism, Aborigines rationalised their experience within a modern nation state by selectively reappropriating from the past in order to assert their cultural continuity. Descent and land now form the basis of an Aboriginal world view. Working amongst the Wiradjuri in



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the settled south east, Macdonald found that the regional domain was a relational concept which dynamically incorporated tribal traditions and contact history to establish associations between individuals and sites associated with missions, fringe camps and historical events.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter examines the experiences of a second generation of Aborigines for whom the regional domain had become a more distant, infrequently visited site. Of particular importance is the situation of children, as with Ronald Bull and Revel Cooper, who experienced institutionalisation as part of government assimilation policies. Macdonald's informants maintained that children taken away from their families suffered an irreparable loss to their sense of Aboriginality. Their absence meant they could never regain the shared sense of history which bonded a community.<sup>2</sup> But allowance needs also to be made for processes of compensation and adjustment. As discussed already, socialisation occurs throughout the life of an individual and is influenced by personal experience and historical context. As Giddens remarks,

While not made by any single person, society is created and recreated afresh, if not *ex nihilo*, by the participants in every social encounter. *The production of society* is a skilled performance, sustained and 'made to happen' by human beings. It is indeed only made possible because every (competent) member of society is a practical social theorist; in sustaining any sort of encounter he draws upon his knowledge and theories, normally in an unforced and routine way, and the use of these practical resources is precisely the condition of the production of the encounter at all.<sup>3</sup> [emphasis in the original]

Giddens's theories of social action presume that individuals make choices from the opportunities and limitations presented to them within the changing circumstances of their life.

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<sup>1</sup> Macdonald, " 'The Koorie Way' ", pp. 126-7, 432, 440-463.

<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, " 'The Koorie Way' ", pp. 264-5.

<sup>3</sup> Giddens, *New Rules for Sociological Method*, pp. 15-16.

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For Aborigines, land is a focus of social activity and it is imperative they associate with a specific location. However Aborigines living in remote communities are better placed to maintain these relationships with land. On the one hand, delayed settlement meant that many aspects of their spiritual life continued, on the other, they are located on land which is privileged through settler nationalist myths as 'the outback.' By contrast, Aborigines in settled Australia, experienced dispossession and dispersal and the imperative to sustain relationships with land is masked and overridden by the polarisation of the country and the city. With modernity, both spheres came to be associated with opposing positions of optimism and pessimism: the countryside projected as either a romantic past idyll or, as backward and provincial; the city, a site of degradation and destruction or the privileged site of progress where individuals gain from the relative anonymity and freedom of urban existence.<sup>4</sup>

The reinterpretations of the landscape tradition considered here traverse the contested terrain between these two paradigms. Aboriginal artists in the city begin to negotiate entry into the art world—the co-operative networks of professionals who control the training, marketing and reception of art practices through established patterns of convention.<sup>5</sup> If, as Howard Becker argues, artists' reputations are closely linked to institutional and gallery infrastructures, then it is apparent that Aboriginal artists, situated on the margins as an ethnic minority, would be overlooked until such time as the running revisions of value within the art world could theorise an Aboriginal expression. Becker thus comments,

Aesthetic decisions decide the life and death of works. Even more, they decide the life and death of genres. Works in a medium or style defined as not art have a much shorter life expectancy than those defined as art.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973); see also Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982, New York: Verso, 1989), "Introduction."

<sup>5</sup> Becker, *Artworlds*, Ch. 1.

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No organizational imperatives make it worth anyone's while to save them.<sup>6</sup>

Meanings are mutable; art which is stigmatised can, of course, be rediscovered and reincorporated into art history at a later date. For this reason it is productive to evaluate Aboriginal artists in Melbourne against the model established a generation previously by Albert Namatjira, the founder of the Hermannsburg School of watercolourists and the first Aboriginal artist to exhibit professionally. The essential point made by Daniel Thomas in a recent re-evaluation is that Namatjira's art grew out of many art worlds of: mission craft, tourism, watercolours, the landscape tradition, fashionable society and primitivism.<sup>7</sup>

## ii Patterns of socialisation

The Aboriginal artists considered here grew up in an era of assimilation. Policies in force from 1939-1963 expected all Aborigines to adopt the same responsibilities, hopes, and loyalties as the majority society. To achieve dispersal and absorption, legislation allowed welfare officers to intervene in Aborigines' private lives. Reports submitted to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991) found that

children have borne the full force of attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture. . . through processes such as dormitory living, and transfer of children to White welfare institutions and detention centres, and to placement of children in boarding schools.<sup>8</sup>

One estimate suggests 5,625 children were removed from their families between 1883-1969 and placed into institutions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Becker, *Artworlds*, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Thomas, "Albert Namatjira and the Worlds of Art: A Re-evaluation," in *Albert Namatjira: The Life and Work of an Australian Painter* (ed.), N. Amadio (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 21-26, pp. 22-24.

<sup>8</sup> Ian O'Connor, report to the Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody quoted by Rowse, *After Mabo*, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Gillian Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 80.

The Bull family experienced the full effect of this authoritarian legislation. Perhaps influenced by the growing tension and worsening conditions at Cummeragunga prior to the walk-off, the Bull family left the Station in the late 1930s to resettle at Lake Tyers where Ronald Bull was born in 1943.<sup>10</sup> Once at Lake Tyers the family came under the jurisdiction of the Victorian Aborigines Act of 1928, which denied entry to the eldest children in the family of seventeen. Bull probably spent the first ten years at Lake Tyers but, sometime after his father's death, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines removed Bull from his family to join several older brothers already living at the Tally Ho Boys' Village, a Methodist Church institution in Burwood, Melbourne.

This level of co-ordinated action between government agencies and religious institutions indicates the way Christianity's proselytising and paternalistic aims supported assimilation policies. The 1957 Annual Report of the Central Mission Services stated that, at Tally Ho,

boys are given a congenial home life and in many cases their first opportunity to live in a home . . . [and] they are given a wonderful opportunity to become adjusted for good citizenship.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the pastoral aims of the church justified the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Elsewhere, the Report cited one instance of apparently successful transition with glowing pride.

From Humpy to Home

Little Tim was found living in a bark humpy on the banks of the Murray—now he just loves every minute so much that he refuses to go out from Tally Ho even for a day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A record of birth has not been located, hence, this date may be slightly inaccurate. Later in life Ronald Bull sometimes used the name Elliott Bull but there is no evidence that this was his given name at birth.

<sup>11</sup> "The Tally Ho Boys Village Grows," *Somebody Cares! The Report of the Central Mission Services*, Central Mission Annual Report, 1957, p. 11, Wesley Central Parish Mission Archives. In the absence of official records, the author wishes to thank Nancy U'Ren, archivist at Wesley Central Mission for her interest and assistance with my research.

<sup>12</sup> "The Tally Ho Boys Village Grows," p. 13.

Nevertheless it is important to distinguish between the rhetoric of the Church and the daily reality of existence at Tally Ho. Ian Cox, superintendent at Tally Ho between 1956-1962, maintains the Child Welfare Department forced Tally Ho to take Aboriginal children.<sup>13</sup> If such pressure was brought to bear, this would account for the high percentage of Lake Tyers boys at Tally Ho. Cox's recollections tally with existing evidence: in 1980, although Aborigines represented 3% of the population, 14% were institutionalised.<sup>14</sup> The philosophy of long-term care implemented at Tally Ho aimed to educate and train boys for future work on farms in the belief that the countryside established a link between nature and God. Cox was, however, sensitive to the special needs of Aboriginal children; he allowed Lake Tyers boys to sit together in the evenings around a campfire. Cox recalls Bull's talent was already in evidence and he drew prolifically. Under enlightened supervision aimed at overcoming institutional stereotypes, Bull's cottage parents, Mr and Mrs Watts, fostered his artistic talent: Bull requested and received art books as birthday and Christmas presents from cottage parents and foster families.<sup>15</sup>

Bull's somewhat contradictory accounts of his years at Tally Ho offer another, more personal perspective. Later in life Bull tended to exaggerate the degree of disruption he had experienced as a child, variously claiming that he was institutionalised at a very young age and that he never returned to Lake Tyers.<sup>16</sup> These assertions are difficult to deny or verify. To date there is no evidence that Bull was institutionalised as an infant and his assertions are

<sup>13</sup> Asst. Professor Ian Cox, tel. conv. 14 September 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Read, *A Hundred Years War*, p. 120.

<sup>15</sup> Les Fyffe, Interview, 24 March 1992; Mavis Thorpe Clark, "Ronald E. Bull: Aboriginal Landscape Painter," *Smoke Signals*, Vol. 6, No 1, February-March 1967, pp. 12-13; "Village Boys Now Top Artist: Friendly Ways of Tally Ho," *Nunawading Gazette*, 29 November 1967, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> In 1962, Bull claimed he was sent to an orphanage at two, that his father was dead and he "wouldn't know what his mother looked like." "Bond to 'Boy Namatjira': 'Won't be In Court Again'," *The Sun*, 16 June, 1962; Clark, writing in 1967, similarly maintains Bull did not return to Lake Tyers between 1953 and 1967. Clark, "Ronald E. Bull", p. 12.

countered elsewhere in recollections of his childhood at Lake Tyers.<sup>17</sup> Although Bull may have visited Lake Tyers rarely, Cox is adamant Bull returned there on holidays from Tally Ho. Similar inconsistencies emerge in Ronald Bull, a Weekend Magazine film made by ABC television in 1976. At one point Bull recalls his unhappiness at Tally Ho: "while my older brothers were [at Tally Ho] we were all right and made me feel very secure but [after they left] and I was one of two hundred this made me feel very insecure and I was very self conscious."<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in the film Bull adopts an opposing viewpoint, claiming that, after an initial period of confusion, he realised, "Tally Ho was one of the best things that happened to me." Bull's vacillation can be attributed to the contradictions incorporated in assimilation; institutionalisation traumatised Aboriginal children by separating them from Aboriginal society, yet it also offered the possibility of other identities and opportunities. In her reminiscences of life at the Retta Dixon Children's Home in Darwin, Barbara Cummings evokes the isolation and misery she experienced.<sup>19</sup> In a somewhat surprising admission, she points out that children preferred the dormitory system, where they maintained their Aboriginal solidarity, to the family cottages which separated them into a private domestic sphere. In Bull's case, of course, his trauma was exacerbated by his isolation within a predominantly white institution.

Whilst the majority of Tally Ho boys began employment on farms at fourteen—the official school leaving age—Bull remained a further year before he went to live with Pauline Edmonds who owned dog kennels at The Log Cabin, David Road, Lilydale. Edmonds became a surrogate mother to Bull; he worked in

<sup>17</sup> Records indicate Bull was not an inmate of Orana, the Methodist home for infants and younger children.

<sup>18</sup> This, and the following quotation are taken from Ronald Bull, Weekend Magazine March 1976 available at ABC archives. This film includes significant earlier footage from a silent, black and white film which records Bull as a teenager with his foster mother, Pauline Edmonds and the artist Ernest Buckmaster—further evidence that his talent had already gained recognition.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Cummings, *Take This Child: From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*, (Canberra; Aboriginal Studies Press, 1990).

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the kennels and she helped establish him as an artist. After leaving Tally Ho, Bull extended his experience of art from reproductions seen in books and in classrooms at Tally Ho to the original works of art available on exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Lorna Lanman, a friend of Edmonds, maintains "as soon as [Bull] knew the National Gallery of Victoria was there, he visited frequently."<sup>20</sup> Bull would look at paintings for hours, apparently committing their content, composition and colour to memory to gain control over their representations. In her brief biography of Bull, Mavis Thorpe Clark confirms,

As soon as he was able, he spent hours at the gallery, mentally assimilating all that the great landscape painters such as Hans Heysen, Arthur Streeton, Ernest Buckmaster and English landscape painters could offer. He tried to understand how they achieved their effects. He would memorise a colour, go home and try to mix it from his own paints. If he succeeded he wrote down the formula. He kept careful notes of all his findings.<sup>21</sup>

As a mature artist, Bull continued to visit the Gallery whenever he travelled from his home in the Dandenongs to Melbourne to purchase materials. In the film Ronald Bull, he says that when he got tired he would go to the Gallery and get "a great relief from just sitting looking at pictures. . . I feel a lot better in myself just looking at them."<sup>22</sup> Writing in 1967, Clark reads Bull's proclivities as evidence of his assimilation however Bull learnt about Western art history and committed a canon of great artists to memory through a process of mimesis and observation typical of oral cultures.

Bull's admiration for Heysen apparently originated with reproductions he had seen in a school room at Tally Ho. Living at Lilydale he,

met the great painters that I had read about. As far as I was concerned they were on the other side of the world and it turned out they were just around the corner.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Lorna Lanman, Interview, 20 September 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, "Ronald E. Bull," pp. 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Bull, Weekend Magazine, ABC television.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Bull, Weekend Magazine, ABC television.

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Through her interest in art and association with the Mt Evelyn and Yarra Valley Art Society, Edmonds introduced Bull to Richard (Dick) Ovenden and Ambrose Griffin (b. 1912 ).<sup>24</sup> Once Bull learned Ernest Buckmaster lived nearby, he visited constantly and studied with him.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently Bull corresponded with Hans Heysen.

The informal tuition Bull received from Buckmaster and Heysen provided further access to the skills and knowledge incorporated in a European artistic tradition. Buckmaster (1897-1968) had trained with W. B. McInnes and Bernard Hall at the National Gallery School. He rarely took students and, when he did so, he was a hard taskmaster who expected them to adhere to a rigorous academic approach that demanded repeated copying from models until they achieved perfection.<sup>26</sup> Since the turn of the century, modernists had objected to these academic methods of copying and precepts believing they retarded individual responses to the contemporary world but in this instance, Buckmaster's tuition provided Bull with the technical skills and aesthetic training that enabled him to reinvent reality and represent the area of the Dandenong Ranges to which he was sentimentally attached.

In 1963, Bull submitted several sheets of drawings to Heysen, (1877-1968) for his critical response. Heysen found,

a lot of interest in both sheets—every drawing being done with assurance & without hesitation,—they show a good sense of Composition and conveyed with & by an expressive line,—the drawing of hands particularly interested me and all in all the drawings show a decided talent well worth developing—which I feel you can achieve by going out to nature and work hard & constantly by drawing anything & everything that interests & appeals to you. [Heysen warned Bull against

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<sup>24</sup> The Mt Evelyn and Yarra Valley Art Group was a key meeting point during the 1950s and 1960s. Members included Edmonds, Griffin, Lanman, Bull and Gisella-Teimann Kaplen who joined in the late 1960s.

<sup>25</sup> Buckmaster lived at 'Grantully', 12-16 Hereford Road, Mt. Evelyn, some 3-4 miles from Lilydale.

<sup>26</sup> Norman Buckmaster, tel. conv. 26 March 1992.



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copying suggesting that it was] . . . far better to jot down & express things in your own way at your stage. but do not be content with just a fluid surface—go deeper & try & carry some drawings to a greater completion—not only what objects look like but what they actually mean to you.<sup>27</sup>

Heysen invited Bull to submit further drawings and a correspondence apparently developed that culminated in Bull visiting his mentor just prior to Heysen's death at the age of 91, in 1968.<sup>28</sup> One can imagine that an artist of Heysen's eminence would have received many such submissions from young artists seeking his professional advice. Heysen perhaps gave Bull special consideration, however, because, through a combination of circumstances he had become involved in Namatjira's career; he probably perceived Bull as another talented Aboriginal artist who deserved support.<sup>29</sup> Although catalogues indicate that Bull also studied with John Brack at the Gallery school, it has not proved possible to verify this claim; at the most, Bull was an occasional and unofficial student.<sup>30</sup>

Writing to his foster mother, Pauline Edmonds, in 1963, Bull refers to the letter he received from Heysen as his "most cherished possession."<sup>31</sup> Indeed Heysen's support appears to have been one of the catalysts which helped Bull resolve upon a career as an artist. For Bull, like Heysen, the landscape was a

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<sup>27</sup> Hans Heysen, letter to Ben (Ronald Bull), 1 January 1963, (copy in the author's possession kindly supplied by Les Fyffe).

<sup>28</sup> This correspondence has not been located; "Scene Lives Again," *The Sun*, 20 July 1972; The date of Bull's visit remains unconfirmed but it cannot have taken place in the last week of Heysen's life as is sometimes claimed. Heysen suffered a stroke on the 16 June 1968, he was transferred to Mount Barker Hospital on 22 June and died on 2 July. Colin Thiele, *Heysen of Hahndorf*, (1968, rpt. rev ed. Adelaide: Rigby, 1976), p. 283.

<sup>29</sup> As a Lutheran, Heysen supported the Hermannsburg Mission with Christmas parcels and financial donations. He also contributed to the 1934 Melbourne exhibition which raised money for a pipeline from Koporilya Springs. Following Heysen's early support for Namatjira, Pastor Albrecht invited the artist to Hermannsburg to give Namatjira further tuition. This visit never transpired. F. W. Albrecht, letters to Hans Heysen, 29 November 1939, 1/4594 and January 1940, 1/4638-4, MS 5073 National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>30</sup> No official record of enrolment exists and John Brack does not recall Bull in attendance. Given that the Roll of Art Students (Painting) National Gallery School 1886-1967 in the Art Library, State Library of Victoria records full-time painting students only, Brack's evidence is taken as confirmation that Bull was not a regular student. Helen Maudsley, tel. con. 16 September 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Bull, Letter to Pauline Edmonds, 6 June 1963, Pauline Edmond archives.

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central focus of interest, but Bull's statements about painting the land are deeply contradictory, suggestive of the symbolic role it played in his unresolved identity.

I can see clearly and put it all down without confusion now. Before it was hard to put on canvas what I love most for others to see. . . [In the landscape] the feeling one gets is tremendous even though all that sullen despair and confusion [makes it] very difficult to define it in one's mind. This love cannot be understood or interpreted through paint.<sup>32</sup>

It is critical to our understanding of Bull's development as an artist that he wrote these letters to Pauline Edmonds from within another institution—Pentridge.

### **iii An Aboriginal audience**

It is an indictment of race relations in Australia, that the surviving major work from Bull's early artistic career is a mural painted in Pentridge, Melbourne's metropolitan prison. Relationships between Aborigines and law enforcement agents remains a central arena for racial prejudice and the high rate of Aboriginal imprisonment reflects the despair and resentment this breeds. When a jail sentence was imposed in 1958 on the Aranda artist, Albert Namatjira, for supplying liquor to members of his family who were not citizens like himself, a public controversy emerged but little changed. During the early 1960s, when Bull was imprisoned for a series of minor offences,<sup>33</sup> the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment was roughly equivalent to that of today: eleven times that of non-Aborigines.<sup>34</sup> Evidence reveals a cumulative process of racial discrimination which begins with police who generally view the lifestyle of young urban Aborigines as deviant and disorderly. Bull exemplifies the sequential institutionalisation experienced by so many Aboriginal families.

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Bull, Letter to Pauline Edmonds, 20 March 1963, Pauline Edmond archives

<sup>33</sup> Bull served sentences from Jan-Sep 1959, Sep 1962-August 1964, Dec 1969-April 1971. The author wishes to thank Gary Presland of the Police Historical Unit for his assistance in providing this information. This record may not be complete.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *After 200 Years*, p. 303.

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Formerly, incarceration stigmatised Aborigines but has been understood in a more complex way since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. A contemporary revaluation of Aboriginal imprisonment sees leading artists Ian W. Abdulla, a Ngarrindjeri, and Jimmy Pike, a Walmajarri from the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia, acknowledge that the art training they received in prison enabled them to regain their self esteem and re-identify as Aborigines.<sup>35</sup> Self determination for Aborigines acknowledges that art produced in prison can operate cathartically as a means of productively channelling tension. Prison was a productive site for Revel Cooper, who also served terms of imprisonment in Geelong, a Melbourne suburb and in Fremantle near Perth between 1961-1970. Through the association he had established with James Davidson, of the Aboriginal and Pacific Art Gallery in Melbourne, Cooper was able to continue selling his art whilst in prison.<sup>36</sup> The many exhibitions Davidson mounted in Victoria and interstate at this time gained recognition and equality for urban Aboriginal artists. (see Appendix 2.1) We now realise that the status given to art is influenced by the context in which it is viewed and when Davidson hung Aboriginal art from settled Australia alongside the art produced by remote communities he overrode existing discourses of primitivism. Davidson's prices also reflect his priorities. Cooper's paintings sold for between 9-17 guineas each—equivalent to the price for Arnhem Land sculptures and Hermannsburg watercolours although some individual Yirrkala bark painters sold at slightly higher prices.<sup>37</sup> This range of prices indicates that, prior to the

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<sup>35</sup> For Ian W. Abdulla see *Balance 1990: Views, Visions, Influences*, Queensland Art Gallery, 1990, p. 76; For Pike see Jennifer Isaacs, *Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings and Prints*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989), pp. 55.

<sup>36</sup> The correspondence between Cooper and Davidson, 1961-1970 suggests a sound relationship between artist and dealer. Davidson often provided Cooper with critical feedback, and, at Cooper's request, Davidson used money from sales to purchase art materials and a guitar. In one instance, he stood bail.

<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly, the prints of Noel Counihan, the one non-Aboriginal artist whom Davidson often included in his exhibitions, sold for 15/6!

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development of a fine art market in Aboriginal art, greater parity existed between the status given to Aboriginal art throughout Australia.

Within his catalogues, Davidson addressed the issues raised by artists such as Cooper, situating his practice within the framework of race relations.

Revel is a Western Australian part aboriginal. He has had a very turbulent life through no fault of his own, and has had very little education. He has a very unusual style of painting which he has developed himself. The pictures were painted while he was imprisoned in Fremantle.<sup>38</sup>

Although Davidson fails to mention Cooper's background and training at Carrolup, he nevertheless provides a context which suggests the Aboriginal values which might be read into Cooper's sombre landscapes. (Plate 95) Davidson's commitment to the Aboriginal cause is reflected in the fact that a percentage of the profits from all these exhibitions helped raise funds for various Aboriginal programs.<sup>39</sup>

In as much as prison was a site that exemplified colonial authority, Bull regained control over this arena of activity and utilised it as a resource when he painted a mural which he knew would be seen daily by a constant, relatively large, captive Aboriginal audience. Jack Elliot, then a Senior Warder at Pentridge, recalls commissioning the mural from Bull in the early 1960s.<sup>40</sup> At the time, Elliott was supervising renovations in the reception prison and when he learnt of Bull's talent as an artist, he commissioned a mural "to brighten up the hallway."<sup>41</sup> (Plates 96 & 97) As discussed above,

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<sup>38</sup> This statement is repeated in many of the catalogues which accompanied exhibitions.

<sup>39</sup> Until 1964, Davidson directed profits to the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League, thereafter to facilities for Arnhem Land communities and the Aboriginal Scholarship Scheme. This re-direction of funding may be related to an emergent Aboriginal leadership in the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League. *Victims or Victors?: The Story of the Aborigines' Advancement League* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> The author wishes to thank another ex-warder, Jim Armstrong, for his invaluable assistance in helping me locate this mural, research its history and gain access to Pentridge for photography.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Elliott, Letter to the author, undated and tel. conv. 24 October 1993. Prison records indicate Bull may have painted the mural somewhat earlier, in the late 1950s. Deidre Oswald, Letter to the author, 15 March 1994.

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institutional life for Aborigines could be ameliorated by the humanitarian actions of individuals who chose not to precisely follow the letter of the law.

As a depiction of a camp scene from a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the mural bears many similarities with the scenes portrayed by Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists on carved emu eggs. As shown earlier, such images could be criticised as a nostalgic desire for the past but in this instance, the mural operated productively to empower Aborigines through the depiction of a scene which may have heightened their self esteem and sense of solidarity. Produced when the artist was only twenty, this major work reflects Bull's extraordinary talent. The scene incorporates intricately detailed areas as in the engraved patterns on the artefacts and in facial features yet the men and the kangaroo are also infused with a vibrant energy. Stylistically, the colour range of dark ochres, the austere desert landscape and wiry figures resonate with many borrowings from early Renaissance depictions of Christ in the wilderness. Bull's excellent knowledge of Western art history suggests he drew upon historical representations of a biblical wilderness to depict Aborigines in their land. Indeed, one Maloga Mission song recorded by Anna Vroland, "Narwa Bora Pharaoh (Away from Mighty Pharaoh)" indicates that some south eastern Aborigines identified with the persecution of the Israelites.<sup>42</sup> A Mission context ensured Aborigines were familiar with such biblical images.

Nevertheless, Bull undercut these biblical and art historical narratives when he camouflaged heads of kangaroos within the painting. Apparently, when Bull finished the mural he asked Jack Elliott whether he could see the head of a kangaroo. "Once you had picked out one you saw the others," Elliot remarks.<sup>43</sup> The heads of the kangaroos contribute another level of symbolic

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<sup>42</sup> Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Elliott, tel. conv. 24 October 1993.

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order to the painting. In the process of disrupting and denying pictorial coherence these camouflaged emblems are suggestive of a covert Aboriginal resistance to domination. Unfortunately, the kangaroo heads are not visible at present. Whether they are temporarily obscured by poor lighting or whether the surface of the mural has deteriorated permanently will only be known when the photographic documentation presently being undertaken by the Koorie Heritage Trust is completed.

The significance of this Pentridge mural lies in its situated practice: who is painting, where, when and to whom are they speaking? The mural reflects the importance of prisons as public sites where Aboriginal artists communicated with their own people, prisoners by default as a result of racial discrimination and oppression. The essential point of the mural is its location in Pentridge rather than the Victorian National Gallery which failed to purchase any paintings by Bull.

It seems that, outside Pentridge, Bull was ill at ease with such overt demonstrations of his Aboriginal heritage—or perhaps he found no market for such work. Bull began many paintings—only to destroy them before completion. He was, by all accounts, a gentle, loving person who established many firm friendships. Everyone closely acquainted with Bull, his foster mother, Pauline Edmonds, his lifelong friend from Tally Ho, Les Fyffe, his dealer, Peter Sparnaay and the Aboriginal artist Lin Onus.<sup>44</sup> independently recall seeing large canvasses which copied or ‘poached’ from Theodore Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa of 1821-4. Gericault gave history painting an uncompromising truth to contemporary reality when he depicted the rescue of the few surviving slaves and Europeans from the slave ship *Medusa*. The choice of this particular image suggests Bull identified, as an Aborigine, with

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<sup>44</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 23 March 1992; Pauline Edmonds, Interview, 24 March 1992; Peter Sparnaay, Interview, 21 March 1992; Les Fyffe, Interview, 24 March 1992.

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the history of colonial conquest and slavery of Afro-American people. The problem was that Bull was in advance of his time. Self determination since the 1970s meant Aboriginal artists felt free to openly criticise black/white relationships. In his provocative painting, Outsider of 1988, Aboriginal artist Gordon Bennett, a subsequent winner of the Moet et Chandon prize, draws upon the style and subject matter of Van Gogh to address constructions of the Other and the violence of colonial history. Were one of Bull's paintings to be located, the critical question would be, to what extent he has altered the race of the Medusa survivors—as some informants have suggested.

Two small portraits of Aboriginal elders, painted late in Bull's career, have survived. (Plate 98) As already discussed, the genre of portraiture reflected the importance which the West placed upon individuality but Aborigines also value portraits as a tangible record of their family history. These two portraits may reflect the direct influence of Bull's mentor, Ernest Buckmaster, who had gained considerable renown as portrait painter. Indeed, one of Buckmaster's commissions included a portrait of the Aboriginal singer, Harold Blair. There are further interesting parallels with the depiction of a tribal elder by the Hermannsburg watercolourist, Albert Namatjira and the influence of his mentor, Rex Battarbee.<sup>45</sup> In their rough, expressive handling of paint, both portraits differ remarkably from the sensitive linearity evident in the earlier mural. And there is considerable difference between the two small portraits; Bull depicts two individuals, men whom he knew or recalled with affection from Lake Tyers.

Until the death of Bill Onus in 1968, the firm of Aboriginal Enterprises at Belgrave remained a central focus for Bull, Revel Cooper and Lin Onus. All

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and Ruth M. Megaw, *The Heritage of Namatjira*, cf. fig. 7.6. Albert Namatjira, Kamatu Near Organ Pipes, 1938 with Fig. 7.7, Rex Battarbee, Nabi, Pintubi Tribesman, 1940.

three sold their art through the firm and, not surprisingly, similarities emerge in their choice of subject matter. Bull commenced, but did not complete, several paintings of Aboriginal legends giving visual form to the old Wiradjuri stories he recalled from his childhood. He also expressed interest in illustrating a book of Aboriginal legends—perhaps influenced by Cooper's illustrations for *Yagan of the Bibbulmun* the story of a Nyungar guerilla leader published in 1964.<sup>46</sup> (Plate 99) In his cover design for this publication Cooper combines figurative and geometric elements, to reposition Bibbulmun within the ceremonial life of an earlier era. Cooper's interpretation of Aboriginal resistance can be contrasted with the *Musquito* series of 1977-1982, painted a little over a decade later by Lin Onus.<sup>47</sup> Influenced by the political activism of his father, Lin Onus recognised that "Koories had few historical figures like Cochise, Sitting Bull and Geronimo. . . [To address this gap, he researched and completed a series on the] murderous guerilla fighter . . . Musquito."<sup>48</sup> (Plate 100) The self portraits which Onus incorporated into this series of eleven paintings, now in the collection of the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League, ensures they are doubly compelling, conflating his identity with that of the resistance leader.

When K. Langloh Parker first published Aboriginal legends at the turn of the century she drew upon the imperial model established by Kipling's *Jungle Book*, published several years previously. These developments in childrens' literature combined fantasy with morality and they reflected a growing international interest in folk history. Locally, such publications contributed towards the authentication of Aboriginal culture. More recently they have

<sup>46</sup> Mary Durack, *Yagan of the Bibbulmun* (1964, 2nd ed. West Melbourne: Nelson, 1976).

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Muecke analyses stories about Sandawara or 'Pigeon' (an Aboriginal resistance fighter from the Kimberleys) to demonstrate how Black and White versions select details which locate their Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal listening subjects. Stephen Muecke, "Discourse, History, Fiction: Language and Aboriginal History," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1983, pp. 71-80.

<sup>48</sup> Lin Onus quoted in Isaacs, *Aboriginality*, p. 28; John Lahey, "Aboriginal Ned Kelly is Captured on Canvas," *The Age*, 16 October 1985.



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been criticised as nationalist and primitivist myths which tend to relegate Aboriginal culture to the level of children's 'Just So' stories.<sup>49</sup> But a distinction needs to be drawn between the role Aboriginal myths play for mainstream Australians and for Aboriginal artists. Whilst these critiques of colonial discourse are necessary, they must account for the distinctive position of Aborigines who have appropriated from sources within this genre. The urban Aboriginal artist Lin Onus and the Wiradjuri artist Esther Kirby whose carved emu eggs have been discussed previously, are two artists who have admired and utilised the illustrations of the mainstream artist Ainslie Roberts as a rich and productive source of imagery.<sup>50</sup> The important role which Aboriginal legends can play is borne out by the Thorgine (Frazer Island) artist, Fiona Foley. She recalls the pride in ancestry and cultural history generated when members of her family wrote and illustrated legends of their community.<sup>51</sup> In teasing out these various culturally determined positions one sees that Aboriginal culture is not autonomous, developing in a separate realm from the majority culture; it is historically mediated through selective incorporations from the ideas and icons of the wider community.

#### **iv Painting the land**

Landscapes account for the dominant subject matter in Bull's art. The landscape represented a genre which accorded with Bull's concerns as an Aborigine whilst his aesthetic response to the land communicated with mainstream Australian society. Nevertheless Aboriginal landscapes raise a number of contentious issues. For Bull, the land was a tangible link with the past and a sign of his dispossession: for the majority culture, the landscape

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<sup>49</sup> See for example, Andrew Lattas, "Primitivism, Nationalism and Individualism in Australian Popular Culture," in *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 45-58, pp. 55-57.

<sup>50</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 23 March 1992; Sylvia Kleinert, "Another Aboriginal Art," *Art Monthly Australia Supplement: Aboriginal Art in the Public Eye*, pp. 44-45. p. 45.

<sup>51</sup> Fiona Foley quoted in Isaacs, *Aboriginality*, p. 42.

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represented a symbol of national identity and confirmation of their colonial presence.

We see later that the fame and notoriety generated by the Aranda watercolourist, Albert Namatjira (1902-1959), established a model which would influence future generations of Aboriginal artists and the critical response to their work. Yet a comparison between the landscapes of Bull and Namatjira reveals few similarities. Namatjira's watercolours of the MacDonnell Ranges address a particular region—the dry, rocky outcrops, and vivid colours of his Western Aranda territory in Central Australia. Moreover Namatjira represents Aranda land by syncretising two different pictorial traditions. In The Western MacDonnell Ranges of c. 1957 Namatjira symbolically re-orders pictorial space by combining a two-dimensional topographic reading of the land, typical of his own cultural traditions, with a three-dimensional illusionism—the result of his exposure to a variety of Western artistic traditions at the Hermannsburg Mission. (Plate 101)

Closer parallels apparently exist between the landscape paintings of Bull and his mentor Hans Heysen, but this is partly an effect of geography and history. Both artists painted the same south east region and both depict the landscape with verisimilitude. Nevertheless it is the differences rather than the similarities which come to the fore. Heysen's Red Gold of 1913 reflects a Eurocentric viewpoint. (Plate 102) The basis of his European landscape painting tradition lies in the artist's authentic response before the 'motif' in nature—a goal achieved, in this instance, through detailed pencil studies. Heysen's academic training is reflected in a broad range of subject matter including still life, portraits, scenes of rural labour and landscapes. His culturally coded position, as a member of the majority society imbues the landscapes with patriarchal and nationalist values. Red Gold depicts a

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pastoral idyll where cattle meander down a track between monumental, yet softly feminised eucalypts toward a distant settlement. Heysen's landscape operates as a metaphor for the progress and wealth of colonial endeavour.

The contrasts with Bull are fruitful. Bull's landscapes, unlike those of either Namatjira or Heysen are not characterised by their stylistic unity: indeed the closer parallel is between Bull and the Nyungar artist, Revel Cooper. Art by Cooper, illustrated in this study, included the boomerang made for Bill Onus, landscapes such as those sold to James Davidson and his illustration for *Yagan of the Bibbulmun*, evocative of Aboriginal ceremonial life. Similarly, any account of Bull's artistic development must accommodate the content and style of his early figurative mural, the portraits of elders and a wide range of landscapes. Whilst the general point could be made that Bull evacuated signs of habitation from his landscapes—figures, animals and buildings—they are not completely absent. Stylistically Bull's landscapes encompass the realism of his teacher, Ernest Buckmaster, as indicated in the watercolour At Healesville of 1974 (Plate 103), where dense yet muted purple and green meet in the depiction of a site invested with considerable importance for south eastern Aborigines by association with Coranderrk. The major oil painting, Summer Evening at Gembrook of 1978 (Plate 104), reflects a more expressionistic style, where complementary colours and bold brush strokes portray the Dandenong Ranges as remote and isolated from civilisation. Heysen gained renown for his personification of eucalypts. In the foreground of Red Gold, individual trees emerge from deep shadows but at the skyline they are reduced to silhouettes. By contrast, Bull's mountain gums are brilliantly lit with paint; almost shadowless, they appear to be growing from the earth. The abstraction present in the watercolour Olinda of 1977 (Plate 105) reflects a further stylistic shift. Here, an intimate view of the bush offers tangled undergrowth in front of parallel bands of trees and light. Within the

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professional art world, where the reputation of an artist rests upon their personal stylistic development, the presence of such hybridity which apparently copied well-known masters, implied slavish imitation and a lack of originality; in short, assimilation. But the point has been made earlier that copies also represent an original creative performance; they are a form of doubling which reflects back upon prior models. Alternative interpretations suggest Aboriginal artists who painted landscapes acted as social agents utilising the presence of an existing artistic tradition to aesthetically re-colonise their land.

Aborigines respond strongly to the bold brush strokes and arbitrary colours of a painting such as Summer Evening at Gembrook. Jim Berg, Director of the Koorie Heritage Trust, says "That's the way we Koories like to see the land looking rough and untouched."<sup>52</sup> But such a response would not apply equally to the painting At Healesville. Thus to read Bull's landscapes from an Aboriginal viewing position, we need to know who has painted them and the context in which they were painted. The contemporary Aranda artist, Wenten Rubuntja, who paints in both the Hermannsburg watercolour style and the more fashionable 'dot painting' style of the Western Desert, argues it is not the style that determines the difference between Aboriginal and White landscapes but Aborigines' relationship to the land.

When whitefellas look at Aboriginal country and paint it they see it differently, and they see the land and paint it exactly as it is. When Aboriginal people look at the country this is what happens. . . They follow the Dreaming history story as they paint. They think about it as they paint.<sup>53</sup>

As an urban Aboriginal artist Bull could not be said to be following his "Dreaming history story" yet he appears to have worked in a similar manner to

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<sup>52</sup>Jim Berg, Interview, 6 August 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Jenny Green, "Country in Mind: The Continuing Tradition of Landscape Painting," in *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 283-316, p. 290.

Aranda artists who paint from memory at their camps. His friends, Lorna Lanman and Peter Sparnaay, who drove him to sites in the Dandenong Ranges, describe how Bull would sit in the bush, imbue himself with its atmosphere, then return and produce a series of imaginative compositions. Bull "didn't have to sketch the work he painted, it was in his mind. He went and walked through the area to find something . . . a week or two later there were the scenes—a part of him. When he was in the bush he was so happy." Lanman comments.<sup>54</sup>

Stephen Muecke's study of Aboriginal narratives, further explains the difference between European conceptions of the landscape as a particular or imagined location and Aboriginal concepts of country. For Muecke,

There is no landscape without a sense of otherness: landscape has to be seen or experienced, in the way a tourist does. So, for the indigenous person, there is really no such thing as the landscape. . . . Perceptions of landscape depend on difference, therefore, and on displacement. . . . What is noticeable about Aboriginal narratives is the complete absence of a *specular* vision of the landscape. Narration is not interrupted by descriptive passages. Such perspectives are the obsession of the newly-arrived, for whom, as we well know, the landscape was necessarily Other—as negative, as empty, as feminine, and whatever other metaphorical displacements of that position as might be called forth by the occasion.<sup>55</sup> [emphasis in the original]

Bull's Aboriginality emerges in the process of painting. Bull learnt to paint by observation, committing to memory historical models drawn from reproductions and originals which he selectively incorporated with images drawn from his personal experience of sites to which he was sentimentally attached.

Hence the landscapes Bull painted were not illustrations but personal models of reality. When Bull represented sites in the Dandenong Ranges, he

<sup>54</sup> Lorna Lanman, Interview, 20 September 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1992), pp. 166-168.

relocated his identity through an illusion of reality. By painting for the majority culture—for whom land was also a key to indigenous identity—Bull, like Cooper and Namatjira initiated a paradigmatic shift which largely excluded figures, animals and evidence of the modern world. This adjustment process recolonised regional domains through an aesthetic response to land which correlated with the perception of the majority culture. As Bull commented,

I see my world as one in which everyone is loving life, being happy, seeing the world as I see it. My landscapes have no people, no buildings of today. They are the things I see. My world. . . I don't like seeing people in them because people don't belong there. All I need is for people to look into them and enjoy them and *want* to be there.<sup>56</sup> [emphasis in the original]

One can argue, with Josef Alsop and Stefan Morawski, that, at a general level, there are universal aesthetics present which allow this cross cultural interaction to occur.<sup>57</sup> In Morawski's terms, realistic landscapes invoke a truth to reality. They are emblematic of the "natural, social and cultural regularities which combine to fix some biologically and culturally stable ways of selecting aesthetic objects as peculiarly coherent structures."<sup>58</sup>

Thus Bull could draw upon the philosophies of an existing landscape tradition to articulate his own culturally coded position. Bull, like Heysen and Buckmaster, maintained that his landscapes represented the "truth of nature". For Heysen, however, verisimilitude to an objective truth masked underlying ideologies which reified colonial power whereas for Bull his heart was for the land *as land*—as country to which he was emotionally, spiritually, politically and aesthetically attached. Today, Aborigines in settled Australia express their commitment to nature personified as an earth Mother. The Wemba

<sup>56</sup> Martin Dougherty, "A Brush with Bull," *Sunday Observer Magazine*, 18 August 1974, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Josef Alsop, *The Rare Art Traditions: a History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Happened* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) p. 82 refers to the universal structures of speech proposed by Noam Chomsky; Stefan Morawski, *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974).

<sup>58</sup> Morawski, *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*, p. 168.

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Wemba elder, Nellie Moore, who is a relative of Bull's, describes his landscapes in spiritual and genealogical terms as a depiction of "the earth as mother and the trees as our brothers."<sup>59</sup> Such contemporary humanist perspectives allow Bull's paintings to be interpreted as an expression of pan-Aboriginality. Iris Lovett-Gardner saw Bull's paintings when she worked for Bill Onus at Aboriginal Enterprises. For her, Bull is the south eastern equivalent of Western Desert painters; both "saw the earth. . . they saw the land. . . [They were] portraying part of their mother because the land is their mother."<sup>60</sup>

Just as Bull visually 'poached' from the images of art history to produce his own Aboriginal voice—a tactic of resistance now advocated by the novelist, Mudrooroo—he also appropriated from art history texts.<sup>61</sup> Closely paraphrasing the style we associate with the nineteenth-century novelist, Marcus Clarke, Bull wrote to his foster mother Pauline Edmonds in 1964,

This is our land Australia, set in sea of blue and in those days of the dreamtime the earlier artists, poets & writers loved this land. They like us admired the same grey-green bushland made bright by wattle trees hue and the tall old trees that stand up like quiet sentinels whose sturdy limbs have braved the seasons for a century or more. They seem so old and tired with their twisted torn gnarled trunks which seem to be scarred by the stone axes of some wandering long-dead tribe. They tell a story that is grotesque and beautiful for all its strangeness beneath that same Southern Cross in the sky, they tell of old tales that are unheard of as they are lost in the annals of time.<sup>62</sup>

An analysis of Bull's text, against Clarke's original, indicates the extent to which the Aboriginal artist is, consciously or unconsciously, altering the text to subtly articulate an Aboriginal viewpoint. In evoking the mood of a harsh, funereal Australian landscape Clarke wrote,

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<sup>59</sup> Nellie Moore, Interview, 13 March 1993.

<sup>60</sup> Iris Lovett-Gardner, Interview, 18 March 1992;

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Lattas "Essentialism, Memory and Resistance: Aboriginality and the Politics of Authenticity," *Oceania*, Vol. 63, No. 3, March 1993, pp. 240-267, pp. 251- 258.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald E. Bull, Letter to Pauline Edmonds, 2 April 1964. Pauline Edmond archives.

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In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, and the Weird,—the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write. . . The time-worn gums shadowing the melancholy water, tinged with the light of fast-dying day seem fit emblems of the departed grandeur of the wilderness, . . . Glorified for a last instant by the warm rays of the sinking sun, the lonely trees droop and shiver as though in expectation of the chill night which will soon fall alike on the land they have surveyed so long and the memory of the savage people who once possessed it.<sup>63</sup>

Bull implements slight modifications to Clarke's text, so the dendroglyphs created by a "wandering long-dead tribe" become his own ancestors, their stories, his cultural heritage. And whereas for Clarke, the Australian bush evokes a forlorn mood of "weird melancholy," associated with the extinction of the Aboriginal race, Bull attributes to the land, the potential for ugliness *and* beauty; the former, symbolic of Aboriginal dispossession, the latter, offering a source for renewal and strength through the continuing beauty of the land.<sup>64</sup>

At several points, Bull's text makes overt reference to the Australian continent and the constellation of the southern cross.<sup>65</sup> Although stars are of universal concern to humanity, the meanings we ascribe to them are culturally coded. Individual Aboriginal communities attach their own meanings to given constellations whilst those Aborigines who worked in the pastoral industry, knew the movement of the southern cross during the course of the night marked the changing shifts.<sup>66</sup> For mainstream Australians, the cross is pre-eminently a symbol of our geographic location and the egalitarian values enshrined in the nation's ethos. Thus the emphasis Bull gives to the southern cross as an emblem of national identity is not surprising given the recurrence of such symbols within south eastern art. As already discussed, the depiction of the continent, flags and coats of arms, flora and fauna and the landscape

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<sup>63</sup> Marcus Clarke, "Waterpool Near Coleraine," In *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia: The Colonial Period 1770-1914* (ed.), Bernard Smith (1975, rpt. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 132-136, pp. 135-136.

<sup>64</sup> See also, Ronald Bull, Letter to P. Edmonds, 24 November 1963, Pauline Edmond archives.

<sup>65</sup> For a more detailed analysis on this constellation see Sylvia Kleinert. "A Constellation of Identities," *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 39, April 1991, pp. 7-9.

<sup>66</sup> Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987 ), p. 75.



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showed that many Aborigines imagined themselves incorporated within the larger power formations of the nation state. For similar reasons, many Aborigines chose to serve in the armed forces during the World Wars. To discredit these incorporations as either a nostalgia for the past or false consciousness denies the role of Aborigines within modern history. For Aborigines like Bull and Cooper, the landscape was a demonstrable sign of their desire to gain recognition and equality within contemporary constructions of nationhood and their paintings communicated this political position to the majority culture.

#### **v Critical reactions**

Throughout his productive life as an artist, Bull found himself continually evaluated against the canon established by his predecessor, Namatjira. In 1962, three years after the death of Namatjira, Buckmaster opined that Bull was "better than the late Namatjira at this stage of development."<sup>67</sup> Doubtless Buckmaster intended to be complementary in the comparison he drew between his own pupil and Namatjira but his response denied Bull recognition. A generation earlier, when Namatjira pioneered a breakthrough in contemporary Aboriginal art by appropriating from the style, techniques and imagery of the landscape tradition to exhibit as a professional artist, no apparent precedents existed. In response, the art world had to negotiate adjustments to its prevailing values to accommodate the idea of a contemporary Aboriginal art.

As already shown, there were similarities between the two artists—and there were differences. As Aborigines, both selectively reinterpreted from an existing landscape tradition to articulate their own aesthetic and political response to land. Landscapes dominated their production, in their short but

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<sup>67</sup> "Bond to 'Boy Namatjira': 'Won't be in Court Again'," *The Sun*, 16 June 1962.

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prolific working life, each is thought to have produced about 2000 paintings. Namatjira and Bull shared a common colonial context marked by discrimination and oppression. But whereas Namatjira gained fame as a 'full blood' Aranda Aborigine from the Hermannsburg Mission, prevailing constructions for Aborigines denied legitimacy to south eastern Aborigines like Bull.

In the critical response to Namatjira, discourses of otherness which distanced Aborigines temporally and spatially from the modern world became conflated with the idea of the artistic genius. The late nineteenth-century evolutionism of Spencer and Gillen gained the Aranda a national and international reputation as one of the most primitive tribes on earth. Namatjira's emergence as a professional watercolourist of note was thus hailed as a symbol of his assimilation and evidence that Aborigines deserved equality. As we have seen, to a political activist such as Bill Onus, Namatjira represented an heroic figure, evidence that the racism which prevailed against Aborigines could be overcome. But the myth of the artistic genius interpreted an artist's creative development through the sensationalised events of their biography: tragic life events were blamed onto the victim.<sup>68</sup>

Subsequent generations of Aboriginal artists inherited these unresolved contradictions. When Bull began exhibiting as a professional artist, he found himself judged against the stereotype established by Namatjira. When journalists described Bull as "The New Namatjira: a tragic wanderer between two worlds. . . on a roller coaster to catastrophe," they sensationalised aspects of his personal life—his Aboriginal status, early institutionalisation, criminal record, avoidance of publicity and ultimately, his premature death from a heart condition—to project the artist as the gifted, but tragic, victim of

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<sup>68</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Artist, Mythologies and Media Genius: Madness and Art History," *Screen*, 21, 1980, pp. 57-96.

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circumstances.<sup>69</sup> Indeed Bull saw the parallels between his own turbulent life and the heroic figures from art history whom he admired. He commented,

it is generally accepted an artist's life is not one of peace but confusion, turmoil and striving for an elusive goal one of perfection. As you know mine is an Idea that somehow or other lives within me, recalling Michelangelo's block of marble. It is said of him that as he stared at those he could release stone from stone.<sup>70</sup>

Caught between sensationalist journalism and the net of race relations, it seemed to Bull that it was innate for artists to emerge from humble beginnings and attain fame before they experienced tragedy.

Lin Onus, however, viewed Namatjira somewhat differently. Through his father, Onus came into contact with Namatjira when the Western Aranda artist visited Melbourne in 1954 after his presentation to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Looking back on the 1950s, Onus sees the double standards which operated against Aboriginal artists. The American abstract expressionist, Jackson Pollock, he points out, could gain fame and status through his exuberant and outrageous lifestyle but "the instant coloured people [behaved like this] it ceased to be heroic"; instead, Aborigines found themselves the focus of police attention and subsequent imprisonment.<sup>71</sup> The point could also be made that the romantic aura which surrounded abstract expressionist artists accorded with the myth of the artistic genius whereas an academic landscape tradition placed great store upon a diligent and consistent practice. Just as Heyesen had previously retracted his admiration for Namatjira when he observed changes in Namatjira's style which he interpreted as a deterioration and capitulation to market responses, so

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<sup>69</sup> Dougherty, "A Brush with Bull,"; "The New Namatjira," *Melbourne Observer*, 4 March 1973, p. 4; Des Fregon, "Battle To Survive in White Man's World: Ronald Bull Master of Art," unmarked cutting; "Artist Explains Walkabout," *The Age*, 18 April, 1968.

<sup>70</sup> Ronald Bull, Letter to Pauline Edmonds, 26 October 1970, Pauline Edmonds Archives.

<sup>71</sup> Lin Onus Interview, 23 March 1992.

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Buckmaster curtailed his friendship with Bull, when the Aboriginal artist's lifestyle suggested he was abusing his talent.<sup>72</sup>

When Namatjira first exhibited in the late 1930s, he arrived with the support of the Hermannsburg Mission, its broad base of social connections helped negotiate his entry into the art world. The artist Rex Battarbee also acted as Namatjira's mentor, he facilitated Namatjira's arrival by ensuring that viewers understood something of his background. Over many years, Battarbee played a major role as a cultural broker in the exhibition, marketing and distribution of Namatjira's paintings. The timing of Namatjira's entry into the art world was a further critical issue. Namatjira's watercolours of the MacDonnell Ranges accorded closely with recent developments in the landscape tradition influenced by George Lambert's war-time landscapes from the middle east theatre and Heysen's forays into the Flinders Ranges. These reinterpretations of existing landscape conventions modified existing public perceptions and primed the critical response. Although modernists bemoaned the apparent loss of tribal traditions, Namatjira achieved widespread popularity. In addition, the development of a tourist industry in Central Australia represented a catalyst for the Hermannsburg School and an influence on its subsequent development as the Dead Heart of Australia emerged as a new site of national identity.

Bull's career as an artist can be contrasted with that of Namatjira at several points. Unlike Namatjira, Bull did not fit existing constructions for Aborigines, he did not accord with the imaginative construction of Aborigines as noble savages located in a distant, spectacular realm. Bull operated without the supporting infrastructure offered to Namatjira. Even more critically, he entered the art world a generation later than Namatjira at a time when the landscape

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<sup>72</sup> Norman Buckmaster, tel. conv, 26 March 1992; Thiele, *Heysen of Hahndorf*, p.304.

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tradition was, for various reasons, ostracised by the art elites as an anachronism, a conservative art practice supportive of nationalist ideologies. Since critics failed to understand why Bull elected to paint such "exhausted subject matter," the implication was that Bull, like Namatjira, was either dominated by his mentors or naive and uninformed.<sup>73</sup> Clark tried to refute these charges when she argued that Bull had already rejected modernism when he was at Tally Ho.<sup>74</sup> Her response made it clear that Bull had consciously chosen to paint landscapes but this did not entirely solve the problem. Provincial concerns that Australian art had to be measured against an international avant garde confused modernism with modernity. To a greater degree than elsewhere, prevailing art world debates in Australia tended to equate modernism with abstraction and the rejection of academic art.<sup>75</sup> Today there is acknowledgment that modernism cannot be defined stylistically. Nor should terms such as abstraction and representation be considered strictly defined categories; they are volatile, culturally coded terms. Arguably Bull was not necessarily committed to either realism or abstraction; his imperative concern was the land. Modernism thus produced contradictory responses to Aboriginal art. As already discussed, the visual affinities between Aboriginal art and modernism located by the artists Frances Derham and Allan Lowe and the journalist Gladys Hain proved the most productive response to the 1929 exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*. Again in the 1970s, modernists led acceptance for the acrylic 'dot painting' which developed at Papunya Tula. But modernism's aesthetic ideologies denied the regional differences created by historical colonial relationships and in so doing, excluded Aboriginal landscape painting.

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<sup>73</sup> Clark, "Ronald E. Bull," p. 13.

<sup>74</sup> Clark, "Ronald E. Bull," p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> The experiences of Aboriginal artists who attended art school during this era attest to the racism and conservatism which prevailed, Isaacs, *Aboriginality*, p. 41; Fiona Foley in discussion with Jennifer Isaacs, "The Land, the City: the Emergence of Urban Aboriginal Art: *Art Monthly Australia Supplement*," Summer 1990, pp. 10-12, p. 10.

Overlooked from consideration by the network of critics, galleries and institutions who constituted the art elites, Bull was vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>76</sup> His reputation as an artist was not well served by exhibitions in department stores and in galleries in the Dandenongs which catered to tourists. Just as James Davidson exhibited the paintings of Revel Cooper, Bull needed dealers committed to the landscape tradition, who recognised his Aboriginal status and were prepared to mediate on his behalf with the buying public. From 1972, Bull exhibited with Peter Sparnaay's Upstairs Gallery and in 1974 and 1975 with Tom Roberts, grandson of the Heidelberg painter and director of the Kew Gallery. This last exhibition was opened by Doug Nicholls, a relative of Bull's.

Despite the ambivalent response Bull received from the art world, Lin Onus acknowledges Bull was his most significant role model. Whilst most of Bull's non-Aboriginal friends refer to his love of the Dandenong Ranges, Onus saw that Bull had to keep returning to Cummeragunga and Barmah Lakes to manifest his Aboriginality. Through Bull, Onus came to understand that south eastern Aborigines had maintained sentiment for their country. By the 1970s, radical black power movements began to express these relationships to land through land rights claims. Following the return of Lake Tyers and Framlingham to Aboriginal ownership, Lin Onus led a Bun wurrung (Kulin) land rights claim at Belgrave from 6 February-28 April 1971.<sup>77</sup> Aborigines built

<sup>76</sup> It is alleged that leading department stores refused to pay Bull equitable prices and that many private dealers insulted the artist by paying him in liquor. Sparnaay, Interview, 21 March 1992; Lanman, tel. conv. 8 July 1993. It can be argued that the association held to exist between alcohol and Aborigines, which has resulted in the stereotype of the "drunken Aborigine" relieves non-Aborigines of their responsibility and casts the blame onto Aborigines who are seen to be "drinking themselves to death." Marcia Langton, "Rum, Seduction and Death: 'Aboriginality' and Alcohol," *Oceania*, Vol. 63, No 3, March 1993, pp. 195-206.

<sup>77</sup> Other Aborigines involved in the land claim were, Peter Bailey, Bill Briggs, Roy Larkin, Bruce McGuinness, Bob Mazza and John Newfong. The claim was reported in the following articles. "We Will Camp Here'-Says Native Leader," *Free Press*, 3 February 1971; "Natives Camp in Over Land Claims," *The Age*, 8 February 1971; "Sherbrooke Land Claim Settled: Aborigine Leader Accepts a House," *The Age*, 15 April 1971; "Fire Bombs Hit the Round-house," *The Age*, 19 April 1971; "Land Rights Claim - is it the End?," *Free Press*, 29 April, 1971; Ngai, "A Look at the Aborigines' Lands Act 1970," *Origin*, February 1971, p 8.

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a round house which they hoped would operate as an information centre on Aboriginal health and the preservation of Aboriginal culture but the claim ended violently and in near tragedy when the centre where Aborigines were camped was bombed and destroyed by fire. Such experiences provided a vivid reminder to Aborigines that racism still prevailed in some quarters of Australian society. There was danger involved in open resistance. From thereon, future land rights claims proceeded within existing legal frameworks.

Whereas Bull romanticised his Aboriginal relationships with the land, Onus deflected these readings by offering a very pragmatic explanation for the landscapes he began to paint in his youth. Landscapes were simply something he thought he could do. They represented a form of training: "if you're going to paint something you've got to have your draughtsmanship sorted out. . [and painting the land] was a technical stepping stone to doing something."<sup>78</sup> Embarking on a career as an artist, without any formal training, it seemed to Onus that the landscape was a useful starting point, permanent and static, where the leeway between veracity and imagination was greater than in figuration. The photorealist style evident in Onus' early Musquito series is therefore an extension of Bull's illusionism. Geometry only re-emerged in Onus' work after he visited the Gamberdi community at Maningrida in Arnhem Land in the 1980s where he became incorporated into the family of one of the master painters of this area, Jack Wunuwun. In these later works, photo-realism is juxtaposed against cross-hatching that encodes kinship structures and clan relationships. Thus the disjunction within Fish and Lilies is expressive of the unity and dissonance of south eastern Aboriginal experience. (Plate 106)

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<sup>78</sup> Lin Onus, Interview, 23 March 1992.

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## **vi Conclusion**

A second generation of Aboriginal artists living in Melbourne transferred their attachment to land within a new urban domain. Allegiance to the Dandenongs was established over several decades through the involvement of Bill Onus and his outlet for Aboriginal art and craft, Aboriginal Enterprises. Whereas an earlier generation of Aborigines remained enclaved in the inner suburbs of Fitzroy and Preston, Ronald Bull, Revel Cooper and Lin Onus extended their associations with the Dandenong Ranges.

Bull's biography reveals the sequences of institutionalisation which governments used to implement assimilation and sever the transmission of Aboriginal values. Contradictions within the art of Ronald Bull and Revel Cooper indicate the trauma and despair these practices produced. A gap however, existed, between the official rhetoric of assimilation and Aborigines' daily incarceration in institutions. Although Aborigines still encountered elements of racial discrimination, there were individuals from the majority culture who recognised Aborigines' special situation and facilitated changes which took account of their Aboriginality. Despite official interventions in his personal life, Bull continued to identify as an Aborigine. He frequently returned to Cummeragunga and Barmah Lakes, (if not Lake Tyers) his mural at Pentridge, recapitulated on the past to operate as an emblem of solidarity for Aboriginal prisoners, and in paintings sold to mainstream Australians Bull communicated his aesthetic response to the land.

Although Bull lost many connections with his Aboriginal culture and suffered trauma as a result of his institutionalisation, he utilised his artistic talent to exploit new opportunities which allowed him to gain some access to the infrastructures of the professional art world. Unfortunately, the critical response to Bull evaluated the south eastern artist against the stereotype



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established a generation earlier by the Aranda artist, Albert Namatjira. As shown already, constructions of the artist as genius allowed the majority culture to sensationalise individual Aboriginal artists and blame their tragic circumstances onto the artists as victims. The myth of the artist as genius presumed art arose from a cultural vacuum—a response which denied the cultural continuity of south eastern Aborigines and the fact that their art was constituted through their political, cultural and economic conditions of production. Elsewhere, modernism led to the growing appreciation for Aboriginal art but in this instance, modernism's exclusivities rejected Ronald Bull's landscapes by subsuming them within existing landscape traditions. In so doing, modernism denied the history of colonial race relations; it proved unable to theorise a space for Aboriginal artists whose primary concern was with the land.

The mural completed by Bull, was site-specific and directed to a knowing audience in a particular context. As discussed earlier, a negative interpretation perceives these images of a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle as anachronistic. But Bull selectively incorporated from Western artistic traditions, prestaging the appropriations which would become fashionable within post modernism and acceptable practice for Aborigines within an era of self determination. Bull couples the realism of an Aboriginal camp with camouflaged heads of kangaroos to introduce a second symbolic order which disrupts the unity and internal coherence of the picture plane. Within a decade, Onus would similarly incorporate the clan patterns of his adopted family at Maningrida to contrast what might be seen with what is known about Aboriginal culture.

For the wider community, Bull painted landscapes. In these too, he appropriated from Western artistic traditions, creatively copying and playing

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back to mainstream Australians their familiar icons of national identity. Those dealers who exhibited the work of Bull and other urban Aboriginal artists acted as facilitators for Aborigines in settled Australia by mediating with the public. Bull's landscapes elicited an appreciative response by acting as a bridge or conduit for communication through a universal aesthetic. In a settler colony, land is a key element in the relationships between Aborigines and the wider community; but whereas colonisation dispossessed Aborigines and brought the two cultures into opposition, an aesthetic response to the land produced a process of adjustment, learning and negotiation when mainstream Australians admired Aboriginal representations of nature. For Aborigines, reinventing the land, reconciled dispossession with repossession through a process of accommodation. By contrast with the Bun wurrong land rights claim of 1971 which ended in violence, art sidestepped the racism present in Australian society to undercut the status quo.

This second generation of urban Aboriginal artists bridged a critical era in the history of south eastern art, from the post war period when increasing numbers of Aborigines chose to live in Melbourne, to the emergence of a land rights movement in the 1970s associated with self determination. Individually, these artists bore the brunt of authoritarian government legislation aimed at assimilation yet they overcame these restrictions to exploit new opportunities which offered them some access to the art world. The city created these new situations, artists were able to selectively renegotiate local relationships with their kin and their regional domain. Simultaneously modernity destroyed cultural traditions and it created the possibility for new, more fluid relationships between individuals. Thus the history of south eastern Aboriginal art must account for Ronald's Bull's transfer from Lake Tyers to Melbourne and his subsequent attachment to both the Dandenongs and Cummeragunga, the influence of Revel Cooper in Western Australia and Victoria, the importance of

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Albert Namatjira as a figure of national prominence and the interaction which Lin Onus initiated with the Gumerdi community of Maningrida in Arnhem Land. Aboriginal Enterprises, the outlet for Aboriginal art and craft established by Bill Onus at Belgrave played a key role in these developments: a centre for social interaction between younger and older members of the Aboriginal community, the workshop where Lin Onus and Revel Cooper gained skills and knowledge in the production of artefacts, one of the first venues where Ronald Bull, Revel Cooper and Lin Onus sold their art and, ultimately, the site for the Bun wurrong land rights claim.

## Conclusion

This study was driven by two primary aims: one, to establish why the history of Aboriginal art in the south east has been overlooked, and the other, to examine the pattern of cultural production in the south east by relocating Aboriginal art within the historical context formed by colonial relationships. In place of any single, unilinear chronology, my revaluation revealed a matrix of differentiated and relatively independent regional sequences each influenced by the response of individuals and communities to specific local circumstances.

Although it is the case that all societies construct a sense of their own identity in relation to others, Western systems of power and knowledge located Aborigines at the originary point of civilisation, as an object of fear and desire and displaced in time and space from the modern world of progress. Analysis of the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* and Percy Leason's portrait series, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* revealed that salvage paradigms influenced the representation of Aborigines and the collection and display of their material culture on the evolutionist assumption that Aborigines were doomed to extinction. These discourses of primitivism allowed the functionalist anthropology, which gained hegemony in academic circles after the 1920s, to present Aborigines through a synchronic perspective as a static, timeless model situated in a pre-colonial world. By failing to take account of colonialism's variable rate of impact such constructions privileged remote communities where 'full-blood' Aborigines retained many elements of a former hunter-gatherer economy together with kinship structures, language and ritual life. By contrast, Aborigines living in settled Australia, where radical disruption had occurred, were rendered invisible. Thus the status given to a traditional and authentic Aboriginal culture supported and sustained settler nationalist myths of fatal impact.

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The value which the Western world gives to culture, as a sign of civilisation and refinement, underwrote these constructions for Aboriginality. When the West reifies tradition, the authentic status of culture is preserved through the collections of material objects held in museums and galleries. It follows that official and institutionalised responses made by professionals with specialised knowledge dominate the response to Aboriginal culture. The emphasis given to authenticity and tradition meant change was interpreted as evidence of decline and disintegration—an interpretation which reinforced the domination of the West and overlooked the many creative adjustments initiated by Aborigines. In his 1965 study of tourism at Angas Downs, Frederick Rose acknowledged the effect of this bias.

The tragedy is not so much that the traditional art and techniques are lost but that the artistic potentialities of the Aborigines under the new conditions are not realised. What is remarkable is not that the old methods are lost but the virility that is shown in grappling with new problems under most unfavourable conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Western definitions of Culture tend to overlook the constant reinvention which occurs through popular culture—for Roy Wagner, this is the "[i]nterpretive culture [which] provides a meaningful context for the living of everyday life."<sup>2</sup> Critical response evaluated Aboriginal art according to the elitist values of high art—a skewed perspective which marginalised Aborigines' innovative incorporations from the mass media and their interaction with tourists as inauthentic kitsch and evidence of deculturation and commoditization.

To recover meaning and value for the history of south eastern Aboriginal art, this thesis has adopted a processual view which assumed culture was in a continual process of reinvention. Evidence from the south east was tested against models from remote communities on the assumption that, once the differential impact of colonialism was taken into account, many more

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<sup>1</sup> Rose, *The Winds of Change in Central Australia*, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, p. 61.

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continuities existed throughout Aboriginal Australia than formerly acknowledged. As John von Sturmer comments,

There is a notion that the arrival of Europeans foreshadowed a shift from primal simplicity to an unfathomable complexity - or a scene of degradation, hence an occasion for despair. In fact, it is more rigorous to see the transition from one complexity to another. If one focuses on Aboriginal practice, one may discover a good deal of continuity between the complexities which succeed each other. Indeed, it may be more a case of shifting content in enduring processes than anything else.<sup>3</sup>

This study began with the hypothesis that, if individuals in south east communities are bound to their regional domain through a system of relationships which are equally as complex and dynamic as 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. This is not to deny the presence of profound distinctions. In remote communities where ritual life is intact, the production of art for exchange as a commodity has required negotiation to constantly adjust the boundaries between restricted and public contexts.<sup>4</sup> The protection of rights to designs transmitted from one generation to another through ritual is critical. By contrast, all the art produced in the south east is part of the public domain. What becomes apparent is that, in establishing the continuity of art in the south east, the gap between traditional and urban Aboriginal gives way to a continuum.<sup>5</sup>

As in remote communities, depictions of the land and its flora and fauna and individuals' changing relationships to these domains emerge as the dominant content of south eastern art. These generalised findings can then be differentiated into various regional and chronological sequences. The distinctive local differences in evidence between the carved emu eggs of the

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<sup>3</sup> von Sturmer, "A Critique of the Fox Report," p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, pp. 1-2, Geoffrey Bardon *Art of the Western Desert* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators have already drawn attention to this problem. Onus, "Language and Lasers," p. 14; Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," p. 62.

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Bagundji and Wiradjuri reveal the important role played by the river systems of the Darling-Murray in the economic, spiritual and social construction of a private Aboriginality. In this region a combination of factors, the rich aquatic life of the river, the area's relative isolation and relations with the pastoral industry have ensured the river represents a locus for personal memories. Carving in relief or intaglio, artists incorporate scenes from their former hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the events of contact history and their daily life in the pastoral industry to evoke a rich heritage of memories.

Emblems of national identity emerge as a further set of recurring motifs on the artefacts and carved emu eggs produced by two rural communities, the Kurnai and the Wiradjuri. In order to understand why Aborigines in the south east, as at Hermannsburg, used images of the continent of Australia, heraldic coats of arms, flags and sailing ships in their compositions, distinctions need to be made between the Aboriginal use of these motifs and their appeal to the nationalism of the majority culture who purchased these commodities. Aboriginal incorporation of these symbols into their compositions does not constitute a sign of domination and acquiescence but signifies their desire to be included, on an equal basis within the 'imagined communities' of the nation state. Despite their exclusion from the census taken in 1901 at Federation, Aborigines continued to express loyalty to their native land. The boomerang Sam Kirby made and decorated for Alick Jackomos is one instance where these emblems operate as vehicles for a politically radical assertion of Aboriginal equality. In the emu egg which Kirby carved as a gift for Queen Elizabeth II, these elements fulfil a quite subversive role.

This study charts the gradual emergence of a more public, homogenous and heightened sense of Aboriginality. The wedding of Suzy Murray and George Patten represented one such moment in time when a Christian ceremony

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became the site for an assertive display of Aboriginal unity and power. In this instance, a new spirit of pan-Aboriginality is expressed in the recontextualisation of boomerangs from Central Australia and Lake Tyers. Similarly, Bill Onus at Aboriginal Enterprises collaborated with artists from mainstream Australian society to incorporate elements from the art of remote communities. But in tandem with these expressions of pan-Aboriginality, subsequent generations of urban artists continued to represent personal responses to their regional domain. A series of individual painters, Albert Namatjira, Revel Cooper and Ronald Bull influence Lin Onus, reinterpreting existing landscape traditions which were so critical in the formation of myths of national identity for the majority culture. In tracing the background of these individual artists, their patterns of interaction and their access to the infrastructures of the professional art world, an historical context for urban Aboriginal art emerges.

Several reasons can be proposed which explain why this historical context has been ignored. First of all, urban Aboriginal art has been chronologically aligned to the land rights movement of the 1970s, as a movement of resistance. It may well be, as Roy Wagner suggests, that the stress which the West gives to a conventional context for cultural traditions can only be counteracted by inversion through acts of differentiation which seek "*novel or unusual situations and circumstances*".<sup>6</sup> [emphasis in the original] In essentialising a contemporary resistance, we have tended to obscure the many local acts of resistance initiated by south eastern Aborigines since settlement. The successful petition to Queen Victoria, mounted in 1863, gained recognition and support for their cause through gifts of basketry, crochet and weapons. At Lake Tyers, the production of artefacts for exchange with tourists represented a form of resistance which contravened Management

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<sup>6</sup> Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, p. 58 .



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directives and the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. When Aborigines operated collaboratively and cooperatively to produce and display artefacts, stage concerts and pool their takings, they refused to be incorporated into a Protestant work ethic. Parallels for these initiatives exist elsewhere in settled and remote communities.

Second, when individual Aboriginal artists emerged into prominence, generally they were evaluated according to Western artistic traditions which idealised artistic creativity. The myth of the artist as genius meant Tommy McRae, Albert Namatjira and Ronald Bull were measured against a romantic stereotype which separated artists from the material conditions of their existence and the conditions of historical struggle which informed their work. Such constructions conflated the mystique of the tragic, alienated artist with Aborigines who were represented as Wanderers between Two Worlds.<sup>7</sup> Today, the modernist myths which represent Aborigines as self-taught, maverick, naive or outsider artists are equally problematic. Such constructs deny an artists' Aboriginality and instead they subsume artists within a further primitivism which is a construct of modernism's desire for spontaneity and freedom of personal expression. The idea of the maverick or outsider, usefully locates Aboriginal artists outside the professional art world, but in the process, they are reprimativised as the West's imaginary other.

Moreover, these categories support and sustain Western artistic hierarchies. When Janet Watson's basketry aeroplane is commended as a maverick work whilst utilitarian baskets manufactured from the same coiled basketry technique are considered anachronistic, a skewed perspective is privileging the unique art object. Ethnographic considerations exacerbate these distinctions of taste. The status which material culture initially attained,

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<sup>7</sup> See Joyce Batty, *Namatjira: Wanderer Between Two Worlds* (Adelaide; Hodder & Stoughton, 1977).

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through its association with evolutionism, has now waned. In addition, artefacts made for exchange as commodities rather than for use in daily life, are deemed to have lost their authenticity, hence they slip across the gap which divides artefact from craft object and tourist souvenir. But the ambiguity which surrounds replica artefacts denies the way they articulate social relationships as when the boomerang operates as a key symbol of national identity.

A concern for the frames which divide high art from popular culture overlooks the role played by artefacts in maintaining Aboriginality. Significantly, many contemporary Aboriginal artists, Jimmy Pike from the Walmajarri people of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, Robert Campbell Jnr, an artist from the Ngaku people of northern New South Wales and the Ngarrindjeri, Ian W. Abdulla and Kerry Giles cite observation and participation in the production, decoration and display of artefacts as the basis of their Aboriginality becoming established.<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal culture is not egalitarian in the sense usually expressed; within communities individuals gained status for their skill and knowledge in the manufacture of artefacts. When young children such as Albert Mullett, Bindi Williams and Lin Onus truanted or left school at a young age, they stepped outside the parameters of the majority culture and learnt respect for elders in the process of observation and imitation. Various kinds of socialisation emerged in the course of this study, within communities, between generations in key families such as the Mullett, Walsh, Kirby and Onus dynasties and through the tourist industry as a site for public demonstrations which, in the case of Bill Onus, brought national influence.

The idea of an "urban Aboriginal art" is thus a misnomer, a construct which fails to acknowledge the socio-cultural processes which have contributed to

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<sup>8</sup> Isaacs, *Aboriginality*, pp. 13. 55; *Murrundi: Three River Murray Stories*, The Contemporary Arts Centre of South Australia, 26 March-25 April 1993, unpagged.

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the artistic development of Aborigines. Art, as a unique art object marketed to an elite, maintains its status over the more humble and mundane associations of craft. In as much as art is associated with the city, which is the privileged site of progress in the modern world, artefacts and crafts become marginalised as provincial and anachronistic through their association with the country. Thus the critical response to south eastern art is structurally inflected through a country/city dichotomy which is a product of modernity. National trends exacerbate this local situation; Australia wide, the market for Aboriginal art divides into two distinct categories, a fine art market and a tourist market. The point has been made that we have failed to identify and develop markets for fine Aboriginal craft.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the low status given to craft has contributed to the delayed recognition for Aboriginal women's productive endeavour. Primitivist and patriarchal ideologies have selectively evaluated women's crafts as either 'traditional' or anachronistic and evidence of assimilation. The Aboriginal viewpoint brought forward in this study suggests otherwise. Women adapted their existing skills and knowledge to operate within the general constraints imposed upon women within a settler colonial society but in addition, women remained central figures in their households and they continued to operate on a collaborative and cooperative basis with men. The distinctive use of space implemented by Aboriginal households in the south east, as in remote communities, questions the degree to which the West's discrete division between public/private spheres may be relevant to Aboriginal communities.

It became clear at several points in this study that it was the nexus between Aborigines and modernity that had contributed to the exclusion of south eastern Aboriginal art in as much as the progress of modernity, disrupted and

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<sup>9</sup> Morphy, "Aboriginal Fine Art," p. 39.

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confused discourses of primitivism. In some contexts, as in remote communities, Aboriginal art could still be displaced from the modern world but as modernity progressed, south eastern Aborigines were chided for their cultural essentialism. With post-war modernisation Aborigines' expressed links with kin and land were interpreted, like the landscape tradition itself, as a nostalgic delusion, which retarded progress toward civilisation. These critiques misunderstand the nature of Aboriginality. The carved emu eggs by Sam Kirby represent the past in the present through a composite picture which depicts Aborigines as the original inhabitants of the continent, the history of colonisation and the impact of contemporary international events. Aboriginality represents a dynamic and selective process of forgetting, remembering and transforming which chooses to delete much of the violence and tragedy of race relations in Australia.<sup>10</sup> Understanding how Aboriginality operates in the south east calls into question existing value judgements based on the relative conservatism or radicalism of Aboriginal art. From an Aboriginal viewpoint, much south eastern Aboriginal art fulfils a cathartic role, where beauty neutralises ugliness.

The critical response to south eastern art was also confused by long-standing Western debates concerning abstraction and realism. Carol Cooper's analysis of south eastern artefacts found that, although a rich and diverse heritage of geometry and figuration were present at contact, Aboriginal incorporations of Western motifs contravened collectors' expectations and led to these artefacts being relegated to the status of curios. The drawings of Sydney McRae, artefacts produced at Lake Tyers and the landscape paintings of Ronald Bull were similarly criticised, the former as evidence of deculturation and commoditization, the latter as a sign of conservatism and lack of

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Rowse discusses a contemporary instance when these selection processes operated. Tim Rowse "Just Talk: Detachment as Cultural Aggression," *Agenda: Contemporary Art*, Special Issue, No. 28, Summer 1992/3, unpagged.

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originality. Modernism, equated with abstraction and the rejection of academic realism, polarised these debates such that abstraction and representation were treated as discrete categories. Eric Michaels has noted that modernism changed public perception and opened the way for an appreciative response to the geometry present in the 'dot painting' developments of the 1970s. In the south east, however, modernism's effects were more problematic. In the critical response to *Australian Aboriginal Art*, a modernist aesthetic productively undercut a prevailing evolutionism but modernism's aesthetic ideologies also contributed to the rejection of Percy Leason's portraits and the landscapes of Ronald Bull. Today the general trend toward realism in the art of third world minorities is no longer judged in such Eurocentric terms but is reinterpreted as a constructive and valid response to their changing circumstances within colonial history.

At many points, the evidence from the south east tallied with the analysis of art from remote communities. Notwithstanding the impact of colonial history, the developing skills of artists and individual and community responses to market forces, regional differences are evident in the south east, as in the distinctive styles of realism found in the carved emu eggs of the Bagundji and Wiradjuri and in the geometric elements used on Lake Tyers and Wiradjuri boomerangs. The fact that south east art is characterised by a structural interplay between geometry and figuration confirms that the use of the respective style is only partly triggered by the response of the wider community. The further point is, south eastern artists vary their style according to whether their viewing audience is the Aboriginal community, friends from the majority culture, tourists or the fine art market. In his analysis of the critical response to bark paintings by the Yolngu of Arnhem land Howard Morphy similarly found that artists made a selection amongst existing styles in

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response to perceived different audiences, tourism and galleries.<sup>11</sup> In a surprising parallel with Peter Sutton's research, this study found compositions in the south east incorporated considerable balance and symmetry in the content and position of their geometric and figurative elements.<sup>12</sup> As in the art of remote communities, paired heraldic images and mirrored elements are present in Lake Tyers artefacts and the carved emu eggs and artefacts from the Murray/Darling basin. Whilst Sutton suggests this symmetry may operate as a metaphor for the reciprocity governing Aboriginal relationships, an alternative explanation might be that these elements reflect the presence of universal aesthetic elements appreciated by Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

This study is predicated on a definition of art as a form of cultural production whose meaning is cooperatively produced in various social contexts. Since south eastern Aborigines were rendered invisible by government policies aimed at their absorption and assimilation, it was inevitable that art, as a semi-autonomous field, would be excluded from official recognition. This study revealed that false assumptions of authenticity and tradition sustained by discourses of primitivism produced selective patterns of inclusion and exclusion which supported Western hierarchies. But marginalisation by institutions and specialised professionals did not prevent Aborigines from continuing to communicate with the wider community by producing commodities for exchange. In addition to selling and bartering their art with tourists and local patrons, many Aborigines chose to present their art as gifts to members of the majority culture. In so doing, they maintained continuity with the past and circumvented incorporation into a capitalist economy by involving non-Aborigines in their relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, pp. 183-213.

<sup>12</sup> Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," pp. 59-88.

<sup>13</sup> McBryde, "Exchange in South Eastern Australia," p. 146 notes the importance of gifts in early cross-cultural interaction in the south east.

It is useful to evaluate the various situations in which gifts were exchanged. The crochet, basketry and weapons which Coranderrk residents presented to Queen Victoria in 1863 were part of a successful petition for land rights. The boomerangs which the Kurnai presented to Reverend James Stannage and that which the cast of An Aboriginal Moomba presented to Irene Mitchell, recognised their friendship and assistance to Aborigines. When Harry Mitchell produced pastoral artefacts expressly for Mrs Armstrong, the wife of the manager at Nulla station, he acknowledged the bonds which linked employers and employees. In many instances, Murray river Aborigines carved eggs for free or presented them to friends in recognition of their services. In distinguishing between the gifts which Sam Kirby produced for Alick Jackomos and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II his critical reflexivity subtly adjusted the composition and content of each gift to recognise the viewing position of the recipient.

Cultural production thus involved Aborigines in complex relationships with the wider community which cannot be fitted into any simple us/them dichotomy. In the contested and complicated arena of colonial relations, Aborigines had to negotiate divided loyalties to their community, employer, church or the nation state yet in the many instances of collaboration and cooperation discussed here, relationships of domination and subordination are not evident. Rather, it needs to be recognised that the entrepreneurial role elected by individuals, particularly in such examples as Laurie Moffatt and Bill Onus, brought them status within their own communities and in the eyes of the majority culture. As cultural brokers, they ensured cross-cultural interchange occurred on their terms and in the process, they educated the wider community. Equally the role played by non-Aborigines as collaborators deserves reconsideration. In earlier instances, as when Dieri people at

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Killapaninna Mission near Lake Eyre produced unique toas in collaboration with the mission teacher, H. J. Hillier, or the artist Rex Battarbee acted as a mentor for Albert Namatjira, charges of domination and inauthenticity have come to the fore. But this specific analysis of local instances of collaboration reveals otherwise. When Percy Leason depicted Lake Tyers Aborigines, when the Gilsenan's staged concerts, when Buckmaster and Heysen taught Ronald Bull, Roberts, Sparrnaay and Davidson marketed Aboriginal art and O'Dare collaborated with Onus Aborigines actively countered the various primitivisms of the majority culture and they ensured that they determined how they would be represented. In some instances, attitudes underwent a profound change. In selectively appropriating from Aboriginal culture, non-Aborigines have been forced to adjust their own viewing position to accommodate that of Aborigines. Although other factors have played an influential role, over a period of time, the continual pressure by Aboriginal artists and their non-Aboriginal collaborators has forced institutions to change their approach. The collecting and exhibition policies of institutions now more closely reflect the attitudes of Aborigines.

Although this study has charted the patterns of cultural production in the south east, Aborigines remain relatively unaware of this cultural heritage. Because art was produced as a commodity and exchanged locally, objects rarely remained in the community. Furthermore, policies of dispersal have mitigated against an awareness of these local continuities and regional differences. Today, communities are involved in a process of cultural renewal but they find themselves placed in a cultural vacuum: remote communities have formed enclaves to protect the integrity of their own designs and they suggest that Aborigines in settled Australia draw upon their own 'traditions'.<sup>14</sup> But apparently, the south east has no history. South eastern artists are

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<sup>14</sup> This development seems to bear out the historical pattern of indigenous response from incorporation to containment identified by Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation*, p. 9.



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empowered when they know their rich and diverse heritage; this knowledge assists them in dealing with the status accorded Aboriginal art from remote communities and the homogenised and stereotypical view of Aboriginal art as bark painting or 'dot painting' which generally prevails in the wider community. As the contemporary Ngarrindjeri painter Ian W. Abdulla recently remarked, "You got no dots in the River! Where would you get dots in the River from?"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, "An Interview with Ian W. Abdulla,"