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

**Sylvia Kleinert**



A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
of The Australian National University, April 1994.



I declare this thesis is entirely my own original research.

Signed ..... *Sybil Klemm* .....

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**Abstract**

My study addresses the apparent gap which exists in the history of south eastern Aboriginal art, from the death of William Barak and Tommy McRae at the turn of the century, to the emergence of an urban Aboriginal art in the 1970s. An analysis of the patterns of inclusion and exclusion created by the 1929 exhibition of *Australian Aboriginal Art* establish the paradigm. Discourses of primitivism constructed Aborigines as a static, tradition-based society, distanced in time and space from the modern world. This selective response gave recognition to a south eastern Aboriginal heritage and the art produced in remote communities but elided evidence of a contemporary Aboriginal presence in settled Australia.

Operating within the uneven power relationships of a colonial context, south eastern Aborigines experienced oppression and discrimination, but they were not dominated. The world view of the south east Aborigines of this study does not reflect an assimilation of the colonising culture. The Aborigines considered here value autonomy and independence, they maintain relationships with kin and land and an exchange modality which governs their relationships with the majority culture. My research therefore suggests many more parallels between Aborigines in settled Australia and Aborigines in remote communities than formerly acknowledged.

The chronological element in my study establishes the continuity of south eastern Aboriginal art and traces the emergence of a more heightened expression of public Aboriginality in post-war Melbourne. Similarities and differences emerge within each chapter in the analysis of specific sets of art objects produced by men and women operating within particular local circumstances: in the pastoral and tourist industries, within institutions or

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fringe camps, in the country and the city. This study explores how Aborigines produced art for exchange as a commodity within the constraints and opportunities presented by the new social, industrial and cultural spheres of the modern world. In hindsight, it is apparent that the general movement of Aborigines from rural regions to Melbourne from the late 1930s onwards allowed Aboriginal artists to gradually negotiate entry to the infrastructures of the professional art world. Nevertheless the structurally privileged position which the city maintains over the country as a site of progress in the modern world, in conjunction with artistic hierarchies which place a higher value on the fine arts than the crafts and popular culture have contributed to the hiatus surrounding south eastern Aboriginal art and obscured its heterogeneity.

The south eastern Aborigines of my study acted as historical agents and chose whether they wished to become involved in the production, marketing and response to Aboriginal art. Aborigines gained status in the process of cultural production and a more equitable entry into the capitalist economy. The exchange of art objects also acted as bridge between Aborigines and the wider community by changing prevailing attitudes. In a young settler colony primitivism fulfilled a multiplicity of ambiguous roles. There were many ways in which mainstream artists could express their fascination with Aboriginal culture through the appropriation of Aboriginal motifs and depiction of Aborigines—some of which were more constructive than others. My study focuses on several instances when south east Aborigines colonised the professional art world, intervening and collaborating to ensure their viewpoint was adequately represented. Over time, institutions adjusted their acquisition and exhibition policies to accord more closely with an Aboriginal viewpoint. Retrospectively Aborigines in the south east secured continuity with the past through their selective appropriations from mainstream Australian culture. By means of these adjustment processes Aborigines were able to exert some



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control over the manner in which they were incorporated within the modern Australian nation state.

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## Abbreviations

AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies until 1990, thereafter the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait and Islander Studies.
AA	Australian Archives.
ANU	The Australian National University.
BPA	The Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines.
MoV	In 1983 the National Museum of Victoria amalgamated with the Science Museum to become the Museum of Victoria.
NGA	The Australian National Gallery until 1993, thereafter the National Gallery of Australia.
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria.

## Notes:

Throughout the thesis I have retained imperial measurements and currency to maintain accuracy with the historical era. Measurements for art objects are given in centimetres in the following order: height, width and depth.

## Conversion rates:

£1 = \$2.01

1 mile = 1.6093 km.

The names given to Aboriginal clans, languages and regions have been arbitrarily allocated since colonisation. There now exists considerable variation in this area of knowledge and this is exacerbated by the historical gap which surrounds Aborigines in the settled south east. The map of culture and language groups for the south east (Fig. 2) amalgamates primary evidence from my own fieldwork with recent scholarship in geography; linguistics and anthropology. Whilst every attempt has been made to document the contemporary viewpoint of south eastern Aborigines the

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processes of cultural renewal currently underway mean that my findings are provisional. Within the thesis I maintain consistency with the spelling(s) suggested by AIATSIS except where authors have followed their own style. Alternative names for sites have also been indicated. To avoid confusion, this study adopts the name in common usage.

In some instances, I have taken the liberty of making slight changes to grammar, punctuation and spelling of oral transcriptions where this improves coherence and does not alter the meaning of the text. Square brackets [ ] indicate words or phrases inserted in the text by the author.

For reasons discussed elsewhere, the term Aborigines is used throughout. In addition, where possible, I identify individuals by their clan or associated community. When alternative nomenclature occurs within quotations, terms such as Koori(es) or blackfellows have been retained. Gubs or gabas is the term used by south eastern Aborigines for mainstream Australians.

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