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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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A thesis of this nature owes a considerable debt to many individuals and organisations who have assisted with my research. Present and former staff of the following institutions contributed through their sustained support: Australian Archives, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Gippsland Anglican Aboriginal Fellowships, Healesville Historical Society, Koorie Heritage Trust, Metropolitan Reception Prison, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Museum of Victoria, National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Police Historical Unit, State Library of Victoria, South Australian Museum, Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement, Swan Hill Public Library, Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League and the Wesleyan Central Mission.

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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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### **A note on the title**

The title of my thesis, "Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella" is a well-known south eastern Aboriginal song. As in any folk tradition, the origins of the song are obscure and wording varies according to time, place and performer. My title follows the version sung in 1961 by Alick Jackomos, a lifelong supporter of Victorian Aborigines and recorded by Alan West, then a curator at the Museum of Victoria. Some performers, including Percy Mumbulla from the south coast and Alick Jackomos attribute the song to the Wallaga Lake community, others, like the Aboriginal singer, Jimmy Little, and the ethnographer, Anna Vroland, favour Lake Tyers. In 1968 Percy Mumbulla claimed Jacky Jacky was a corroboree song taught to him by Sam Drew (Bubela) however the Lake Tyers informants cited by Vroland attribute the English verses to Captain Newman, manager of Lake Tyers station in 1928-1931: they maintain the chorus refers to the arrival of steamer traffic between Bairnsdale and Orbost at the turn of the century. The tune, in all cases, resembles the Liverpool song, "Johnny Todd".

The song thus selectively incorporates from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal traditions. Most particularly, "Jacky Jacky" encapsulates the way that south eastern Aborigines accommodated a colonial presence by parodying, and thereby gaining some control over, existing stereotypes. Through this inversion, humour becomes a tactical weapon in a song of political protest played back to the majority culture. If indeed Captain Newman collaborated in the words of the song then this further supports the more complicated and contested picture of colonial relationships offered here. "Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella" is part of the musical heritage of the south east, sung together with Aboriginal and Maori songs, Afro-American spirituals, and popular Western music at public concerts since the late 1920s.

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Anna F. Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots* (Melbourne: private publication, 1951), pp. 10-11 reproduces the complete song as follows:

### Jacky Jacky

- 1      Jacky was a fine young fellow,  
         Full of fun and energy  
         Jacky was thinking of getting married  
         But the girl ran away you see.
- Chorus              Clicketa boobilah wildy maah  
                         Billying etcha gingerry wah.
- 2      Jacky used to spear the emu  
         With the spear and waddy too.  
         He's the only man who can tell you  
         What the emu said to the kangaroo.
- 3      Hunting food was Jacky's business  
         Till the white boy came along,  
         Put his fences across the country  
         Now the hunting days are gone.
- 4      White boy he now pays all taxes,  
         Keeps Jacky Jacky in clothes and food,  
         He don't care what becomes of the country,  
         White boy's tucker him very good.
- 5      Now the country's short of money,  
         Jacky just sits and laughs all day.  
         White boy want to give it back to Jacky;  
         No fear, Jacky won't have it that way.

## **Introduction**

The catalyst for this study came from the realisation that a significant absence exists in the history of Aboriginal art in the south east. Whilst knowledge about the nineteenth-century continues to grow and contemporary Aboriginal art gains increasing critical acclaim, little is known of the work produced in the intervening decades from the death of William Barak and Tommy McRae at the turn of the century to Lin Onus' first exhibition at the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League in 1975. This gap implies that traditional Aboriginal culture came to an end, then subsequently re-emerged, as if from a cultural vacuum, transformed into a culture of resistance. Such selective responses deny the cultural continuity of Aborigines in settled Australia and the historical context of contemporary Aboriginal art.

This re-evaluation of south eastern Aboriginal art proceeds through two, inter-related strategies. One examines how the discursive strategies of Western intellectual traditions represent Aborigines through a series of binary oppositions which systematically structure relations of hierarchical privilege. The other retrieves Aborigines from these essentialist and stereotyped constructions by situating them within a colonial context. Although Aborigines are marginalised as an ethnic minority and embedded within colonialism's uneven power relationships, they are neither dominated nor determined by these fields of power and knowledge. South eastern Aborigines—like their counterparts in remote communities—act as social agents in their historical mediation with mainstream Australian society initiating conscious adjustments and incorporations which have secured continuity with the past. In place of single, homogeneous constructions of Aboriginal culture, or the dichotomies of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art referred to above, a plurality of distinctive local histories emerge as individuals and communities respond to the constraints and opportunities presented by specific circumstances, their gender and their location.

South eastern art is expressive of Aborigines' lived reality as an ethnic minority within a modern nation state. Hence one strand within this study considers the conditions of historical struggle in which Aboriginal art is produced and the spiritual, social, political and aesthetic values which may be encoded in this art. But additional meanings accrue in the process of cultural production as art objects are exchanged as gifts or commodities with the majority culture and generate a critical response. When objects enter the world of goods, they traverse the contested terrain which separates Aborigines from the wider community: alien regimes of values determine the status of Aboriginal art. In the West, hierarchical structures of knowledge produce professionals who possess institutional power. When they privileged the art of the past and remote communities and denied legitimacy to a contemporary Aboriginal presence in the south east, their selective response mirrored and in effect supported, assimilationist policies aimed at rendering south east Aborigines invisible.

Prevailing constructions for Aboriginality overlook the range of Aboriginal initiatives, their interventions within various arenas of art world activity and the extent of their collaboration with the wider community. Recuperating Aboriginal art from a site which has been overlooked recolonises and returns to the world the evidence of their rich and diverse experience. By situating Aboriginal art within the social and political transformations effected by colonialism, this study aims to question existing primitivist stereotypes. In turn, these insights yield productive parallels between Aborigines in remote communities and those in settled Australia, suggesting many commonalities in their creative response to colonialism.

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## Theoretical perspectives

It is the "significant absence" which surrounds south eastern Aboriginal art, rather than its complete exclusion, which is a key concept in this study.<sup>1</sup> The pattern of inclusions and exclusions which emerge suggests two essentialist constructions of Aboriginality—each, from a different perspective, denying a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the south east. The binarism of traditional and contemporary art point to the ambiguity and contradictions surrounding the sign of 'the primitive' within European intellectual traditions. Prevailing discourses for Aborigines are selective: they admit certain positive representations whilst repressing other, more negative images.<sup>2</sup>

These apparent contradictions can be understood in terms of a materialist philosophy as part of the relationship between individuals in society and their conditions of existence. These relationships are seen to be socially constituted through a language of signs, i.e. the relation between the means of expression (the signifier) and the concept (the signified). The structuralist psycho-analytic studies of Jacques Lacan show that these relationships are formed in the process of childhood development as the individual negotiates the transition from the Imaginary, the subjective world of the unconscious, to the Symbolic, the conscious universe of objects. A Lacanian schema predicates these developments on the mirror phase and a castration complex.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, tran. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (1964, New York: Hill & Wang, 1985), pp. 76-7; see also Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, tran. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1969, New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 25; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983, 2nd imp. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 46 notes that cultures are never totally absented.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Hamilton, "Fear and Desire: Aborigines, Asians, and the National Imaginary," *Australian Cultural History*, No. 9, 1990, pp. 14-35.

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In the former, the subject undergoes a split in the process of misrecognising the self as an image of the Other.<sup>3</sup> The Other is used here to refer to the third term by which being is consciously realised. Lacan argues that, in negotiating entry to the Symbolic order, the subject becomes aware of their need to achieve self-realisation but their lack can only be fulfilled through desire for the Other. Desire thus represents a space predicated on hate and love, on absence and the investment in symbols as a substitute for presence. For Lacan, meaning and identity are created through these gaps in signification and the systems of differences and transformations they produce. It follows that relationships with the Other do not represent a systematic set of oppositions but a hierarchy of mediations in a constant process of negotiation and transformation through a chain of signifiers. In the circuits of exchange between individuals and society, it is not just a transfer of information which occurs but the position of the speaker which is critical: when we see the other, we are in reality looking at ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Lacanian analysis explains how individuals create meaning and identity within social relationships but these useful insights must be distinguished from subsequent literature which tends to equate the Other with indigenous societies.<sup>5</sup> For Jacques Derrida the development of writing—and history—mark the difference between the West and the Other.<sup>6</sup> Derrida shows that a Western logocentric tradition excludes primitive cultures from history to

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, tran. Alan Sheridan (1977: rpt. London: Tavistock Publications, 1982), pp. 1-7; Malcom Bowie, *Lacan*, Fontana Modern Masters, Editor, Frank Kermode (Hammersmith: Fontana, 1991), pp. 91-95.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tran. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1974, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 22, 72, 84-87, 231, 252-3. Derrida also uses the term *differance* to refer to the action of differing (*différent*) in the systematic game of differences produced by language.

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strategically locate them as an originating source—separated from the linear progress of civilisation. Thus the West achieves its hierarchical power and authority by articulating relationships with the primitive 'Other' through a series of binary oppositions: reason/intuition, truth/error, culture/nature.<sup>7</sup> It is the play between these dichotomies, Derrida argues, which allows the West to valorise or disqualify the Other at will.<sup>8</sup>

Michel Foucault's genealogy for the discursive formations of Western intellectual traditions reveals that their power and knowledge are grounded in the *episteme* of positivist methodology.<sup>9</sup> Structures of authorship, scholarship and institutionalisation disseminate this knowledge throughout society so it is taken for granted as a set of natural, universal truths. Nevertheless the binarisms through which the West articulates its relationships with the Other actually incorporate contradictions and ambiguities: early ethnography, for instance, emerged from an amalgamation of existing myths and knowledge, the taxonomy of natural science and evolutionism.<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon Foucault, Edward Said's seminal study of Orientalism demonstrates how scholars, pilgrims, travellers and statesmen constructed the Orient as a set of static, essentialist stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> Although distinct differences exist in the historical and spatial formations between Orientalism and primitivism, Bain Attwood argues each operates as "a mode of discourse which. . . produces authoritative and essentialist 'truths' about indigenes. . . which is characterised

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 97, 103-6, 148-9, 169, 180.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, pp. 25-39, 178-195; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1966, rpt. London: Tavistock Publications, 1982), p. x-xii, xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 39, 71, Chs. 5, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978: rpt. London: Penguin, 1985).

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by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge."<sup>12</sup> Thus primitivism is a discursive strategy which allows the West to admire and appropriate from indigenous people who remain stereotyped and romanticised as noble savages, distanced in time and space from the contemporary world. Whether at a popular or scholarly level, such imaginative constructions, based on fear and desire of the Other, bear little relationship to the lived reality of indigenous people; they are nevertheless the means by which the West confers authenticity.

These critiques persuasively demonstrate how Western discursive strategies determined possible constructions of primitivism. But they also raise problems. It has been argued that, for all Foucault's insights, he presents us with a closed text that fails to distinguish between myth and reality.<sup>13</sup> Concerned with dismantling the Enlightenment, Foucault and Derrida generally fail to acknowledge the extensive modifications and reinterpretations implemented by contemporary scholars.<sup>14</sup> Far from empowering marginalised minorities, these writers appear to confirm Eurocentric stereotypes by exaggerating difference into a rigid binarism that emphasises the domination of the West.<sup>15</sup> Although Derrida and Foucault indicate gesturally strategies for resistance, their ethnocentrism does not

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<sup>12</sup> Bain Attwood, "Introduction," *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines, Special Edition of Journal of Australian Studies*, (eds.), Bain Attwood & John Arnold, 1992, pp. i-xvi, p. i.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.146; Zhang Longxi, "The Tao and the Logos: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," *Critical Inquiry*, 11, March 1985, pp. 385-398; Zhang Longxi, "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West," *Critical Inquiry*, 15, Autumn 1988, pp. 108-131.

<sup>14</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 171-2,

<sup>15</sup> Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), Ch 7, esp. p. 127; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 11, 23, Ch. 11.

produce constructive solutions.<sup>16</sup> Against the grain of these generalised and monolithic readings of 'the West' and 'the Other' we need to locate an "idiom for alterity" which examines specific instances of cross-cultural interaction, at different levels of society, within a plurality of regional discourses of otherness.<sup>17</sup> Hence this study distinguishes between Orientalism and primitivism in general, and the particular constructions of primitivism which emerge in the settler colonies such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia, where colonisers and colonised co-exist—each claiming indigenous identity.<sup>18</sup> This study is concerned only with Australia.

Whereas earlier anthropology studied indigenous societies as separate entities, living in synchronicity with, but divorced from, the modern world, my approach recognises that Aborigines are embedded within "the uneven entanglement of local and global power relations on the colonial peripheries."<sup>19</sup> Situated within this colonial context, primitivism takes on a new guise, as the obverse of racism. Writers in the Marxist tradition have addressed the racial oppression, dispossession and cultural disruption that ethnic minorities suffer in the process of colonisation but they offer only a very

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.158; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, (ed.), Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (1972: rpt. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 92-98, 125; p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 4; see also Nicholas Thomas, "Anthropology and Orientalism," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 7, No. 2, April 1991, pp. 4-7.

<sup>18</sup> To indicate certain parallels and continuities with general studies such as Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938, enl'd ed. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1986), I use the term primitivism rather than 'Aboriginalism', cf Attwood, "Introduction," *Power Knowledge and Aborigines*, p. i; see also Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture; Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Polity Press, due 1994), p. 234.

<sup>19</sup> For a critique of the traditional anthropological method of the participant observer see George W. Stocking, "The Ethnographer's Magic: Fieldwork in British Anthropology from Tylor to Malinowski," In *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (ed.), G. W. Stocking, Vol. I (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 70-120, pp. 104-110; The quotation is drawn from Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. xi.

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deterministic and pessimistic picture of race relations.<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, for example, draws upon Marx and psychoanalysis and suggests that, unless colonial power is overthrown, social relationships remain polarised between colonisers who are guilty of false consciousness and indigenous people who are presented as dupes and victims of the system, collaborating in their own destruction.<sup>21</sup>

A need exists for these generalised accounts of colonialism, to be examined against the evidence from specific communities and their history of adjustments to particular manifestations of colonialism.<sup>22</sup> When colonisation is defined more neutrally as inherent to the human condition then it is apparent that Aborigines and non-Aborigines are engaged and transformed in a process of mutual becoming. For the south eastern Aborigines studied in this research, art represented a means of extending their resources through the re-colonisation of their environment and the expansion of their social repertoire through selective incorporations, interventions and collaborations with non-Aborigines. By differentiating between colonialism's relative rate and degree of impact throughout Australia, this study retrieves recognition for Aborigines in settled Australia. Traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art become part of a continuum which positions Aborigines within a shared colonial context.

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of the Political Economy*, tran. Samuel Moore & Edmund Aveling, Vol. 3 (1894: rpt. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), Ch. 20; Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, tran. H. Chevalier (1959, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 42; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957, New York: Orion Press, 1965), pp. ix, 16, 30-34, 45, 71, 79, 88, 90, 102, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tran. Constance Farrington (1961, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 181-199.

<sup>22</sup> see for example Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).

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Meanwhile, the teleologies that operate lend support to a further binarism: domination and resistance. As shown earlier, the West privileges to itself the idea of historical progress and, in doing so, Eric Wolf argues, imposes stasis on the people "without history" such that tradition becomes a key strategy in constructions for the Other.<sup>23</sup> Whilst diversity and change are a sign of progress for the West, they become "emblematic of the disintegration of indigenous cultures in the face of imperial expansion."<sup>24</sup> This situation occurs because discourses of primitivism reify tradition. Ambivalent towards the radical changes of capitalism and industrialisation, the West constructed indigenous societies through idealist philosophies as a unitary whole and pure essence.<sup>25</sup> With the progress of modernisation by the mid-twentieth century, tradition was open to reinterpretation as a constraint on development. Used in both senses, tradition operates as a backward-looking concept. Since indigenous societies were expected to conform to these essentialising stereotypes, their many adjustments and reinventions at the level of everyday life went unrecognised and instead stood as evidence of inauthenticity.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, processual interpretations for culture argue that traditions are never inert and passively transmitted, they are "always a symbolic constitution of the past in the present."<sup>27</sup> All cultures contain within them the necessary resources for continuity and innovation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 4-5;

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, pp. 9-13; Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc. 1975), pp. 1-16 analyses how anthropologists have constructed primitive culture through their own culturally determined viewpoints.

<sup>26</sup> Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, pp. 104, 151-3; The valorisation of tradition means that research marginalises evidence of cultural change see, James Urry, "Beyond the Frontier: European Influence, Aborigines and the Concept of 'Traditional' Culture," *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 5, Nov. 1979, pp. 2-16. p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Jolly, quoting Linnekin and Handler, in "Specters of Inauthenticity," *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 49-72, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, pp. 34-35, 67; By contrast, Eric Hobsawm differentiates between indigenous societies and modern nation states. Eric Hobsawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," In, *The Invention of Tradition* (eds.), E. Hobsawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-14.

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If earlier texts emphasised Western dominance, a converse trend within cultural studies, art history and anthropology reinterprets minority histories as evidence of resistance. The emergence of a contemporary artistic expression among Aborigines in settled Australia has been heralded as a breakthrough which undercuts earlier ethnographic constructions for Aboriginal art. Without any historical context for an emerging urban Aboriginal art, it seemed to Vivien Johnson, who led the recognition for this new movement, that it emerged

as if out of nowhere, a whole new community of Aboriginal artists sprang up [whose] . . . pride or anger or joy, or all three, in their Aboriginality is born of a generation growing up with the Aboriginal Land Rights movement as a context and an inspiration.<sup>29</sup>

By tracing the origins of urban Aboriginal art to a conjunction between spatial and temporal influences: "[t]he wavefront moving out from Central Australia in the 1970s" after the development of Papunya Tula 'dot painting' and the emergence of a radical land rights movement in the coastal cities, Johnson elides the continuous history of small, local oppositions mounted by south eastern Aborigines since settlement in the 1840s, aimed at recognition for their dispossession and demands for compensation.<sup>30</sup> The idea of resistance is a seductive and powerful idea which implies subversion and a drive toward liberation—but one which raises many problems.

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<sup>29</sup> Vivien Johnson, *Art and Aboriginality 1987: Portsmouth Festival U. K.* 9 May-4 June 1987, unpagged.

<sup>30</sup> Dianne Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga: Pioneers and Policy," In *Opportunity and Response: Case Studies in Economic Development* (eds.), T. Scarlett Epstein and D. H. Penny (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1972), pp. 10-68.

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The further position argued by Aboriginal activist, Gary Foley that "any expression of Aboriginal art is an act of political defiance" presupposes a unitary colonised subject acting communally for given objectives.<sup>31</sup> But it seems that some Aborigines would not necessarily agree with Foley: Marcia Langton arguing instead that "to politicise the poetic of Koori art in this way is to narrow it."<sup>32</sup> In opposition to retrospective and generalised reinterpretations of this kind, Roger Keesing argues that they obscure the nature of indigenous response. In his extended work amongst the Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands, Keesing found individual actors involved in a tangled web of local interests whose outcomes were largely unforeseen.<sup>33</sup> Equally, an emphasis on resistance excludes the many processes of adjustment, accommodation and collaboration implemented by colonial subjects. Colonialism implicates Aborigines in relationships which give rise to divided loyalties as they form various allegiances to family and community, pastoralists, Christianity and the modern nation state.<sup>34</sup>

In response to these problems, it is essential to differentiate between past interpretations and contemporary responses. It is not historically accurate to retrospectively read Albert Namatjira's Hermannsburg watercolours from the 1940s and 1950s through Homi Bhabha's celebratory readings for mimicry and hybridity. We have no evidence that Namatjira intended such interpretations and previously, these landscapes were interpreted as a sign of domination and assimilation.<sup>35</sup> Celebrating hybridity overlooks the fact that,

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<sup>31</sup> Gary Foley quoted by Johnson, *Art and Aboriginality*, unpagged.

<sup>32</sup> Marcia Langton quoted by Tim Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1993), p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Roger M. Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 1- 14, Chs. 22-4.

<sup>34</sup> Howard and Frances Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History: Ideology and Images of the Past in Northern Australia, *Man (N. S.)*, Vol. 19, 1984, pp. 459-78, p. 475.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask: A Partial Interpretation," In *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia* (eds.), Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and M.

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even today, cultural constructions of racial purity continue to deny the legitimacy of south eastern Aborigines. This has resulted, as Annette Hamilton points out, in the construction of two "circuits of meaning" concerning Aborigines.<sup>36</sup> One, the real Aborigines construed as 'full bloods' living in remote communities who participate in ritual and maintain aspects of their culture. Second, the negative picture of de-tribalised 'half-caste' Aborigines who are presumed to have lost their cultural identity through their association with missions, fringe camps and cities.

The question has been put, What exactly is being resisted? In her study of race relations in the country town of 'Brindletown', Gillian Cowlshaw privileges a "culture of opposition" expressed through rebellious, anti-social behaviour. But in his review of this publication, Tim Rowse finds that Cowlshaw has replaced an earlier ethnographic essentialism, which marginalised 'half-caste' populations in settled Australia, with a political essentialism whose distinguishing feature is resistance. In the process, he argues, she privileges an Aboriginal resistance read through negative traits whilst those interstitial Aborigines who mediate between the town's ethnic minority and the majority cultures are relegated to a subsidiary position.<sup>37</sup> Rowse maintains to the contrary that Aboriginal culture in settled Australia represents,

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Ruth Megaw (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1992), pp. 249-282; For an extended critical response to Homi Bhabha see Young, *White Mythologies*, Ch. 8 and Abdul R. Jan Mohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 12, No. 1, Autumn 1985, pp. 59-87.

<sup>36</sup> Hamilton, "Fear and Desire," p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Rowse, "Are We All Blow-Ins?," Review of Gillian Cowlshaw's, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), *Oceania*, Vol. 61, No. 2, Dec 1990, pp. 185-191.

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a heterogenous set of responses to a colonialism which gives certain real but limited kinds of recognition and encouragement to some people while reinforcing, in others, a sense of autonomy and mutual exclusion.<sup>38</sup>

This raises the key issue of Aboriginality, defined here as a cultural construction of identity integral to relations between Aborigines and mainstream Australians. Aboriginal cultures are not autonomous, their identity is historically mediated through interaction with the wider community. For Jeremy Beckett, Aboriginality represents an 'imagined community' which is

not arbitrary, but, like all cultural processes, takes place under particular political and economic circumstances, within a particular cultural tradition and in terms of particular historical experiences. It is these experiences that give the construction its authenticity and also its fluidity.<sup>39</sup>

Historicising Aboriginality draws attention to several significant issues. There are distinctions to be drawn between a private Aboriginality characterised as "behavioural, situational and heterogenous" and public expressions of Aboriginality: "symbolic, global in application . . . and uniform in concept".<sup>40</sup> Sally Weaver argues that public ethnicity, formed out of relations with the modern nation state, generalises, selectively incorporates from, and may ignore, private Aboriginality. "Identity is conjunctural, not essential" but colonial experiences may trigger Aborigines to espouse culturally essentialist positions.<sup>41</sup> Hence the Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo Nyoongah maintains "Aboriginal thought does strongly incline towards the essential position: the template of the Dreaming ancestors being the guide to the present and the

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<sup>38</sup> Rowse, "Are We All Blow-Ins?," p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> When Beckett uses Benjamin Anderson's term, 'imagined communities', he aligns Aboriginality with other forms of nationalism. Jeremy Beckett, (ed.), "Introduction," In *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (ed.), Jeremy Beckett, (1981, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), pp. 1-10, p. 2; see also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, London: Verso, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Sally M. Weaver, "Struggles of the Nation-State to Define Aboriginal Ethnicity: Canada and Australia," in *Minorities and Mother Country Imagery*, (ed.), Gerald C. Gold, Social and Economic Papers, No. 13 (St John's, Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University, 1984), pp. 182-210, p. 185.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 11.

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future, that is conservation rather than revolution."<sup>42</sup> This does not mean however that Aborigines assert their culture is a unitary whole: Marcia Langton acknowledges it is composed of continuities with the past and useful incorporations from the present.<sup>43</sup> The critical issue raised by these debates is Aborigines' right to imaginatively construct their Aboriginality—as a complex process of remembering, forgetting and transforming within changing historical circumstances—free from strictures of tradition and the charge of inauthenticity.

Recuperating social agency for colonised subjects counters these essentialising stereotypes and the debates they generate. Janet Wolff defines the dialectical or structural relationship in which individuals exist within society as being "both the product of human agency and the conditions for human agency."<sup>44</sup> Individuals are not free but nor are they determined: social structures are both constraining and enabling.<sup>45</sup> For Pierre Bourdieu all societies are divided into groups which operate through given conventions to govern consciousness.<sup>46</sup> Just as family and education systems produce a system of acquired dispositions, or *habitus*—"systems of durable and transposable *dispositions*"—so all aspects of cultural production operate through 'schools' which transmit the attitudes and ideas governing perception

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<sup>42</sup> Mudrooroo Nyoongah, "Comments on Hollinsworth," *Oceania*, Vol. 63, No. 2, December 1992, pp. 156-157, p. 156; This author is also known as Colin Johnson and Mudrooroo Narogin.

<sup>43</sup> Marcia Langton, "Urbanizing Aborigines: The Social Scientists' Great Deception," *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1981, pp. 16-22, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies* (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1976), pp. 160 -161; see also Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, pp. 22-24.

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, tran. Matthew Adamson (1987, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 75. In capitalist societies these groups equate with class structures however similar structures occur in indigenous societies.

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and thought.<sup>47</sup> By emphasising how culture represents a common catalogue of answers to recurring problems and a reservoir of themes for invention and improvisation, Bourdieu demonstrates that cultural disruption is less radical than has been presumed. Thus theories of cultural transmission, social agency and culture concur: the recursive patterns of social existence incorporate change. For Anthony Giddens,

All social reproduction is grounded in the knowledgeable application and reapplication of rules and resources by actors in situated social contexts . . . *Change, or its potentiality, is thus inherent in all moments of social reproduction.*<sup>48</sup> [emphasis in the original].

This analysis of agency offers a reconsideration of the dynamic balance between tradition, change and continuity which allows us to see that cross-cultural interaction within a colonial context is not simply a reactive process, a capitulation or a rebellion; rather it represents a subtle complexity of individual initiatives geared to the limitations and opportunities offered by distinct situations.

In keeping with the materialist philosophy which underlies this thesis, art is defined as a form of life grounded in social experience. This definition undercuts those idealist philosophies which depend upon the notion of a human essence that transcends particularities of time and place. Whilst anthropology has generally assumed that material culture arises from the social, political and economic conditions of existence, art history has, until recently, conceptualised artistic creativity primarily through the model of the

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<sup>47</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, tran. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradictions in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 114.

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individual genius.<sup>49</sup> In demonstrating the degree to which the art world is a social and collaborative activity where meaning and value emerge through the processes of production, marketing and exchange, Wolff and Howard Becker suggest many more similarities between the art world and the model developed by anthropology than formerly recognised.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, particular problems arise in the analysis of art in the process of cross-cultural interaction. Formerly the barter and gift exchange of pre-industrial societies was differentiated from the commodity production of the modern world and this led to the assumption that indigenous societies would disintegrate when they came into conjunction with capitalism.<sup>51</sup> Anthropologists, historians and theorists acknowledge the problems of authenticity and taste which arise when the cultural production of ethnic minorities flows as a commodity across the "different *regimes of value*" created by the "spatial, cognitive or institutional distances" of a colonial context.<sup>52</sup> The less purist position adopted by Arjun Appadurai and Nicholas Thomas brings gifts and commodities together as objects produced for exchange. Appadurai's innovative study of the social life of objects locates three situations which define how economic exchange creates a politics of value: the commodity phase of an object, its candidacy as a commodity and the context in which the commodity is marketed and exchanged. Within the contested arena of colonial relationships, where Aborigines represent an ethnic minority, contrasts emerge between the culturally relative meanings

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<sup>49</sup> See, Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies and Media Genius: Madness and Art History," *Screen*, 21, 1980, pp. 57-96.

<sup>50</sup> Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, see especially pp 32-48; Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (ed.), A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3-63, pp. 6-15; Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, Ch. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Appadurai, "Introduction," In *The Social Life of Things*, pp. 4, 48.

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which artists and communities place on objects and their mutability in the process of exchange. As objects change their status and accumulate meanings through their cultural life, it is the misinterpretations, contradictions, and fissures evident in their histories which draw attention to Aborigines' ambiguous political status. In this context, art operates as a multiplicity of sign systems: a network of intervals and delays, where internal distinctions and plays of difference replace centrally fixed meanings as art is reinterpreted and transformed within new frames of reference.<sup>53</sup>

### **Existing literature**

This theoretical analysis has revealed how the West constructs indigenous societies as a traditional, static, pure essence displaced temporally and spatially from the modern world—a bias which accounts both for the status given to Aboriginal art from remote communities and the dearth of research on the history of Aboriginal art in settled Australia. This study addresses these disparities through two approaches. Existing unitary concepts of the colonised subject can be challenged by demonstrating the variable impact of colonialism. Once these differentiated experiences are taken into account, many commonalities and elements of continuity between Aborigines in remote communities and those living in settled Australia emerge.

Aboriginal art from remote communities can appear to support discourses of primitivism. In many remote communities, religious and ceremonial life is still largely intact, and elements of a hunter gatherer lifestyle remain—hence art objects from these communities convey an aura of ethnographic significance and authenticity. In the south east, early and dense settlement dispossessed

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<sup>53</sup> John Griffiths, "Deconstruction Deconstructed," In *Deconstruction, Omnibus Volume* (eds.), Andreas Papadakis, Catherine Cooke and Andrew Benjamin (London: Academy Editions, 1989), pp. 93-97, p. 96.

Aborigines and largely destroyed their ritual life and their intricate ties to the land. Following the nineteenth-century ethnographic studies of A. W. Howitt, R. Brough Smyth, Rev. J. Mathews and J. Dawson,<sup>54</sup> the settled south east remained a neglected area of research until the mid 1940s and even then, analysis occurred through the existing paradigms of Elkin's 'intelligent parasitism,' a Marxist 'internal colonialism' and Lewis' 'culture of poverty.'<sup>55</sup> Although Marie Reay, Jeremy Beckett and Dianne Barwick established the continuity of Aboriginal culture in the south east, others, like Aldo Massola, who wrote extensively on Victorian Aboriginal history in the 1970s, maintained a nineteenth-century approach which presumed south eastern Aborigines were doomed to extinction.<sup>56</sup>

These patterns of anthropological research were influenced by national, institutional and personal agendas in conjunction with historical events.<sup>57</sup> In the post-War period, for example, research in the Pacific overshadowed that on Aborigines because the need for government funding tied the discipline to

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<sup>54</sup> R. Brough Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria and Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*, 2 Vols. (London: John Ferres, 1878); Rev. J. Mathews, *Eaglehawk and Crow: A Study of the Australian Aborigines* (London: David Nutt, 1899); J. Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: The Language and Customs of Several Tribes in the Western District of Victoria* (1881, Canberra, fac. ed. AIATSIS, 1981); A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of the South-east Australia*, (London: Macmillan & Co. 1904); It should be noted that the latter publication summarises earlier research published in Lorimer Fison and A. W. Howitt, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (Melbourne, George Robertson 1880), D. J. Mulvaney, "The Australian Aborigines 1606-1929: Opinion and Fieldwork," In *Through White Eyes*, (eds.), Susan Johnson and Stuart Macintyre (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp. 1-44, pp. 37-41.

<sup>55</sup> For a critique of the 'culture of poverty' approach see Langton, "Urbanizing Aborigines," pp. 16-22.

<sup>56</sup> Marie Reay, "A Half-Caste Aboriginal Community in North-Western New South Wales," *Oceania*, Vol. 15, No. 4, March 1945, pp. 294-323; Marie Reay "Native Thought in Rural New South Wales," *Oceania*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Dec 1949, pp. 89-118; Jeremy Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community in the Pastoral West of New South Wales," M.A. Thesis, ANU, 1958; Jeremy Beckett, "Marginal Men: A Study of Two Half Caste Aborigines," *Oceania*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1958, pp. 91-108; Jeremy Beckett, "The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards," *Quadrant*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1965, pp. 38-43; Jeremy Beckett, "George Dutton's Country: Portrait of an Aboriginal Drover," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1978, pp. 2-31; Dianne Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin: Regional Affiliation and Group Identity among Aboriginal Migrants in Melbourne," Ph.D Thesis. ANU 1963; Aldo Massola, *The Aborigines of South-Eastern Australia as They Were* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1971).

<sup>57</sup> This account is based upon Nicolas Peterson, " 'Studying Man and Man's Nature': The History of the Institutionalisation of Aboriginal Anthropology," *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 2, 1990, pp. 3-19.

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a practical role as a training for Australia's colonial administration in New Guinea. When interest in Aboriginal studies resumed in the 1960s, it remained driven by two long-held assumptions: that Aboriginal culture was doomed to extinction but that it deserved to be studied as a unique insight into the human condition. Hence, a preference emerged for authoritative, normative accounts of Aboriginal culture rather than studies which addressed the rapid transformations in Aboriginal society.

The apparent gap confronted in the history of south eastern Aboriginal art correlates with discriminatory legislation enacted against Aborigines, first in Victoria, then in neighbouring states.<sup>58</sup> During the nineteenth century, Aborigines were protected on reserves and missions on the evolutionist assumption that they represented a 'Stone Age' people doomed to extinction. With the rising number of 'half-castes', discriminatory legislation was enacted aimed at the absorption and assimilation of Aborigines into mainstream Australian society: 'full-bloods' continued to reside on reserves but 'half-castes' were excluded. Increasingly, government agencies intervened in Aborigine's personal lives—as when children were removed from their families and placed in care. Many Aborigines were forced to move as missions and reserves closed: Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) in 1908, Gayfield in 1910, Lake Condah in 1919, and Coranderrk in 1924 until, by 1927, Lake Tyers was the sole remaining Victorian Station. (Fig 3) By the late 1930s, many Aborigines walked off the remaining reserves at Cummeragunga and Lake Tyers to join the fringe camps outside country towns or move to Melbourne. Simultaneously, assimilation policies implemented between 1939 and 1963, expected Aborigines to adopt the ideas and values of White

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<sup>58</sup> I refer here to the 1886 amendment to the earlier 1869 Aborigines Act. Further Acts were passed in 1890, 1910, 1915, 1928 which were not repealed until 1957. Similar legislation was implemented by New South Wales in the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, amended in 1915 and 1918 and the Exemption Act of 1942.

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Australians. South eastern Aboriginal art arises out of these material circumstances and expresses the conditions of historical struggle in which Aboriginal lived.

Recent anthropological research suggests many more similarities exist than were formerly supposed between the initiatives and adjustments implemented by Aborigines throughout Australia in their response to colonialism. The work of Barry Morris among the Dhan-Gadi northern New South Wales, Gaynor Macdonald with the Wiradjuri and Philip Clarke among the Ngarrindjeri at Raukkan (Point McLeay), (Figs 2 & 3) show that south eastern Aborigines—like their counterparts in remote communities—have a world-view concerned with maintaining relationships with kin and land, their autonomy and an exchange modality: values which resist assimilation and incorporation into a capitalist economy.<sup>59</sup> Of primary concern in this study is how Aborigines express these values in the production and exchange of art. If, as Barwick and Basil Sansom further demonstrate, these values continue to be maintained in urban-based communities, then what changes have occurred in this process?<sup>60</sup> To what extent do structural differences between rural regions and the city influence the style, content and techniques which artists employ? Are there, in fact, identifiable regional styles apparent in the south east such as those found in remote communities?

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<sup>59</sup> Barry Morris, "Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence: The Dhan-Gadi of New South Wales and the Protection of the State," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2, 1985, pp. 87-115; Gaynor Macdonald, "The Koori Way: The Dynamics of Cultural Distinctiveness in Settled Australia," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1986; Philip A. Clarke, "Aboriginal Use of Space in the Lower Murray, South Australia," *COMA Bulletin*, 1993 (forthcoming), cf. the evidence for remote communities in J. C. Altman, *Hunter-gatherers Today An Aboriginal Economy in Northern Australia* (Canberra; Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987); John von Sturmer, "A Critique of the Fox Report," In *Aborigines and Uranium* (ed.), Colin Tatz (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1984), pp. 21-103.

<sup>60</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin; Basil Sansom, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal Fringe Dwellers in Darwin* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980).

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Issues of style, content and technique are germane to this debate and critical to an understanding of how south eastern Aboriginal art encodes meaning. Carol Cooper's study of nineteenth-century south eastern Aboriginal art established the breadth and wealth of artistic imagery in the south east at contact. Her evidence revealed that

the mobiliary art of the southeast (i.e. art on artefacts as opposed to that which was painted or engraved on to cave walls) had greater figurative content than all similar art from other style areas in Australia. It also had the greatest range of non-figurative motifs and total designs.<sup>61</sup>

Cooper, together with Howard Morphy, Luke Taylor and Gary Catalano warns that the geometric and figurative elements in Aboriginal art are not equivalent to Western concepts of abstraction and representation.<sup>62</sup> Rather they argue that art in small-scale societies produces a multiplicity of meanings when geometric and figurative elements come together in combination. Acknowledging these stylistic parallels allows art in the south east to be set against existing evidence from remote communities.

To retrieve continuity for south eastern art, processes of production, exchange and response need to be situated within a colonial context. In the past, Cooper points out, discourses of primitivism took Aboriginal incorporations from the majority culture as emblematic of cultural disintegration and justification for their exclusion from collections.<sup>63</sup> Today, this historical response can be weighed against the general trend toward realism evident in the art of third world ethnic minorities. Writing from an African perspective, Bennetta Jules-Rosette and Susan Vogel maintain that realism is a dynamic

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<sup>61</sup> Carol Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," In *Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors' Council, 1981), pp. 28-41, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 33; Howard Morphy, "What Circles Look Like," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, April 1980, pp. 17-36; Luke Taylor, Book Review of *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, In *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 1, 1990, pp. 41-46, p. 42; Gary Catalano, "Changing Responses to Aboriginal Art," *Meanjin*, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 1977, pp. 572-581, p. 576-577.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 38.

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tactic initiated by indigenous people to access new resources that address a contemporary reality and mediate on their behalf.<sup>64</sup> Eric Michaels' study of the use of television by the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, Central Australia established a local paradigm for indigenous appropriation. His research revealed that the Warlpiri selectively used the media and transformed it according to their own, culturally distinctive values.<sup>65</sup> And, in the process of such adjustment movements, it has been argued, cultural change is effected.<sup>66</sup>

In his study of cultural change in the Pacific Nicholas Thomas contrasts indigenous and European appropriation to show that, whereas the West views negatively indigenous appropriation and resistance to the technologies, objects, and imagery of the West, Europeans gain cultural capital from their acquisitions.<sup>67</sup> In answer, he points to the need to historicise appropriation as a means of understanding the different social and political agendas that may drive interest in other cultures. In an Australian context, white artists since early contact have responded to an indigenous presence through depictions of Aborigines: more recently, with appropriations of Aboriginal motifs. Formerly, both practices were viewed appreciatively: today representation and appropriation are widely criticised as evidence of domination and cultural colonialism.<sup>68</sup> This study tests these assumptions against the historical evidence from a specific instance of extended interaction between Lake Tyers

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<sup>64</sup> Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*, Topics in Contemporary Semiotics, Series Editors: Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), pp. 154-7; Susan Vogel, "Introduction: Digesting the West," in *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1991), pp. 14-31, pp. 21-25.

<sup>65</sup> Eric Michaels, *For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu*, Art & Criticism, Monograph series, Vol. 3 (Sydney: Artspace, 1987).

<sup>66</sup> Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections, Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 4, 7; Luke Taylor, "The Aesthetics of Toas: A Cross-cultural Conundrum," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No 1, 1988, pp. 86-99,

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, Chs. 3 & 4.

<sup>68</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972, London, BBC 1984), p. 96; Recent responses to the issue of appropriation emerge in Ann Stephen, "Margaret Preston's Second Coming," *Art Network*, No. 2, 1980, pp. 14-15.

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Aborigines and the artist, Percy Leason. This evidence demonstrates that discourses of primitivism are mutable and, that Aborigines were, in some cases, able to influence the terms on which their portraits were painted and the subsequent critical response. A re-consideration of appropriation distinguishes earlier concepts from the present where there is a growing sensitivity to Aboriginal copyright.<sup>69</sup> Once again the evidence suggests that Aborigines viewed appropriation as more constructive than the racist indifference which generally prevailed.

At several points in the thesis the evidence from the Hermannsburg School of watercolourists serves as a paradigm.<sup>70</sup> (Fig. 1) Although there are differences between the remote situation of the Aranda community and south eastern Aborigines, my earlier research demonstrated the importance of the collaboration between Albert Namatjira, the founder of the school, and the artist, Rex Battarbee.<sup>71</sup> In the past, such collaborations have been criticised as evidence of exploitation and domination but they can also be seen to represent "adventurous foray[s] into new ground."<sup>72</sup> At the time, Namatjira's appropriations from a Western landscape tradition were largely misunderstood: applauded and criticised as evidence of his assimilation and loss of tribal traditions. In the critical response to the School, it is apparent that professionals framed Aboriginal art according to certain hierarchical criteria: art critics bemoaned the loss of tribal traditions whilst links between the School and the tourist industry suggested cultural disintegration. The insights

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<sup>69</sup> For a contemporary interpretation of the Aboriginal viewpoint on appropriation see Stephen Gray, "Aboriginal Designs and Copyright: Can the Australian Common Law Expand to Meet Aboriginal Demands?" *Copyright Reporter: Journal of the Copyright Society of Australia*, Vol. 9, No. 4, December 1991, pp. 8-20.

<sup>70</sup> This school of painting emerged in the 1930s among Western Aranda living at the Hermannsburg Mission 1877-1891 and 1894-1982 (later Ntaria).

<sup>71</sup> Sylvia Kleinert, "The Critical Reaction to the Hermannsburg School," In *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia* (eds.), Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw (Melbourne: William Heinemann, Australia, 1992), pp. 217-247.

<sup>72</sup> Philip Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight: the Mutability of Ethnographic Objects," *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 59-71, p. 59.

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offered through these re-evaluations suggest the tourist art produced at Lake Tyers and 'Aboriginal Enterprises,' the outlet for Aboriginal art and craft established at Belgrave, in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, (Fig. 3) by Bill Onus, would be misrepresented as kitsch. In Namatjira's own lifetime, the appreciative response to these creative initiatives came from a non-professional audience. Whilst professionals and institutions disregarded these contemporary developments, amateurs such as the businessman, J. K. Moir, founder of the Bread and Cheese Club (a mens' literary club in Melbourne), the public servant and writer, Robert Croll and writer and journalist, Charles Barrett, acted as facilitators who contributed to the recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal art.<sup>73</sup>

In the West, the locus of power and knowledge lies with those artists, curators, dealers and critics who operate as a collaborating network of professionals. They implement the distinctions of taste and artistic hierarchies which influence the patterns of inclusion and exclusion evident in the exhibition and collection policies of institutions. South eastern Aboriginal art could be excluded from official and institutional recognition because, as Bourdieu shows, the art world has only limited autonomy within the broader field of social, historical and economic relations to which it is structurally related.<sup>74</sup> The history of the changing perception to Aboriginal art demonstrates that evolutionist theories and modernist aesthetics played a critical role in determining value judgements.<sup>75</sup> This study extends our understanding in this area by providing an analysis of the various primitivisms evident in the 1929

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Barrett, "Tommy McRae: Aboriginal Artist," *Victorian Naturalist*, Vol. 52, Sept 1935, pp. 86-88; Charles Barrett and Robert Croll, *Art of the Australian Aboriginal* (Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1943); Charles Mountford, *The Art of Albert Namatjira* (1944, Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1949).

<sup>74</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," *Poetics*, 12, Nos. 4-5, Nov. 1983, pp. 311-355, p. 319.

<sup>75</sup> Philip Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History," In *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, (ed.), P. Sutton (Ringwood, Vic: Viking, 1988), pp. 143-179.

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exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*. In addition, Appendix 2.1 documents the growing popular interest in Aboriginal art which occurred outside official and institutional frameworks. Luke Taylor explains this response by arguing that it is the points of congruity which the majority culture locate between their own social, natural and cultural experiences and an Aboriginal aesthetic which is the initial catalyst that arouses interest in the cultural values espoused by Aborigines. Thus "Aboriginal art has the subversive effect of slipping Aboriginal values past an otherwise staunch opposition to mainstream Aboriginal culture."<sup>76</sup>

The marginalisation of south eastern Aboriginal art is also considered in the context of prevailing artistic hierarchies which privilege the fine arts over the crafts. The status and recognition given to urban Aboriginal art suggests that a structural relationship operates between institutional, artistic and spatial hierarchies. Indeed Néstor Canclini's international study found indigenous craft relegated to a more subsidiary role through an association with the country whilst greater status accrued to art in city galleries.<sup>77</sup> Canclini's findings suggest that Aboriginal craft is marginalised through a combination of factors: an association with evolutionary paradigms and a hunter-gatherer lifestyle taken as anachronistic in the modern world coupled with the assumption that craft is skilful but not creative. The question is raised, Does indigenous craft tend to reify negative stereotypes? By focusing equally on Aboriginal art and craft produced in rural and urban locations, this thesis explores these various hierarchies to show that the production of artefacts and crafts is not restricted to the country, nor are artists in rural communities in some way disconnected from the experience of modernity. Indeed, crafts emerge as a key means by which Aboriginal communities have maintained

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<sup>76</sup> Taylor, "The Aesthetics of Toas," pp. 88-89.

<sup>77</sup> Néstor García Canclini, "Crafts and Cultural Identity," *Cultures*, 6, 1979, pp. 83-95.

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their distinctive identity and succeeded in communicating these values to White Australians.

Other related research shows that ambiguity surrounds the idea of 'decoration.'<sup>78</sup> In Western art, ornament is differentiated from beauty: associated instead with the superficial and adjunctive. Denied status within the art world, ornament is associated with the crafts, the domestic sphere of women and marginalised minorities. In particular, the term indicated a loss of authenticity and integrity when applied to contemporary Aboriginal art. This nexus suggests that Aboriginal women's craft would be doubly marginalised as a conflation of two bounded oppositions within European intellectual traditions. My concern here is not with the complicated issue of women's role in Aboriginal society, but with recuperating a sense of women's contribution to transformations in Aboriginal society.<sup>79</sup>

### **Methodology**

This study is in no way intended to be all encompassing. Given the significant absence which surrounds south eastern Aboriginal art and existing essentialist stereotypes of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art, the aim has been to establish the cultural continuity and diversity of Aboriginal art in this region. Minority histories do not exist ready-made; rather they are gradually constructed and have to be achieved through a gradual process of interaction and adjustment.<sup>80</sup> Until now, the history of south eastern art has been almost invisible; it cannot be reconstructed as a continuous seamless

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<sup>78</sup> Sylvia Kleinert, "Deconstructing 'The Decorative': A Study of the Impact of Euro-American Artistic Traditions on the Reception to Aboriginal Arts and Crafts," in *Crafts in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives* (ed.), Noris Ioannou (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), pp. 115-130.

<sup>79</sup> For an overview of these debates see Jan Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges: Aboriginal Women and the Politics of Feminism," *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 120-131.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Muecke, "Lonely Representations: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies," in *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 32-44, p. 41.

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narrative. The distinctive structure adopted here expresses the plurality of heterogeneous viewpoints which characterise the colonial experience of Aborigines in settled Australia. At many points, these experiences overlap to reaffirm the evidence of Aborigines' continuous historical struggle as it was implemented through strategies of resistance, accommodation and collaboration. Thus chapters focus on specific instances when inclusion and exclusion occurred, when Aborigines and non-Aborigines came into interaction in the process of cultural production and when individuals within communities responded to the opportunities and restrictions presented by particular circumstances to produce art which communicated with the majority culture.

Whereas formerly, Aborigines were spoken for and rendered mute by colonial discourse they now claim the right to speak on their own behalf, write their own histories, and represent themselves. Indeed many consider any writing by non-Aborigines as a form of exploitation; such exclusivism, however, may actually misunderstand the idiom of otherness and polarise positions of difference.<sup>81</sup> Inevitably my knowledge is partial and provisional, a translation from my own experience which brings forward "vicariously and distantly what others have always known."<sup>82</sup> This study therefore proceeds circumspectly not claiming to speak for Aborigines, rather, within the contested politics of representation, to acknowledge a speaking position as a non-Aborigine<sup>83</sup> I write to recover the continuous history of south eastern art from the position of obscurity to which it has been relegated.

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<sup>81</sup> Here I follow Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 1, Fall 1985, pp. 89-107, p. 91; Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, p. 9; Attwood, "Introduction," *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>82</sup> Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774-1880* (Carlton, Vic. Melbourne University Press, 1980), p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Jan Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges," pp. 130-131.

One of the more sensitive issues raised by this study is the naming of Aborigines—a problem which reflects the difficulties that discourses confront in retrieving identity. For some time now, some south eastern Aborigines have asked to be called by their preferred name of Koori(es)—a term which differentiates Aborigines in remote communities from those living in settled Australia. A further point is that the term Koorie is Aboriginal in origin, whereas Aborigine is European.<sup>84</sup> However, during research, it became clear that south eastern Aborigines are not agreed on any single nomenclature: some rural communities perceive of themselves and wish to be called 'blackfellows' whilst others prefer to identify themselves through their local linguistic or tribal names. To acknowledge these differentiated identities, this study generally refers to south east people as Aborigines: where possible, I also identify individuals by their tribal or community affiliations. My use of the terms 'full blood' and 'half-caste' does not, of course, imply an acquiescence to these cultural constructions of race. These terms have been retained here to maintain historical accuracy and to indicate the primary argument underlying the study: that the apparent hiatus in the history of south eastern Aboriginal art correlates with discriminatory legislation aimed at rendering Aborigines invisible.

This study draws upon the archives of government departments which sought to administer Aborigines' daily lives, and those of institutions such as the Museum of Victoria and National Gallery of Victoria that expressed and implemented hierarchies of knowledge. Other sources reveal the extent and diversity of the co-operative and collaborative relations between Aborigines and mainstream Australians that these official sources usually elide. Those non-Aboriginal colleagues, patrons, artists, dealers, and entrepreneurs who

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<sup>84</sup> Richard Broome, "Why Use Koori?," *Koori History: Sources for Aboriginal Studies in the State Library of Victoria*, Vol 2, No. 43, Autumn 1989, p. 5.

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interacted with Aborigines also collected their art and documented past events. These archives represent an index of cross-cultural interaction.

Aborigines remain the primary source for this history. To minimise any incursion into Aboriginal communities, I restricted my contact to three distinct geographic areas: the Kurnai communities in Gippsland, the Bagundji at Mildura, the Kulin/Wiradjuri at Swan Hill and Yorta Yorta at Echuca along the Murray River and Aborigines in Melbourne. Research followed a circular process: after gaining permission to proceed with this project from Jim Berg of the Koorie Heritage Trust, I made contact with each community. Once I had documented the art objects produced by these communities—usually located in private collections—these photographs became a catalyst for oral history.

A disagreement exists amongst scholars as to the worth of oral histories. Whilst Bain Attwood and Thomas point out that oral informants inevitably interpret the past from a contemporary viewpoint, Barwick, Heather Goodall and Bruce Shaw argue oral history is important not for "the facticity of historical accounts, but rather with the way the experience of past events, incidents and circumstances are signified culturally and socially."<sup>85</sup> Oral history reveals the historical consciousness of individuals. The art objects I have researched are part of public discourse, and with a few individual exceptions, Aborigines welcomed the research as giving recognition to individual artists from their communities. Where possible, photographs of family members and the art they have produced have been deposited with individuals in these communities.

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<sup>85</sup> Bain Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* (St Leonard's, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 146-147; Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, p. 88; cf. Dianne Barwick, "Writing Aboriginal History: Comments on a Book and its Reviewers," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 4 No. 2, 1981, 74-86; Heather Goodall, "Aboriginal History and the Politics of Information Control," *Oral History Association of Australia*, No. 9, 1987, pp. 17-33; My quotation is drawn from Bruce Shaw, "Making Histories/Living History," *Writing Australian Culture, Social Analysis*, (ed.), Julie Marcus, Vol. 27, 1990, pp. 83-92, p. 83.

The focus is on the geographic region of the south-east rather than the political state of Victoria. (Fig. 1) Replacing a political boundary with a geographic region provided the flexibility to account for the patterns of interaction between Aboriginal communities: one from Lake Tyers to Wallaga Lake and La Perouse in Sydney, another from Raukkan (Point McLeay) in South Australia to various communities in western Victoria and the diaspora in the late 1930s from fringe camps and reserves in New South Wales and Victoria to Melbourne. To a significant extent, regional differences evident in south eastern Aboriginal art reflect the patterns of exchange between clan and language groups at contact.<sup>86</sup> In some instances, geographical features continue to influence south eastern art. Aborigines living in the Murray-Darling basin for instance, utilised its rich riverine environment as an economic resource, as a means of communication, as a strategy of resistance to evade repressive legislation and as a source of imagery redolent with memories of a past way of life. Doubtless parallels exist between the evidence brought forward in this study and the experience of Aborigines in other states—historical circumstances and patterns of urbanisation are replicated elsewhere—nevertheless, the history of Aboriginal art in the south east is unique, influenced by particular physical, political, social, and economic factors.

The time frame chosen for this study is significant because it fits between other, well-researched periods and it is historically important as a demonstration of a dynamic Aboriginal presence for the south east. A cluster of events mark either end of this period. The deaths of Barak and McRae at the turn of the century marked a moment of change. Thereafter, discriminatory

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<sup>86</sup> Isabel McBryde, "Exchange in South Eastern Australia: An Ethnohistorical Perspective," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, 1984, pp. 132-153, see especially Fig. 1.

legislation aimed at the absorption of Aborigines into the majority culture influenced the status given to south eastern Aborigines and their art. At the other end of the continuum, a cluster of events suggested a final terminating date of 1980: the National Referendum of 1967 that gave Aborigines full citizenship and the Commonwealth the power to legislate on their behalf, the Bun wurrung (Kulin) land rights claim mounted by Lin Onus at Belgrave in 1971 and the premature death of Ronald Bull in 1979.

### **Thesis outline**

Chapter 2 examines the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* as a paradigmatic response to Aboriginal art. Although evolutionism continued to retard recognition for Aboriginal art, a populist approach sited this exhibition within an art world context. The exhibition gave recognition to a nineteenth-century heritage and art from remote communities however it excluded evidence of a contemporary and local Aboriginal presence. Distinctions of taste placed value upon unique art objects from the previous century: the Thomas Bungaleen memorial, the bark drawing from Lake Tyrrell and the drawings of William Barak and Tommy McRae; but essentialist constructions denied recognition for the drawings of Sydney McRae, Tommy's grandson whose incorporations from the modern world were interpreted as a sign of cultural disintegration. The exhibition stimulated appropriations by many non-Aboriginal artists including Percy Leason, Frances Derham and Allan Lowe.

Chapter 3 examines Percy Leason's response to the Victorian centenary of 1934. In that year Percy Leason painted a series of portraits of Lake Tyers Aborigines which he exhibited as *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*—a project motivated by a salvage paradigm. Critiques of representation suggest such depictions involve relationships of domination and exploitation, but in

this case, the evidence suggests otherwise. Leason's primitivism was more objective and sympathetic than many others in vogue at this time and in the process of painting the portraits, he was forced to adjust his framework to the wishes of Aborigines who controlled the terms on which they would be depicted. At the time, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* received a poor reception, critically evaluated as 'anthropology and not art': today, these individual portraits are highly valued by Aborigines as part of a local Aboriginal heritage.

In chapter 4, inmates of Lake Tyers are shown to have existed in a ration economy which they supplemented with income earned from concerts, displays and the sale of artefacts to tourists. As a key icon in the construction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity, boomerangs dominate this cultural production. Kurnai articulated their cultural identity through totemic symbols and they situated themselves within the 'imagined communities' of the nation state through emblems of national identity and representations of the landscape. Cross-cultural interaction of this nature has been interpreted both constructively and pessimistically, but at Lake Tyers, many Aborigines apparently welcomed this interaction with tourists, as they controlled the terms on which the interaction took place and exploited the fascination of non-Aborigines with their culture. Eventually the Board for the Protection of Aborigines curtailed tourism at Tyers as a disruptive element which hindered assimilation.

Chapter 5 considers the baskets, string bags, feather flowers, dressmaking and embroidery produced by Aboriginal women in the south east. For a variety of reasons this cultural production has been overlooked but it testifies to the political and social transformations which took place within Aboriginal

society. In a range of textile production women maintained their Aboriginal values and widened their social repertoire by adapting and diversifying their existing skills to a new domestic environment. They continued to work in collaboration with men and in the wedding of Suzy Parker and George Patten in Melbourne in 1940 a new public Aboriginality emerges. Although an ambiguous relationship is held to exist between women, decoration and the domestic space, here, and elsewhere in the thesis, Aboriginal women emerge as equally resourceful and creative in their response to the constraints and opportunities created by their gender.

Chapter 6 examines the carved stock whip handles, walking sticks and emu eggs produced by Aboriginal artists from the relatively isolated but resource rich area of the Murray river region. Through their association with the pastoral industry, Aborigines adapted folk art traditions to their existing skills and knowledge in the production of artefacts. Distinct stylistic differences emerge between Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists as skills and knowledge are transmitted through certain families. In their interaction with private patrons, Harry and Gordon Mitchell, Joe and Hilton Walsh and Sam and Esther Kirby syncretise images from a past Aboriginal lifestyle, with contemporary symbols of friendship and national identity.

In the late 1930s an increasing number of Aborigines migrated to Melbourne. After a decade of political activism, Bill Onus used cultural activities to gain status and equality for Aborigines. His initiatives are discussed in chapter 7. Onus first drew upon an Aboriginal heritage of displays and concerts to stage several theatrical events, then in the 1950s, he opened 'Aboriginal Enterprises,' an outlet for Aboriginal art and crafts in Belgrave which became a centre for regional and international tourism. Through his entrepreneurial

skills Onus provided Melbourne Aborigines with a social centre, employment and training and a heightened sense of their Aboriginality. Aborigines and non-Aborigines collaborated in this venture, and Onus encouraged the appropriation of Aboriginal motifs to regain status and authenticity for south eastern Aborigines.

Chapter 8 considers an emerging urban Aboriginal from another perspective—the group of painters centred around the Wiradjuri artist Ronald Bull, who, with Albert Namatjira and Revel Cooper, influenced Lin Onus. These artists renegotiated relationships with their regional domains by reconceptualising their historical reality and incorporating from the landscape traditions of the majority culture. The degree to which artists were able to gain access to the skills and knowledge and professional infrastructures of the art industry is evaluated through the hierarchies of power and knowledge within the art world. Lin Onus emerges from this formative set of influences to initiate a new contemporary Aboriginal expression.

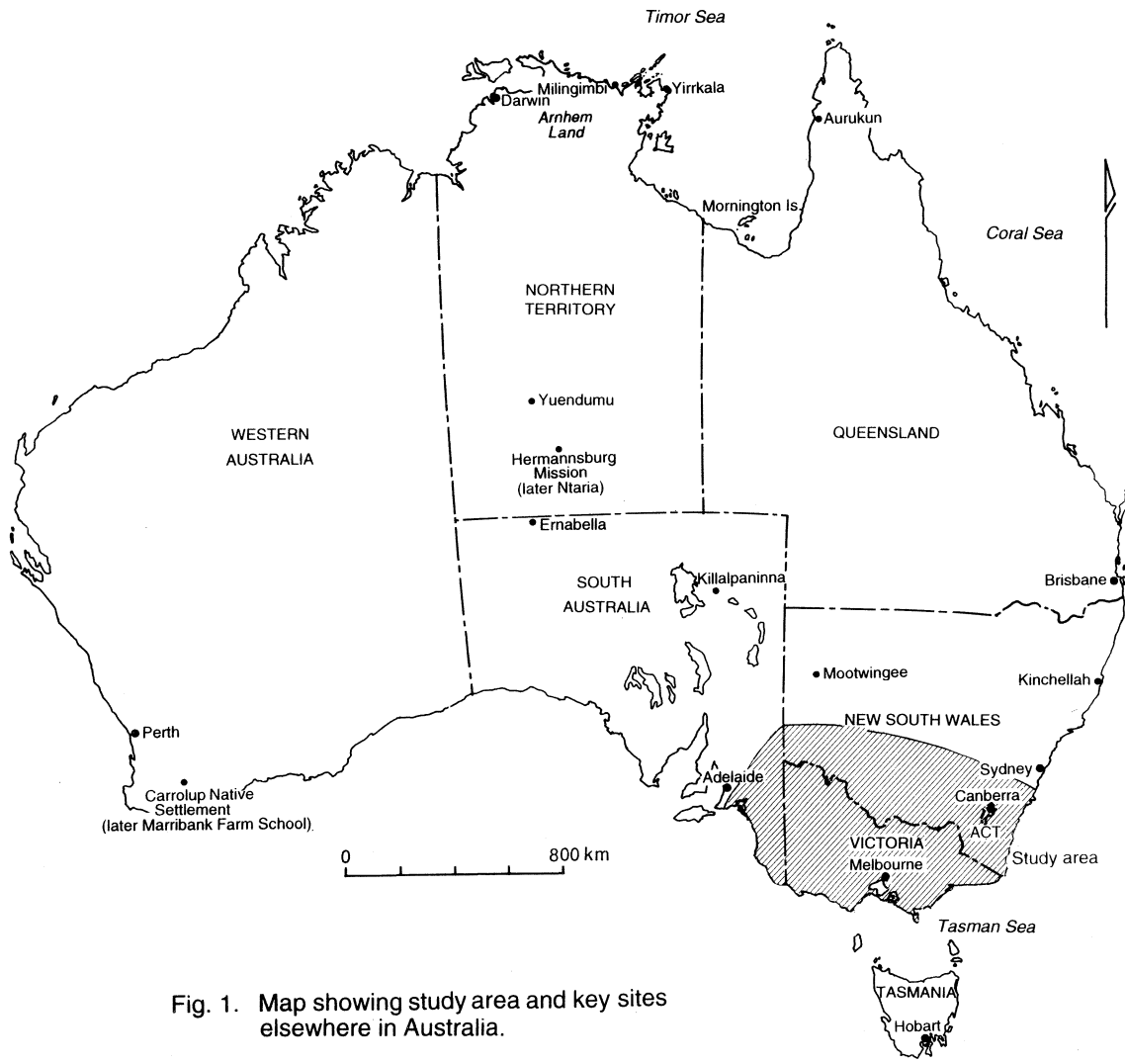
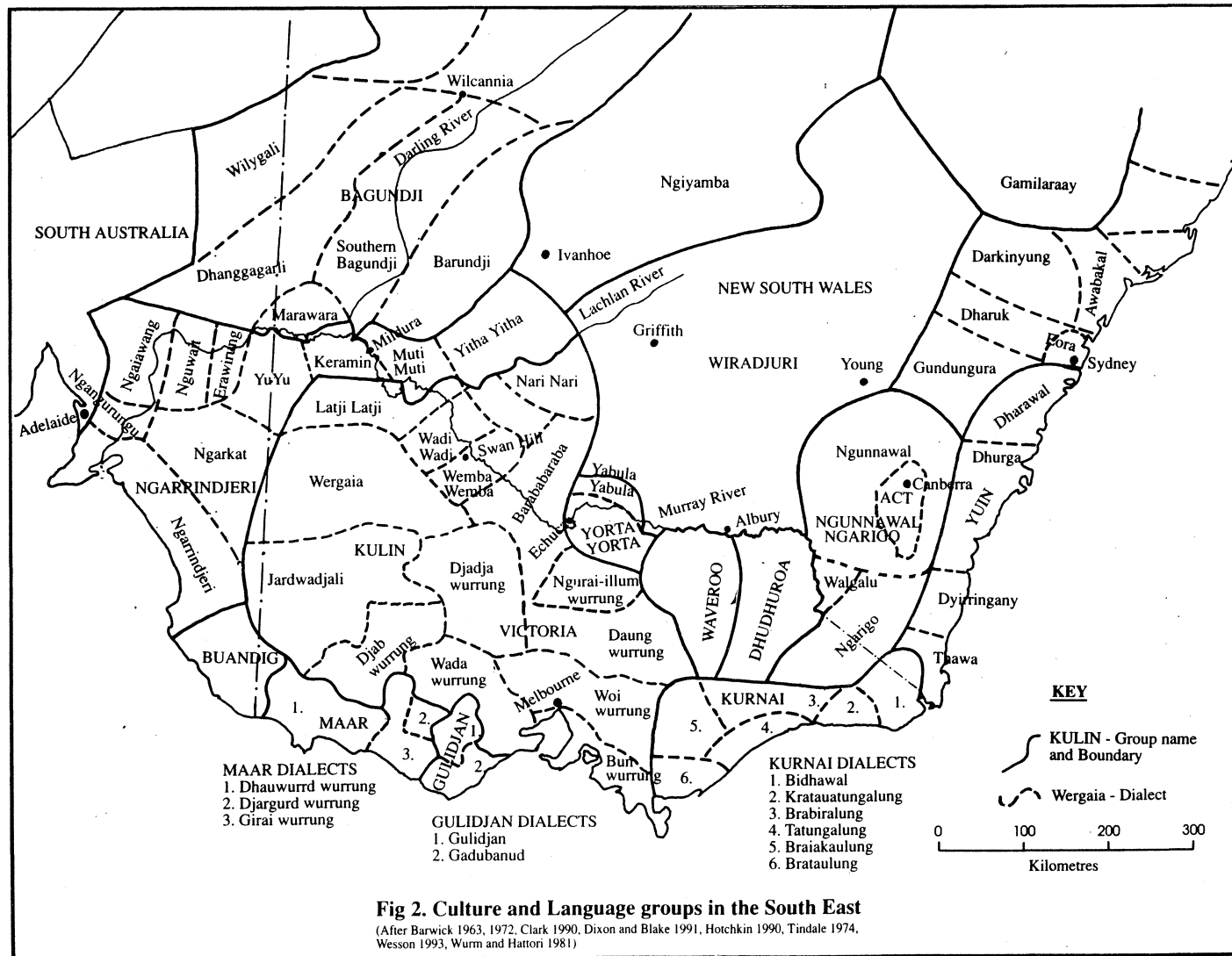


Fig. 1. Map showing study area and key sites elsewhere in Australia.





## **2. A paradigmatic response: the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art***

### **i Introduction**

The role played by museums and galleries in the appropriation, collection and display of indigenous art has been widely criticised as a form of cultural imperialism. This chapter tests these general assertions against the material evidence from a specific instance of institutional practice: the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. The structure of this exhibition and the commentary it generated reveals that a variety of distorting and selective primitivisms indeed controlled representations of Aboriginality and conflated Aboriginal art temporally and spatially so that it provided an authentic and pristine past for the settler colony. In privileging art from Victoria's past and art from remote communities, a dynamic local Aboriginal presence was denied—an exclusion which expressed and reinforced government policies of absorption and dispersal. Aborigines, however, were able to exploit the exhibition to gain recognition for their culture; the exhibition generated widespread interest in Aboriginal art and it acted as the catalyst for further appropriations.

The 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* represents a critical moment in the changing response to Aboriginal art. Not since the South Australian Museum staged *The Dawn of Art* some forty years previously, had a major exhibition been devoted to Aboriginal art in Australia. The event was, moreover, a relatively isolated phenomenon. Institutional interest in the exhibition of Aboriginal did not re-surface until the 1940s with a spate of national and international exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Appreciation for Aboriginal art thus lagged well behind European responses to 'primitive art' where, by the turn of the century, ethnographic collections of African and Pacific art generated

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the *Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art and its Application* Organized by the Australian Museum, Sydney, 11-22 August, 1941; *Art of Australia 1788-1941, An Exhibition of Australian Art Held in the United States of America and the Dominion of Canada Under the Auspices of the Carnegie Corporation* (ed.), Sydney Ure Smith, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941) and *Primitive Art Exhibition*, Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, Swanston Street Melbourne, May 1943.

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widespread admiration. These gaps and delays in the collection and exhibition of Aboriginal art have been attributed to theories of social evolution.<sup>2</sup> Evolutionism admired Aboriginal culture as a primitive prototype of human existence and the assumption was made that Aborigines were doomed to extinction. Hence a salvage paradigm motivated the collection of material culture: each generation believed it was the last to be given the opportunity to preserve authentic information on Aborigines for the sake of posterity. But implicit in the belief that Aborigines were one of the most primitive of races went the assumption of mental inferiority. In the nineteenth century, recognition for an Aboriginal artistic heritage was withheld and the evidence dismissed or re-attributed to other cultures.<sup>3</sup> Evolutionism caused Aboriginal art to be marketed differently delaying recognition for Aboriginal bark paintings until after the Second World War. If Aborigines had no fine art traditions, it was argued, then developments in this arena represented "a bastardised product of European contact."<sup>4</sup> Evolutionary tenets were not set to one side until the *Primitive Art Exhibition* of 1943 when Aboriginal art was displayed alongside the art of Africa, the Pacific, America and Asia.

Evolutionism therefore remained a pervasive force which continued to influence judgements made about Aboriginal art at various levels of understanding, professional and amateur. By the 1930s, the British School of functionalism led by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, the foundation professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney, rejected evolutionary paradigms as "no longer academically respectable."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless earlier evidence

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art," pp. 143-179; 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.

<sup>3</sup> D. J. Mulvaney, "Through White Eyes," pp. 32-34.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Morphy, "Aboriginal Fine Art—Creation of Audiences and the Marketing of Art," In *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market* (eds.), P. Loveday and P. Cooke (Darwin: The Australian National University North Australia Research Unit, 1983), pp. 37-43, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, " 'Studying Man and Man's Nature', " p. 4. The first Chair of Anthropology was established at the University of Sydney in 1925.

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revealed that Australian anthropology was driven by regional imperatives which overlooked the study of contemporary developments in Aboriginal art. Similarly, Australian modernism developed along particular regional trajectories where a late, but emergent interest in Aboriginal art—led by the modernist Margaret Preston—had to negotiate the countervailing claims of centre/periphery relationships and the issue of indigenous identity within a settler colony context.<sup>6</sup> The number of exhibitions in Victoria devoted to Aboriginal art between 1900 and 1980 indicate a growing popular interest. (Appendix 2.1) The artefacts, craft and art chosen for display in different contexts and the critical response they generate indicates the way developments in anthropology, the art world and a growing humanitarian concern for the self-determination of indigenous people produced points of congruity which overlapped to gradually change perceptions toward Aboriginal art. Whilst some exhibitions drew upon the expertise of curators associated with the Museum of Victoria, the majority occurred outside institutional and professional frameworks. Various interest groups stage the exhibitions, acting as cultural brokers in the process of cross-cultural interaction: amateur clubs, charities, cultural festivals, councils for adult education, universities, missions, art educators and dealers.

Indeed, amateurs, rather than professionals, were the driving force behind the 1929 exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*. Impetus for the exhibition came from a number of different sources. The exhibition was one of several initiatives instigated by the Acting Chairman of the Museum Committee, Senator R. D. Elliott, an energetic businessman who was determined to recuperate flagging public interest in the Museum.<sup>7</sup> Limited funding in the

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview on Preston see Roger Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*, (Canberra: ANG, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> R. T. M. Pescott, *Collections of a Century; The History of the First Hundred Years of the National Museum of Victoria* (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1954), pp. 127-131. Elliott also revived public lectures, the publication of the Museum *Memoirs* and he initiated new displays.

1920s had restricted development of the Museum and these financial problems were exacerbated by the lack of interest displayed by Baldwin Spencer, Honorary Director of the Museum between 1899 and 1928. Prior to his resignation in August 1928, Spencer was engrossed in the publication of *The Arunta* in 1927 and *Wanderings in Wild Australia* in 1928.<sup>8</sup> Essays for the publication associated with the exhibition came from Alfred Stephen Kenyon (1867-1943) an engineer, ethnologist, historian, and founding member of the Anthropological Society of Victoria and Charles Barrett (1879-1958), a naturalist and journalist.<sup>9</sup> Both men were members of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria which initially proposed the exhibition.<sup>10</sup>

Mounted as a co-operative venture by the Public Library, Museum and National Gallery of Victoria,<sup>11</sup> *Australian Aboriginal Art* did not seek to be scientific or technical, rather its avowed aim was to stimulate "a public interest in the habits and customs of Australian Aboriginals"—a rhetoric which appealed to an egalitarian ethos by suggesting that scientific knowledge was both accessible and pleasurable.<sup>12</sup> Significantly this more popular approach was strategically implemented by locating the exhibition in the Print Room of the National Gallery of Victoria.

The breadth of the exhibition generated widespread public interest. Planning for *Australian Aboriginal Art* included expeditions to rock art sites in the Grampians, (Gariwerd) Victoria and Mootwingee, New South Wales. (Figs. 1 & 3) The exhibition included photographs, drawings and tracings of rock art

<sup>8</sup> Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People*, 2 Vols. (London: Macmillan, 1927); Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 2 Vols. (London: Macmillan, 1928).

<sup>9</sup> The Anthropological Society of Victoria was formed in the same year as the exhibition, 1929.

<sup>10</sup> *Australian Aboriginal Art*, Preface, p. 4; cf Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art," p. 166 attributes the exhibition to the Bread and Cheese Club but the Club was not formed until 1938.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately this co-operative spirit did not continue. For the subsequent history see Judith Ryan, "A History of the Aboriginal Collection at the National Gallery of Victoria" *Gallery*, May 1990, pp. 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> *Australian Aboriginal Art*, 1929, Preface, pp. 4-5.

from these sites and a reproduction of the Glen Isla shelter in the Grampians. Two Wangkangurru men from Central Australia participated in the exhibition by making artefacts and other objects in front of this shelter. In addition to borrowing from interstate Museums, missions and private collectors, the Museum of Victoria drew upon its own rich collection of bark paintings, ceremonial objects and material culture from Central Australian and Northern Territory communities. Although artefacts dominated collections of south eastern art, other unique art objects were also represented: dendroglyphs, the Thomas Bungaleen headstone, the Lake Tyrrell bark drawing (Fig. 3) and drawings by Tommy McRae and William Barak. Public lectures from the anthropologists A. P. Elkin and George Aiston and the artist and art educator, Frances Derham further stimulated public interest.

## ii Popular evolutionism

Evolutionism goes some way toward explaining the predominance of artefacts in the exhibition.<sup>13</sup> During the nineteenth century, collections of material culture ordered in series from the simple to the complex were thought to objectify evolutionary paradigms. Thus in 1875, Lane-Fox (Pitt Rivers) incorporated the boomerang into diagrams that traced its progression from a simple stick to a complex, aerodynamic weapon.<sup>14</sup> South eastern artefacts were displayed at the International Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866, the R. E. Johns collection was sent to the 1878 Paris Exhibition, and in 1884, Pitt-Rivers donated his collection to Oxford University.<sup>15</sup> In Australian museums, a pragmatic and utilitarian concern with the technology of everyday life

<sup>13</sup> Howard Morphy, "Gaps in Collections and Spaces for Exhibition: Reflections on the Acceptance of Aboriginal 'Art' in Europe and Australia," *Aboriginal Art in the Public Eye, Art Monthly Australia Supplement*, Summer 1992/3, pp. 10-12, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Morphy, "The Original Australians and the Evolution of Anthropology," In *Australia in Oxford* (eds.), H. Morphy and E. Edwards, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum, 1988), pp. 48-61, fig. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Lesley McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality' in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Victoria: a Study of Material Culture in Historical Documents, Historical Photographs and Artefact Collections," B. Hons. Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1988, pp. 66-67; Morphy, "The Original Australians," p. 49.

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enhanced the influence of evolutionism. When Spencer transferred the Museum's Egyptian archaeological collection to the National Art Gallery in 1904, he effectively separated Aboriginal culture from the history of European civilisation to incorporate it within natural history taxonomies.<sup>16</sup>

Such collections of artefacts were not bodies of objective, factual data but expressions of primitivist ideologies which stereotyped Aborigines and distanced them from a contemporary colonial reality. The displays of anonymous artefacts seen by visitors at the 1929 exhibition sustained this distance. (Plate 1) Lesley McCall's research on institutional and private collections in Victoria in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries found that men's fighting and hunting weapons predominate—a bias which exaggerated the image of Aborigines as archetypal savages. Moreover such displays testified to indigenous assimilation and the effectiveness of those evangelical and government policies which demanded Aborigines' absorption into mainstream Australian society.<sup>17</sup> Existing constructions for Aboriginality as a pure, authentic and 'traditional' entity were sustained by a selective process of inclusion and exclusion. When the Museum of Victoria ceased collecting south eastern artefacts after the 1920s they excluded contemporary tourist artefacts produced at Lake Tyers and denied recognition for a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the south east.<sup>18</sup> Thus discourses of primitivism incorporating evolutionary theory apparently confirmed cultural constructions of race. In 1937, the Chairman of the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines, H. S. Bailey, reported to the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities that Victoria had no Aboriginal problem because most 'full bloods' had died out and 'half-castes' were assimilated.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Mulvaney, "Museums," *Australian Cultural History*, No. 2, 1982/3, pp. 38-45. p. 40-43 .

<sup>17</sup> McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 27, 43-44, 57-8, 68, 83-90.

<sup>18</sup> McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 27, 38, 42, 57, 88-89, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia*, Aboriginal Policy and Practice, Vol. 2, Aborigines in Society 6 (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1971), p. 25.

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These disjunctions and ambiguities in the response to Aboriginal artefacts indicate the dilemmas present in a colonial reality. Unlike European primitivism located in the imperial centres, primitivism in settler colonies is intimately connected with the political relationships between colonisers and colonised.

The link established between evolutionary paradigms and material culture highlights the apparent distinctions between the ethnographic context of the museum and the art world. Given the emphasis the art world places on individual creativity, the assumption has been made that it was art galleries rather than museums that first recognised Aboriginal art. But in reality, museum and art gallery practices arise from the same Western intellectual traditions and the historical evidence reveals considerably more fluidity between these fields of power and knowledge than has been formerly recognised. In 1878, Brough Smyth devised the term 'ethnotypical art' as a means of classifying the artefacts and art objects in the Museum's collection.<sup>20</sup> Spencer's *Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection of the Museum of Victoria* produced in 1899 subsequently fixed Aboriginal culture into an evolutionist schema, but Spencer also furthered recognition for Aboriginal art. Prior to becoming a zoologist Spencer had trained as an artist. During his years as Honorary Director Spencer remained a patron of Australian art, a Trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria, and a purchaser for the Felton Bequest. In 1912, he collected about 50 Oenpelli bark paintings adding a further 150 over the next few years.<sup>21</sup> When these barks were exhibited in 1914, the Victorian Artists' Society advertised their display and suggested to

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<sup>20</sup> R. Brough Smyth, *Catalogue of the Objects of Ethnotypical Art in the National Gallery published by the Direction of the Trustees of the Public Library and Museums of Victoria* (Melbourne: Mason, Firth & M'Cutcheon, 1878).

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin Spencer, *National Museum of Victoria: Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection in the National Museum of Victoria*, (1899, 2nd ed. 1915), p. 12; For a biography on Spencer and the history of this collection see D. J. Mulvaney and J. H. Calaby, "So Much That is New": *Baldwin Spencer, 1860-1929, a Biography* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1985).

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its members that they should "Patronise Australian Art."<sup>22</sup> A museum context did not preclude bark paintings from being interpreted as Aboriginal art.

The evidence from the exhibition suggested to many a reappraisal of Aboriginal culture was long overdue. Since the turn of the century, European anthropologists had expressed growing dissatisfaction with the crude models established by evolutionism proposing instead that geography and the history of culture contact were critical in the analysis of Aboriginal culture.<sup>23</sup> When the Chief Secretary Dr. Argyle opened the exhibition on 9 July 1929 he questioned prevailing misconceptions and pointed out,

It has for along time been a serious misapprehension to regard the Australian aborigine as a member of the lowest human branch of the human race. . . The intellect of the aborigine is not of such a low order as often is supposed. . . <sup>24</sup>

It was true, as Argyle went on to suggest, that Australia's harsh environment had influenced Aborigines' nomadic lifestyle. However, the emphasis he gave to nature supported the stereotypes of the noble and ignoble savage and constructions of soft and hard primitivism which aligned Aborigines with nature as the originary source for the linear history of civilisation. As James Clifford comments, "In this linear history nature functions as origin, as site of the fall, as raw material, and in this system we are still very much within the 'salvage paradigm'."<sup>25</sup> The problem was that the natural environment to which Argyle alluded was not an idealised past realm but a contested colonial site within a modern world of radical change.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Victorian Artists Society Journal*, 1 July 1914, p. 6; see also "Aboriginal Artists; The Alligator River School, Hunting and Theology," *The Argus*, 16 June, 1914; The author wishes to thank Mary Eagle for drawing this reference to my attention.

<sup>23</sup> Mulvaney, "The Australian Aborigines," pp. 42-43 cites the influence of F. Ratzel and F. Favenc, and the subsequent development of the Culture-circle(Kulturkreis) school of anthropology as evidence of changing attitudes.

<sup>24</sup> "Aboriginal Art: Exhibition at Gallery, Arunta Tribesmen Present," *The Argus*, 10 July 1929.

<sup>25</sup> James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm, Discussion" In *The Politics of Representations* (ed.), Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation, Discussion in Contemporary Culture, Number One (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), pp. 142-150, p. 142.

In his catalogue essay, Kenyon acknowledged the importance of anthropology, psychology and pedagogy as specialised fields of knowledge which offered new insights and explanations for Aboriginal art.<sup>26</sup> The public lecture given by A. P. Elkin in association with the exhibition lent added status to these new insights. During his lecture, on the 'Art of the Cave Man' Elkin maintained,

[T]he true aim of the anthropologist was an endeavour to understand the psychic and physical conditions under which primitive man existed and to find the true motive underlying his art.<sup>27</sup>

In the new discipline of pedagogy, to which Kenyon referred, Pestalozzi and Piaget had demonstrated that stages in the mental growth of children correlated with their artistic development. But when these insights became conflated with evolutionism, Aborigines could be represented as the childhood of mankind. Barrett commented that,

[t]he records of our rocks contribute a chapter to the great story of art in its infancy . . . [because Aboriginal art] . . . was as simple as the first clear words of speech uttered by a child.<sup>28</sup>

Through such essentialising constructions—in vogue from the late nineteenth century onwards—ontogeny was seen as recapitulating phylogeny: adults of inferior groups were aligned to the children of superior groups who were represented as "living primitives".<sup>29</sup> This portrayal represented "the child as an earlier state, a naive, simple expression of unfragmented consciousness, which also tends to be related to a psychological primitivism, or a Jungian archetype."<sup>30</sup> Whilst they remained unquestioned, the continuation of such

<sup>26</sup> A. S. Kenyon, "The Art of the Australian Aboriginal," In *Australian Aboriginal Art*, pp. 15-39, p. 15; Herbert Basedow's publication *The Australian Aboriginal* (Adelaide: F. W. Preece & Sons, 1929), p. 297 similarly argued "the psychological factor [a]s the most important aspect in the analysis of Aboriginal art." These responses may have been influenced by G. Roheim's 1925 publication, *Australian Totemism: A Psychoanalytic Study in Anthropology*.

<sup>27</sup> "Aboriginal Art: Exhibition at Gallery: Study of the Caveman," *The Argus*, 10 July 1929.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Barrett, "The Primitive Artist," *Australian Aboriginal Art*, pp. 5-13, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1981), p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Miller, "Primitive Art and the Necessity of Primitivism to Art," In *The Myth of Primitivism: Perspectives on Art* (ed.), Susan Hillier (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 50-71, p. 56.

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theories inscribed Aborigines within paternalistic power relationships which justified colonialism.

Hence recognition for the rock art heritage of the south east which represented a major aspect of the exhibition, was prompted by a salvage paradigm—an ideological construct which justified the dispossession and violence of colonialism.<sup>31</sup> Expeditions documented the rock art at Mootwingee in New South Wales, the Cave of the Serpent at Mount Langi Ghiran and the Glen Isla shelter in the Grampians (Gariwerd) by means of photographs, rubbings, drawings and reproductions. The artist and illustrator, Percy Leason, was closely involved with the preparation for the exhibition: he was commissioned to produce a reproduction of the Glen Isla rock shelter intended as a backdrop for the visiting Central Australian Aborigines, Jack Noorywanka and Sandy (Stan) Loycurrie and he contributed designs for the catalogue. Leason's evolutionism came to the fore as a result of these experiences: he questioned the authenticity of the Glen Isla shelter claiming that the drawings were a hoax perpetrated by Reverend John Mathew in 1897.<sup>32</sup> Leason believed Aborigines were 'true primitives,' incapable of such drawings.

[Aborigines] made vast numbers of chipped and painted outlines and silhouettes but seldom if ever did they achieve anything beyond the range of the clever child. Even at their best they were far behind the Prehistoric Magdalenians of France and northern Spain; they had something to learn from the Bushmen of Africa and others: and they had serious rivals on their own side of the globe amongst peoples of the Pacific islands especially in decorative art.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Barrett, *The Primitive Artist*, p. 12.; The excitement generated by these 'discoveries' and concern for their preservation is evident in newspaper articles prior to the exhibition. "Mystery Cave in Grampians: Scientific Find: 'Red Hand' Paintings by Aborigines," *The Herald*, 11 March 1929; "On the Trail of Lost Tribes: Relics of the 'Stone Age'," *The Herald*, 9 April 1929; "New Aboriginal Cave Discovered: Mural Drawings in Stone Age Gallery," *Ararat Advertiser*, 4 April, 1929; "What Mystery is Behind Rock Carvings of Primitive Artists?," *Adelaide Mail*, 23 November 1929.

<sup>32</sup> Rev. John Mathew, "Note on Aboriginal Rock Painting in the Victoria Range, County of Dundas, Victoria," *Royal Society of Victoria Proceedings*, Vol. 9, 1897, pp. 29-33, rebound as J. Matthew, R. L. Jack and W. R. Harper, *Aboriginal Rock Drawings etc.*, copy held at A IATSIS.

<sup>33</sup> Percy Leason, "Current Art Shows: Australian Aboriginal Art in the Print Room at the National Gallery," *Table Talk*, 18 July 1929, pp. 18, 65, p. 18.

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In his selective response to Aboriginal art, Leason was clearly influenced by the evolutionist assumption that Aborigines were the most primitive of all indigenous people. To Leason, naturalism was the hallmark of Western civilisation. Hence, in his chart depicting the *Chief Factors in the Rise and Decline of Painting*, he positioned primitive art, child art and modernism at the base of his pyramid and placed Renaissance masters and his own teacher, Max Meldrum, at the apical position.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, Leason's critical response to the 1929 exhibition, compared Aboriginal art unfavourably with a European artistic tradition.

It would be pleasant to record that as artists the interesting aborigines were all that some of their good friends think they were: but to do so would be kinder to the aborigines than to the truth. To stop on the way up to the exhibition and study the Rodin "Minerva" . . . is later to have the first impression that the aborigines had precious little art at all. And that actually is a fairly reliable impression.<sup>35</sup>

The naturalism attained by European Palaeolithic cave art remained an anomaly which Leason later attributed to environmental factors.<sup>36</sup>

The cover which Leason designed for the exhibition catalogue neatly encapsulates the oppositions and contradictions resolved through discourses of primitivism. (Plate 2) Leason depicted an Aboriginal artist utilising a tree as a make-shift easel whilst he draws the simple outline of a kangaroo on a bark painting, an image reflective of Leason's Eurocentric value judgements and his many misconceptions about Aboriginal art. Yet the cover was widely admired because it resonated with all the romantic stereotypes associated with Aborigines as a primitive, distant Other.

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<sup>34</sup> Percy Leason, Chart depicting the "Chief Factors in the Rise and Decline of Painting," Pictorial Collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>35</sup> Percy Leason, "Current Art Shows," p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Copies of Leason's published papers on this subject are located in MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

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Kenyon's far more constructive position followed the cultural relativism of the English art historian and critic, John Ruskin, who distinguished between the "intellectual realism" of indigenous art and child art and the "visual realism" or illusionism of Western artistic traditions. Theoretically these methods of visual analysis allowed the art of different groups in society to be considered on equal terms with Western art history, but a problem arose when they were inflected through discourses of primitivism. The emphasis which the West placed upon tradition meant that bark paintings from remote communities where Aborigines used an 'intellectual realism' were judged more pure and authentic than those from the settled south-east which revealed the evidence of cultural change in their incorporations from Western illusionism. As Kenyon commented,

In Victoria the drawings were made or scratched with a point on the smoke-blackened inner surface of the bark. Some of these, such as the drawing of Lake Tyrrell and the squatters, show a facility of execution and appreciation of design quite surprising. But it is in the Northern Territory that bark paintings reach their greatest development. They represent the highest achievement in Australian Aboriginal Art, and display in an extreme form what is termed in connexion with the art of fossil European man, intellectual realism.<sup>37</sup>

A comparison of the Lake Tyrrell bark drawing acquired by the Museum in 1874 with an Oenpelli bark painting collected by Spencer in 1912 reveals how the "intellectual realism" admired by Kenyon is stylistically expressed as a distorted, two-dimensional figure which evokes anthropomorphic interpretations and the supernatural beliefs of an animistic cosmology. (Plates 3 & 4) The bark drawing from Lake Tyrrell also includes evidence of the spiritual life of south eastern Aborigines but they are juxtaposed with naturalistic vignettes of European settlement. Thus discourses of primitivism allowed the unique character of Aboriginal art found in some contexts to form an authoritative stereotype which privileged the art of remote communities

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<sup>37</sup> Kenyon, "The Art of the Australian Aboriginal," p. 37; The one other bark drawing from Victoria which has survived is now held by the British Museum of Mankind. This bark painting was displayed at the 'Victorian Court' of the Paris Exhibition in 1855.

over that of the settled south east. The structural hierarchies imposed by these value judgements selectively masked the fact that all Aboriginal artists, to varying degrees, initiated modifications and incorporations in response to their colonial experiences. They also failed to acknowledge Aborigines' varied experiences of colonialism: in remote communities ritual and ceremonial life, kinship structures and many aspects of a hunter-gatherer society are still relatively intact but in the settled south east, early and dense settlement destroyed many aspects of Aboriginal culture.

Doubtless Kenyon's essay influenced journalists who exaggerated the distinctions between the art from remote communities and that from Aborigines who had,

come into contact with whites. [A] picture of a native corroboree drawn by one of these aboriginals, and the exquisitely-fashioned feather flowers which were the work of another. . .[were admirable] . . .But, on the whole, since the coming of the white civilisation, the art of the Australian aboriginal has been dying out as sure as the race itself.<sup>38</sup>

Discourses of primitivism admired only that Aboriginal art which could be distanced from the modern world temporally or spatially. Change—indicated by the incorporation of alien subject matter and adoption of a naturalistic style—was taken as evidence of the fatal impact of European settlement. Evolutionary paradigms sustained these ahistorical constructions which denied the colonial reality of Aboriginal existence.

### **iii Central Australian visitors**

Critics agreed that the 'full blood' Wangkangurru men were the highlight of the exhibition.<sup>39</sup> (Plate 5) Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie travelled from Central Australia with the ethnographer George Aiston, a former policeman

<sup>38</sup> "Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art," *Weekly Courier (Launceston)*, 17 July 1929, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> At the time, the Wangkangurru men, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were variously described as Aranda and Kaitish men. Here I follow Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art," p. 166.

and owner of Mulka station, to make ceremonial ornaments and artefacts during the exhibition. Posed in situ before the 'authentic' reproduction of the Glen Isla rock shelter, their tangible presence conflated the aura associated with distant Central Australian communities (established through the writings of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen between 1899 and 1927) with recognition for a local prehistory that gained prestige and cultural capital for Victoria. Such incorporations of indigenous people into national and international exhibitions have been criticised as symbolic of the power relationships inscribed within colonialism and, in one sense, the display by Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie appeared to idealise relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and belie dispossession and colonial violence.<sup>40</sup> But today, it is seen as very progressive to include indigenous people in exhibitions as active participants from a living culture whose presence can minimise curatorial authority.<sup>41</sup> Nor was this the first time a decision had been made to include a display by Aboriginal participants.<sup>42</sup> In 1887, 'full bloods' from Raukkan (Point McLeay) and Point Pierce Missions camped at the Adelaide Jubilee exhibition and staged a "tableaux of savage life" which incorporated hymns, Aboriginal songs, a recital of 'The British Flag' and the staging of a mock battle.

When James Kershaw, the new Director of the Museum, broached his plan with Aiston, he saw the Aborigines fulfilling a didactic role which would "make [the exhibition] as realistic and instructive as possible . . ." but in later correspondence he admitted that the Aborigines would be "a great novelty and would create no end of interest."<sup>43</sup> Kenyon's response exemplifies the

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<sup>40</sup> Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1925* (London: The Lowie Museum in Association with Scolar Press, 1983), pp. 1-65.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, pp. 209-212.

<sup>42</sup> Carmel McKeough and Norman Etherington, "Jubilee 50," (ed.), J. P. Norman, *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, No. 12, 1984, pp. 3-21. p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Letters James Kershaw to George Aiston, 22 March & 24 April 1929, Correspondence, Museum of Victoria Library, Australian Aboriginal Art Exhibition 1929, Box 2, Aiston Folder.

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way museums incorporated Aborigines as objects of scientific interest and as an exciting and entertaining spectacle. Unlike dioramas which represented the daily life of the past through plaster casts and paintings, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie staged their own culture like living specimens. Their presence suggested an apparently unmediated encounter where Aborigines became signs of themselves.

The seamless, unified culture evoked by this display was, however, more apparent than real. Organising this presentation required Aiston and Kershaw to negotiate between existing constructions for Aborigines and a modern colonial reality. When Kershaw initially approached Aiston he sought,

two Aborigines, a man and a woman who would attend the exhibition daily for a couple of weeks and give practical demonstrations of the primitive methods of making fire, hair and fibre string, making and ornamenting boomerangs, clubs &c. or stone implements.<sup>44</sup>

But Aiston found it impossible to fulfil Kershaw's request. The older authoritative men in his district either spoke little English or refused to travel to Melbourne owing to their prior experiences of racism in Adelaide. To his credit, Aiston demurred against placing Aborigines into such circumstances against their will.<sup>45</sup> Aiston informed Kershaw he could,

. . . get plenty of young people, but they will be of no more use to you then (sic) your own Lake Tyers people, they know nothing of the customs and traditions of old people. <sup>46</sup>

In keeping with the thinking of his era, Aiston conceived of Aboriginal culture as a unified whole composed of a traditional lifestyle centred around kinship and ritual. Unable to conceptualise a dynamic Aboriginal culture, which might implement adaptations to ensure its survival, Aiston equated authenticity with stasis. Thus young Central Australian Aborigines, like Aborigines at Lake

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<sup>44</sup> Letter Kershaw to Aiston, 22 March 1929, Aiston Folder.

<sup>45</sup> Letters Aiston to Kershaw, 3 March, 2 May & 21 June 1929, Aiston Folder.

<sup>46</sup> Letter Aiston to Kershaw, 19 May 1929, Aiston Folder.

Tyers, were projected as “authors of their own predicament” who were criticised for their capitulation to a complex capitalist society; a position which denied their various colonial experiences—dispossession and violence at the frontier and policies of dispersal and absorption in the south-east.<sup>47</sup>

Thwarted in his plans, Kershaw approached the Chief Protector of South Australia who was able to suggest a solution:

[W]e have here in Adelaide a pure blooded aboriginal named David Unaipon who has been educated at Point McLeay Mission station and intellectually and educationally is head and shoulders above the average aboriginal. He takes considerable interest in Aboriginal customs and history and has done some reading in anthropology and kindred sciences. He is a teetotaller, well behaved and I believe would come to the exhibition if you want him, on condition of course that his expenses are paid. If he came it would be unnecessary for any white person to come with him and look after him.<sup>48</sup>

Kershaw did not accept the Chief Protector’s offer. He required Aborigines who would fulfil an educational role *and* present a spectacle of Otherness. Although highly recommended, David Unaipon (1872-1967) was, like Lake Tyers Aborigines, no longer sufficiently different to be considered as Other.<sup>49</sup>

Museums in other settler colonies faced the same dilemma. At the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha in 1898 it was commented that,

All tribes that are of any interest from an aboriginal stand-point are represented at the congress. Some have become so civilised that their presence could add little interest from an ethnological point of view so the government did not assemble its most civilised proteges at Omaha, but the tribes it has conquered with the greatest amount of bloodshed . . .  
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The dilemma which Aiston and Kershaw faced illustrates the contradictions within primitivism. Representations of Aborigines had to conform to

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Chief Protector of South Australia to Kershaw, 7 June 1929, Aiston Folder.

<sup>49</sup> David Unaipon was a Ngarrindjeri man from Raukkan (Point McLeay Mission) in South Australia well known as a lecturer, musician, preacher, writer and scientist.

<sup>50</sup> Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs*, pp. 50-51, quoting from “The Omaha Exposition and the Indian Congresses,” *Scientific American*, 15 October 1899, p. 248.

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constructions of authenticity which displaced them from the modern world: simultaneously Christian Missions and government regulations sought to eradicate the very 'traditional' Aboriginal culture which Aiston admired and Kershaw sought to present.

Finally, Aiston informed Kershaw that he had to "make do with two good men, the both of them are well enough civilised to be able to explain things and I do not think they will be afraid."<sup>51</sup> But inevitably there were anomalies. Although Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie simulated a continuing 'Stone Age' untouched and undisturbed by the violence and dispossession of European invasion, they were not, as one journalist commented, "anachronisms anything up to 20,000 years out of time."<sup>52</sup> Jack had lived at Killalpaninna Mission (Fig. 1) and Stan Loycurrie was a former member of the Native Police. When both resisted their reprimativisation by refusing to appear naked, this only accentuated the incongruity between their feathered headdresses and decorated bodies, the artefacts they produced, and their utilitarian blue dungarees.<sup>53</sup> One astute commentator, Gladys Hain of the *Hobart Mail* saw the disjunctions as a pretence and a mistake.

They suggest the differences between our race and theirs, and their appearance stresses the incongruity of their existence on our up-to-date continent.

Had they brought a real native of today, either the untutored savage - or the mission trained boy and girl - the trustees would probably be accused of distorting the true image of black brother.<sup>54</sup>

Hain's progressive modernism recognised that differences existed between Aborigines in remote communities and those in settled Australia, but at the same time she was unable to describe hybridity positively.

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<sup>51</sup> Letter Aiston to Kershaw, 21 June 1929, Aiston Folder.

<sup>52</sup> *The Bulletin*, 17 July 1929, unmarked cutting.

<sup>53</sup> "Aboriginal Art Show Opened: Mystery Carvings that Defy Solution," *The Herald*, 9 July 1929.

<sup>54</sup> Gladys Hain, "Were They So Very Different?: Thoughts on the Exhibition of Aborigine Art and Weapons," *Hobart Mail*, 17 July 1929.

The range of responses Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie generated are expressive of these tensions. As Kershaw foresaw, the Wangkangurru Aborigines provided both the "correct atmosphere. . . [c]olour and. . . a touch of romance."<sup>55</sup> One visitor

. . . was reminded. . . of the Red Indians brought to Melbourne years ago by Dr Carver, and of the thrill with which the boys of those days beheld in flesh their heroes of fiction. Boys of the present generation would doubtless be just as interested in these aborigines from the interior, whom they would probably never have seen but for the Exhibition. Educationally, . . . these displays were very valuable.<sup>56</sup>

These somewhat paternalistic responses are contradicted by others which noted how "singularly unconcerned and unperturbed [Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were by the] obvious curiosity and interest of the crowd of onlookers which is gathered continuously around them."<sup>57</sup> Their many incorporations from the modern world were readily apparent: the chisel they used in the manufacture of artefacts was improvised from a disused shearing blade, their mia-mia constructed from branches of local tea-tree whilst rabbit fur doubled as feathers for their body decoration and in the nurtunja—a ceremonial frame of wood and string which they manufactured during the exhibition.<sup>58</sup> Today, the viewing of such secret, sacred objects would be restricted, but at the time, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie may well have chosen to make such objects public to gain recognition and status for Aboriginal culture within the context of the Museum. Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie appear to have enjoyed the exhibition; they inspected stone tools and Stan recognised a photograph of his sister taken many years

<sup>55</sup> "Arunta Tribesmen :Two Come to Melbourne, Aboriginal Art Exhibition," *The Argus*, 6 July 1929; "Aboriginal Art: Exhibition at Gallery, Arunta Tribesmen Present," *The Argus*, 10 July 1929; "Aboriginal Art : Exhibition Opens Today," *The Argus*, 9 July 1929.

<sup>56</sup> "Abo. Art Display," *The Herald*, 10 July 1929.

<sup>57</sup> "Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art," *The Weekly Courier* (Launceston), 17 July, 1929, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> "Black Magic: Exhibition of Aboriginal Art: Native Religious Rites and Ceremonials," *The Age*, 10 July 1929; "Aboriginal Art: Exhibition at Gallery," *The Argus*, 10 July 1929.

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previously—probably during the Spencer and Gillen expeditions.<sup>59</sup> Nor were Lake Tyers Aborigines entirely excluded. At the opening of the exhibition when Argyle announced that arrangements would be made for Lake Tyers Aborigines to visit the exhibition, he was greeted with applause—a sign that although south eastern Aborigines were considered doomed to extinction, they remained in the conscience of mainstream Australian society.<sup>60</sup>

#### **iv A Victorian history: Tommy McRae and William Barak**

Recognition for a south eastern heritage came from the inclusion of work by the individual artists, Tommy McRae (1820's-1901) and William Barak (1824-1903). The catalogue for the 1929 exhibition reproduced drawings by McRae as did the catalogue for *Art of Australia 1788-1941* which travelled to the United States and Canada.<sup>61</sup> (Plate 6) Both McRae and Barak were represented in the important *Primitive Art Exhibition* of 1943 staged at the National Gallery of Victoria by the European ethnographer, Leonhard Adam (1891-1960), and Daryl Lindsay, Director of the Gallery. But what is of interest in this study is how Barak and McRae were produced as artists, through the response of patrons and the critical reception to their work. In explaining why contemporary south eastern artists went unrecognised, we need to understand how primitivist ideologies created an aura around Barak and McRae which located them in the recent past.

Both artists are characterised by their complex figure compositions which depict tiered groups of Aborigines. (Plates 6 & 7) There is growing agreement amongst scholars that McRae and Barak are representing far more than momentary events; increasingly these scenes are interpreted as complex narratives which incorporate legends and memories of tribal gatherings

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<sup>59</sup> "Aboriginal Craftsmanship," *The Age*, 10 July 1929; "Aborigines Find Melbourne Cold: Saving Money to Buy Presents," *The Herald*, 8 July 1929.

<sup>60</sup> "Black Magic," *The Age*, 10 July 1929.

<sup>61</sup> *Art of Australia 1788-1941*, pl. 12.

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witnessed by both artists in their childhood.<sup>62</sup> Carol Cooper and James Urry show that McRae's drawings of dancing figures include artefacts and body decoration specific to the Wahgunyah region of the Upper Murray where McRae lived.<sup>63</sup> In Barak's compositions the possum skin cloaks, the participating animals and the bodies of the dancing figures are hatched with geometric elements. Thus sets of continuities present in the work of both artists accord with our understanding of how south eastern Aboriginal art operates as a system to encode personal and group identity and relationships with the land.

The lives of both men coincided with the settlement of the south east, and both became advocates and statesmen for their people who fought the government policies of absorption and dispersal implemented late in the late nineteenth century. Barak, of the Woi wurrung (Kulin) people was present as a young boy in 1834 when Batman signed a 'treaty' with local tribes through which he purchased the Port Phillip District. He joined the Native Police and may have lived at Acheron before he helped establish Coranderrk Mission in 1863 where he remained until his death. European settlement also brought violent confrontations and radical disruption for the Kwat Kwat (Waveroo) society to which McRae belonged. Afterwards the remaining few hundred Aborigines in the area integrated into the pastoral industry and moved between reserves and missions.<sup>64</sup> Situated in a colonial context, where they had few means of entering the capitalist economy, Aborigines produced artefacts and art as a means of economic support. Such cultural production expressed the political and social transformations occurring in Aboriginal society by substituting one

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<sup>62</sup> Carol Cooper and James Urry, "Art, Aborigines and Chinese: A Nineteenth Century Drawing by the Kwat Kwat artist Tommy McRae," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 5, Part 1, 1981, pp. 80-88, pp. 85; Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," pp. 38-9; Anne Brown, "Barak: A Man of Transition," 1991, unpublished paper in the author's possession; pp. 25-37.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper and Urry, "Art, Aborigines and Chinese," p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> Cooper and Urry follow Norman Tindale in allocating McRae to the Kwat Kwat people but research suggests Waveroo is the more accurate culture and language group for this area.

form of action for another. Thus in one instance, the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch, asked the Coranderrk people if he could view a corroboree—a potent symbol of Aboriginality—but these ceremonies were already defunct and instead, Barak presented him with a painting of the subject.

In June 1929, immediately prior to the opening of *Australian Aboriginal Art*, E. H. Cox contributed to the interest which surrounded McRae in an article for *The Argus*, which presented McRae as a genius.<sup>65</sup> The concept of the genius has a long tradition in Western intellectual traditions associated with the idea of an inner, creative essence and to Cox, the concept of the artistic genius seemed to explain the achievements of prehistoric and indigenous art: “[i]n primitive peoples, genius first manifests itself in a benevolent form in the ability of an individual here and there, to draw.”<sup>66</sup> Attributing genius to McRae conveniently sidestepped the stasis imposed by evolutionism to give recognition to individual creativity—a sign of self awareness in the civilised world—but this construction allowed McRae to be separated from the material circumstances of his existence and projected as a noble savage living within a pristine hunter-gatherer society. Thus Cox wrote that,

[f]or the first 10 or 15 years of his life [McRae] never saw a white man. He lived the ordinary life of an aborigine taking part in tribal corroborees, hunting, fishing and occasionally fighting and all the time unconsciously storing up in his mind a vast fund of impressions . . . of the ways of his people . . . Chance had cast the gift of great ability . . . [upon McRae and when his genius was] . . . discovered. . . it caused considerable interest, and in no small way added to his prestige.<sup>67</sup>

The construction Cox places on McRae's life is doubly misleading: glossing over both the radical disruptions of colonisation and denying any sense of social agency for McRae.

<sup>65</sup> E. H. Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist: Inherited Genius at Lake Tyers," *The Argus Camera Supplement*, 8 June 1929, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist," p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist," p. 4.

As Becker and Bourdieu show, artists in a complex society do not achieve status unless their art is recognised and purchased by members of the elite.<sup>68</sup> Patrons produced recognition and status for Barak and McRae when they commissioned and purchased their art and presented it as gifts to institutions or significant Regal and vice-Regal visitors who included the Prince of Wales, Lord Hopetoun and Sir Henry Loch.<sup>69</sup> McRae gained further recognition when Andrew Lang, the British writer, folklorist and anthropologist used the drawings his brother, Dr. W. H. Lang, had collected many years before to illustrate K. Langloh Parker's two books of Aboriginal legends published in 1896 and 1898.<sup>70</sup> When Cox emphasises how McRae was 'discovered' by his first patron, Roderick Kilborn, the postmaster at Wahgunyah, he projects Aboriginal culture as static whilst privileging Western artistic traditions which intervene to recognise McRae's individual creativity.<sup>71</sup> The parallel instances of the 'discovery' of indigenous artists by agents of Western civilisation which recur in colonial histories justify the intercession of mentors like Kilborn as catalysts for progress.<sup>72</sup> At the time these relationships of patronage were expressed in terms of a "cross-cultural class solidarity": comment was passed on McRae's refined manners whilst Barak was said to carry himself with a "regal dignity" as befitted one of "Nature's gentlemen."<sup>73</sup> Aborigines perceived themselves as the equals of Europeans but these relationships arose out of

<sup>68</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 93-119; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tran. Richard Nice (1979, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), Ch. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Ann Bon, "Barak: An Aboriginal Statesman," *The Argus*, 28 November 1931, p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper and Urry "Art, Aborigines and Chinese," p. 84; K. Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales* (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1896); K. Langloh Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales* (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1898).

<sup>71</sup> Other collectors were Dr. H. W. Lang of Corowa, J. C. Leslie, editor of the Corowa Free Press and J. G. Gray, a pastoralist.

<sup>72</sup> Locally, the relationship between Rex Battarbee and Albert Namatjira offers one example: Ima Ebong, "International Art: the Official Story," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 176-229, pp. 185-7, cites similar interventions in Africa.

<sup>73</sup> The first quotation is from Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, p.172; the second from Bon, "Barak: An Aboriginal Statesman," p. 6.

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the social status of the patron and they belied the prevailing racial prejudice against Aborigines.<sup>74</sup>

In Barak's case, the conflation between artistic genius and the stereotype of the noble savage was played out through his ambiguous status as 'King Barak, the Last of the Yarra Tribe.' In her history of Aboriginal gorgets or 'king plates' Jakelin Toy observes that

Traditionally, Aboriginal societies did not have kings or chiefs in the sense used by English-speaking people. However elderly and senior initiated men were held in high esteem and physically, spiritually or intellectually superior men were also able to command significant respect. . . .When the colonists searched for leaders among the Aboriginal people, in order to find influential allies, they saw in those respected men the qualities they recognised as the badges of leadership in their own society.<sup>75</sup>

Initially Aborigines were, no doubt, honoured by their awards. Marie Fels would concur with Troy that Aborigines recognised the social significance attached to European class structures. Over time, however, as the situation of Aborigines deteriorated, attitudes changed.<sup>76</sup> Today, Aborigines express both appreciation and resentment toward such insignias of rank which give recognition to past family members but deny the continuity of Aboriginal leadership and the presence of flourishing Aboriginal communities.<sup>77</sup>

The events which followed Barak's death in 1901 highlight these contradictions. When Barak died, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines unanimously recommended that £20 be set aside to erect a monument over his grave but the Chief Secretary refused to sanction their decision.<sup>78</sup> In 1934,

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<sup>74</sup> Annette Hamilton, "Equal to Whom?: Visions of Destiny and the Aboriginal Aristocracy," *Mankind*, Vol. 17, No. 2, August 1987, pp. 129-139, pp. 134-134.

<sup>75</sup> Jakelin Troy, *King Plates: A History of Aboriginal Gorgets* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>76</sup> Marie Fels, *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Philip District 1837-1853* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), pp. 19, 91; Troy, *King Plates*, p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> Troy, *King Plates*, pp. 38-41.

<sup>78</sup> Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 40th Annual Report, 1904, p. 5.

to coincide with the Victorian Centenary, a public subscription, organised through *The Argus*, unveiled a monument to Barak in nearby Healesville (Fig. 3) at a ceremony attended by one of his descendants, Billie Russell.<sup>79</sup> (Plate 8) The monument drew immediate criticism from residents who perhaps wished to forget that Coranderrk and its Aboriginal inhabitants existed. Following vandalism, the Barak memorial was dismantled and stored at the Council Depot until 1955, when it was restored and relocated in the Coranderrk cemetery by members of the Bread and Cheese Club.<sup>80</sup> (Plate 9)

In his article, Cox contrasted the quality of McRae's drawings with those of his grandson, Sydney McRae (1914-1966), the son of Alex McRae—one of three children taken away from the McRaes in 1891 and 1893 as government absorption policies took effect.<sup>81</sup> To Cox "the imprimatur of real ability" was evident, but he lamented the "pathetic sense of change [: whereas Tommy McRae] was born in a primitive world, . . . Sydney was born in the modern world".<sup>82</sup> Of course the apparent separation between the primitive and the modern was heightened by Cox's selective response which deleted most of the older McRae's extensive and compelling imagery of squatters, settlers, sailing boats and interaction with Chinese. Cox contrasts the apparently idiosyncratic drawing technique of Tommy McRae who lay on the ground to draw eidetically from the ground up with that of Sydney, who, Cox believed, reflected his complete conquest by "the white invasion" when he drew seated at a table or with his paper pinned vertically to the wall.<sup>83</sup> To Cox these

<sup>79</sup> This history has been constructed from numerous articles and letters to the editor in *The Healesville Guardian* between March 1934 and September 1935. The author wishes to thank Les Harsant, President of Healesville and District Historical Society Inc. for his assistance in supplying these references.

<sup>80</sup> For the subsequent history of the monument see articles in *The Healesville Guardian*, October 1954- September 1955 and various articles in *Bohemia*, the magazine of the Bread and Cheese Club: "Outing to Coranderrk," *Bohemia*, Vol. 7, No 2, 1 August 1951; "Coranderrk Outing," *Bohemia*, 1 October 1955.

<sup>81</sup> Cooper and Urry, "Art, Aborigines and Chinese," pp. 83-4; Angelina Morgan, Interview, 3 September 1992.

<sup>82</sup> Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."

<sup>83</sup> Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."

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changes reflected deculturation, but as a photograph of Barak painting reveals, he worked in the same manner as Sydney McRae. (Plate 7) These transformations can be reinterpreted constructively as adaptations by Aboriginal artists.

Earlier we saw how Aborigines were blamed for their loss of tradition. Cox similarly judges Tommy and Sydney McRae on moral grounds, interpreting their choice of subject matter as a sign of their loyalty to Aboriginal culture. He pointed out that Sydney McRae,

Instead of drawing a corroboree. . . draws a football match. His grandfather's bark canoe has given way in his drawings to the motor car, the railway locomotive, and even the aeroplane. His pictures of fighting - and there are some on the walls of his home - show not naked blacks armed with spear and waddy, but khaki-clad fighters from modern armies hugging rifles behind muddy earthworks or crouching behind the shield plates of big guns.<sup>84</sup>

Cox's primitivism reveres the traditional Aboriginal culture of Tommy McRae and laments the apparent loss of this cultural heritage as part of the inevitable tragedy of artistic genius. But in so doing Cox, like Aiston, failed to acknowledge that government policies were in the process of disrupting and dismantling south eastern Aboriginal culture.

The location of Sydney McRae's drawings, if they still exist, is unknown, but it is possible to retrieve value and meaning on the basis of Cox's quite vivid descriptions which confirm the boy's acute perception and drawing ability. Influenced no doubt by images from the popular press which Aborigines used to line the walls of their homes for warmth and decoration, Sydney McRae captured the action of various sports, racing, boxing, football, and wrestling—subjects which seem unsurprising for a boy of fourteen.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore the

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<sup>84</sup> Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."

<sup>85</sup> Shirley S. Wienke, *When the Wattles Bloom Again: The Life and Times of William Barak, Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe* (Woori Yallock, Victoria, private pub. 1984), p. 60.

success of Lake Tyers Aborigines in the sporting arena was important: sport remains one area where Aborigines gain some equality and social status.<sup>86</sup> Nor should it be forgotten that nine Lake Tyers men had enlisted and served in the First World War.<sup>87</sup>

Although Aborigines were relative newcomers to the world of goods, this did not necessarily imply their capitulation to capitalism. Rather in the social life of things, the cars, trains and aeroplanes which Sydney McRae drew, represented services and commodities whose symbolic significance was "expressive—to Aborigines—of the *European* collectivity, and the power that collectivity wields."<sup>88</sup> When Sydney McRae responded to the modern world he articulated a relationship to the power and knowledge of non-Aborigines which suggested that the world of commodities could be penetrated, co-opted and modified—thus in effect rejecting the idea that non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds were radically separate spheres.

#### **v Modernist affinities**

Modernism generated the most dynamic response to the exhibition. Hain thought it appropriate and innovative that the exhibition was located in the National Art Gallery. As a result, *Australian Aboriginal Art*

. . . recalls any other exhibition of Art rather than the solid realities of bush life . . . Instead of being set up in the Museum, where native Bears, fossils, canoes, and realistic black men cast a lingering shadow on the narrow paths one must tread to view them, this exhibition hides away in the Print Room at the Gallery. . . <sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> AA, Series B356/Item 54, Sports at Lake Tyers, Managers Reports for period 1 March 1932-30 April 1932; Managers Report for period ended 31 October 1934; For a more pessimistic view see Richard Broome, "Professional Boxers in Eastern Australia, 1930-1979," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 4, June 1980, pp. 49-72.

<sup>87</sup> A A, Series B356/Item 17, Lake Tyers Administration 1934-1939, Board for the Protection of Aborigines to A. P. A. Burden, 31 January 1939.

<sup>88</sup> Grayson Gerrard, "Everyone Will Be Jealous for That Mutika," *Mankind*, August, 1989, Vol. 19, No. 2, August 1989, pp. 95-111, p.106.

<sup>89</sup> Hain, "Were They So Very Different?."

The parallels Hain drew between museum dioramas, prehistoric relics and natural history reveal how the constructions which museums placed upon Aboriginal culture displaced them from the modern world. By contrast, the art world placed emphasis upon individual creative expression. In conjunction with a modernist aesthetic, this cleared a space in which to incorporate Aboriginal artists within the progress of the West. Hence Hain expressed disappointment at the prevailing anonymity.

No artist of all the hundreds represented left any sign of his identity. The silence of oblivion falls between us and these intellectual giants of a vanished race.<sup>90</sup>

Doubtless Hain exaggerated but it is clear from her response that anonymity consigned Aborigines into prehistory.

Modernism questioned existing academic conventions and renewed itself by appropriating from indigenous art. During the exhibition, the designer Frances Derham<sup>91</sup> (1894-1987) gave two lectures in her position as vice-President of the Arts and Crafts Society.<sup>92</sup> Spencer probably inspired Derham's interest in Aboriginal art. He was president of the Arts and Crafts Society in 1917, two years after Derham joined and she may well have heard his 1916 and 1917 public lectures which advocated the appropriation of Aboriginal art.<sup>93</sup> Derham's diary reveals that she prepared for her lectures by reading

<sup>90</sup> Hain, "Were They So Very Different?."

<sup>91</sup> As a child, Frances Derham studied at art schools in New Zealand and Ireland. Returning to Australia, she worked as a draughtsperson for her father before studying drawing at the National Gallery School and sculpture at Swinburne Technical School. Derham taught at Swinburne and at Ruyton Girls' School and continued to study privately with Mary Cecil Allen, Ethel Spowers and George Bell. During this time Derham married and had four children. From 1929-1964 Derham taught art at the Kindergarten Training College and from 1935 at Preshil. In her research on indigenous children's art, Derham visited Hermannsburg in 1938, Aurukun Queensland a decade later and Malabunga in New Guinea in 1960. From 1938 onward Derham mounted interstate exhibitions of international children's art (Appendix 2:1) and in 1961 published the key text, *Art for the Child Under Seven* (Canberra: Australian Preschool Association, 1961) with Christine Heinig.

<sup>92</sup> The first lecture "The Interest of Aboriginal Art to the Modern Designer," was given on 28 June, 1929 to the Society, the second in the Gallery at the invitation of the other vice-President, Senator Elliott on 18 July 1929; "Member's Evenings," *The Recorder*, No 2, June 1929; *Frances Derham M.B.E.*, 2-9 March, 1986, Jim Alexander Gallery, East Malvern, Melbourne.

<sup>93</sup> Mulvaney and Calaby, "So Much That is New." p. 326, fn. 82. Spencer joined the Art and Craft Society in 1907.

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Spencer's recent publication, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, but the influence of Spencer's evolutionist position and the distinctions he drew between ceremonial and secular, or 'playabout,' art are not in evidence in her subsequent lecture.<sup>94</sup> What motivated Derham was a critique of her own academic art education: she believed copying casts and the study of perspectival conventions destroyed creativity. In responding to the criticism that primitivism was a sign of decadence Derham argued in one public lecture that,

[t]he mental change indicates a yearning for simplicity. The native not only gets back to nature but in his conventionalised art form uses unerringly basic geometric forms which have fascinated man throughout the ages.<sup>95</sup>

Although such essentialising interpretations for primitive society are no longer acceptable, one needs to recognise that the aesthetic ideologies of modernism emerged from Western intellectual traditions which generally misconstrued primitive societies as a simple and natural originary essence.

Today the visual affinities which modernists located between their own aesthetic ideologies and tribal art are widely criticised as evidence of a cultural imperialism.<sup>96</sup> The point is made by many commentators that such appropriative practices are morally tainted serving only to maintain power and control over indigenous people. But a distinction needs to be maintained between contemporary commentary and the historical context in which these incorporations occurred—at a time when Aborigines were oppressed by racial discrimination and when theories of social evolution restricted recognition for Aboriginal art. Primitivism in settler colonies, has developed in particular trajectories, in dialogue with Aboriginal culture. Hence it is noteworthy that

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<sup>94</sup> Frances Derham Archives, Melbourne University Archives, Diary for 1929, Entry for 25 June 1929; Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, Vol 1, p. 170 & pl. 1.

<sup>95</sup> "Expression in Primitive Art: Every Aboriginal Mark Means Something," *The Herald*, 13 July 1929.

<sup>96</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Ch. 9.

Derham writes in the present tense. Unlike European modernists, she emphasised the specific cultural meanings in Aboriginal art pointing out to her audience that the "markings on shields and other native weapons, which they imagined merely provided a decoration, bore a vital significance. 'The aborigine never draws or scratches a meaningless line.' " she added.<sup>97</sup> Derham's position, at this point in time, is in advance of the artist who led the interest in Aboriginal art, Margaret Preston. She still advised,

The student must be careful not to bother about what myths the [Aboriginal] carver may have tried to illustrate. Mythology and religious symbolism do not matter to the artist, only to the anthropologist.<sup>98</sup>

Derham saw that artistic hierarchies trivialised decoration as meaningless ornament. Not until a decade later would the anthropologists F. D. McCarthy and D. S. Davidson reinterpret the idea of the 'decorative' as an all-inclusive term which recognised the structural relationship between all aspects of Aboriginal art.<sup>99</sup>

Derham's first major work to draw upon Aboriginal motifs was a linocut cover for *The Recorder*, the journal of the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria which she designed in March 1929.<sup>100</sup> (Plate 10) Incorporating from Aboriginal art allowed Derham to replace an earlier art nouveau style with the angular figurative and geometric elements she located in artefacts illustrated in Spencer's publications.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> "Expression in Primitive Art," *The Herald*, 13 July 1929.

<sup>98</sup> Margaret Preston, "Away with Poker-Worked Kookaburras and Gumleaves," *Sunday [Daily] Pictorial (Sydney)*, 6 April 1930, p. 22.

<sup>99</sup> F. D. McCarthy, *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art* (Sydney: Australian Museum, 1938); D. S. Davidson, "A Preliminary Consideration of Aboriginal Australian Decorative Art," *Memoirs of The American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 9, 1937.

<sup>100</sup> The earliest Aboriginal influences appear in her Book-plate: Delivery Book Club 1925, NGA, (Acc. No. 82:1578); Jonathan Parsons, "Aboriginal Motifs in Design: Frances Derham and the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria," *Koori History*, pp. 41-42 incorrectly cites this work as a woodcut.

<sup>101</sup> see for example Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, Vol. 2, pls. 553:1 & 2, 554:2 & 6.

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In a series of later prints including Aboriginal Artists (Plate 12), Derham returned to a more organic style placing flat, naturalistic figures on a background of flowing concentric lines in a manner closely resembling the Carved Wooden Grave-marker for Thomas Bungaleen. (Plate 11) The difference is, that in Derham's print, figurative and geometric elements which formerly signified relationships between Aborigines and their land, now refer to a number of subjects: landscapes, cave walls and artefact designs. These reinterpretations seem to confirm the criticism that appropriation decontextualises indigenous art—but in this instance, the Thomas Bungaleen headstone drew widespread admiration from many commentators who recognised it was a key object within a south eastern Aboriginal heritage. Brough Smyth, Protector of Aborigines in Victoria had commissioned the wooden grave stone from Barak's brother Simon Wonga (c. 1824-1874) as a memorial to a young Kurnai man who had died in police custody.<sup>102</sup> Following Brough Smyth, Hain recorded the specific meaning for each of the visual elements on the board: the men in the upper part appointed to investigate the cause of death, the animals which indicated Bungaleen did not die for lack of food and the wicked spirits or Moorroops in the lower section who caused death.<sup>103</sup> To Hain, the Thomas Bungaleen memorial evoked a profound spirituality which suggested common human experiences.

Many of his drawings and decorative panels express the long, long thoughts of reflective man, and to my mind show that he links up with our maturer intelligence at far more points that we usually admit.<sup>104</sup>

In her response, one sees how an aesthetic interchange with Aboriginal art primed Hain to arrive at a new recognition of Aboriginal spirituality and Aboriginal equality with other Australians.

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<sup>102</sup> R. E. Barwick and Dianne Barwick, "A Memorial for Thomas Bungeleen (sic) 1847-1865," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 8, Part 1, 1984, pp. 9-11.

<sup>103</sup> See Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol 1. p. 288.

<sup>104</sup> Hain, "Were They So Very Different?."

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The visual affinities Hain located undercut evolutionism. She favourably compared Aboriginal body and basket decoration with modern Parisian design and the photographs and tracings of rock art from Mootwingee with the work of the European sculptor, Rodin.

One of all these huge drawings stands out—it is the huge kangaroo—at Mootwingee, New South Wales. Those who have seen the white horse in the chalk country outside Westbury, England, . . . will know how these drawings impress themselves on the mind, the personality they come to possess, and the way each succeeding generation makes them part of the unforgettable landscape lingering on the edge of consciousness in their daily life.<sup>105</sup>

The similarities Hain found between the prehistoric art of Europe and Australia acknowledged an Aboriginal presence in the cultural landscape of Australia.

This evidence highlights the way Aboriginal art can effect change. The critical response to Aboriginal art occurs through an aesthetic interchange which is at its most fruitful when visual reproductions or ownership make Aboriginal imagery accessible over an extended period. The origins of all of Derham's motifs can be traced back to various publications—notably, Spencer's *Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collections of the Museum of Victoria* and his *Wanderings in Wild Australia*. As already noted, a drawing of the Thomas Bungaleen head stone whose repetitious, symmetrical forms probably appealed to a modernist sensibility were reproduced in Brough Smyth and the catalogue for the 1929 exhibition. The ceramicist Allan Lowe (b. 1907) was even more fortunate. He became familiar with the Museum's collection whilst studying ceramics at the Working Mens' College (later Melbourne Technical College, now Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) located directly opposite.<sup>106</sup> Barak's paintings first captured Lowe's attention during the 1929

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<sup>105</sup> Hain, " 'Were They So Very Different?' ."

<sup>106</sup> Lowe originally trained as a painter at the Working Mens' College in Melbourne in 1919, at the Julian Ashton School in Sydney 1922-3 and the National Gallery School in 1926-8. He then retrained as a ceramicist with Gladys Kelly at the Working Mens' College before establishing a pottery studio at his family's home in Merlynston in 1932. Peter and Marion Lowe, Interviews, 4 September, 1991 and 16 March 1992; *Allan Lowe Pottery 1929-1979, A Retrospective*

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exhibition.<sup>107</sup> Primed by this experience, he purchased a painting by Barak in 1932 from the antique dealer, Kozminsky's in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. (Plate 13) Over time, the Barak became Lowe's most prized possession, and the source for many designs.

Clearly Derham and Lowe were stimulated towards an abstraction which freed them from their own academic constraints. Such appropriations call into question the myth of originality which underlay the aesthetic ideologies of modernism. And there is a moral component to their appropriation: when artists from the majority culture drew inspiration from Aboriginal motifs they displaced the Aboriginal artists who were the original owners of the designs from recognition. But this aesthetic exchange with Aboriginal art could bring about a deeper understanding of Aboriginal values. Derham and Lowe, like Preston, later sought to know more about Aboriginal culture: Derham's interest in children's art took her to Hermannsburg Mission and Aurukun, (Fig. 1) whilst Lowe developed a close friendship with the anthropologist, C. P. Mountford.<sup>108</sup> In the 1950s, both artists assisted with exhibitions which raised money for the Aboriginal Scholarship Scheme.

The broader issue of national identity was raised with the inclusion of two of Lowe's ceramics in work submitted by the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria to the Australian Pavilion at the Empire Exhibition at Glasgow in 1938.<sup>109</sup> (Plate 14) Such international exhibitions symbolised Australia's progress as a nation through displays of art and craft, primary produce and manufactures.<sup>110</sup>

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*Exhibition of Pottery by Allan Lowe*, National Gallery of Victoria, 11 September-21 October 1979.

<sup>107</sup> The author wishes to thank Paula O'Dare for her assistance in eliciting this information from Allan Lowe whose ill health prevented him from contributing to my research. Paula O'Dare, Letter to the author 23 November 1991.

<sup>108</sup> For instance, Roger Butler locates five different phases in Preston's interest in Aboriginal art. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston*, pp. 27, 42-47.

<sup>109</sup> Lowe joined the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria in 1935.

<sup>110</sup> Typically, crafts people remained anonymous. Participating artists included Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin, Sydney Long, Robert Johnson, Elioth Gruner, John D. Moore, Will

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To a young settler colony on the periphery of the international art world a sense of national identity was critically important however art world debates polarised between international and regional perspectives. Writing in 1929, the Herald critic Basil Burdett came down firmly in favour of the established option.

We must strive for expression in our own way, not ignoring the gifts and influences brought back to us by our returning students and painters, for it is apparent that as we are not a separate race with this country as our natural inheritance, we must continue to find our inspiration in European modes. No one would seriously suggest that we found our art upon primitive expressions of the aborigine, nor that we should discover our major influence in the East.<sup>111</sup>

For Burdett the appropriation of Aboriginal art was a contentious issue, a practice which threatened standards and overturned existing traditions. Lowe thought otherwise: when he argued that Aboriginal art was the 'fertile ground' on which to create a "truly Australian art form" he admitted the sterility of his own cultural heritage.<sup>112</sup> Significantly, Lowe's designs depicting the virile, masculine imagery of Aboriginal dancers were entirely appropriate to a national ethos. The platter at the front of the photograph reinterprets the original meaning of the Barak painting to become a frieze of figures stylistically reminiscent of the European modernist, Georges Rouault. The incised monochrome vase situated mid-centre deploys stylised male figures dancing with boomerangs, shields and spears combined with geometric forms—images probably derived from Aranda displays in the Museum of Victoria. (Plate 15)

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Ashton, Hans Heysen, Norman Lindsay, Kenneth Macqueen, John Eldershaw, Harold Herbert, Hardy Wilson, Daryl Lindsay and William Longstaff. *Empire Exhibition Scotland*, Official Catalogue, 1938, p. 185.

<sup>111</sup> Basil Burdett, "Some Contemporary Australian Artists," *Art in Australia*, 3rd Series, No. 29, September 1929, unpagged.

<sup>112</sup> Allan Lowe, "Use of Aboriginal Motifs," *Exhibition of Aboriginal Art and Craft* Mounted by National Union of Australian University Students, University of Melbourne, 1956?, p. 7.

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## vi Conclusion

The pattern of inclusions and exclusions within the Museum of Victoria collection and the exhibition of 1929 formed a series of binary oppositions: whilst there was interest in an Aboriginal past in Victoria and in the art produced in remote communities, contemporary Aboriginal art from the south east was ignored.

The decision to situate the exhibition in the Print Room of the National Gallery was a decisive and innovative tactic indicative of the growing interest in Aboriginal art. Nonetheless, *Australian Aboriginal Art* marks a moment in time when such populist approaches recognised the input from specialised professionals who would eventually assume the right to speak on behalf of Aborigines. Although a popular evolutionism continued to constrain recognition for Aboriginal art by reinterpreting insights available from psychology, pedagogy and anthropology, the emphasis which the West placed upon individual creativity began to retrieve Aboriginal art from the anonymity of prehistory. When, however, Aboriginal artists were interpreted through the romantic construction of the artist as genius they were separated from the contemporary world and the reality of their colonial existence.

The most dynamic and complex response to Aboriginal art came from modernists. Undoubtedly their incorporations from Aboriginal art usurped recognition from the original owners of these designs—a reflection of the uneven power relationships which operate in a colonial society. But the visual affinities they located between tribal art and their own modernist aesthetic operated as a conduit for change. Through their aesthetic response to Aboriginal art, artists from mainstream Australian society saw new value in Aboriginal culture and they acknowledged a shared heritage of a cultural landscape and a common humanity. As settler subjects in a young colony,

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they co-opted Aboriginal art as a means of achieving a national identity; but their understanding prompted some adjustments to their own position and recognition of Aboriginal values. Thus the meanings for Aboriginal art generated by the exhibition were neither completely determined nor entirely subjective: individuals reinterpreted discourses of otherness from their own particular viewing position.

Although the Museum was a locus of power such institutional exclusion did not prevent Aborigines from continuing to produce art: undoubtedly Sydney McRae continued to draw and, as discussed below, Aborigines at Lake Tyers continued to make artefacts. Nor were Aborigines rendered wholly powerless. The Central Australian Aborigines invited by Aiston acted as social agents: they decided who would travel to Melbourne and how they would be presented. It should be noted that women chose not to collaborate in this cross-cultural interaction. Although the wider community viewed their Centralian visitors as scientific objects and as entertainment, Stan Noorywanka and Jack Loycurrie undercut these constructions. Indeed the evidence from this chapter indicates the degree to which colonisers and colonised appropriated from each other to extend their resources and gain power and knowledge.

The dissonance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewpoints comes to the fore in the response of the artist, Percy Leason. During his involvement with the exhibition, Leason's evolutionism caused him to reject the evidence of a creative and dynamic Aboriginal heritage. But distancing Aborigines from the modern world allowed them to remain an object of fascination as Leason's catalogue cover reveals. As discussed below, however, Leason was forced to modify his primitivism to accommodate the viewpoints of Lake Tyers Aborigines.

### **3 Anthropology or art?:**

#### **Percy Leason and *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines***

##### **i Introduction**

Primitivism is widely criticised as one of several colonial discourses on otherness that mirror and maintain European dominance over indigenous or non-Western peoples. These insights have demonstrated that representations of the other articulate race relations between coloniser and colonised but their interpretations remain generalised, homogenised and pessimistic, and need to be evaluated against the competing primitivisms which occur within specific social and material relationships in settler colonies. Artists from the majority culture usually expressed only a passing interest in the depiction of Aborigines but the series of portraits painted by Percy Leason in 1934 involved extended interaction with Lake Tyers Aborigines. The evidence reveals that the portraits required the co-operation of Aborigines who in fact negotiated the terms of their representation. Contemporary Aborigines' appreciation of these portraits as a legitimisation of their presence indicates that Leason's primitivism was more constructive than many others, despite his intentions. These Aboriginal viewpoints suggest that our theories of representation may exaggerate dominance.

In 1934, the artist and illustrator Percy Leason (1889-1959) embarked on a major project to paint the portraits of the remaining 'full-blood' Aborigines in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> The catalyst for this series came from Leason's earlier involvement

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<sup>1</sup> Leason trained with the Melbourne lithographers, Sands & McDougall whilst he attended evening classes at the National Gallery School and later life classes at the Victorian Artists Society. He moved to Sydney in 1917 to work first for Sydney Ure Smith and then the *Bulletin*, before returning to Melbourne in 1924 at which time he began studies with Max Meldrum. In 1939 Leason moved to the United States where he continued to work as an illustrator, taught at various art schools and opened the Staten Island School of Art; MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria; Isobel Leason, transcript 1968, p. 1, Art Library, State Library of Victoria; L. J. Blake, "Percy Leason: Artist, Cartoonist and Historian," Address given to the Victorian Historical Society, 27 August, 1968, reprinted in *The Victorian Historical Magazine*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Nov. 1968, pp. 158-180, p. 174; Christine Downer, "A Prophecy Unfulfilled: *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* by Percy Leason," *Koori History*, pp. 39-40.

in the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. At the time, Leason's evolutionism, which emerged during his research on the Glen Isla rock shelter, rejected the evidence for a south eastern Aboriginal heritage. Yet when Leason relegated Aborigines back into the 'Stone Age' as 'true primitives' he maintained the fiction that constructed Aborigines as other, distanced in time and space from the modern world. Hence, his catalogue cover essentialised Aboriginal artists as noble savages living an edenic existence.

At the time it was agreed that the display by the visiting Central Australian Aborigines was the highlight of the exhibition, so it was not altogether surprising that Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie stimulated the interest of artists from the majority culture. During the exhibition, the illustrator, Will Dyson, proposed an exhibition of their portraits intended for purchase as part of a national collection.

I know of few worthy representations of our blacks by Australian artists. Two perfect specimens of this vanishing race are at present in Melbourne in connection with the Abo[riginal] Art Exhibition. Is it not possible that portraits of one or both of them might be commissioned by the nation? Portraits that would find a place in our gallery, they would be of permanent human and scientific interest, apart from the artistic value the canvas would hold. . . <sup>2</sup>

Subsequently, many artists including Leason, contributed portraits of the younger of the two Aborigines, Stan Loycurrie, to an exhibition at the Fine Art Society Galleries.<sup>3</sup> (Plate 16)

Clearly Dyson was motivated by a 'salvage paradigm' intent upon recording the images of Aborigines before they passed into extinction. But the exhibition also fulfilled a humanitarian aim by raising money for Aborigines in drought-stricken Central Australia—evidence of the difficult situation in which

<sup>2</sup> Will Dyson, "Portraits of Abos," Letter to the editor, 12 July, 1929, *The Herald*, 13 July 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Participating artists included: W. Beckwith, G. C. Benson, C. Diston, Will Dyson, Harold Herbert, Louis McCubbin, W. B. McInnes, L. E. Reynolds, Jeanette Semple, Charles Wheeler, "The Studio; Artists and Aborigines," *Australasian*, 10 August 1929; "Artists Depicted: Studies by Leading Artists," *The Argus*, 1 August 1929.

pastoralism had placed Aborigines.<sup>4</sup> Although some portraits were privately purchased, officially the exhibition met with rejection.<sup>5</sup> There were reasons for the gap which Dyson had identified. As Margaret Maynard notes, "[h]istorical subject painting was seen as a suitable vehicle for nationalistic sentiment: portraiture was not."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, representations of Aborigines were doubly disqualified from acceptance into the canon of Australian art. As the 1929 exhibition revealed, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were of scientific interest and entertainment value but this did not mean that art institutions would consider such representations important to the nation's cultural heritage. Stan Loycurrie's resistance to reprimmitivisation may have further contributed to the lack of official interest. Leason's portrait depicts a confident and assured Stan Loycurrie located within the contemporary world—in diametrical contrast to his catalogue cover.

None of these experiences modified Leason's evolutionist position but they did contribute toward his emerging fascination with the representation of Aborigines. Leason's 1931 diary already indicates an interest in local Aboriginal genealogies.<sup>7</sup> In 1934, he joined Professor Wood Jones, Donald Thomson and Dr. E. Ford of the Melbourne University in an expedition to Lake Tyers which measured and photographically documented the remaining 'full-blood' Victorian Aborigines.<sup>8</sup> Such biological anthropology—in vogue till the 1930s—interpreted Social Darwinist theories through a

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<sup>4</sup> This exhibition thus predates the 1934 exhibition at the Athaneum Gallery, Collins Street, which raised funds for a pipeline to the Hermannsburg Mission; Jessie Traill, "The Hermannsburg Mission: Memories of a Visit," *The Argus*, 31 July 1929; "Artists Help the Abo: Sketches to be Sold," *The Herald*, 18 July 1929.

<sup>5</sup> At his retirement, the director of the Fine Art Society Galleries, W. H. Gill, gave the remaining portraits to Robert Henderson Croll asking that they be auctioned for charity. Letter, Croll to Miss Brown, 10 January, 1942, MS 9212, Victorian Aborigines Group, Box 3/1c, loose correspondence c1940, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>6</sup> This, and the following quotation derive from Margaret Maynard, "Projections of Melancholy," In *Seeing the First Australians* (eds.), I. and T. Donaldson (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 92-109, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Documentation for this portrait series exists in the form of a 1931 diary which Leason converted into a 1934 diary (hereafter cited as *Diary for 1934*), MS8636, Percy Leason Papers, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>8</sup> "Making a Record": Photographs and Measurements," *The Argus*, 28 February 1934, pp. 5-6.

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simplistic scientific naturalism [which] was sometimes combined with an over-enthusiastic view of the importance of heredity's role in the human make-up and civilisation, giving rise to the eugenics movement.<sup>9</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, photographic collections had been demanded by the salvage paradigm that documented the remnants of an Aboriginal 'race'; presumed to be doomed to extinction. Scientists such as T. H. Huxley had for some time called for a systematic photographic record, such as that which Wood Jones and his team now provided.<sup>10</sup>

Given the emphasis which scientists gave to photography, as an apparently objective and factual record of reality, it is somewhat surprising that, after Wood Jones saw Leason's first completed portrait of an old man, he encouraged the artist to return and paint the remaining forty-six 'full-blood' Aborigines.<sup>11</sup> His response may have been influenced by funding constraints. Wood Jones hoped to publish the results of his research but he admitted that "[t]he facilities for anthropological research in Victoria. . . are very meagre. . . [and] work is hampered by lack of resources".<sup>12</sup> Leason on the other hand, drew upon his own private resources as a cartoonist with the Melbourne *Punch* to fund the production and exhibition of the portrait series.<sup>13</sup>

It was also the case that since Cook's three voyages of discovery which had established the importance of artists as a source of immediate visual information, a tradition existed of artists' involvement with scientific projects—a

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<sup>9</sup> Peterson, " 'Studying Man and Man's Nature'," p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, "Representation and Reality: Science and the Visual Image," In *Australia in Oxford*, pp. 27-45, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines Issued in Connection with an Exhibition at the Atheneum Gallery, Collins Street, Melbourne, September 1934*, cf. Blake, "Percy Leason," p. 173. The catalogue lists 46 portraits of 'full-blood' Aborigines but some doubt exists as to how many portraits Leason completed. Assuming 28 were completed, 23 have now been located. Appendix 2: 2 documents their present location.

<sup>12</sup> "Making a Record: Photographs and Measurements," *The Argus*, 28 February, 1934, p. 6; see also "To Preserve Aborigines," *The Herald*, 23 March 1934, p. 6;

<sup>13</sup> Leason's status as a cartoonist was such that in 1924 Keith Murdoch, owner of the *Herald* and *Punch* signed a five year contract with Leason for £1,750 a year. Blake, "Percy Leason," p. 169.

tradition not altogether erased by the arrival of photography. Just as Leason joined Wood Jones' expedition to Lake Tyers, Arthur Murch visited Hermannsburg Mission in 1930 and 1931 with Professor Whitridge of Sydney University, and Laurie Wilkie travelled there in 1934 with an expedition from the South Australian Museum. This pattern of interaction indicates that the salvage paradigm was a pervasive myth in settler colonies: one to which artists and scientists were seen to make an equally valuable contribution.

Leason's growing commitment to Aboriginal portraiture was also driven by redirections in his artistic career. Leason initially trained as a commercial artist with Melbourne lithographers, but aspired to become a painter and studied at the National Gallery School and the Victorian Artists Society. After moving to Sydney in 1917, he worked first for Sydney Ure Smith and then with the *Bulletin*. By the early 1920s, Leason was gaining recognition as an artist: several of his paintings were purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but in reaction to an emerging modernism, he returned to Melbourne in 1924 as cartoonist for *Punch*. At this point, Leason began studying with Max Meldrum (1875-1955), the colourful and fractious leader of the Melbourne art world.<sup>14</sup>

Meldrum believed that pure art represented a scientific truth.<sup>15</sup> Artists could achieve these universal truths if they followed his "scientific impressionism" or "science of appearances" which analysed the ordered perceptions received by the eye as a set of tonal patches. During Meldrum's own lifetime, the fallacies in his theories, his intolerance toward other artistic philosophies and his mercurial personality led to his marginalisation in the Australian art

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<sup>14</sup> Leason may have met Meldrum earlier than 1924 and would certainly have been aware of Meldrum's philosophy. Ian Burn, *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900-1940* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990) sees the influence of Meldrum in Percy Leason's *Flowers*, of 1922, p. 157, pl. 119.

<sup>15</sup> See *Max Meldrum: His Art and Views* (Melbourne: Alexander McCubbin, n.d); Russell R. Foreman (ed.), *The Science of Appearances as Formulated and Taught by Max Meldrum* (Sydney: The Shepherd Press, 1950).

world.<sup>16</sup> In seeking to retrieve Meldrum's status Ian Burn reinterprets his philosophies as a logical, regional response to modernism. He contends that Meldrum's detached and disinterested approach actually placed "emphasis on analysing the process of seeing, rather than what was seen, [and] encouraged a greater awareness of the subjective conditions of perception."<sup>17</sup> If so, then Meldrum's influence was critical for the series of Aboriginal portraits on which Leason now embarked. After almost a decade with Meldrum, Leason was keen to refine his aesthetic philosophy and painting technique. He recalled subsequently,

[w]hen the portraits were painted I was at the time extremely full of the theory of the relation of sensation, perception and conception to art and enthusiastically desirous of testing it out in the weeks of almost uninterrupted concentration on painting. The theory had at last crystallised itself after the years of slow development from M[eldrum]'s teaching and from experience.<sup>18</sup>

The final catalyst which encouraged Leason to act upon Wood Jones' suggestion was the Victorian Centenary of 1934. From the outset the series of portraits were shaped around a salvage paradigm which incorporated evolutionism. Exhibited under the title, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, the portraits coincided with a moment in time when the rhetoric of the 'vanishing primitive' symbolically reconciled a romantic and picturesque prehistory with the progress of settlement.<sup>19</sup> Leason was,

well paid as a cartoonist, [so] neither expense nor profit were considered in painting the portraits. They were labours of love, the outcome of a deep affection for the Australian scene and much concern for the vanishing aborigines.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945), pp. 158-161 provides an overview of Meldrum's career; For the attack on Meldrum see William Moore, *The Story of Australian Art from the Earliest Known Art of the Continent to the Art of To-day* (1934, fac. rpt, Angus & Robertson 1980), Vol. 1, p. 104; Lloyd Rees, *The Small Treasures of a Lifetime: Some Early Memories of Australian Art and Artists* (1969, Sydney: Collins, 1984), p. 114 maintains Meldrum's influence ruined Leason's career.

<sup>17</sup> Burn, *National Life and Landscapes*, p.172 see also pp. 58, 98.

<sup>18</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Letter to Bernard? inserted entry 7 July 1954.

<sup>19</sup> Graeme Davidson, "Exhibitions," *Australian Cultural History*, 2, 1982/3, pp. 5-21.

<sup>20</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 20 March 1934.

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These statements indicate the value Leason placed upon the series of portraits, as a record of *The Last of the Aborigines* and as a critical turning point in his artistic career.

## ii Aboriginal interventions

The belief that Lake Tyers Aborigines were "The Last of the Victorian Aborigines" was of course a fallacy. Admittedly a rapid decline had occurred in Victoria's Aboriginal population. As Leason pointed out in his exhibition catalogue, after one hundred years of "our occupation" Victoria's Aboriginal population had decreased from six thousand in 1834 to three hundred and thirty Aborigines of 'mixed descent' and forty-six remaining 'full-bloods' in 1934.<sup>21</sup> But this population decline was exacerbated by discriminatory government policies. As settlement progressed, the attitude of Victorians toward Aborigines oscillated between protection and assimilation.<sup>22</sup> Beginning with the Half-Caste Act of 1886 legislation separated families forcibly so that 'full-bloods' of wholly Aboriginal ancestry were protected and supported on the few remaining reserves whilst 'half-castes' of Aboriginal descent were considered legally white and expected to assimilate. Aborigines suffered from the impact of this legislation but its wider ramifications were equally important: they gave credence to a popular Social Darwinism which presumed that this was "the beginning of the end" for a race doomed to extinction. In reality, these Acts implemented constructions of racial purity which excluded the anomaly of 'half-castes'.

In keeping with the thinking of his era, Leason could not conceive of Aboriginal culture as dynamic. Instead he considered Aborigines as a 'dying

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<sup>21</sup> *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, p. 8, Leason defined 'full-bloods' very restrictively. The 1933 Victorian Census listed 92 'full-bloods' and 771 'half-castes'. Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," Table V.

<sup>22</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* pp. 81-94, 101-102.

race'; signs of modernity became evidence of imminent demise. In his catalogue essay Leason commented,

It should be said that the last of the Victorian aborigines offer little material for the student of primitive races. Their old customs have gone. If some of the old crafts are occasionally practised, most of these have been considerably modified, or have lost altogether their original technique. . . [H]alf-castes often do most of the work producing those [boomerangs] sold at Lake Tyers. . . Few remember anything of the old tribal dialects . . . The old tribal laws have been forgotten.<sup>23</sup> [In subsequent interviews Leason further maintained that] the "old men' are inclined to be vague and uncertain of their ancestry, the many years of contact with white civilisation having dulled their memories."<sup>24</sup>

It is apparent from Leason's statement that the exclusion of Lake Tyers artefacts was linked to their inauthenticity. By implication, Leason assumes that the use of modern technology and the production of tourist artefacts by 'half-castes' was evidence of cultural decline.

When Leason chided Lake Tyers Aborigines for their apparent lack of genealogical knowledge he misunderstood Aboriginal culture and ignored the impact of colonisation.<sup>25</sup> As late as the 1860s, lines of descent were significant to older residents of the Station but the adoption of a European patronymic usage after 1900 discouraged memory of the maiden names of female ancestors.<sup>26</sup> Even so, Barwick found her informants traced their genealogy over three or four generations.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Leason had to adjust his racial ideals to fit the exigencies of reality when he discovered that some Aborigines were not "true Victorians": their family history went back to the "imported blood" of Nyungar people brought from Western Australia the

<sup>23</sup> *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> "Last of the Victorians," *Table Talk*, 13 September, 1934, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> In most societies, memory only goes back several generations. Amongst the Western Aranda, myth provides an alternative and valid way of conceptualising an ancestral heritage. John Morton, "Country, People, Art: The Western Aranda 1870-1990," In *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 23-62, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Dianne Barwick, "This Most Resolute Lady: a Biographical Puzzle," In *Metaphors of Interpretation: Essays in Honour of W. E. H. Stanner* (eds.), Dianne E. Barwick, Jeremy Beckett, and Marie Reay (Canberra: ANU Press, 1985), pp. 185-239, p. 189.

<sup>27</sup> Dianne Barwick, "Changes in the Aboriginal Population of Victoria 1863-1966," In *Aboriginal Man and Environment in Australia* (eds.), D. J. Mulvaney and J. Golson (Canberra: ANU Press, 1971), pp. 288-315, p. 297.

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previous century.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Leason disregarded these anomalies to maintain the fiction of racial purity so critically important to his project's authenticity; doubly coding Aborigines as "full-bloods" and "true Victorians" to elevate them as living symbols of Victoria's progress from prehistory to civilisation.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, Lake Tyers Aborigines were not the last of a dying race as the majority society presumed. The 'fatal impact' of colonisation was a convenient settler myth which assuaged colonisers' guilt and their responsibility toward Aborigines. Although considerable destruction of Aboriginal culture in the settled south east had occurred; Lake Tyers Aborigines—like other communities who had experienced similarly violent disruption—maintained more elements of their cultural life than outsiders realised. Purity of race presented a problem for Leason but not for Aborigines who maintained a very firm sense of their identity through ancestry, community and associations with their regional domain.<sup>30</sup> Although government policies and institutional practices wielded power, they were not dominant. Indeed, Leason found that his portraiture project could not proceed until he established amiable relationships with the Lake Tyers Aborigines.

To complete the forty-six life-size oil paintings, Leason moved temporarily with his wife Isobel into the guest house, 'Toorloo,' situated opposite Lake Tyers Reserve and separated from it by an arm of water. The ballroom was converted into a temporary studio by hanging blankets at the windows, a moral and aesthetic expedient which guaranteed privacy for the sittings and the exclusion of natural light advocated by Meldrum. Over the months of

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<sup>28</sup> *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, p. 6; The number of interstate Aborigines was actually higher than Leason realised; see Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 35, fn. 16, 36.

<sup>29</sup> The quotation is taken from *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, p. 6; see also Davidson, "Exhibitions," pp. 8, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Leason acknowledged these racial constructions were irrelevant to Aborigines. *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, p. 8.

March and April 1934, Leason expected his Aboriginal models would regularly leave the Station and, in return for a hot dinner, present themselves for sittings.

To Leason's surprise and chagrin he found himself ostracised and rejected.<sup>31</sup> At first Aborigines were openly ambivalent toward Leason then,

[e]ventually when one or two of the younger men agreed to sit they were timid and suspicious and the remainder hung fire. . . [Leason] could not guarantee continuity of sittings. A model would come one day and would refuse to sit the next. A new start would have to be made on a new model—often with the same result.

Each day,. . . Leason sat in his studio without knowing whether any or all of his models would arrive. If he went in search of them the whole settlement decamped to the bush.<sup>32</sup>

Leason was "in despair" and the whole project was in doubt until one Aborigine, Laurence (Laurie) Moffatt (c.1897-1966), chose to intervene and act as mediator, facilitating the process of production.<sup>33</sup> When Moffatt "appointed himself organiser and promised to provide at least one model a day" he effectively countered Leason's assumption of authority as coloniser.<sup>34</sup> Whether Leason was mortified by the need for assistance when he had taken for granted that Aborigines would wish to collaborate in his project or whether he was annoyed by the rebuff he had received, he privately denigrated Moffatt in his diary as "something of a schemer".<sup>35</sup> Yet, were it not for Moffatt's intervention, Leason's project would have been aborted. Motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit or perhaps, a desire for status within his community, Moffatt's historical agency mediated across the social, spatial, cognitive and institutional differences which separated Leason from Lake Tyers Aborigines.

<sup>31</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 15 & 19 March 1934.

<sup>32</sup> "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," *The Herald*, 11 September 1934, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 15 & 19 March 1934.

Even so, Leason had to negotiate with individual Aborigines to gain their services as models. Notwithstanding Moffatt's timely intervention, Aborigines retained their autonomy: free to choose the degree to which they wished to become involved in Leason's project. As shown above, Aborigines manipulated the regulations imposed by government legislation and those laid down by the Station managers by moving on and off the reserve at will. In this way, Aborigines maintained relationships with excluded 'half-caste' kin.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, managers attributed the "lack of willingness and an air of passive resistance" from the "inmates" at Lake Tyers to the presence of these outsiders: interstate Aborigines and those expelled from the station who camped on the opposite shore of the lake.<sup>37</sup>

Not only did some Aborigines remove themselves to avoid Leason, several refused to pose unless they were paid for their services. Jim Hammond and James Scott (c.1900-1956) each demanded payment of £1 from Leason in return for modelling but Leason refused to recognise that he was involved in a form of commodity exchange.<sup>38</sup> Instead he cast Hammond and Scott as trouble-makers: Scott's portrait remained unpainted and Hammond was deleted from the catalogue of *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*—further confirmation that Leason was prepared to adjust his constructions of racial authenticity to suit his own purposes.<sup>39</sup> Implementing an alternative tactic, some Aborigines bartered their services in exchange for reciprocal obligations from Leason. On one occasion at least, Leason repaid his models by assisting them with transport to visit their friends and families in Fitzroy.<sup>40</sup> The range of choices implemented by Aborigines displaces any assumption that these portraits arose out of relationships of dominance, submission or passive

<sup>36</sup> A A, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report for Twelve Months Ended June 30, 1926, pp. 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> AA, Series B356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Report for Period Ending 1 May 1933, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 9 March & 8 April 1934.

<sup>39</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 24 March 1934.

<sup>40</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 2 July 1934.

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acquiescence. Indeed the pattern of interaction shocked Leason into reconsidering his romanticism toward Aborigines such that he relocated them within the modern world, remarking privately that he had “lost all illusions about the blacks. Some [of] the old ones are like rather sly old cockies to talk to; some [of] the young ones are somewhat like Fitzroy Iarrikins.”<sup>41</sup> The ambiguities and contradictions evident between Leason's private conclusions and the public narratives which relate his encounter at Lake Tyers indicate the degree to which he modified his primitivism to gain Aboriginal compliance.

### **iii Gendered primitivism**

With one notable exception, which will be considered later, Leason's portraits depict Lake Tyers Aborigines semi-nude. Within Western artistic traditions, the nude represents a central and continuing theme, an academic canon of artistic accomplishment that references broader personal, philosophical, spiritual and political themes. Seen in this context, Leason may well have chosen semi-nudity as a personal artistic challenge which might later confirm his status as an artist.

In addition, representations of indigenous people semi-nude, further evoke a popular primitivism of the noble and ignoble savage. Although the myth of the noble savage originated in a classical yearning for a Golden Age, modernist revivals of this poetic idealisation, which symbolised the authentic relationship held to exist between ‘primitive man’ and nature, re-emerged through the writings of English poets and the French enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>42</sup> In his extensive analysis of the visual imagery generated by Cook's voyages of ‘discovery’, Bernard Smith reveals the extent to which representations of Pacific people were variously represented through

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<sup>41</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 12 & 15 March 1934.

<sup>42</sup> A. D. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas, Gen Editors, A. D. Lovejoy, G. Chinard, G. Boas and R. S. Crane (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1935), Vol 1, pp. 7-16.

imaginary constructions of the noble and ignoble savage.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere Smith suggests that the idea of the noble savage waned before a combination of influences: colonialism, evangelism and evolutionism.<sup>44</sup> Ruth Phillips, writing in another settler colony context, identifies three sequential shifts in the representation of Native Americans from "Savage Barbarian and Noble Savage" to that of "Touristic Indian" and the contemporary overthrow of these discourses.<sup>45</sup> Much has been excluded in the process of creating these linear narratives of progress: in contrast, Maynard shows that, after violence ended in settled Australia, a nostalgic melancholy displaced stereotypes of the ignoble savage.<sup>46</sup> Ironically Aborigines remained constructed as a past edenic ideal and admired for the very signs of traditional Aboriginal culture which government policies sought to eradicate.

At the outset, Leason hoped to depict Lake Tyers boys nude: a homoerotic desire which visually integrated Rousseau's modern fascination with children with the evolutionist assumption that Aborigines represented the childhood of mankind. Once again, Leason found he had to modify his plans when he sensed

that artists are suspect among the Lake Tyers people. He was told that artists who had been there before had painted their fully-clothed subjects as naked wild men with flowing beards and armed with spears and arrows!<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1960, 2nd ed. Sydney: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 5-6, 88-89, 100, 123, 148-9; Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), Ch. 7 questions the homogeneity of Said's concept of Orientalism to show that the conventions of history painting could transform images of indigenous people.

<sup>44</sup> Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970* (1962, 2nd ed. rpt. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 26-31; For similar interpretations in New Zealand see Leonard Bell, *The Maori in European Art: A Survey of the Representation of the Maori from the Time of Captain Cook to the Present Day* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1980).

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Phillips, "Changing Discourses: Negotiating the Touristic in Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art," Paper presented at the College Art Association Conference, Chicago, February 1992, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Maynard, "Projections of Melancholy," pp. 100-102.

<sup>47</sup> "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.

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Aborigines objected to being reprimativised. Lake Tyers Aborigines—like their Central Australian colleagues—were acutely aware that mainstream Australian society constructed Aborigines fantastically.

To Leason, such imaginative reconstructions were anathema. Following Meldrum's dictums, he was committed to depicting Aborigines as accurately and objectively as possible. In order to complete the series of portraits he had to “cultivate cordial and amicable relationships” with Aborigines which accommodated their demands.<sup>48</sup> As a consequence young boys like the eleven year old Jonathan Hood (1923 -?) appear, like the adults, portrayed semi-nude. Evaluated against the many other primitivisms available to Leason, the semi-nudity he chose granted Aborigines a considerable degree of privacy and dignity; Leason depicted both sexes bare to the waist, women were then wrapped in a skirt whilst men wore trousers. The degree of nudity which Aborigines allowed Leason was thus very carefully defined—but it was considerably more than Stan Loycurrie had tolerated. Indeed the error in the title of Leason's earlier portrait, Stanley Nooriwalka, suggests confusion existed in the artist's mind regarding who he was actually painting—evidence of the strained and formal relationships that prevailed. Undoubtedly Leason's transactions with Lake Tyers Aborigines occurred in a more relaxed atmosphere; in this instance, Lake Tyers Aborigines were in their own regional domain and Leason was positioned as other when he elected to cross the boundaries which separated Aborigines and non-Aborigines in a settler colony. Possibly Lake Tyers Aborigines allowed themselves to be depicted semi-nude to assert pride in their Aboriginal identity within a political regime of racial oppression and discrimination.

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<sup>48</sup> Rüdiger Joppien and Bernard Smith, *The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771*, Vol. 1 of *The Art of Captain Cook's Voyages* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1985), p. 47.

Leason's gender was a further factor which mediated his representations of Aborigines. Just as male anthropologists established their closest relationships with Aboriginal men and tended to privilege Aboriginal men's social structures so, the biographies reproduced in the catalogue accompanying *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* reveal the rapport Leason established with the older Aboriginal men. Status is accorded to Charles Green (1884 -?) through his memorable great-grandfather, Lamby. Green had led an itinerant life as a whaler and a farm labourer: as a champion athlete and swimmer he also accorded with the modern stereotype of the Aborigine as a natural sportsman. Indeed biography and physiognomy are conflated in Leason's description of Green as "physically a fine specimen but craggy in appearance".<sup>49</sup> By contrast with the tonal modelling evident in Leason's earlier portrait of Stan Loycurrie, Green's portrait (Plate 17) reveals the impact of Meldrum's teaching.<sup>50</sup> Leason articulates the fall of light onto Charles Green's chest and face as loose, painterly strokes to convey the tangible reality and monumental solidity of a proud upright old man. Leason projects Green through a combination of romantic and realistic codes; his nude torso is placed frontally to the picture in front of a series of parallel black lines which suggest cicatrices, at the same time he is contextualised into the modern world by his belted trousers.<sup>51</sup>

Leason found his representations of Aboriginal women far more problematic. Whereas nudity carried a certain aura and prestige for Aboriginal men, Aboriginal women were doubly marginalised by nudity, as women and as women of colour.<sup>52</sup> Women represent another social group inscribed within the binary oppositions of Western intellectual traditions and their

<sup>49</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 26 March 1934.

<sup>50</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 26 March 1934.

<sup>51</sup> Nicolas Peterson, "The Popular Image," In *Seeing the First Australians*, pp. 164-180, pp. 178-9.

<sup>52</sup> Minh-ha, T. Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 6.

marginalisation is evident in our language. We conceive of the noble savage in masculine terms, as an heroic and powerful subject: hence, Leason identified strongly with older men like Charles Green. The brevity of his biographies for Aboriginal women indicate the more restricted social relationship which operated between the artist and his female models. Feminism interprets female nudes as encoding gender relationships that image women as objects of desire for a masculine gaze. A further set of problems arise in the representations of indigenous women who are stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, accessible and traditionally subjugated.<sup>53</sup> In Australia, evidence from kinship and family structures lent support for these stereotypes and in turn, they informed the scientific discourses and folklore which justified racial discrimination.<sup>54</sup>

As each sitting progressed, the response of Lake Tyers women forced Leason to adjust his preconceptions and his practice. His diary indicates that delays in his painting schedule began to occur after he had completed all but one of the male portraits. On 2 April and again on 9 April 1934, Leason approached the manager and his wife, Mr and Mrs Glen, to intervene on his behalf, but even then, Ethel Hood and Violet Johnson failed to appear citing illness and shyness as their excuse.<sup>55</sup> When Leason painted his first female model, Angelina McRae, (1910-1993) on 3 March 1934 he initially commented that there was "no difficulty in getting her to strip to the waist" but as the sitting progressed and he became aware of his model's increasing discomfit, his own tact intervened to give "her a good deal of consideration, allowing her to wrap

<sup>53</sup> Julie Marcus, "The Blackness of the Body," *The Olive Pink Society Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991, pp. 4-8; Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 186-90, 211-213, 309-314; Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, pp. 48-9; Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 12, Autumn 1985, pp. 204-242.

<sup>54</sup> Mulvaney, "The Australian Aborigines," pp. 28-29.

<sup>55</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries 1-9 April 1934: Those Lake Tyers women whose portraits were not painted were: Ada Harrison, Ethel Hood, Maggie Johnson, Violet Johnson, Ellen Johnson, Alice Logan, Priscilla Logan, Sylvia O'Rourke and Lily Penrith.

herself after each impression.”<sup>56</sup> Today, Angelina McRae recalls that she and the other women “didn’t like posing this way” for Leason, semi-nude and wrapped from the waist down.<sup>57</sup> Once Lake Tyers’ women understood that Leason required them to pose semi-nude, they refused to concur in his project. Leason finally completed only four portraits of women. (Appendix 2.2) These portraits of an Unidentified Woman (Angelina McRae?), Dorothy Turner (1908-?) and Annie Alberts, (1885 -1962), suggest Leason carefully strove to maintain an objective and accurate representation which avoided any erotic or sensual overtones. (Plate 18) Thus the women’s portraits are equally as dignified and reserved as those of the men.

Given this historical context, the portrait of the fully-clothed Clara Hunt (1872 -?) assumes greater significance. (Plate 19) When Leason finally painted Clara Hunt on 5 April, 1934 he found her “very shy, but [an] excellent sitter”. In the absence of any further evidence, the assumption must be made that Clara Hunt refused to disrobe, forcing Leason to further adjust his practice and his primitivism to accommodate his model’s modesty. In a rare contemporary response to the Leason portraits, Burn interprets the portrait of Clara Hunt as evidence that she is “unselfconscious about being looked at or about her dishevelled clothes”—an interpretation which fails to situate Hunt’s portrait as unique within a series of semi-nude portraits.<sup>58</sup> Significantly, this shift in coding to protect personal privacy, appears to have altered the relationship between the artist and model, securing the artist’s attention more firmly on Clara Hunt’s face so that her individual character overrides the ethnic stereotypes signalled in the other portraits. Hence Clara Hunt’s portrait allows Leason a visual play between clothing and skin: a sequence of lighter tonal areas link the hair and the facial features with her partly exposed breast and undergarments.

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<sup>56</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 3 March 1934.

<sup>57</sup> Angelina Morgan (née McRae), Interview, 3 September 1992.

<sup>58</sup> Burn, *National Life and Landscapes*, p. 132.

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#### iv Aboriginal responses

As the project progressed, the dialogue in which Leason was involved, gradually altered his attitudes towards Aborigines. Painting over a period of several months Leason got to know Lake Tyers Aborigines as ordinary people with all the humour he portrayed in his popular 'Wiregrass' cartoons, based on country town life.<sup>59</sup> Although the process of production in which Leason was involved was not without its tensions, Leason was totally committed to his collaborative project and he worked hard; his usual daily schedule was to rise early, paint with his model all day and continue into the evening with preparation drawings and cartoons. Each portrait required several days and, arguably, the time, energy and commitment Leason gave to the project communicated itself to Aborigines. Leason's diary entry for 7 April 1934 records "a great crowd of Aboriginal visitors to see the portraits."

Aborigines were adamant in saying that they preferred Leason's portraits to photographs—a judgement with which Leason would have concurred.<sup>60</sup> Realists like Leason tended to denigrate photography, assuming it was a mechanical form of reproduction which provided an exact transcription of reality. In fact, photographs, like other visual signs, encode reality and express prevailing cultural values. As Elizabeth Edwards shows, the use of photography for the scientific recording of Aborigines actually incorporated a spectrum of styles from studio photography to cartes-de-visite and popular postcards.<sup>61</sup> When one compares the photographs of Lake Tyers Aborigines taken by Wood Jones and Thomson with Leason's portraits, the reasons for Aborigines' preferences are obvious.<sup>62</sup> (Plate 20) Here the men's tightly cropped profiles signify the new powers of surveillance available through

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<sup>59</sup> Blake, "Percy Leason," p. 170.

<sup>60</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary Entries for 29 & 30 April 1934; "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Edwards, "Representation and Reality," p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> "Making a Record: Photographs and Measurements," *The Argus*, 28 February, 1934.

modern technology: transformed into specimens, their portraits evoke an ethnographic concern with the pseudo-science of physiognomy.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, Leason's portraits required a slow and painstaking effort which engendered a more formal, ceremonial atmosphere.<sup>64</sup> Portraiture, unlike photography, involved artists in a slow and arduous process of negotiation with their indigenous models. It thus had the potential to operate as a "redemptive process [where t]ransfers of loyalty could occur."<sup>65</sup> Aborigines no doubt appreciated the way each of the life-sized Leason portraits faced frontally to incorporate the majority of the torso and the textured paint united the surface of the body, the clothing and the background in soft muted patches of tone which conveyed a palpable reality. Each unique portrait connoted an aristocratic aura and status denied by the profile photographs.

Lake Tyers Aborigines were not a naive or uninformed audience. Rather they were continually exposed to Western codes of realism through their schooling, the media and the photographic images taken by tourists, anthropologists and visiting artists. Somewhat patronisingly, Leason commented that the Aborigines,

showed a remarkable sensitiveness in criticising a painting. Sometimes I would ask one of a group watching me work what he thought should next be done . . . [and I always received a] . . . sound comment.<sup>66</sup>

Laurie Moffatt, who spent most time with Leason, critically appraised the portraits of Leason against those of a previous visiting artist, Harry Raynor (1891-1963).<sup>67</sup> Moffatt commented,

<sup>63</sup> Sekula argues that the archive of the body emerged as a new photographic realm by the 1840s operating honorifically in the sphere of culture and repressively as a form of social regulation. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, No. 39, 1986, pp. 3-64. pp. 5-8.

<sup>64</sup> Bernard Smith, *Art as Information: Reflections on the Art from Captain Cook's Voyages* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1979), p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Joppien and Smith, *The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771*, p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Harry Raynor trained at Gordon Institute, Geelong and taught in Victorian Technical Schools. Until the early 1930s, Raynor's interest lay in Aboriginal portraiture, thereafter he painted marine subjects under the name, 'Ships Raynor'. Joan Oliver, (née Raynor), Interview, 30 August 1992; Margaret Chalmers, (née Raynor), Interviews, 31 August 1992 & 19 October, 1992.

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I don't think that chap Raynor was much of an artist, all he seemed to think about was making old Hector like a wild bushman—someone from up north. There you get us as we are, alive. Raynor's were only pictures.<sup>68</sup>

Moffatt's astute response acknowledged how different codes of realism could produce a plurality of primitivisms. He explicitly rejects fictional images which relocate Lake Tyers Aborigines in a past realm. We also see how Aborigines in settled Australia might contest the power and status of Aborigines in remote communities by reprimativising them through the ideologies of mainstream Australian society. Amongst the Lake Tyers community, Leason's portraits generated considerable pleasure as likenesses of individuals. Aware of their marginalisation, Aborigines valued Leason's portraits as powerful icons which legitimated their contemporary existence.

Even though Lake Tyers Aborigines rejected being represented as ignoble savages, this does necessarily undermine their earlier relationships with Harry Raynor. Rather this history of interaction suggests that Aborigines co-operated with individual artists out of friendship and an interest in their projects. Aborigines' viewpoint on how they wished to be represented was not static but in a constant process of amendment and negotiation, contingent upon their accumulated experience and changing political strategies. When Raynor painted Aboriginal portraits at Coranderrk and Lake Tyers in the early 1930s he too was motivated by a salvage paradigm.<sup>69</sup> Raynor, like Leason, located Aborigines in a past, idealised realm and reprimativised his subjects for particular reasons. Recognising that Aborigines were a dispossessed minority who suffered racial discrimination, he hoped to impart a moral lesson to his public that Aboriginal culture existed in harmony with nature.<sup>70</sup> In his relationships with Aborigines, Raynor intended that an image such as

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<sup>68</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 30 April 1934.

<sup>69</sup> "Artist on Need to Record Aborigines," *The Herald*, 21 March, 1934, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> This portrait closely resembles that of Hector (Bull?) as yet unlocated; See also, "Painting our Aborigines," *The Argus*, 15 September, 1993, p. 4.

Aborigine with Duck of 1933 (Plate 21) might restore their pride and dignity by sloughing off the cast-off clothing which was symbolic of their degradation.<sup>71</sup> It is evidence of the friendly relations which existed between Raynor and Aborigines from Coranderrk and Lake Tyers that they acquiesced in his semi-nude portraits. And perhaps Moffatt was unaware that Raynor had repaid Hector Bull for his services as a model, with painting lessons and materials, thinking that in so doing, he was opening up future opportunities for Aborigines in the modern world.<sup>72</sup>

When we compare Leason's portrait of Charles Green with Raynor's portrait of Old Billie Russell from Coranderrk other aesthetic reasons for Moffatt's preferences become apparent.(Plate 22) First there is the tangible reality conveyed by the illusionism of oils against the more ethereal transparency of watercolours. Although Charles Green is decontextualised from Lake Tyers and situated in the 'Toorloo' ballroom before a grey blanket, his figure is nonetheless firmly united with the background, whereas Old Billie Russell is separated from any corporeal context by a generalised and insipid sky. Second, anachronisms exist within the portrait itself. As a gesture of courtesy to his age, Raynor depicts the old man in a jacket (and tie lent by the artist) but these elements from the modern world are contradicted by the weapons held aloft as if to suggest an heroic but futile gesture.<sup>73</sup> Finally, Raynor's portrait is flawed by anatomical errors where the foreshortening across the body lacks sufficient space and breadth. Hence, the strength of the portrait lies in the profile head of Billie Russell, articulated with considerably more detail than the tonal patches deployed by Leason.

<sup>71</sup> Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992.

<sup>72</sup> Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992; Biography of Harry Raynor produced by Margaret Chalmers, 19 October, 1992, p. 3. Copy in the author's possession.

<sup>73</sup> McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 58, 68 notes the central role played by hunting and fighting implements in representations of Aborigines.

Despite Moffatt's preferences and the marked stylistic differences between Leason and Raynor, both artists had a great deal in common. Leason and Raynor, like Meldrum, rejected the imaginative recreations of history painting and modernism; all three strove to depict the objective truths of reality.<sup>74</sup> The problem is, the language of art is interwoven with the practice of everyday life, the reality of colonial existence and discourses on otherness. Realism did not signify a metaphysical essence as these artists believed, rather, in a colonial context, codes of realism mediated the oppositions between colonisers and colonised. Nor did their depictions of Aborigines simply reflect or transcribe reality: any portrait is composed of an infinitely complex set of personal, physical, technical and stylistic factors from which the artist produces their own personal response.

Moreover, artists were influenced by their experience of cross-cultural interaction. Leason and Raynor grew to respect and admire the Aborigines with whom they interacted, and their actions contravened social conventions. Although a salvage paradigm informed the practice of each, their portraits avoided existing stereotypes. Lake Tyers Aborigines were able to override Leason's racist ideologies by intervening at various points in the process of production and they appreciated Leason's honest attempt to portray them as individuals. It is generally assumed that representations of the other encode relationships of dominance; a more constructive interpretation recognises that in a colonial context where racism marginalised Aborigines, Leason and Raynor used the "social space created by friendship" to legitimate an individual Aboriginal presence.<sup>75</sup> Aborigines at Lake Tyers and Coranderrk understood and appreciated that Leason and Raynor were affirming, rather than negating or denigrating them. Far from wielding power over Aborigines, Leason and Raynor were engaged in a collaborative process where

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<sup>74</sup> Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992; *Max Meldrum: His Art and Views*, pp. 24, 76, 83, 98.

<sup>75</sup> Joppien and Smith, *The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771*, p. 47.

Aborigines operated as historical agents deciding who should depict them and how they should be depicted.

### **v Distinctions of taste**

The various responses which the portraiture of Raynor and Leason generated amongst Coranderrk and Lake Tyers Aborigines reveals that meaning is not inherent in art objects. Rather, meanings are generated and accumulate in the process of production, marketing and exchange. Visual images thus operate as discursive systems as audiences inflect art objects with their own historically specific, culturally inscribed meanings. The interpretations elicited by Leason's portraits would inevitably undergo a further shift when they were exhibited during the Centenary as a series that commemorated "The Last of the Victorian Aborigines." In this context they were evaluated by another segment within the art world: the network of critics who were powerful through their association with institutions and the media.

Viewers from mainstream Australian society critically evaluated the portraits according to their own ideological position toward Aborigines. Artist and critic Arthur Streeton, responded with great appreciation;

The general expression of most of the works rather reflects the care bestowed upon the vanishing race in recent months. The natives painted appeared rather plump, more satisfied, and much less wild than those left in North Australia. They look from the canvas with an expression of calm comfort and confidence as if they had forgotten their stone age thoughts and deeds.

. . ."Mrs Hunt" one of the best painted works in the show, has with her full aboriginal structure the calm and beautiful outlook on life of some dear old English dame, a very kindly look.<sup>76</sup>

Streeton's paternalistic response supported the hegemony of the status quo and suggested that the protectionist policies implemented late in the nineteenth century to 'soften the dying pillow' of the Aborigines were really a

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur Streeton, "Two Art Shows: Aborigines and Water-colours," *The Argus*, 11 September 1934, p. 5.

luxury which amounted to pampering. Streeton's combination of admiration and condescension contrasted diametrically with that of another artist and critic, Blamire Young (1862-1935) who was vitriolic in his criticism of Leason.<sup>77</sup> Young first addressed,

our responsibility to the native race or races that were dispossessed by the white settlement of this continent—an ancient and knotty question—and, secondly our judgment in publicly displaying the result of the policy of isolation which led to the establishment of the aboriginal reserve at Lake Tyers. . . Those who visit the display will form their own opinion of its suitability for a Centenary exhibition. They must also make up their minds whether it can be classed as an exhibition of works of art, or as an ante-mortem analysis of a moribund race, painted more or less in expiation of our sins . . .<sup>78</sup>

Young's implied criticism of the Lake Tyers reserve suggest that his loyalties favoured assimilation over protection but his criticism of Leason's portraits also invoked distinctions of taste and artistic hierarchies to imply that Leason's portraits were 'anthropology and not art.'

Viewed as a series, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* inevitably connoted a nostalgic conservatism which ensured the portraits would be interpreted historically as a commentary on the inevitable demise of the Aboriginal race. One reviewer, perhaps influenced by the muted light which Leason had chosen, read into the portraits an "under-current of sadness in the sitters' expressions as if their hopeless future weighs heavily upon them as indeed it must".<sup>79</sup> Thus, non-Aborigines interpreted these portraits as a contemporary recapitulation of the heroic melancholy evoked by portrait vignettes of the previous century—although Leason did not delete hands, or fade portraits out in the manner of earlier artists.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Blamire Young, "Percy Leason and the Blacks: Pictures That Set a Problem," *The Herald*, 10 September, 1934, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Young, "Percy Leason and the Blacks," p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> "Last of the Victorians," *Table Talk*, 13 September 1934, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> Maynard, "Projections of Melancholy," pp. 97-102.

Young commented that he found the space of the portraits ambiguous and the grey blankets altogether “uncompromising” and indeed, the hermetic studio space decontextualised Aborigines from any sense of their lived environment. The portraits of the young artist Sydney McRae and that of Bobby King which Leason painted at Pentridge Gaol highlights the *lack* of context. (Plate 23) Their incarceration confirmed the deteriorating conditions at Lake Tyers. By 1934, a succession of bad managers had led to an increase in tension and there were instances of open rebellion at the Station; in 1931, McRae was charged with housebreaking and criminal assault and three years later with breaking into the store.<sup>81</sup> When Leason eliminated this evidence of social turmoil and unrest, he prioritised his allegiance to pictorial conventions of unity over any recognition of the difficulties which Aborigines confronted in their contemporary existence.

In his devastating critique of Leason, Young made it clear that he was not barring artists like Leason or Murch from depicting Aborigines, but he insisted that their images had to be “strictly disassociated from any idea of providing a museum with reliable ethnographic records.”<sup>82</sup> Ironically the position Young adopted replicated that of the previous generation of critics, who had similarly castigated the Aboriginal portraiture of Benjamin Minns and Tom Roberts.<sup>83</sup> Young’s review went on to raise a provincial concern about the international reputation of Australian art.

Those who remember European comment on Australian pictures exhibited at Burlington House some years ago will recall the almost unanimous verdict that there was something or other in the make-up of the antipodean mind that would always interfere with its recognition of

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<sup>81</sup> A A, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 19 February, 1925, p. 2; Report for Twelve Months Ending June 30, 1926, pp. 5-6; Series B356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Managers Reports 1930-1944, Managers Report for period 17 August 1931-30 November, 1931, p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Young, “Percy Leason and the Blacks” p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> Maynard, “Projections,” p. 106.

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artistic motive and defeat any effort toward a national understanding of where banality leaves off and art begins.<sup>84</sup>

Clearly Young was motivated by his own distinctions of taste but his concern also reflects how some elements within the art world deflected a concern for regional identity against the values established by the imperial centres.

Young was quite prepared to incorporate Aborigines into art when the work in question recreated an historical event, as his own earlier depiction of the ex-convict Buckley Acting as an Interpreter at Indented Head confirms. Until the nineteenth century, history painting maintained the highest status above portraiture, landscape and still life within Academic hierarchies, until its status was questioned and overthrown by nineteenth-century Realism. Burn argues this painting is noteworthy for the way it brings Aborigines and non-Aborigines together in a "claustrophobic exchange" expressive of the oppression of white settlement.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless the rhetoric associated with the Centenary suggested that history painting would be more officially acceptable than portraits of contemporary Aborigines.<sup>86</sup>

The celebration of the settlement of Victoria called for paintings which would give recognition to John Batman as the heroic, legendary founder of Melbourne. As its contribution, the City Council commissioned W. H. Mathieson for a stained glass window for the Melbourne Town Hall which depicted Batman rowing up the Yarra River. The State Library of Victoria purchased a watercolour by A. T. Mockridge of Batman's First Meeting with the Native Women at Gellibrand Harbour on May 31 1835. (Plate 24) At the time of purchase, the painting was commended for its "truth to history" and the public were informed that Mockridge had sketched Aborigines at Lake Tyers and the vegetation at Gellibrand Harbour to ensure absolute authenticity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Young, "Percy Leason and the Blacks," p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Burn, *National Life and Landscapes*, p. 31.

<sup>86</sup> Maynard, "Projections of Melancholy," p.106.

<sup>87</sup> see also "Painters Pains to Make Picture True to History," *The Herald*, 22 March, 1935.

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Nevertheless, history paintings allowed artists to draw upon other primitivist codes to imaginatively re-present and re-invent the founding myths of exploration. When artists depicted the founding of Victoria by the 'treaty' which Batman had signed with eight Port Phillip elders inevitably they masked a colonial history of dispossession.<sup>88</sup>

Significantly, Mockridge chose not to illustrate the dramatic moment when Batman met the Aboriginal elders with whom he signed a 'treaty', instead he depicted an earlier meeting between Batman and a group of Aboriginal women and children near Gellibrand Harbour. Formerly, Aboriginal culture was associated with the concept of 'hard primitivism', admired for its ability to survive and endure a harsh physical environment which had retarded development. In this painting Mockridge symbolises the subjugation of Aboriginal culture and the triumph of colonisation by effectively shifting the reading of Aboriginal culture from one of 'hard primitivism' to the 'soft primitivism' then associated with Maori and Polynesian cultures. Mockridge foregrounds the heroic figure of Batman as he exchanges gifts with Aboriginal women whilst Aboriginal men relegated to one side seemingly dissociate themselves from this encounter. When Mockridge depicts Aboriginal women clustered around Batman, covering their nudity in lengths of cloth, adorned in ornaments and admiring their appearance in a mirror, he constructs them as sexualised, erotic objects. Presented as a generic aggregate, Aboriginal women appear to confirm the Eurocentric trope of the indigenous woman apparently captivated by the ornaments of civilisation. The women stand as metonyms for the land and its people, acquiescing in invasion.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Alastair H. Campbell, *John Batman and the Aborigines* (Malmsbury: Kibble Books, 1987), pp. 84-108; The 'treaty' is infamous, nevertheless it recognised prior Aboriginal ownership. Dianne Barwick "Mapping the Past: An Atlas of Victorian Clans 1835-1904," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 8, Part 2, 1984, pp. 100-131, p. 107.

<sup>89</sup> Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," pp. 204-221.

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Given the evidence brought forward of the historical agency which Lake Tyers Aborigines asserted before visiting artists, we can be sure that Aboriginal women at Lake Tyers would never have allowed themselves to be represented in this way. Indeed, the supposition that Mockridge relied upon his imagination rather than his drawings from life completed at Lake Tyers, is supported by the dissonant figure on the right, whose stockier proportions and skin garments closely resemble Thomas Bock's (1790-1857) widely circulated drawings of Tasmanian Aborigines—an appropriation which would have lent added veracity to Mockridge's imaginative construction.

#### **vi Exclusions and inclusions**

The official status attained by Mockridge's unique history painting can be usefully contrasted with the marginalisation of Leason and Raynor. Leason hoped *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* would be purchased as a series by the National Gallery of Victoria and both Sir Frank Clarke, the President of the Legislative Council who opened the exhibition and Arthur Streeton concurred. They saw the portraits in evolutionist terms as ethnographically significant and of historical interest to posterity but only because there was "little likelihood of another generation [of Aborigines] being born."<sup>90</sup>

Other factions within the art world disagreed. From the outset, Meldrum claimed the portraits were "anthropology and not art"—a somewhat surprising response from Leason's mentor perhaps attributable to professional jealousy. Seen in broader terms the similarity of responses from Meldrum and Young, each of whom spoke from a particular position, suggest an alternative agenda: that an increasingly professionalised art world sought to dissociate itself from its former collaboration with scientific pursuits. Influenced by this critical response Daniel Mahony, Director of the Museum of Victoria, (1931-1944) rejected the portraits on similar grounds.

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<sup>90</sup> Streeton, "Two Art Shows, p. 5.

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[T]hese paintings would be of value in the future to students of anthropology and as materials for illustrators and students of the high arts. . . [but] . . the collection was 'not suitable for the National Gallery.'<sup>91</sup>

This official exclusion parallels the response to the portrait exhibition mounted by Dyson in 1929 and indicates the way institutions authorised certain imaginative representations of Aborigines which accorded with settler colony nationalist mythologies. Young criticised Raynor's portraits too, as neither sufficiently accurate as scientific observations nor imaginative enough to deserve the title of art.<sup>92</sup> Influenced by this critical reaction, Leason and Raynor abandoned their commitment to Aboriginal portraiture and in 1938, Leason departed permanently for America, taking six of the Lake Tyers portraits with him.<sup>93</sup> Henceforth the portraits drifted into obscurity, tainted initially by the criticism of Young and Meldrum and subsequently marginalised by contrast with the more radical social realism of Yosl Bergner (b. 1920) and Noel Counihan (1913-1986). Several belated and unsuccessful attempts were made to purchase the Leason portraits<sup>94</sup> but, as late as 1971, when Leason's widow gave the original six portraits to the LaTrobe Library, they were dismissed as "mediocre".<sup>95</sup>

It is significant that the Leason portraits, which Aborigines value and appreciate, met with official rejection whereas representations of Aborigines by the social realists were received with acclaim. By contrast with Leason, the

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<sup>91</sup> MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, letter to Bernard ?added entry dated 7 July 1954; Leason, "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8; "National Collection," *Table Talk*, 13 September, 1934, p. 5; "Gallery Trustees, Queen Victoria's Pets: Aboriginal Paintings Not Accepted," *The Age*, 30 November 1934.

<sup>92</sup> Blamire Young, "Watercolours of Natives: Mr Raynor's Records of a Dying Race," *The Herald*, 22 March 1934, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> Blake maintains that Leason migrated to the United States because his career was hindered by his reputation as a cartoonist but Leason's friendship with Meldrum ended in bitterness. Blake, "Percy Leason," p. 174 cf. MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 1, "The Meldrum School" typewritten manuscript unpagged & "Conception," in Brown Book, n d; Isobel Leason, transcript 1968, p. 1, Art Library, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>94</sup> Allan Dawes, "Nation has Lost the Leason Masterpieces: Portraits of our Natives Spurned, May Go to The U.S.," *The Argus*, 17 May 1955, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Keith Dunstan, "Percy Leason Fans... Its Back to Wiregrass," *The Sun*, 25 September 1971, p. 23.

social realists, Bergner and Counihan, addressed the political issues raised by Aboriginal deprivation and dispossession to depict Aborigines under a generalised sign as victims of colonisation and racial prejudice.<sup>96</sup> The Polish refugee Bergner, for example, identified with the plight of Aborigines as a result of his own experience of racial prejudice and his life as a refugee. This universal perspective is apparent in his 1941 drawing of a Group of Aborigines. (Plate 25) Aborigines appreciate his paintings as a realistic portrayal of the conditions in which Aborigines lived during this era<sup>97</sup> but we need to be clear, Bergner is not portraying individual Aborigines. Although the catalyst for this drawing came from Bergner seeing Aboriginal fringe camp dwellers at Tocumwal, in New South Wales, Bergner's models were his Jewish army colleagues!<sup>98</sup>

Thus representations of Aborigines are not the honest, uninhibited expressions of humanity that Geoffrey Dutton would have us believe.<sup>99</sup> Nor do they encode monolithic relationships of power and dominance. The truth to reality to which artists aspired was influenced by a multiplicity of factors which included: the artist's character and gender, their personal circumstances, their technical proficiency and the political context in which their images were produced, exchanged and received. Leason aimed to portray Aborigines as accurately and objectively as possible but interaction with Aborigines changed his viewpoint and Leason accommodated their historical agency. Individual entrepreneurs ensured the success of these transactions which intersected the boundaries that usually separated Aborigines and non-Aborigines. In asserting their rights as to who would paint them and how they were to be depicted Aboriginal men and women were equally powerful. When one examines Leason's intentions and the terms on which his encounter with

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<sup>96</sup> A decade after Bergner, Counihan painted Aborigines at Swan Hill in 1959.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Berg, Interview, 6 August 1991.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Klapferer, Interview, 17 March 1992.

<sup>99</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigines Portrayed in Art* (Adelaide: Macmillan, 1974), p. 13.

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Aborigines took place, Aborigines emerge as historical agents who collaborated with Leason. From their viewpoint his portraits reaffirmed personal and community pride in their Aboriginal identity.

To date these Aboriginal viewpoints have been overridden by the critical response to Leason's portraits. Critics do not take an inclusive approach to art, they classify art and seek out ways and means to exclude and marginalise certain genres.<sup>100</sup> The consensus between Meldrum, Young and Mahony subsumed qualitative judgements within distinctions of taste so as to exclude an entire genre of cultural production. In so doing, elements within the art world reinforced prevailing hegemonic positions.

Thus the status given to Aboriginal portraiture encodes changing relationships between colonisers and colonised. Within the visual imagery generated by Cook's voyages, portraiture is continuously present as a fluid and dynamic genre, providing visual information for scientists and forming the basis for the imaginative constructions of history painting.<sup>101</sup> Aboriginal portraits recur in nineteenth century photography in the cartes-de-visite and postcards collected by scientists for use in research. But when Victorian Aborigines were rendered invisible by government policies of absorption, the professional art world shunned Aboriginal portraiture and it became relegated to the realm of popular culture. When critics drew upon canons of taste and artistic hierarchies to assert their own power and knowledge they masked the reality of colonial relationships. As Smith shrewdly observes:

it is probably in the tensions that developed between art in the service of taste and art in the service of information that the allied problem of the relationship of visual art to power and domination resides. Both art as

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<sup>100</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 137-145, 221; Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 53-68.

<sup>101</sup> Joppien and Smith, *The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771*, see Plates, 60, 61 & 100; Smith, *Imagining the Pacific*, pp. 31-33.

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taste and art as information could be adapted to the needs of power, mastery and domination, but they served in different ways.<sup>102</sup>

Mockridge's imaginative reconstruction of history, which achieved official acceptance as a celebration of the triumphant progress of Victorian settlement, effectively neutralised recognition of Aboriginal dispossession whereas Leason's series of Aboriginal portraits documented a colonial present which many preferred to overlook.

Neither Leason's intentions, nor the degree of Aboriginal agency are immediately evident in the portraits. Rather, their status has been determined by the critical response they have generated. Nevertheless the meanings generated by art objects caught in the process of cross-cultural interaction are open to reinterpretation. Today our greater sensitivity to Aboriginal values and their assertion of self determination, has led to the majority of the Leason portraits being held in institutional collections. (Appendix 2.2 ) We no longer view his series as supporting particular ideologies of primitivism: as a consequence our viewing position has moved immeasurably closer to that of Aborigines who have always read the portraits constructively as images of individuals within their community. To contemporary Aborigines these portraits signify "the past they wanted to forget [and the means by which] it's coming to life again."<sup>103</sup> Each portrait constitutes a "way of recovering history" by reaffirming the complex network of personal kinship relationships central to Aboriginal identity.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Pacific*, p. 179.

<sup>103</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>104</sup> Jim Berg, Interview, 6 August 1991.

## **4 Art for tourists**

### **i Introduction**

The replica artefacts and staged displays produced by indigenous people for tourists have met with a mixed response. The pessimistic view adopted by many scholars interprets tourist art as a commodification of culture: a sign of colonial domination and a capitulation to capitalism. This criticism has further suggested that ethnic minorities and tourists are mutually alienated in this interactive process as indigenous people represent a stereotyped traditional way of life in response to the authenticity demanded by tourists. Other more constructive responses position tourist art alongside ethnographic objects and fine art as a form of cultural production expressive of a new social context. These various analyses have drawn attention to the uneven power relationships which operate when indigenous art comes into conjunction with tourism, but they remain generalised and need to be examined against specific instances of interaction and particular local patterns of commodity production. This analysis of the artefacts produced by Kurnai in the Lake Tyers region (Figs. 2 & 3) suggests tourist art fulfils a multiplicity of roles. When Aborigines choose to become involved in tourism, they negotiate a more favourable response from the majority culture, they gain a degree of economic autonomy and access to markets from which they are otherwise excluded. In the process, Aborigines articulate a local and national consciousness of their Aboriginal identity. Our discourses of primitivism impose strictures of tradition and authenticity which have emphasised dominance and ignored the diversity of representations initiated by Aborigines in this cultural arena.

It is increasingly apparent that Aborigines' extensive involvement in commerce since settlement has enabled them to maintain a vital and dynamic presence within a new colonial reality.<sup>1</sup> The problem is, institutional responses have

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent reappraisal in this direction see Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," pp. 59-71.

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recognised two categories of this cultural production—ethnographic objects and fine art—whilst tourist souvenirs remain excluded. As Bennetta Jules-Rosette argues, the error lies in trying "to view a contemporary . . . artwork as a deviation from traditional forms rather than an object emerging within a new social context."<sup>2</sup> Whereas ethnographic and art-historical continuums impose qualitative judgements which evaluate tourist artefacts in terms of their authenticity, Umberto Eco differentiates between these replicated signs on the basis of a type/token-ratio.<sup>3</sup> This semiotic interpretation recognises that tourist art may operate as an original and expressive sign system. Jules-Rosette continues:

Considered as a system, tourist art demonstrates the expressive and adjustive relationship between popular culture and economic change. It is a semiotic system in which signs also function as the medium of economic exchange.<sup>4</sup>

The innovative developments considered here emerged in response to and in collaboration with an adjacent tourist industry. In such a context, the production, display and exchange of indigenous art becomes entangled in patterns of cross-cultural interaction which are part of a dynamic and interpretative process that generates a multiplicity of meanings. Contrary to the modern conception of linear development, these meanings follow a cyclic pattern: commodities embody particular values for the community concerned, in exchange they signal a further range of meanings to consumers and Aborigines respond to and mirror the expectations of their consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Modern day tourism—not unlike anthropology—is often likened to a sacred journey. For Graburn, tourism is dissociated from everyday life and carries

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<sup>2</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 178-183.

<sup>4</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, pp. 225-6.

with it the expectation of spiritual renewal.<sup>6</sup> He sees 'ethnic tourism' as a combination of earlier forms of natural and cultural tourism where romantic associations of the landscape are conflated with indigenous people—objectified as the childhood of mankind living in accord with nature. His assumptions ring true in the Australian context and suggest why Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) and Lake Tyers Missions proved so attractive to visitors from the late nineteenth century onwards. Nevertheless we cannot assume that the same single monolithic primitivism motivated all tourists. Chapters 2 and 3 revealed a plurality of primitivisms operating among individuals and groups in different art world arenas. Further distinctions need to be drawn between contemporary developments in global tourism to which most writers refer, and the local, relatively isolated context of a young settler colony where Aborigines interact with members of the majority culture for whom these objects constitute symbols of national identity.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, tourist art may operate as a constructive vehicle for cultural change.

Kurnai came into conjunction with tourism as a result of their changing historical circumstances. When Reverend John Bulmer founded the Lake Tyers Church of England mission in 1861, Aborigines collaborated in the choice of site: Lake Tyers (or Bunyarnda) represented an important meeting place for all Kurnai people.<sup>8</sup> After Bulmer's retirement in 1907, however, Lake

<sup>6</sup> Nelson H. H. Graburn, "Tourism: The Sacred Journey," In *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (ed.), V. Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 17-31, pp. 25-28.

<sup>7</sup> The comparison is evident in the contrast between the international approach adopted by Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Jonathon Culler, "The Semiotics of Tourism," In *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (London, Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 153-167 compared with the local evidence from Nancy Williams, "Australian Aboriginal Art at Yirrkala: Introduction and Development of Marketing," In *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions in the Fourth World* (ed.), Nelson H. H. Graburn (Berkeley, L. A: University of California, 1976), pp. 266-284. Jules-Rosette observes that the more pessimistic position followed by the former studies give undue emphasis to the role of the consumer rather than the role which tourist art plays for indigenous communities.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Pepper and Tess de Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be: The Story of an Aboriginal Family 1842-1980* (1980, rev. ed. Melbourne: Hyland House, 1989), pp. 38-39, 78; Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," pp. 123 -5.

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Tyers Mission came under the administration of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. In 1917 when it became expedient to consolidate the majority of the remaining Victorian 'full-bloods' on a single reserve, Lake Tyers' inaccessibility ideally suited a paternalistic rhetoric of protection.<sup>9</sup>

But the fascination which Aborigines held for mainstream Australians tended to undercut this government legislation aimed at segregating Aborigines from mainstream Australian society. Already during the protectionist policies of the late nineteenth century, the Station was a focus of attention for visitors and by the 1920s, this interaction assumed a new dimension when Lake Tyers came into conjunction with an emerging tourist industry at Lakes Entrance.<sup>10</sup> Taking advantage of developments in transport and communications, tourists could travel by train to Bairnsdale, then to Lakes Entrance by boat. Increasingly, many preferred to drive by car, visiting Lakes Entrance en route to Sydney.

At the many guest houses which catered for a diversity of visitors, it was assumed that tourists would be interested in 'the Aborigines' and arrangements were in place for them to travel by boat to visit Lake Tyers. (Plate 26) In the 1930s, at the height of the tourist season during the summer months, tourists could experience past and present aspects of Aboriginal life.<sup>11</sup> Eliza O'Rourke baked fish and potatoes in the mud for visitors at Bley's guest house. At the Station, tourists witnessed displays of boomerang throwing and fire-lighting, they purchased artefacts, took photographs and listened to variety concerts which included a fascinating medley of south

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<sup>9</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 43. Barwick observes that Lake Tyers was the only site not coveted by pastoralists.

<sup>10</sup> Lakes Entrance was known as Cunninghame till 1915.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Adams, *The Tambo Shire Centenary History* (Bruthen: Tambo Shire Council, 1981), pp. 234-7, 268-9, 278-280; Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be*, pp. 79-90.

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eastern Aboriginal songs, Afro-American spirituals, renditions of popular music on the piano and the Lake Tyers gum-leaf band.<sup>12</sup>

The situation changed again in the late 1930s when a succession of bad managers led to an increase in tension at Lake Tyers. Instances of open resistance and vandalism by the young artist, Sydney McRae, led to discussion about a possible reformatory at Tortoise Head Island.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence many Aborigines walked off the reserve—despite their deep attachment to the region they refused to accept further restrictions. Some chose to live in nearby fringe camps at Jacksons' Track and Toorloo Arm, others enlisted in the army for the duration of the war whilst many moved temporarily or permanently to Melbourne. In the post-war period, Kurnai resumed their interaction with tourists; Aborigines living at Lake Tyers and nearby fringe camps performed in concerts staged at Gilsenan's tea rooms at Bancroft Bay, Metung. Others, such as the Mullett and Mongta families, who were linked by marriage, produced boomerangs and staged displays of boomerang throwing for the benefit of tourists travelling on the Princes Highway past Bairnsdale.

Thus tourism brought Kurnai directly into interaction with the majority culture. The distinctive artefacts and staged displays which emerged in response to this interaction, on and off the reserve, represent an innovative set of local manoeuvres which can be attributed to Aborigines' determined exploitation of a tourist presence.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Baglin and F. Wheelhouse, *Collecting Australia's Past* (North Ryde: Cassell Australia, 1981), p. 106 notes that "playing the leaf" was part of the folk music repertoire of nineteenth century music halls where a variety of instruments were played: "bones", saw and gum leaf. Research now extends "playing the leaf" to Aboriginal communities in Queensland and south west Western Australia. Aborigines warmed the leaf by a fire and sound was produced from a breath from the mouth when the leaf was held in various positions.

<sup>13</sup> For references to McRae see: A A, Series B356 /Item 54, Managers Reports for period ended 31 July, 1935 and 31 May, 1935, p. 2, Lake Tyers Managers Reports 1930-1944; Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 96 .

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## ii Artefacts as culture

The tourist art produced by Lake Tyers Aborigines can be interpreted as a form of opposition which countered the hegemony of such government institutions. As far as the Board for the Protection of Aborigines were concerned, Lake Tyers Aborigines were fully provided for: supplied with housing, rations, clothing, blankets, medical and dental care. In return, they were expected to work for the reserve at a minimum wage of 3d an hour or 10/- per month.<sup>14</sup> Those Aborigines who fulfilled special duties as butchers, sanitary men, nurses and domestics were paid at a higher rate of up to £5 per month.<sup>15</sup> Within such a system, Aborigines were expected to relinquish their freedom, independence and dignity in exchange for survival within a ration economy that kept Aborigines paupers because it denied them access to material goods.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that men frequently left the isolated reserve to take up seasonal work. Sometimes accompanied by their families, they moved up and down the coast, picking fruit and vegetables and wood-cutting.<sup>16</sup> Officially, Aborigines were meant to get a pass before they left the station; rations were docked if their absence was noted. Mary Harrison recalls during the period when Major Glen was manager 1931-1945:

You had to say 'Yes boss' or 'No boss'. There was no talking back. You had no rights. You had to have an application to go off the reserve and on the reserve.<sup>17</sup>

Although work as itinerant labourers bound Aborigines together as a community racial discrimination often meant local farmers exploited their

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<sup>14</sup> A A, Series B356 /Item 90, Inspection Reports 1931-1934, Chief Secretary's Department; Wages Blacks, Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 9 October 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Thorpe, Interview, 6 March 1993 worked as a nurse for £5 per month whereas Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993 undertook general duties at 10/- a month.

<sup>16</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, pp. 76, 90-91.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

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labour. In his family history, Philip Pepper says that in the 1930s, Aborigines were paid 3/- a bag of peas and they picked 10-15 bags per day.<sup>18</sup> Allowing the more conservative estimate of £1 per day cited elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> it is apparent that the wages Aborigines earned as itinerant labourers brought them far greater access to a capitalist economy than the 10/- per month earned on the Station. In addition, Aborigines withheld information about their earnings so this additional money purchased food and clothing.

Aborigines employed in the Northern Territory pastoral industry were similarly constrained within a ration economy. Significantly, the Hermannsburg watercolourist, Albert Namatjira, cited his resentment against rations as the main catalyst for taking up painting. Namatjira recalled,

before he started painting, no matter how hard he worked—whether at carpentry, blacksmithing, building stockyards or working with Afghans as a camel boy on the train between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs before the railway was put through—he could get rations and clothes but never even a sixpence.<sup>20</sup>

Aborigines in the settled south east felt similarly. In the late nineteenth century, residents at Coranderrk made artefacts for sale and the money they earned purchased necessities such as boots, clothing and food.<sup>21</sup> Indeed this work was so profitable that Brough Smyth, then Secretary to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, found it “humiliating that profits from [the sale were] not paid into consolidated revenue to maintain the reserve.”<sup>22</sup> Subsequent events at Lake Tyers discussed later in this chapter suggest his response typified official attitudes to Aboriginal initiatives

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<sup>18</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Adams, *The Tambo Shire Centenary History*, p. 272.

<sup>20</sup> Rex Battarbee, *Modern Australian Aboriginal Art* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1951), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumerooogunga," p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," quoting Brough Smyth, p. 19.

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Fortunately, Lake Tyers Aborigines were permitted to retain the money they earned from the sale of artefacts. Prices Aborigines received for their artefacts in the 1930s ranged from 5/- and 10/- for a boomerang or basket but even the lower price indicates that an artefact made in a couple of days could earn Aborigines half the average monthly wage paid by the reserve!<sup>23</sup> Given the hundreds of visitors who arrived at Lake Tyers over the summer holidays, it is clear that production for the tourist industry offered Aborigines a means of circumventing both the ration economy of the reserve and the racial inequality of the outside world. This evidence of Aboriginal intransigence to incorporation into a ration economy accords with the findings of Barry Morris working amongst the Dhan-gadi in northern New South Wales and Annette Hamilton's historical overview of Aboriginal resistance.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Aborigines did not passively acquiesce in the restrictions imposed by the Board. As already shown in Chapter 3, Aborigines implemented many tactics which circumvented regulations and gained them relative freedom. Officially, Aborigines were allowed off the Station to sell artefacts twice a year: once for the Bairnsdale Carnival and again for the Agricultural Show but in actual fact many seem to have moved on and off the Station at will, to sell or exchange their wares with the wider community at Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale. Laurie Moffatt emerges once again, as an innovative entrepreneur, a man who actively sought a market for his boomerangs by carrying them with him in a hessian bag when he walked into Lakes Entrance.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to remote communities where Aborigines were restricted to exchanging their art through

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<sup>23</sup> Prices within this range have been confirmed by many Aboriginal informants. The extent of this production in stations and reserves is borne out by official records: BPA, 42 Report 1906, Coranderrk, 4 July 1906 Joseph Shaw, p. 6. 8; BPA, 43rd Report, Coranderrk 1 July 1904, Joseph Shaw, p. 6.10 and BPA, 45th Report, 1909.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, "Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence," pp. 96, 105-107; Annette Hamilton, "Equal to Whom?," pp. 134-5.

<sup>25</sup> Brian Hancock, Interview, 23 February, 1993.

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mission stores,<sup>26</sup> south east Aborigines dealt directly with consumers—a situation which still allows them far more opportunity to sway public opinion.

Commodity production allowed Aborigines to maintain a voluntaristic philosophy of action similar to that which Basil Sansom identified amongst the fringe camps of Darwin. There he found a "grammar of service" operating which assigned value to human action on the basis of an exchange modality.<sup>27</sup> At Lake Tyers women bartered directly with shopkeepers to exchange their baskets for clothing and shoes for their families. Their coiled baskets were highly sought after as presents and many of the women produced on commission.<sup>28</sup> When Aborigines presented artefacts as gifts, they not only acknowledged their friendship and regard for individuals from the wider community but they also involved non-Aborigines in personal relations of indebtedness and reciprocity. Hilda Rule, wife of Len Rule, (assistant manager, later manager), who worked as a matron and craft teacher at Lake Tyers (1935-1958) received boomerangs from Aborigines in return for her kindness in nursing the sick or baking a birthday cake. It is further evidence that amicable relationships sometimes prevailed between staff and Aborigines that her daughter, Dot, received a boomerang as a birthday present from Lindsay Moubourne, an Aboriginal friend at Lake Tyers primary school.<sup>29</sup> ( Plate 27)

In another instance, Lake Tyers Aborigines presented a poker-worked boomerang to Reverend James Stannage in recognition of his assistance to Aborigines whilst he was Rector of Bairnsdale, 1925-1936. (Plate 28) At the

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<sup>26</sup> Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, pp. 20-23, 28-30, 33-36 explores the problems confronted by the Yolngu artist, Narritjin Maymuru at Yirrkala in the shift from Mission craft work which inculcated assimilation to an emerging fine art market for Aboriginal art.

<sup>27</sup> Basil Sansom, "A Grammar of Exchange," In *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia* (1988; Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), pp. 159-178, p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. conv. 18 March 1993.

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time, Kurnai informed Stannage they had commissioned a special boomerang depicting a corroboree from a New South Wales community.<sup>30</sup> Whether this boomerang indeed represented a commission placed with a nearby community such as Wallaga Lake or whether a member of the Kurnai community had parted with a family heirloom this boomerang differs significantly in style, technique and imagery from those given to Hilda Rule which typify the tourist art produced at Lake Tyers. The particular circumstances surrounding this gift indicate Aborigines' awareness of and response to existing discourses of primitivism. In recognising the value which mainstream Australians placed upon Aboriginal ceremonial life, Kurnai gained status for their gift and their community.

Hence commodity production brought economic gain and a degree of freedom and independence from the restrictions imposed by the Board, but equally importantly, the production and display of artefacts allowed Aborigines to undercut institutional impositions aimed at their integration into the majority society. Whilst Attwood emphasises the freedom Aborigines gained away from the Station when they lived communally as seasonal labourers, commodity production on and off Lake Tyers fulfilled an even more significant role.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the agricultural and domestic work demanded by the Station or the itinerant labouring undertaken away from Lake Tyers, the production of artefacts allowed Aborigines to work collaboratively and draw upon their own cultural heritage. From an Aboriginal viewpoint, artefacts are culture and the production of tourist art was a sign of this culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Tom Stannage, Letter to the author, 11 November 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 75-77.

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Culture is performed, not just conceptualised; it is culturally constituted through actions which actively link individuals to the community. Daniel Miller argues,

Culture is derived as a historical force prior to the existence of any individual subject, but is realizable through agency. It is therefore the means by which the individual is socialized as a member of a given society, and is, in turn the form of all individual and social creativity.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless the actions of individuals involved in this cultural production must be historicised and contingently situated. Speaking from a later, more heightened, public expression of Aboriginality, contemporary Kurnai see the production and display of artefacts as a reaffirmation of their Aboriginal heritage. Aileen Mongta and Chook Mullett recall with pleasure how they gathered around the person making the boomerang and were shown how to shave the wood with a piece of broken glass and learn the skills in making them fly whilst listening to humorous stories from a past hunter-gatherer way of life. In their view, making boomerangs is not just a skill, it "reminds you of what you know—it's all related, it's a way of keeping up the culture."<sup>33</sup> Beckett suggests such essentialist definitions—which tend to incorporate our primitivisms—represent Aborigines' strategic response to a colonial context.<sup>34</sup> Today Aborigines conceive of their culture as an entity that incorporates both local and national arenas. In an earlier era, however, Aborigines operated from a more private sense of Aboriginality when individuals drew selectively from their existing skills and knowledge to produce and reproduce their culture in order to gain some degree of control over the social systems in which they were embedded. This process involved Aborigines in a succession of transformations whose outcomes were largely unforeseen.

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 80-81.

<sup>33</sup> Chook Mullett, Interview, 2 September 92; Aileen Mongta, Interview, 5 March 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Beckett, "Aboriginality and the Nation State: A Comparative Perspective," unpublished paper, 1991, Copy in the author's possession.

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This consideration of tourist art at Lake Tyers adds another element to our understanding of institutional structures. In many ways, Aboriginal stations can be likened to the model of the "total institution" proposed by Erving Goffman.<sup>35</sup> Managers habitually referred to Aborigines as "inmates" and they often wielded power autocratically and arbitrarily.<sup>36</sup> Understandably, the destruction of Aboriginal culture and Aborigines' subsequent subservience and dependency has been attributed to the impact of institutionalisation.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there are critical differences.<sup>38</sup> First, race relations on missions and stations were not unique to these institutions but mirrored, in various ways, the racial discrimination Aborigines experienced in mainstream Australian society. Second, hierarchical relations between staff and Aborigines were not inflexible; they could be set to one side. Third Aborigines were not confined within these institutional structures. Although families suffered through separation, Aborigines crossed official boundaries to maintain relationships with kin and interact with mainstream Australian society. Whilst Goffman shows that total institutions tolerated activities like theatrical performances and hobbies as a release of tension for the community, the role which tourist art played for Aborigines as a means of economic gain, and as an oppositional tactic which maintained cultural continuity was of far greater significance.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co. 1961).

<sup>36</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 173. For instances of rebellion see AA, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report for Twelve Months Ending June 30, 1926, pp. 5-6 .

<sup>37</sup> Oral histories such as *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker: The Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900-1972 as told to Janet Mathews* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980) contain many indictments of the Aboriginal reserves as do the contact histories of Charles Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia*, pp. 270-8.

<sup>38</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, p. 28-34.

<sup>39</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 68-70.

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### iii Boomerangs: regional identity/ national symbol

To south eastern Aborigines returning boomerangs are symbolically important as part of their regional heritage: to members of the majority society, returning boomerangs represent a symbol of national identity. In a highly original way, the cultural production of the Kurnai mediated between these two apparently opposed realms and, in the process, negotiated new roles and meanings for Aboriginal artefacts emblematic of Aborigines' changed political, economic and social circumstances.

Chapter 2 demonstrated the intense interest which the boomerang elicited from evolutionists for whom it represented evidence of developmental stages amongst indigenous people. But the emphasis given to ethnographic interpretations has overlooked the parallel emergence of the boomerang in the broader sphere of popular culture as a symbol of national identity. As Australia's national symbols emerged in the wake of late nineteenth century nationalism, the boomerang underwent a further set of transformations to take its place alongside the kangaroo, a sprig of wattle and the swagman as an ubiquitous symbol of national identity. In his book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller points out that portable artefacts lend themselves to such abstract legitimations by the state.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, commercial interests appropriated the boomerang as a sign of a uniquely Australian product to which, it was implied, consumers would undoubtedly return. During the First World War, the returning boomerang conveyed a more poignant message when it was deployed as an emblem in various locations: on the aeroplanes flown by the few Australian pilots who served with the Royal Air Force, on comfort fund badges and on the Lest We Forget badge. In detailing this history, Philip Jones notes that "[e]ach successive wave has contributed to

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, p. 125.

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the remaking of Aboriginal culture in European eyes and promoted a new category of Aboriginal object."<sup>41</sup>

In the process of these appropriations, the boomerang became stereotyped, losing sight of local, regional differences and giving rise to several common misconceptions in the process.<sup>42</sup> The difference between *Wonguim*, returning boomerangs, and *Barn-git*, fighting and hunting boomerangs, became confused. In general the public assumed boomerangs were generic to Aboriginal Australia when in fact they were unknown in Tasmania and the far north. In contrast with these misconceptions, returning boomerangs maintained a special meaning for south eastern Aborigines as part of their own regional heritage. In an earlier era, returning boomerangs featured in sport and in hunting ducks when the boomerang's flight above the surface of rivers and lakes drove birds out of the water and allowed them to be caught.<sup>43</sup> The difference was, produced, displayed and exchanged as tourist souvenirs, these boomerangs accrued a new set of meanings beyond their original use-value within a hunter-gatherer economy.<sup>44</sup> When Kurnai staged displays of boomerang throwing for tourists from the majority culture they transformed the meanings encoded in these artefacts. Such interaction began to disinter artefacts from their museological associations with a dead culture to demonstrate Kurnai's continuing presence in the modern world.

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<sup>41</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," p. 66; This overview of the history of the boomerang relies upon the information bought forward by Jones and that in the exhibition catalogue *Boomerang*, 27 February-19 July 1992, South Australian Museum.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," pp. 67-68; Chips Mackinolty, "Whose Boomerang Won't Come Back? . . . or At Least Get a Decent Return," In *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market* (eds.), P. Loveday & P. Cooke (Darwin: The Australian National University, 1983), pp. 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> During the nineteenth century Aborigines on reserves were able to supplement government rations by foraging for food on adjacent land. By the turn of the century however, pastoral development and the progressive closure and reduction of reserves gradually curtailed these activities. BPA, 43rd Report 1907, Lake Tyers, 17 July 1907, John Bulmer, unpagged, point 9; BPA 37th Report, Coranderrk, 1st July 1901, Joseph Shaw, p. 7.9; BPA 41st Report 1905, Lake Condah, 2 July 1905, J. H. Stähle.

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The painted images and text characteristic of the boomerangs produced at Lake Tyers after the 1920s operated as a complex sign system which contributed toward these changing constructions for Aboriginality. As an innovative and highly original response to an emerging tourist industry, parallels exist between the Lake Tyers boomerangs and the painted artefacts produced by the Aranda at Hermannsburg Mission in the mid 1930s. (Fig. 1, Plate 29) Similarities in the style, content and technique of the artefacts produced by both communities indicate Aborigines' common colonial experiences; their differences suggest the impact of distinctive local circumstances. Although the Aranda maintained a privileged status in anthropology, the mission environment encouraged Aranda artists to produce art and craft as a means of gradually incorporating them into the majority society. This attitude generally meant missions failed to understand the importance which Aborigines attached to their art but it did guarantee their active support and artists were supplied with high quality materials. By contrast, tourist art produced by Kurnai at Lake Tyers was not supported by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Lake Tyers boomerangs are an Aboriginal initiative produced with children's watercolour paint-boxes purchased from local stores.<sup>45</sup>

Cooper's analysis of south eastern artefacts established that, at contact, south east mobiliary art exhibited the richest diversity of geometric and figurative imagery of any stylistic area in Aboriginal Australia.<sup>46</sup> In tracing the changes which subsequently occurred she disputes earlier assumptions that Aboriginal appropriations from the popular imagery of coins, stamps, postcards and the media and their use of metal technology for engraved and poker-worked artefacts, constituted evidence of cultural disintegration.<sup>47</sup> Her reappraisal

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<sup>45</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. con, 18 March, 1993. Another source of supply may have been the Lake Tyers primary school.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," pp. 37- 38.

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contrasts with the evidence from nineteenth-century collections. The Bulmer collection of Kurnai artefacts, presented to May Bulmer, daughter of Reverend John Bulmer at her marriage to Harry Rankin in 1900, demonstrates collectors' preference for geometric ornament. (Plate 30) Artefacts decorated with realistic imagery which appropriated from the majority culture were generally relegated to curio status.

In hindsight, it is apparent that the historical debates concerning the degree of geometric and figurative imagery in Aboriginal art are erroneous. In his overview of the critical response to central desert art Sutton demonstrates that, at various times, tendencies to representation *and* abstraction have both been attributed to European influences.<sup>48</sup> The problem is that Western artistic codes assume that art aims to represent (look like) objects in the real world. It follows that representational art and abstraction are dealt with as discrete categories when, in fact, their relationship is arbitrary and highly ambiguous. In reality, these culturally coded terms bear little relationship to the way small-scale societies encode a multiplicity of meanings by combining figurative and geometric elements in compositions.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, the general trend toward realism identified in third world tourist art becomes modified in the Australian context by cultural and historical factors. In her study of contemporary African tourist art, Jules-Rosette, found hyper-realism in association with certain recurring genres of flora and fauna in an idyllic landscape.<sup>50</sup> She maintains such utopian images do not constitute a

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," In *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 59-88, p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> Morphy, "What Circles Look Like," pp. 17-36; Nancy Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

<sup>50</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, pp. 151-4; Similarities emerge in the popular painting produced for an African audience discussed by Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian, "Art, History, and Society: Popular Painting in Shaba, Zaire," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1976, pp. 1-21.

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nostalgia for the past: rather their hyper-realism is a knowing fiction which recognises the radical disruptions of the modern world. Her evidence suggested that the loss and cultural disruption experienced by indigenous people was expressed as three distinct categories of images: a longing for the past, a veiled criticism of injustices and a tension between individualism and cultural unity. My evidence from Lake Tyers accords closely, but not entirely with her evidence. By contrast with the hyper-realism of African tourist art, the Lake Tyers boomerangs maintain a tension between geometric and figurative representations which engender meaning as total compositions. The imagery on the anonymous boomerangs given to Hilda Rule exemplifies these differences: a map of the continent flanked by flags and the kangaroo and emu drawn from the Australian coat of arms fill the apical position; at the centre of each arm the artist depicts birds perched on a leafy twig, whilst geometric elements are placed either end. This combination of elements gives rise to a visual tension: a disjunction operates between the illusion of depth created by the receding scale and depth of the animals and the diagonal tree at the apex which enters and exits the edge of the boomerang like a pathway crossing the land.<sup>51</sup>

Viewed from this perspective; the figurative motifs at the apex and arms read in conjunction with the geometric elements at either end of the boomerang: placement is equally as important as imagery. The Kurnai elder, Albert Mullett, suggests the figurative and geometric elements which form symmetrical pairs encode continuing links with regional domains and kin. In a boomerang by Joe Mullett, the recurring motif of birds perched on a twisted branch of foliage identifies the family totem of the Mullett family—the Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*). (Plate 31) On a boomerang by Laurie Moffatt the birds represent the wrens which signify Gippsland moieties: the

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<sup>51</sup> Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask," pp. 249-282, pp. 250-255 note the same visual tensions in a Namatjira woomera.

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male moiety *Yeerung*, the Southern Emu-Wren (*Stipiturus malachurus*) and the female moiety, *Djeegun*, the Superb Fairy-Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*).<sup>52</sup> (Plate 32) Similarly, the geometric elements of zig-zags, triangles, dots, parallel lines and circles symbolise clan relationships. Comparisons between Lake Tyers and Wiradjuri boomerangs reveal that the range of elements and their placement on boomerangs differentiates regions. (see Chapter 6 )

In combination, these figurative and geometric images re-contextualise the past in the present. The individual motifs of the koala, emu and kangaroo depicted on a boomerang made by Wally Pepper (1918-1980) and decorated by Dolly Pepper née Mullett (1916-c.1989) represent the former, fertile landscape of their regional domain. (Plate 33) When such images of the land are juxtaposed with the maps, flags and coats of arms which denote colonial authority and power, Kurnai incorporate the heraldic imagery of the colonial power. Keesing argues that such oppositional logic is inherent in the counter-hegemonic discourses of the colonised. They

have repeatedly produced mirror-images of the political structures used to dominate them, have invoked conceptual entities that were convenient fictions of colonial administration, have mimicked and (often unwittingly) parodied the semiology of colonial rule and white supremacy.<sup>53</sup>

When Aborigines at Lake Tyers, as at Hermannsburg, deployed such symbols of national identity they incorporated themselves within the 'imagined communities' of modern nation states. In the process, Aborigines began to interweave local associations with their regional domain into a wider pan-Aboriginal concern with colonial dispossession. Since settlement, south eastern Aborigines had staged protests aimed at achieving recognition for their dispossession yet Federation in 1901 denied Aborigines existed by excluding them from the census. Nevertheless, Aborigines still felt patriotism

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<sup>52</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 26 February, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation*, p. 8.

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for their country: nine Lake Tyers men (in addition to others elsewhere in the Victoria) served in the First World War and twenty-five enlisted in the Second World War.<sup>54</sup> At a time when authorised discourses on Aborigines refused to recognise their presence as part of a contemporary world, a boomerang like that by Keith Bryant, (1942-1979) operated as an "off-site marker"—a talisman which triggered associations in the viewer through the information it conveyed.<sup>55</sup> (Plate 34 ) As a souvenir, Bryant's appropriation of a post card image of Lakes Entrance and the inscription "Best Wishes from Lake Tyers 1957" resonated with memories of Lake Tyers and the tourist's encounter with Aborigines.

Likewise concerts performed at Lake Tyers incorporated the same Aboriginal messages to tourists and fulfilled a similar role for Aborigines. Although Captain Newman (1928-1931) is generally credited with initiating the concerts the previous manager, George Baldwin, (1925-1928) had already reported favourably to the Board that,

Frequent concerts are held and other forms of amusement provided in the social hall. I believe this has resulted in the natives taking a keen interest in their own affairs and in what is taking place around them.<sup>56</sup>

Seeing their positive value, Captain Newman extended the concerts. Cora Gilsenan, a close friend of Lake Tyers Aborigines recalls, Newman

was interested in anything that made [Aborigines] happy, and this meant keeping them occupied so he. . . got together a concert party and took them on tour around the country towns of Victoria . . . in hired halls.<sup>57</sup>

At the conclusion of the tour, the concert party continued to perform at Lake Tyers for the benefit of tourists. Such positive community action resulted in

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<sup>54</sup> Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War From the Somme to Vietnam* (South Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan 1976), p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> AA, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-26, pp. 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993.

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profits being pooled toward a Lake Tyers Social Club and, at Newman's suggestion, Aborigines helped purchase X-Ray equipment for the Bairnsdale hospital which would help alleviate illness in their community.<sup>58</sup> In his research at La Perouse in the 1960s James Bell similarly found a highly integrated social group who actively resisted assimilation by pooling their resources.<sup>59</sup> Despite material change, south eastern Aborigines, maintained many continuities with the hunter-gatherer values demonstrated by remote communities.<sup>60</sup>

"Jacky Jacky Was Smart Young Fellow" was a favourite song. Aborigines undercut the power wielded by the humiliating Jacky Jacky stereotype when they incorporated this derogatory term into a protest song played back to the majority culture. Other songs indicate the way Aborigines were demanding recognition that they were Australia's indigenous race.

Can't we have a song about Australia  
 About the emu and the kangaroo?  
 A song about the possum or the wattle blossom  
 Any kind of rag will do.  
 Can't we have a song about the old gum tree  
 Or about our native land?  
 Something that's original about the Aboriginal  
 The real Australian man.<sup>61</sup>

Later, during concerts in Melbourne, critics would denigrate the American influences evident in Aboriginal culture but Aborigines selectively incorporated through their own world view. Such Americanisms may be better understood as further evidence of modernisation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 85; A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Managers Reports 1930-1944, Managers Report for period 17 August 1931 - 30 November 1931.

<sup>59</sup> James Bell, "The La Perouse Aborigines: A Study of Their Group Life and Assimilation into Modern Australian Society, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1967, pp. 146, 149-50.

<sup>60</sup> Altman, *Hunter-gatherers Today*, pp. 129-151.

<sup>61</sup> Alan West, Lake Tyers tape, 1961, Copy held by the author.

<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Philip and Roger Bell argue that the basis of American influences lies in strategic alliances. *Implicated: The United States In Australia*, Australian Retrospectives, Series Editor, David Walker (Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1993).

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Aboriginal tourist artefacts function as metonym: referring back to their original role within a hunter-gatherer society whilst they accrue new meanings in interaction with the majority culture. They are not replicas; rather in Umberto Eco's terms, they represent an aesthetic idiolect which allowed individual responses to agreed cultural codes.<sup>63</sup> For south eastern Aborigines, returning boomerangs were meaningful as part of their local heritage and in their response to settler nationalism, they maintained and extended their power over this symbol. It was a sign of a more heightened sense of Aboriginality when Aborigines incorporated boomerangs into new ceremonial contexts as, for instance, when Billie Russell attended the unveiling of Barak's memorial in 1934 or at the war-time wedding of Suzy Murray and George Patten when the guard of honour formed an arch of boomerangs in lieu of swords. (see Chapter 5) The additional appropriation of emblems from mainstream Australian culture allowed the past to be reinvented in order to draw attention to present injustices and imagine future possibilities.

#### **iv The critical response.**

It is surely more than a coincidence that the Museum of Victoria ceased collecting south eastern artefacts in the 1920s—at the same time as Lake Tyers Aborigines began to exploit their conjunction with the tourist industry.<sup>64</sup> Exclusion from institutional collections did not prevent the production of artefacts at Lake Tyers, but it contributed to the obscurity which has continued to surround the history of Aboriginal art in this region. In broader terms, such institutional exclusion expressed and reaffirmed the government policies which aimed to render Aborigines invisible by their consolidation at the remote Lake Tyers reserve.

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<sup>63</sup> Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 270-273.

<sup>64</sup> At the behest of the newly formed Native Welfare Board, the Museum of Victoria purchased an undecorated boomerang by Wally Pepper in the 1950s. McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 99-100, 108-9.

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This change in institutional collection policies are attributable to a number of factors. When ethnographic collections were first established in the mid-nineteenth century, it was presumed that the tangible reality of material culture represented objective, factual data which supported evolutionary paradigms. Discourses of primitivism thus inscribed artefacts within systems of knowledge and power which restricted understanding of the way they might be expressive of Aborigines' vital response to a changing social, political, and physical reality. Since the conceptual frameworks which shaped typologies evaluated artefacts as functional items within a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, commodification implied a breakdown of tradition and cultural disintegration.

Anthropology emphasised this interpretation when it conceived of Aboriginal culture as a totality, marked as other by its hunter-gatherer lifestyle, ritual and ceremonial life and kinship structures. When Baldwin Spencer said in 1898, that, "In Victoria there is not a single native who really knows anything of tribal customs" he defined Aboriginal culture in a way that seemed to neatly coincide with the policies of racial discrimination effected in government legislation.<sup>65</sup> In keeping with the thinking of his era, Spencer venerated tradition but could not conceive of a dynamic Aboriginal culture which would adjust to meet changing circumstances.

The effect of this discrimination against contemporary artefacts is heightened by contrast with the growing admiration expressed for Aboriginal art. Writing in 1878, the ethnographer Brough Smyth mourned the changes and adaptations then in evidence in the production of artefacts but he admired the creativity, and vivacity of Aboriginal art, describing the Lake Tyrrell bark

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<sup>65</sup> R. R. Marrett and T. K. Penniman, *Spencer's Scientific Correspondence with Sir J. G. Frazer and Others*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 140.

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drawing as "full of life and action."<sup>66</sup> Artefacts were expected to conform to an evolutionist typology whereas western artistic traditions applauded originality and creativity. Aboriginal artefacts were thus caught in a particular set of ethnographic criteria which associated authenticity with the traditional. In 1929 it was reported

The demand for genuine boomerangs . . . is steadily increasing. They have become so scarce, in fact, that the curator of our Museum, who recently tried to purchase two, was unable to secure them at reasonable price.

From 30/- to £2 is being asked for them in the secondhand dealer's shops and as much as £10 has been demanded for one of the old type of fighting boomerangs.<sup>67</sup>

For those professionals with specialised knowledge, authentic Aboriginal culture could only be located in the past.

As discussed already, Leason's response maintained a nineteenth century viewpoint associating inauthenticity with the hybridity of 'half-castes' and certain key factors: the replication of artefacts for commodity exchange, the use of modern technology and the incorporation of alien subject matter. In the catalogue to the *Last of the Victorian Aborigines* Leason was openly critical.

It should be said that the last of the Victorian aborigines offer little material for the student of primitive races. Their old customs have gone. If some of the old crafts are still occasionally practiced, most of these have been considerably modified, or have lost altogether their original technique.

In the making of boomerangs, for example, the modern axe and iron wedges are used to remove the rough block from the tree, and a vice, a saw, glass scrapers and sandpaper are employed to make the finished boomerang. It is usually decorated, sometimes with a sketch of Sydney Harbour Bridge, and half castes often do most of the work in producing those sold at Lake Tyers.<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere, Leason cynically noted that Aborigines were not using planes and predicted (quite correctly) that automatic planing machines would soon be in

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<sup>66</sup> Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 287.

<sup>67</sup> "Boom in Boomerangs," *The Herald*, 7 November 1929.

<sup>68</sup> Leason, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*. 1934, p. 5.

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use.<sup>69</sup> His veiled contempt denied the skills and knowledge required to produce returning boomerangs from tree roots and elbows. Amongst the Kurnai, individuals such as Alex Mullett (1885-1952) and Wally Pepper gained status in the community as fine craftsmen. (Plate 35) In fact, the level of technology at Lake Tyers closely resembled that used by the Wangkangurru Aborigines, Stan Loycurrie and Jack Noorywanka who had staged displays for the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. Such ingenious and innovative adaptations of metal technology allowed Aborigines to compete in a capitalist economy.

Leason's commentary further implies that commodification alienates Aborigines—as indicated by their appropriation of images from spectacular sites unrelated to their experience. But the opening of Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1933 was a quintessential sign of Australia's modernity: when Aborigines drew upon media images or the influence of kin who had travelled from La Perouse and Wallaga Lakes, to incorporate its image into their boomerangs, they secured a position for themselves within the contemporary world. Underlying Leason's criticism were racist ideologies. Leason suggested that the apparent deterioration of Aboriginal art was directly attributable to the 'half-caste' status of artists, yet elsewhere noted that 'full-bloods' like William Johnson (1860-c.1965) continued to make and use bark canoes.<sup>70</sup> In fact, 'half-castes' probably dominated production because they were in the majority, but Aborigines chose whether or not they wished to become involved with tourism and Leason's informants were the 'full-bloods' who modelled for his portraits.

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<sup>69</sup> Leason, Diary 1933/4, entry for 12 March 1934.

<sup>70</sup> Leason, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, 1934, entry for William Johnson.

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His rejections suggested Aborigines were dominated by their interaction with tourists and a capitalist economy; a supposition apparently supported by evidence from visitors to Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) and Lake Tyers in the previous century. In his analysis of the responses recorded in the mission 'Visitors Books', Attwood reveals that tourists rarely expressed any humanitarian concern for Aborigines.<sup>71</sup> Most commended the good intentions of the missionaries and interpreted evidence of progress toward civilisation as confirmation of their own superiority.<sup>72</sup> The majority, Attwood suggests, were paternalistic voyeurs, with no consideration for an Aboriginal viewpoint. Even in the nineteenth century, tourism to Missions drew criticism. John Stanley James, who wrote for *The Argus* under the pseudonym of 'The Vagabond,' claimed that Lake Tyers risked becoming "a show place, an appanage to the hotels at the Lakes Entrance" who provided excursions to the Missions.<sup>73</sup> In reality, the position James adopts is more conservative than it at first appears: he criticises the way tourists reduce Aborigines to a spectacle but is equally concerned that they disrupt discipline. Later, in the 1940s, the anthropologist Norman Tindale similarly deplored tourists who viewed Lake Tyers as a "kind of zoological garden and place of amusement, where aborigines and near-aborigines can be seen and discussed almost as though they were an animal species."<sup>74</sup> Attwood sees that an element of hypocrisy underlies the elitist position adopted by Tindale, who privileges his own right to view Aborigines as objects of fascination over that of tourists, when the viewing position of both was really quite close.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Bain Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History: Mission Station Visitors Books," in *Koori History*, pp. 21-26. Attwood's analysis draws attention to the strategic and political role played by these 'Visitors Books' as an endorsement of Board policies.

<sup>72</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History," p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Norman Tindale, quoted by Andrew Markus in "Under the Act," In *Australians 1938* (eds.), Bill Gammage and Peter Spearitt, *Australians: A Historical Library*, Gen. Eds. Alan D. Gilbert and K. S. Inglis, (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987), pp. 47-54, p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History", p. 25.

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The critical response to tourism, then and since, implies Aborigines are dominated by such commercial interaction but this supposition is not borne out by local evidence. Within their own regional domains, Aborigines handled their inter-relationships with members of the majority culture in specific ways that preserved their autonomy. Speaking from an American context, Evans-Pritchard argues that from first contact, Indians have responded to whites by parodying their primitivism, hypocrisy, greed and naivety as a means of defending and protecting their group identity.<sup>76</sup> Hilda Rule, remains acutely aware of the disjunction which operated between Aboriginal viewing positions as 'hosts' toward their tourist 'guests.' She maintains that,

. . . [Aborigines] whom I worked with. . . are not the tribal blacks that the general public [hope to see]. I feel that people look back and let their imagination take over & from this, articles are published which give the wrong impression, if only the visitors [tourists] could have heard themselves being mimicked after they left, their faces would be red, this often happened & we would all have a good laugh, "Those poor white fellers" was and almost sounded like a pardon.<sup>77</sup>

Rule's local evidence offers a rare insight into the defences which Aborigines' implemented as tactics against the primitivist stereotypes which conditioned tourist perceptions. Aborigines were not naive: rather they realistically differentiated between transient tourists and those members of the majority culture with whom they were in daily interaction.

Aboriginal oral histories offer further evidence of the way Aborigines negotiated their interchange with tourists on terms advantageous to themselves. Attwood and Pepper recount versions of this story from the 1920s:

[Ellen (Kitty) Johnson (1849 - 1939)] was the oldest on the station and the white people always wanted to see her. She made a lot of money for her grand-children from the tourists. . . One Christmas I was out there when

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<sup>76</sup> Deidre Evans-Pritchard, "How 'They' See 'Us': Native American Images of Tourists," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 16, 1989, pp. 89-105.

<sup>77</sup> Hilda Rule, "Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station," c.1960, Copy in the author's possession, p. 2.

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the tourists were all about taking photographs of the Aborigines on the station. Old Granny Johnson always wore a scarf over her head and smoked a clay pipe: well. . . some of the tourists [were taken] to see this real old lady—she knew the language—well, when they got to her house there she was sittin' out the front with her head covered with a possum-skin rug, and she wouldn't pull her head out of it. She sat there listening to the tourists askin' her to let 'em see her so they could get a photo, but she just sat there. After a good bit of coaxing all of a sudden she shoved 'er hand out and stuck a mug on the ground in front of her and waited till she reckoned there was enough coins dropped in, then she pulled the rug off and sat there, grinnin' away, smokin' her pipe for the tourists to photograph her. The whites often gave her tobacco and before they left she'd bring out some boomerangs and some baskets she had made herself. . . and she got ten shillings [each] for them.<sup>78</sup> (Plate 36)

This narrative suggests the way Lake Tyers Aborigines commodified their culture through interaction with tourists on terms advantageous to themselves. Johnson exploits ethnicity as a sign of difference: language, clothing and lifestyle become markers of authenticity. Tourists are ultimately allowed to take a photograph of her as a souvenir of their visit, but in the process, she has ridiculed their desire, maintained her dignity and gained economically.

Off the reserve and after the war, when Aborigines resumed their interaction with tourists similar tactics prevailed. The Kurnai Mullett and Mongta families worked as itinerant labourers and staged displays of boomerang-throwing for tourists travelling on the Princes Highway past Bairnsdale. Today, the Mongta family continue to produce artefacts at Cann River, trading under the name Far East Gippsland Aboriginal Corporation. Aileen Mongta, a Bidhawal, says Aborigines differentiate between tourists who are interested in learning about their culture and those who treat them as curiosities, as if they were animals in a zoo. Faced with the latter situation, the Mongta and Mullett children recall hiding behind bushes and laughing at tourists when they were hit by a stray boomerang. From an Aboriginal viewing position, debates about authenticity and exploitation are irrelevant and merely represent further attempts

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<sup>78</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 141-2; Another version of this story appears in Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 80 .

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to restrict and retard Aborigines . . . After all they've done to us, do you think it would worry us to be sitting at the side of road selling boomerangs? . . . Every time I see a stall or something and it's public, it just reminds people that Aboriginal culture is still alive.<sup>79</sup>

Seen from the viewpoint of a contemporary Aboriginality, Mongta's comments encapsulate the connections between production, display and exchange of artefacts and the different range of meanings they might encompass for Aborigines and for a range of consumers.

When discussions of tourist art emphasise the "staged authenticity" of indigenous spectacles, this implies indigenous subordination and exploitation by tourists and a mutual complicity between producers and consumers.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the evidence from Lake Tyers reveals that tourists' accepted diverse representations of Aboriginality. Although various levels of primitivism are apparent in the responses of mainstream Australian society, tourists accepted the different ways Aborigines represented themselves through the production of artefacts, staged displays and concerts. The emphasis which specialised professionals placed upon tradition and authenticity resulted in the exclusion of south eastern artefacts from collections and the criticism of both Aborigines and tourists. Their responses denied legitimacy to contemporary cultural developments amongst south east Aborigines.

Erik Cohen explains these apparent inconsistencies by demonstrating that authenticity is a generalised, abstract concept associated with the alienation of the modern world. In place of existing fixed and determined constructions he suggests authenticity is socially constructed and negotiable.<sup>81</sup> Cohen suggests encounters with the other occur at various depths of experience and

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<sup>79</sup> Aileen Mongta, Interview, 5 March 1993.

<sup>80</sup> MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, pp. 8-9, 18-20, 27-31.

<sup>81</sup> Erik Cohen, "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 15, 1988, pp. 371-386.

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tourists arrive with a range of expectations: existential, experimental, experiential, recreational and diversionary. He likens anthropologists to the purist, existential tourist who tends to "switch worlds" by seeking a spiritual relationship which positions the other at the centre. Anthropologists differ of course because they approach their subjects with a more subjective detachment. Nevertheless, it is professionals associated with institutions, he argues, who place emphasis upon authenticity. Within the time frame examined here, the majority of Lake Tyers tourists fell within the categories of recreational and diversionary: those who sought an enjoyable and pleasurable experience and who acquiesced with Aborigines in the idea of authenticity as a "playful attitude of make-believe."<sup>82</sup>

#### **v The politics of tourist art**

The conflicting response which tourist art elicited from managers and the public lends support for these more constructive interpretations. Although Aborigines chose whether they wished to be involved in tourism, the quarterly reports which managers submitted to the Board, continually emphasise the problems which the industry raised from their perspective. When Aborigines gave priority to making artefacts and staging displays and concerts work on the reserve remained incomplete. One manager stated his grievance thus:

. . . during the tourist season even aged men and women and cripples can earn a good deal of money by making and selling baskets and boomerangs. . .the leaf band has been the great attraction to visitors, and together with the boomerang throwers and fire makers they have earned a good deal of money entertaining tourists.<sup>83</sup>

The Protestant work ethic which the Station hoped to inculcate in Aborigines was structured around the concept of regular hard labour. To implement these values, the community was spatially and temporally divided into discrete

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<sup>82</sup> Cohen, "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism," p. 377.

<sup>83</sup> A A, B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers, Correspondence Files, Manager Reports 1919-1926, 1921, p. 2; Annual Report Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 30 June 1918; Aboriginal Station Lake Tyers, 31 March 1924.

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groups: school-age children, mothers at home, women who worked as domestics and nurses for the administration and men who worked as farm labourers. When Major Glen informed the Board in 1932 that Aborigines made more money from "selling boomerangs than they would by legitimate labour" he recognised the extent to which their commodity production circumvented the proscribed boundaries of work called for by a protectionist regime. We can presume that missions and stations further differentiated between the pleasured leisure exemplified in tourism and the activities for self-improvement; reading, needlework and biblical songs which they promoted.<sup>84</sup> Finally Glen banned concerts altogether because they allowed Aborigines to earn money too easily.<sup>85</sup>

As tourism increased, managers continually requested a reduction in the hours that tourists were allowed to visit the Station. Initially in 1918, visitors arrived 10 a.m.-7 p.m. every day, by 1921 these hours were reduced to 4 p.m.-6 p.m. and by the 1930s, these hours were further restricted to Wednesday and Saturday afternoons and public holidays.<sup>86</sup> Indeed managers wanted to close the Station entirely except to authorised persons, but, they complained, "the station has become a recognised Tourist resort and if it were now closed against the T[ourist]s there would be a public outcry."<sup>87</sup> Bowing to commercial pressure managers suggested that tourists "be requested to buy nothing direct from the Aborigines and. . . refrain from any remarks which would tend to

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<sup>84</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 64; Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 23-24: A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Manager's report for period 30 November 1933, Glen to Board 30th June 1932.

<sup>85</sup> AA, B356 /Item 103, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files 1865-1968, Permits and Conduct, 4 April 1936.

<sup>86</sup> AA, Series B 356/ Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926; Annual Report Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 30 June 1918, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 19 February 1925, p. 15.

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make the Aboriginals discontented.<sup>88</sup> In the 1950s, managers' wishes were realised and tourists were excluded altogether: this enforced isolation drastically reduced Aboriginals' economic independence and their additional income.<sup>89</sup>

Just as the Board wanted to prevent tourists from entering Lake Tyers, so they consistently refused permission for Aboriginals to perform corroborees and displays of fire-lighting and boomerang throwing away from the Station.<sup>90</sup> In correspondence with members of the public, the Board reiterated that its policy was to completely isolate Aboriginals from contact with the white population to prevent them from being exploited.<sup>91</sup>

Board Reports reveal that the underlying reason why managers insisted on the exclusion of tourists from Lake Tyers was that interaction between Aboriginals and tourists was seen as potentially subversive. As shown above, Baldwin tried to censor the conversations which occurred between Aboriginals and tourists and he warned the Board that, "A number of Tourists sympathize with the inmates and lead them to believe they are not being well treated."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Major Glen specifically attributed "the hostile attitude so recently displayed by our charges" to the bad influence of tourists.<sup>93</sup>

Visitors exercise a demoralising effect on natives, who become fawning mendicants when strange whites are on the station & refuse work

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<sup>88</sup> A A, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, p.15.

<sup>89</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 80

<sup>90</sup> A A, Series B313/246, Visits and Displays, Letter to BPA, 22 July 1927; Letter to A .G. Allnutt, Mildura Harriers Club, 20 July 1927; Letter to George D. Muedeil, Historical Society of Victoria, 9 February, 1934; Letter to Mrs G. Brunt, 8 July, 1933; Letter from Chief Protector of Aboriginals, J. W. Bleakey, Brisbane, 23 November 1933.

<sup>91</sup> Similar comments occur in several reports. A A, Series B313/Item 246, Visits & Displays, Letter from Secretary of the BPA, 18 July 1933; Letter BPA to Chief Secretary's Department, 22 November 1931.

<sup>92</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 19 February 1925, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> AA, Series B 356 /Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Manager's Reports 1930-1944, Letter to Secretary, BPA, 1 April 1933, p. 2.

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because money from boomerangs manufactured surreptitiously in working hours is too easily come by.<sup>94</sup>

Far from protecting Aborigines from exploitation, we see that the Board's isolationist policies represented an institutionalised racism aimed at stopping all Aboriginal interaction with the public in order to quash potential rebellion. Exploitation was a highly emotive charge which incriminated tourists and elevated the Boards's role as moral guardian.

Off the Station, the Board continued to intervene in the interaction between Aborigines and tourists. In the post-war period, Freddie Harrison approached Reverend Richard Gilsenan, formerly of Condah mission, now resident at Bancroft Bay, Metung and a friend of many Aborigines, with a suggestion that the concert party be revived. From 1945-1960 concerts were performed twice weekly in the summer months at Gilsenan's tea rooms.<sup>95</sup> "It became so good [his daughter, Cora Gilsenan recalls], it was wonderful. . . hundreds and thousands came to hear the Aboriginal concerts. . . [because Aborigines are]. . . born entertainers."<sup>96</sup> On concert nights, those Aborigines still residing at Lake Tyers, would leave illegally, whilst others living nearby walked for miles to participate. Performances commenced in the afternoon with William Johnson throwing the boomerang followed by a three-hour evening concert of soloists, comedy, and "playing the leaf". Women were present, but rarely performed because they had "too many children to look after".<sup>97</sup> Afterwards, the Gilsenans provided supper and Aborigines walked home or camped overnight—once again, contravening Station regulations.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Manager's Report for period ended 1 August 1932-30, September 1932.

<sup>95</sup> Frank Hill, "Unusual Bush Concert: All Aborigine Cast," *Womans Day and Home*, 19 February 1951, pp. 13-14.

<sup>96</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993; Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>97</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>98</sup> Cora Gilsenan has been politically active on behalf of Lake Tyers Aborigines since the 1930s.

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Aborigines decided to revive the concerts but the Gilsenan family played a critical role as facilitators. Aware they would be accused of exploiting Aborigines, they did not charge admission. Instead Aborigines pooled the donation they collected during the concert. Members of the wider community who act as facilitators for Aborigines are often now criticised as paternalistic, but the Gilsenans provided a venue for Aboriginal concerts for fifteen years against persistent interference from the Board who demanded the concerts cease.<sup>99</sup> In an era of prevailing racism, Cora Gilsenan ensured that leading figures in Melbourne society visited Metung and heard the concerts. Fitzroy Aborigines also attended: Marj Tucker, the Aboriginal activist and singer, appeared as a guest artist whilst Alice Young and Joyce Taylor were amongst those who travelled to Metung to hear the concerts.

This evidence contradicts prevalent interpretations of tourism which have consistently denigrated tourists as uninformed and unsupportive of indigenous people. The assumption that tourists were motivated by a primitivism which demanded authenticity is further qualified. Rather, their differing response to various missions and stations suggest that some tourist viewpoints responded to Aborigines' changing political circumstances. In certain circumstances then, tourism offered an "alternative base for political action" which could undercut government infrastructures aimed at maintaining the social barriers erected by racism.<sup>100</sup> The response of tourists can be contrasted with that of government authorities who tried to prevent interaction between Aborigines and tourists. The evidence is pervasive. The local response of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (later the Native Welfare Board) is matched in Central Australia with the actions of the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory who actively discouraged the sale of artefacts to tourists and Geoffrey

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<sup>99</sup> Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993; Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993; Fred Bull, Interview, 6 September, 1992.

<sup>100</sup> MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, p. 12.

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Bardon's extraordinary initiatives at Papunya in 1971-2.<sup>101</sup> Such paternalistic policies denied independence to Aboriginal people and tried to curtail their creative development.

## vi Conclusion

This study considered the replica artefacts, staged displays and concerts produced by Aborigines at Lake Tyers and the surrounding region in response to the tourist industry. The evidence supports the findings of Jon Altman and Howard Morphy who maintain that interaction with tourism is beneficial to Aboriginal art.<sup>102</sup> This study also found that Aborigines actively sought markets for their commodities and they gained a degree of autonomy in the process. In the process, this commodity production helped to maintain a sense of Aboriginal identity which resisted assimilation. The objects produced for exchange with tourists operated as sign system expressive of Aborigines' changed circumstances: artists reinterpreted their allegiance to land and kin by combining existing elements with techniques, styles and motifs appropriated from the majority culture. These innovations gained recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal presence within a modern nation state.

Whilst museum curators and ethnographers neglected these developments in south eastern Aboriginal art, tourists tolerated diverse representations of Aboriginality. Their support undercut the restrictive legislation implemented through the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Artefacts are not then inert objects, anachronistic to the modern world, rather they perform a powerful

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<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Isaacs, *Desert Crafts: Anangu Maruku Punn* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992), p. 46; Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*. (Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1991), pp. 41-46.

<sup>102</sup> Jon Altman, *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry : Report of the Review Committee* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), pp. 17-18, 44,89, 96, 98, 123-5; Howard Morphy, "Art of Northern Australia," In *Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1980), pp. 52-65, p. 54.

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role; as real objects which bridged the gulf which exists between different social perspectives.

Ambiguities are apparent in the contribution which Aboriginal women make to these various processes of cultural production. Lake Tyers women acted as social agents when they determined whether and how they would be represented by Percy Leason in his portrait series. They also collaborated in the production of artefacts for exchange with members of the majority society. But the evidence has also revealed that women's role within the domestic sphere placed constraints upon their activities. Nor do their fibre crafts match the prestige which boomerangs maintain as a pervasive symbol of national identity. The anomalies and contradictions which surround Aboriginal women's art call for special consideration.

## **5 A women's sphere**

### **i. Introduction**

This chapter considers the cultural production of Aboriginal women in the south east. To date, their creative work has been marginalised. Western constructions of gender coupled with artistic hierarchies have assumed that a natural relationship exists between women and the crafts—with a particular emphasis on fibre. This revaluation draws upon examples outside the main time frame of the thesis to situate women's crafts within a particular historical era—prior to industrialisation—when assimilation policies restricted Aboriginal women within a domestic sphere in a settler colonial society. Our existing discourses evaluate Aboriginal women's craft as anachronistic and evidence of assimilation; alternative interpretations emerge through an Aboriginal perspective. In various responses to specific local contexts—on missions and stations, in fringe camps and in the city—Aboriginal women adapted existing skills and knowledge and incorporated from the majority culture to extend their cultural repertoire in the domestic sphere. In so doing, women maintained their autonomy and independence and their central role within the Aboriginal household. Evidence also exists that women continued to be involved in collaborative and cooperative processes of production, marketing and exchange that characterise Aboriginal productive endeavour.

When Lesley McCall identified an androcentric bias in late nineteenth and early twentieth century collections she attributed this bias to two factors: the peripheral sphere of women and the ephemerality of fibre.<sup>1</sup> Existing constructions for Aboriginality emphasised men's association with ceremonial life—a bias enhanced by the predominance of male collectors and ethnographers. Paradoxically, the predominance of men's hunting and fighting weapons in collections signalled both their ferocity and the colonial process of pacification. Today, such gaps in collections are being redressed

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<sup>1</sup> McCall "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality,'" pp. 90, 102-3.

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and there is growing recognition for the rich heritage of Aboriginal fibre. Regional differences are apparent in the way Aborigines transform plant, animal and human fibres into complex structures for use in ritual and daily life.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless these re-evaluations remain narrowly focused on the traditional fibre crafts associated with a hunter-gatherer economy and raise a number of problems. Constructions of Aboriginality which emphasise traditional perspectives position Aboriginal fibre craft in the past, creating the impression that it is a dying tradition. Alan West, for instance, has usefully documented the processes of manufacture involved in string bags and coiled baskets but he excludes Aboriginal incorporations from the majority culture.<sup>3</sup> West's approach to material culture can be criticised as a sterile technical analysis which classifies Aboriginal fibre craft within the typologies of scientific discourse and removes objects from the meaning and value they generate in the process of production and exchange.

Cultural status and historical meaning for Aboriginal fibre practices reappear when natural and industrial fibres are considered as a continuum based on their shared material properties. This concept allows Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider to usefully explore how "cloth has furthered the organisation of social and political life."<sup>4</sup> Their idea of a fibre continuum is germane to this thesis but it is difficult to accept the distinctions they develop between natural

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Jennifer Isaacs, *Australia's Living Heritage: Arts of the Dreaming* (Sydney: Landsdowne, 1984), p.104; McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 44, 102-3; *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, 10 September-10 November 1991, Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 7; *Yanada: New Moon*, 3-26 June 1993, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, unpagged; *Women's Work: Aboriginal Women's Artefacts in the Museum of Victoria* (Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Alan West, "Australian Aboriginal Cordage, String Bags, Nets and Other Single Element Fabric Structures," In *Memoirs of the Museum of Victoria (Division of Human Studies)*, (forthcoming); Alan West, *Aboriginal Australia Culture and Society: Fibre crafts* (Canberra: ATSIC, 1991), unpagged; *Making an Aboriginal Coiled Basket*, Director, Alan West, Museum of Victoria 1975; for an earlier but similar approach concerned with diffusion see D. S. Davidson, "Australian Netting and Basketry Techniques," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 1933, pp. 257-99.

<sup>4</sup> Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider, (eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 1. see also pp. 10-16.

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and industrial fibres: the former seen as signifying symbolic associations with spirituality and fertility, the latter associated with the exploitation of indigenous people within capitalist economies. This study questions these distinctions by showing that members of a small-scale society, situated within a young settler colony undergoing industrialisation, were able to selectively appropriate from Western technologies whilst maintaining their own world view.

This revaluation is further contextualised within an analysis of Western artistic hierarchies. Distinctions between the fine arts and the crafts established with the Renaissance associated the former with the masculine artistic practice of the academies, the latter with the industrial production of the guilds and the leisured pursuits of aristocratic women. In the eighteenth century, Kant's aesthetic theories reified these distinctions by arguing that craft's utilitarian role excluded it from the proper realm of the fine arts that were held to exist in their own right as objects of aesthetic contemplation. In her revaluation of embroidery from a feminist perspective, Rozsika Parker demonstrates how radical changes in the eighteenth century associated with industrialisation and capitalism divided bourgeois society into public and private domains such that the crafts, especially embroidery, came to express women's natural and essential femininity, a symbol of their virtue and dutiful obedience.<sup>5</sup> Parker maintains that the reconsideration of women's crafts cannot be divorced from class: for the wealthy, embroidery, lacemaking and dressmaking signified social status; for the poor it represented a means of economic survival.

Aboriginal women's craft has therefore been situated in the nexus between primitivist and patriarchal ideologies. Since Aborigines were assumed to be children of nature, the acquisition of domestic skills signified their civilisation. To Christian missions the idealisation of feminine virtue through training in

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<sup>5</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984, rpt. London: The Women's Press, 1989).

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obedient and dutiful domestic labour, could be seen to resolve the contradictions embodied in the popular stereotypes that Aboriginal women were both promiscuous and submissive. Given the ambiguity which surrounds women's crafts, it is not surprising that Grace Cochrane's history of Australian craft locates certain Aboriginal women's crafts within the sexual politics of colonial and racial relations.

From the nineteenth century teachers, squatters' wives and missionaries dressed their Aboriginal servants in European clothing and taught them the genteel (Christian) crafts of the time. Thus in many places traditional art forms were replaced by such objects as Victorian feather ornaments for dining tables, or white crocheted needlework.<sup>6</sup>

Cochrane's commentary implies maternalistic relationships but, as Parker notes, denigrating women's crafts disparages other women and can serve to endorse the stereotypes which support existing ideologies.<sup>7</sup> One might question the degree to which the Western nexus of public and private spheres is relevant to Aboriginal society. In Parker's opinion, patriarchal ideologies are only undercut when an analysis is made of who is producing craft, when, where, and under what circumstances. Hence this chapter also considers Aboriginal women's crafts in the context of the "close encounters" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women—their commonalities and differences within colonial experiences constructed and bounded by gender.<sup>8</sup>

Underlying the value judgements imposed on Aboriginal fibre-craft is the erroneous assumption that fibre is naturally associated with women.<sup>9</sup> Although this study is not concerned with men's practice, an essential point of emphasis is that Aboriginal communities in the south east, as in remote

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<sup>6</sup> Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992), pp. 135-136.

<sup>7</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges," p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Jennifer Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts* (Sydney: Landsdowne, 1987); Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 81; cf. Weiner & Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 25.

communities, structure their cultural production through differently engendered relationships that sustain collaboration and cooperation.<sup>10</sup> For example, Jan Penney's research found mid-Murray communities in the late nineteenth-century used nets co-operatively.<sup>11</sup> She further distinguishes between men's nets over 80 yards long made for the purpose of catching emus and smaller nets and baskets made by women.<sup>12</sup> Androcentrism and feminism have together tended to elide men's continuing involvement with fibre. Basket makers at Lake Tyers in the 1930s included at least one man, James Scott.<sup>13</sup> And in 1937, the anthropologist Norman Tindale, in association with the South Australian Museum, filmed Clarence Long (Milerum), one of the last initiated Ngarrindjeri men, making a coiled basket decorated with the feathers of his totem, the Boobook owl, and a coiled mat similar to those formerly used for burials in the Coorong region.<sup>14</sup>

## ii Weaving the past into the present

A recently excavated women's burial site near Melbourne poignantly evokes the role of fibre within Aboriginal culture. As Weiner and Schneider observe, "the softness and ultimate fragility of these materials capture the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative processes of illness, death and decay."<sup>15</sup> The young woman was buried with

<sup>10</sup> Women's craft raises the question of women's status but gender relationships within Aboriginal communities are not my direct concern. The complexity of these issues is indicated in Annette Hamilton, "Daughters of the Imaginary," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Oct. 1990, pp. 1-25. It should also be noted that Aboriginal women tend to refute Western feminist perspectives. For a critically reflexive analysis of these issues see Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges," pp. 124-126.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Penney, "Encounters on the River: Aborigines and European in the Murray Valley 1820-1920," Ph.D. Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1989, pp. 48-51, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie: Culture Contact in the Mid-Murray Region," B. A. Honours Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1979, pp. 10-14.

<sup>13</sup> A 'scabby' or egg basket by James Scott in the Hilda Rule collection continues a Gippsland style of basket identified by Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol 1, p. 345, fig. 159.

<sup>14</sup> The film *Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making*, produced by the South Australian Museum in 1989 contains three short films: *Clarence Long Demonstrating Basketry in 1937*; *Basketry Workshop at the South Australian Museum in 1989* and *Feather Flower Making at the South Australian Museum*. Copy held by the author and original available at the South Australian Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Weiner and Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 2.

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her *til-bur-nin*, the emu feather skirt worn before the birth of the first child and in dances.<sup>16</sup> Buried with her was a small string bag containing emu meat, the bones of the emu split into knives and a bone awl used perhaps in basket making, as a pin for a possum skin cloak, or in magic. Her body, encased in a large string bag, lay on a bed of branches together with the emu bones and the small string bag. The association of these items in the context of a burial suggest how fibre's structural qualities might operate as a metaphor for personal relationships. In this instance the continuous, interwoven threads which produce containers for personal belongings are recontextualised to enshroud the body after death. Fibre contributes toward economic survival but it is also intimately connected to the spiritual beliefs that link Aborigines with the land. Despite its ephemerality, fibre can denote age, status and gender within an Aboriginal community.

George Angas' mid-nineteenth century depiction of a Milmendra woman from the Coorong region (Fig 3) in South Australia reveals the contribution which fibre objects made to a hunter-gatherer economy. (Plate 37) Hanging from the woman's shoulder on a long string handle, is a coiled basket used for food, tools and personal possessions whilst a coiled mat strapped upon her back transports a young baby leaving the young woman free to travel through the bush carrying a firestick. The contrast between this harmonious representation and the photograph of Caroline Hayes and Eliza O'Rourke producing baskets at Lake Tyers in the 1930s, strikes a jarring note signalling the radical change that has occurred in the intervening decades. (Plate 38) But it may well be that prevailing constructions of Aboriginality inflected the initial response of the artist and subsequent readings for these images; romanticising the traditional lifestyle of one whilst emphasising the apparent deculturation of the other.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Springfield Gorge Burial," *V. A. S. News*, Newsletter No 5, Winter, 1989, pp. 4-5; for references to the *til-bur-nin* see Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. 272-3.

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In their finely nuanced ethnography of the Ngarrindjeri people Ronald and Catherine Berndt trace the patterns of influence and interconnections which contributed to change following European settlement.

. . . traditional culture and those persons who were aligned with it did not disappear immediately. With the curtailment of the initiation rituals . . . a gradual winding down and replacement by European features took place. The break came with the passing of the old people . . . who had had first hand experience and knowledge of their culture. . . They were in fact the real repositories of their culture . . . However, something remained. There were still [those in the 1920s] . . . who had first hand knowledge of the winding down of their culture. Their memories were still vivid in regard to how they had lived, what they had seen and what they had been told. . . The men and women who had had direct exposure to their traditional background, and the opportunity to acquire knowledge about it, found that much of what they learnt had little or no practical use in their changed surroundings. There was no formal institution such as initiation through which that knowledge could be passed on to a younger generation; the Mission school had no use for it. . . Moreover, what had been their heritage could not be reinforced through living examples: there was nothing to back it up. It was categorized as obsolete information that had little bearing on everyday events, relegated to what were regarded as 'the old times'. . . Obviously, information was passed on, but nothing of a systematic nature or a rounded picture of what life had been like. . . There was not so much a gap between the generations as a great abyss linked by social relations and ties of kin but not cultural content.<sup>17</sup>

In their over-riding concern to record vestiges of a traditional memory culture it may well be that the Berndts overlooked the way Ngarrindjeri, like other Aboriginal communities, meshed continuities with the past with borrowings from the modern world in their material culture.

It was the case that settlement in the south east progressed so rapidly that many elements of Aboriginal ceremonial life and their former hunter-gather lifestyle were destroyed. Aboriginal material culture altered in form and content to accommodate these changes but it did not cease. Coiled baskets, for instance, were adapted for exchange as commodities. The basket made

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald M. Berndt, Catherine H. Berndt and John E. Stanton, *A World That Was: The Yarraldi of the Murray River and the Lakes, South Australia*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press, 1993), pp. 296-7.

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by Julia Edwards at Lake Tyers in 1956, typifies the new generic form which emerged when Aborigines replaced the long string handle which formerly hung from the forehead or shoulder with a short, firm handle—sometimes stiffened with cloth. (Plate 39) In the production of such baskets, women continued to draw upon their knowledge of the land and utilise its natural resources. At Lake Tyers, women gathered the spiny-headed Mat rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) and the red Tall Sword Edge (*Lepidosperma elatius*) which was then split with a thumb-nail, scraped out, tied in bundles and dried in the sun.<sup>18</sup> Following existing patterns, the stored reeds were damped down overnight before they were used, then baskets were constructed spirally by tying down bundles of reeds with a buttonhole stitch.

Such sturdy hand-made baskets were widely admired and much sought after by the wider community for use on farms and shopping. But for ethnographers, for whom material culture represented an index of acculturation, these changes suggested cultural decline. As Smyth commented,

It is not easy now to get baskets of the pattern which prevailed before the introduction of European arts. Those made by the women at Coranderrk are of all shapes and sizes, invariably provided with handles, and made for sale, and with a view to meet the wants of the whites who purchase them.<sup>19</sup>

Smyth's response suggests that Aboriginal initiatives to market responses inevitably represented a capitulation to capitalism.

In fact, the balance between continuity and innovation evident in Aboriginal responses to a colonial context could only occur through the fragile, yet

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<sup>18</sup> The plants Aborigines used varied from one region to another. Thus the grass used by Connie Hart, the Gurnditjmarra (Maar) basket maker has been identified as Puung 'ort grass. Merryl K. Robson, *Keeping the Culture Alive*, Aboriginal Keeping Place, Hamilton and District Museum, 1986, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 346.

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tenacious process by which transmission of knowledge occurred. Mothers did not formally teach their daughters the skills and knowledge required for basketry; learning occurred through patterns of socialisation based on mimesis and observation. In her analysis of patterns of cultural transmission in the bilums produced in the New Guinea highlands, Maureen MacKenzie found that girls learned manual dexterity, physical movements and technical knowledge in the process of imitating older women.<sup>20</sup> In the settled south east, women were no longer with their children in a hunter-gatherer context but they remained the central focus of Aboriginal households.<sup>21</sup> Women placed value on maintaining their relations with kin, they co-operated in the face of insuperable problems and, as the story-tellers in the community, they relayed a shared history and stories of ancestors that reinforced the sense of belonging which formed the basis for lifelong patterns of socialisation.

Nevertheless, cultural transmission is a complicated process—made all the more problematic in the colonial context of a modern world. Doubtless all girls growing up at Lake Tyers saw baskets being produced, yet it appears only a few had the natural talent and tenacity to maintain these skills and learn the repertoire of known designs. In New Guinea, MacKenzie found a dual set of imperatives operating: on the one hand girls had to convince older women of their enthusiasm and desire to learn, on the other, older women guarded their cultural knowledge and withheld access from all but the most trustworthy and hardworking.<sup>22</sup> She arrived at the conclusion that, if the deception that techniques were difficult to learn was practised too convincingly, aspects of cultural knowledge may not be passed on to the next generation. In an

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<sup>20</sup> Maureen MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 102-6.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Keen, "Introduction," In *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia* (1988, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), pp. 12-13; Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 167, 278, cf 239-240 on the status of men; Macdonald, " 'The Koori Way' ," pp. 95, 168-169, 307-9.

<sup>22</sup> MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects*, pp. 106-109.

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Australian context, anthropologists have attributed the apparent disintegration of Aboriginal culture in the face of radical change to older Aborigines withholding cultural knowledge and a lack of interest from the young, but these accusations fail to take account of the changed historical circumstances in which Aborigines lived.<sup>23</sup>

Confronted with the urbanisation of the modern world, Aboriginal women chose whether they would continue to produce their fibrecraft. String bags like that in the Bulmer collection (Plate 40) were still produced at the turn of the century but when mass produced bags became commercially available for a few pence, production ceased. Coiled baskets confronted a similar set of circumstances at a slightly later date. At 'Aboriginal Enterprises', the outlet for Aboriginal art and crafts established at Belgrave in the post-war period, Bill Onus acknowledged that the "beautifully made grass baskets" by a relative, Mary Smith of Coranderrk, had to compete against commercial products. One wholesaler "wanted 200 of these, but I could let him have only two, because [it] takes a week to make a basket," Onus said.<sup>24</sup> As a successful entrepreneur, Onus had to rely upon silk screen fabrics and boomerangs which utilised modern technology and industrial materials. By contrast, baskets required access to a constant supply of natural resources: Alice Thorpe, Julia Edwards' daughter-in-law, recalls she only made six baskets—sold for 30/- each—after she left Lake Tyers for Melbourne in 1938.<sup>25</sup> Even then, Thorpe required transport to Healesville where friends helped her collect the necessary reeds. Today, contemporary basket makers located in the country: Thelma Carter,

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<sup>23</sup> Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 23-25; Beckett, "The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards," p. 42; Reay, "A Half Caste Aboriginal Community," pp. 311-312, 314; Reay, "Native Thought in Rural New South Wales," pp. 90, 96, 111, 114, 118; cf Keen, "Introduction," p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> This and the following quotation are drawn from Herschell Hurst, "He Tells Tales of his Own People," *The Australian Home Beautiful*, November 1955, pp. 25-26.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Thorpe, Interview, 6 March 1993.

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Connie Hart and Yvonne Koolmatrie, suggest that the continuation of their craft is threatened by the gradual depletion of the environment.<sup>26</sup>

Patterns of socialisation within Aboriginal culture mean skills and knowledge that appear moribund, actually remain available for revival and reinterpretation. Socialisation is not a unified package passively imprinted onto children or adolescents; its variable influences continue throughout our lives in tandem with the process of cultural change.<sup>27</sup> As a child, the Gurnditjmara (Maar) woman Connie Hart (1918-1993) observed older women making baskets but she had to practise in stealth because they forbade her to learn. "My mum told me we were coming into the white people's way of living. So she wouldn't teach us" Hart reports.<sup>28</sup> Forty years later Hart has retrieved her basket making skills by drawing upon her childhood memories. A similar resurgence has taken place through workshops held amongst Ngarrindjeri people: the coiled mats made by Clarence Long—formerly used in burials—are now reinterpreted as wall hangings. Most recently, Yvonne Koolmatrie's eel traps, bowls, echidnas and aeroplanes redefine coiled basketry in sculptural terms.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these creative reinterpretations, basketry is still dismissed as a dying tradition: an "atrophied version of the way things were" anachronistic to the modern world.<sup>30</sup> Ostensibly this response simply denies Aborigines the right to be creative by reinterpreting tradition in negative terms as a constraint on creativity. In commenting on the differentiated status of Aboriginal art and

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<sup>26</sup> For the reference to Thelma Carter and Connie Hart see A. Jackomos and D. Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 72-75; for the evidence on Yvonne Koolmatrie see *Murrundi: Three Murray River Stories*, 26 March-25 April 1993, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, unpagged.

<sup>27</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> *Yanada: New Moon*, unpagged.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures': Inventing Aboriginal Craft," In *Craft in Society*, pp. 131-152, p. 135.

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craft, Philip Jones commends the "quirky" coiled basketry aeroplane made in 1942 by the young Ngarrindjeri woman, Janet Watson, as "a subversive and inspirational model" by a maverick artist.<sup>31</sup> (Plate 41) He contrasts the production of functional baskets as

allied to new functions: making money, satisfying the varying demands of an arts and craft industry and restating cultural identity. . . . Aboriginal craft [Jones argues] finds itself in a dilemma. The choice between good craft and bad craft is the choice between a craft founded on an atrophied version of the way things were—a kind of Aboriginal Morris Dancing—and one displaying characteristics of innovation, dynamism and opportunism. Examples of the former type abound in Australia. Dying traditions of carving and basketry, like the last speakers of Aboriginal languages, may be guarded like flickering flames.<sup>32</sup>

The distinctions Jones makes privilege the originality and individuality of the unique art object over the functional role and ordered repetition of skills and patterns intrinsic to craft. His value judgements subtly displace the basketry aeroplane from the banal sphere of domesticity into a more elevated fine art context where it is regarded as an expressive response to the modern world. It may be more productive, however, to consider the entire range of work produced by individuals within communities as part of women's contingent practice.

To retrieve meaning and value for all basketry we need to recognise that each object represents a creative solution to a unique problem.<sup>33</sup> Julia Edwards' basket thus represents a series of conscious aesthetic choices where the form of the basket frames and circumscribes the repeating infill of decorative patterns. Ethnographic parallels with remote communities suggest that these intricate geometric compositions of chevrons, diamonds and cones may be individual clan patterns transmitted between groups of women working

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures'," p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures'," pp. 134-5.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (London: Phaidon, 1979), p. 64.

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together.<sup>34</sup> In addition, such geometric elements express our psychological response to space in terms of complex figure/ground relationships fulfilling a universal need to impose order, rhythm and symmetry on the natural environment. Reinterpreted in this context, the anonymous cake plate made at Coranderrk in the early 1900s makes an equally relevant commentary on certain aspects of Aborigines' contemporary existence as does Janet Watson's aeroplane. (Plate 42) In this functional item, the maker departs from previous generic types to incorporate from the twisted and filigree forms found in the domestic ornaments of silver-ware, ceramics and crochet.

### iii Flowers from the land

As already shown, feathers are incorporated within the systemic meanings of Aboriginal culture and early ethnography records many instances of feathers used in a ritual context.<sup>35</sup> Aborigines carried feather whisks and women wore their *til-bur-nin* or feather aprons in dances. Feathers operated as signals in intertribal meetings: attached to spears, they signalled a challenge to other tribes and along the Murray, women wore white cockatoo feathers in their hair as a symbol of their peaceful intentions when they moved outside their own territory.<sup>36</sup> Indeed Thomas Worsnop and Smyth perceptively noted that women used feather flowers as body decoration in preference to natural flowers.

Notwithstanding the numerous varieties of beautiful native flowers, it has not been observed that any use has been made of their decorative qualities. . . They almost always used the coloured feathers of the

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<sup>34</sup> Dianne Moon, "Maningrida Arts and Crafts," In *Karnta: Aboriginal Women's Art* (ed.), Chris McGuigan, Adelaide Festival Centre, n.d. pp. 22-24.

<sup>35</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. 165-6; Thomas Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc. of the Aborigines of Australia* (Adelaide: C. E. Bristow, 1897), p. 159, pl. 28; Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 679.

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Krefft, "On the Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the Lower Murray and Darling," *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales 1862-1865*, read 2 August 1856, pp. 357-374, p. 364.

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cockatoo, native pheasants, pelicans, or parrots as ornaments for the hair. . .<sup>37</sup>

Feather flowers emerged in the late nineteenth century from these earlier contexts and occur throughout Australia. Their provenance is not restricted, as Cochrane suggests, to specific historical situations; rather, as Mira Lakic argues, these social forces “simply modified an existing craft into an acceptable European mode of fashion and art.”<sup>38</sup> The difference is, of course, that the feather flowers produced in the south east for exchange as commodities fulfilled a new role as decorative objects within the domestic sphere whereas some feather flowers produced in remote communities continue to be used in ceremonial contexts.<sup>39</sup> Western artistic traditions generally underestimate ornament, aligning it with the gendered constructions of women as superficial and superfluous but when Aboriginal women utilised natural resources to produce posies intended as decoration for their own homes and those of non-Aboriginal women, their aesthetic response recolonised the domestic sphere.

Although feather flowers occur throughout Aboriginal Australia, in the south east, the Murray River is a focal point for their emergence and dispersal—a status attributable perhaps to a mild climate, rich resources and relatively delayed settlement. In the nineteenth century, Indian hawkers along the Murray purchased feather flowers, rush baskets and pin cushions of stuffed tortoise shells from Aboriginal women.<sup>40</sup> Following the consolidation of Aborigines at Lake Tyers, Wotjoballuck (Wergaia) people from the Wimmera region transmitted the skill of feather flower making to Gippsland.<sup>41</sup> Point

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<sup>37</sup> Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts*, p. 156; see also Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xli, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Mira Lakic, "Dress and Ornamentation," in *Women's Work*, pp. 19-30, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> For the ritual use of feather flowers see Peter Cooke and Jon Altman, (eds), *Aboriginal Art at the Top* (Maningrida: Maningrida Arts and Crafts, 1982), pls. 171, 174, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 258.

<sup>41</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 7 September, 1992.

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McLeay Aborigines attribute their feather flower traditions to Victorian Aborigines who arrived in the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> Whilst earlier feather flowers were simply whisks—bundles of feathers bound together—feathers were subsequently assembled as flowers as a contact development. In the film, Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making, made by the South Australian Museum in 1989, women deftly assemble posies from a variety of coloured feathers: white and pink from adult galahs, orange from young galahs and green from grass parrots.<sup>43</sup> Looped buttonhole stitches—similar to those used in coiled baskets and string bags—bind the first group of small feathers to a wire frame to form a bud; thereafter larger feathers are added to form the petals. Feather flowers from the 1920s in the collection of the Museum of Victoria and the Mildura Arts Centre employ the same methods of manufacture.<sup>44</sup> (Plate 43)

A more detailed consideration of the role which feather flowers—and other commodities—performed emerged from an examination of individual women living in fringe camps near Swan Hill in the first half of this century. The Wemba Wemba woman, Aggie Edwards is a key figure in Swan Hill history. Born at Mellool station in 1873, Edwards began to attract attention as the last of the 'full-bloods' in the region following her introduction to Governor Hopetoun in the 1890s. At her death in 1928, Edwards' status was such that the Australian Natives Association erected a memorial in the Swan Hill cemetery, eulogising Aggie Edwards as the "Last Queen of the Moolpa

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<sup>42</sup> Judy Inglis. "Aborigines in Adelaide," *Polynesian Society Journal*, Vol. 70, 1961, pp. 200-218, p. 203.

<sup>43</sup> Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making, South Australian Museum, 1989.

<sup>44</sup> In 1927 Sergeant Arthur Edward Bentley, then of the Swan Hill police, presented a collection of feather flowers to the Museum of Victoria. Although these flowers are anonymous documentation suggests they originate from Boundary Bend, Victoria. (Acc Nos: X36448, X36449, X36450, X36451, 36447, X36635). An unknown donor gave the feather posy attributed to Aggie Edwards (Plate 43) to the Mildura Arts Centre. The author wishes to thank members of the Bentley family for their assistance with my enquiries.

Tribe".<sup>45</sup> Edwards, like Barak, gained fame during her own lifetime: more recently, she has become the focus of considerable scholarly research—but the honorific bestowed upon her remains intact. In her research on Edwards, Jan Penney acquiesces in the settler myth that Edwards was the 'last of her tribe'—a subterfuge that masked the destruction of Aboriginal culture and denied legitimacy to 'half-castes.' Contradictions emerge as a consequence: having demonstrated that the unique aquatic environment of the river was a sustaining force for Aborigines until the turn of the century, Penney then blames Aborigines for their sudden disintegration—attributed to the withholding of cultural information by elders, Aborigine's dependence upon charity and their lowered birth rate as a result of disease and poor health.<sup>46</sup> The 'culture of poverty' approach she adopts mistakes cause and effect and disregards the origin of these radical changes in colonisation. An amended biography for Aggie Edwards establishes the continuity of Wemba Wemba people.<sup>47</sup>

Edwards' situation appears in a different light by positioning her within contemporary Aboriginal history. During the first decades of the twentieth century, many Aborigines lived as refugees as a result of government policies aimed at their dispersal. Aborigines met with racial discrimination in certain quarters as a result of the power vested in institutionalised forms of social

<sup>45</sup> Aldo Massola, "Mortuary and other Monuments to Aborigines, *The Victorian Naturalist*, Vol. 87, No. 10, 7 October 1970, pp. 299-305, p. 305. "Moolpa" refers to a station south of Swan Hill where many Aborigines lived.

<sup>46</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 321, 339, 345-6, 352; see also Danny Mackay, Dolly Moser and Wendy Moser, *History of the Swan Hill Mid-Murray Area* (Swan Hill Aboriginal Educators: n.d., p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Here the author draws upon interviews with Nellie Moore and Doug Nicholls to correct the accepted biography for Aggie Edwards. See Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie," pp. 85, Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 331, 339, 344-6; Penney, "Queen Aggie: The Last of Her Tribe," in *Double Time: Women in Victoria —150 Years* (eds.), M. Lake and F. Kelly (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985), pp. 97-103 and Mackay et. al., *History of the Swan Hill Mid-Murray Area* p. 8. King Wilson's daughter, Aggie was born on Mellool Station in 1873. At twenty, Aggie married Harry Edwards, an older Muti Muti man and the couple lived at Nesbitt's estate, several miles downstream from Swan Hill. After Harry Edward's death in 1912, Aggie contracted two further marriages, to Bob Nicholls, a non-Aboriginal shearer and Cobb & Co. coach driver and Jacky Logan formerly of Coranderrk. Each marriage produced a son the second of whom was adopted by Bob Nicholls and assumed his name.

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control implemented through government departments, private organisations and the police. They were also placed at an economic disadvantage. As 'full-bloods,' Aggie and her husband Harry drew some rations, but after his death in 1912, Edwards eked out a subsistence existence. Like other Aborigines, she struggled for survival in a fringe camp built from canvas, scrap timber and flattened, four-gallon tin drums. (Plate 44) Nevertheless, Aborigines maintained their dignity and autonomy living in fringe camps where they were free from the restrictions and regimented life of missions and stations. The independent existence Edwards chose, on land to which she was spiritually attached, links her to rural outstation movements of this period. This resistance movement, which witnessed Aborigines electing to walk-off stations to return and live independently on land formerly owned by their people, parallels and pre-dates by several decades similar outstation movements in remote communities.<sup>48</sup>

Although Edwards lived in difficult circumstances, she acted as a social agent and exploited every possible opportunity to interact within the local milieu of a small country town. Edwards earned a penny each time she opened the gates across the Speewa anabranch of the Murray River for local pastoralists and drovers.<sup>49</sup> She gathered and sold dead wool caught on barbed wire fences.<sup>50</sup> Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of the environment, Edwards sold fish, ducks, eggs, rabbits and rabbit skins (seen drying on lines in Plate 44). She also produced feather lures and feather flowers, rush baskets and small draw-string purses made from the skin of water rats.<sup>51</sup> Despite her poverty and the prevailing racial discrimination, Aggie Edwards maintained a circle of friends amongst women from the wider community. Operating from cultural values

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State* (Rushcutters Bay, NSW: Australian National University Press/Pergamon Press, 1988), p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Jessie Thomson, Letter to the author, 17 August 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Tom O'Halloran, Interview, 12 March 1993; Bill O'Lachlan, tel. conv. 26 October 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 346.

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grounded in reciprocity, Edwards' repaid the hospitality and kindness of her friends with gifts of fish, rabbits and feather flowers.<sup>52</sup> Exchanged as gifts or commodities, feather flowers thus decorated many of the domestic interiors of country towns. When women from the majority culture chose to incorporate these flowers into their interior decoration, their aesthetic response to the environment accorded with that of Aborigines.

Today, the Wemba Wemba elder, Nellie Moore, recalls growing up in the 1950s at Pinkeys, a fringe camp situated opposite the township of Swan Hill, across the river in New South Wales.<sup>53</sup> At the time, her grandmother, Mary Moore, sold small and large posies of feather flowers for 7/6 and 10/- each, at outlets such as Tom O'Halloran's jewellery shop.<sup>54</sup> As discussed, mothers are central figures in Aboriginal households and children growing up in such fringe camps knew they had to help their mothers by contributing to the supply of feathers. During his boyhood in Gippsland, Albert Mullett hunted birds with slingshots, but before he cooked and ate the birds, he plucked and kept their feathers to take home to his mother.<sup>55</sup> Women were proud of their feather flowers and other, more practical items. They represented a means of income—but they were equally significant as a form of aesthetic expression. Moore explains their dual role.

They were for food, that was to buy the flour, tea, sugar and meat. . . They use that as an art thing now and it's really not, it's an industry thing . . . It was something that they were good at doing and to say that they done that and they got a joy out of making that and it also provided the food on the table. . . [Before] it was a decoration for corroborees [but in the fringe camps] we had nothing so we had to have something to look at . . . If someone made a feather flower they might've gone out and got a crane [feather] 'Oh how beautiful.' you'd say because you never seen anything

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<sup>52</sup> Oliver Godena, tel. conv. 14 September 1992; Francis Cureton, *Remembering Swan Hill: Paddle Boats and Other Things* (Swan Hill: privately publication, 1977), p. 20

<sup>53</sup> A local police sergeant, Arthur Feldtmann cleared Swan Hill of fringe camps in 1950s through a series of initiatives which rehoused Aborigines. Arthur Feldtmann, *Swan Hill* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973), Ch. 19, esp. pp. 185-7.

<sup>54</sup> Tom O'Halloran, Interview, 12 March 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 7 September 1992.

like that. Even if someone made a dress you know, they sewed it themselves. They did the embroidery stitching and the stitching was so fine my mum used to do, it looked like it was done by machine. . . and all the jumpers used to be hand knitted. . . because you never had those decorations you've got now. . . where you lived on the river bank you had nothing, you just had the bare essentials [so we'd] go and get gum leaves [and put feather flowers in the hut].<sup>56</sup>

Moore's memories of her childhood, add to our understanding of the role which fringe camps played in Aborigines' lives. Situated within their regional domain, fringe camps represented Aborigines' private realm, their "corner of the world" where they lived autonomously maintaining many elements of a small-scale society.<sup>57</sup> When Aborigines used feather flowers as interior decoration they compensated for the ugliness of their environment. Mediating continuities with the past, feather flowers mitigated the present.

Philip Clarke's research amongst Aborigines at Raukkan (Point McLeay), bears out this hypothesis. Despite state intervention which aimed to modify Aboriginal culture by changing its perception of time and space, he found that Aboriginal extended families tend to use the major rooms in their homes for a combination of activities including cooking, eating, relaxation and sleeping.<sup>58</sup>

Discussing the decoration of this domestic sphere Clarke argues

In southern South Australia, Aboriginal people tend to decorate the insides of houses in a distinctive way. Many homes of Aboriginal people I have visited feature large displays of family photographs on walls and in china cabinets. Often, objects such as clubs, boomerangs, sedge mats and baskets, feather flowers, painted stones, trophies and certificates, also decorate the rooms. The economics of decorating the home means that generally the objects must either be inexpensive or have been made by the owner or a relative. . . None of the Aboriginal people I have worked with in southern Australia have ever purchased Aboriginal art works such as Western Desert dot paintings and Arnhem land bark paintings. It appears that this Aboriginal art is chiefly produced for non-Aboriginal consumption. . . Most Aboriginal families take considerable pride in exhibiting a selection of objects that proclaim their Aboriginality. . . Household items associated with the pre-European material culture of the Lower Murray are considered to represent their links to the past Ngarrindjeri culture. For instance, Aboriginal visitors to houses of other

<sup>56</sup> Nellie Moore, Interview, 13 March 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tran. Maria Jolas (1958, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Clarke, "Aboriginal Use of Space in the Lower Murray. "

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community members may remark, when inspecting a sedge mat hanging on the wall or a bunch of feather flowers in a vase, that a particular ancestor of the maker was also a good basket-maker or feather-flower maker. Continuity with the past is stressed by Aboriginal people through knowledge of their kinship. Both objects and photographs are used to demonstrate that people 'know their culture'. In many Aboriginal homes, the decoration openly reflects how Aboriginal people perceive their Aboriginality, in both the local and national arenas.<sup>59</sup>

Contemporary photographic evidence compiled by Penny Taylor further demonstrates the extent to which, throughout Australia, Aborigines decorate their homes with objects and photographs which they see as emblems of their Aboriginality.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless there are significant differences between Moore's memories of an earlier era and Aborigines' contemporary self perception of themselves as part of a local and national Aboriginal polity. Today, a more heightened sense of public Aboriginality imbues objects such as feather flowers with past associations. James Clifford terms this "part of a modern re-collection . . . [of] family history and ethnic memory [that] becomes newly, *traditionally* meaningful in the context of the present-becoming-future."<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Moore recalls an earlier period when Aboriginality arose out of a private consciousness that was contingent upon the particular circumstances in which an individual operated and the relationships they negotiated with the majority culture. Moore's evidence also reveals that, prior to the emergence of a fine art market in Aboriginal art which has been dominated by the art of remote communities, the feather flowers produced by south eastern Aborigines decorated the homes of Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

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<sup>59</sup> Clarke, "Aboriginal Use of Space in the Lower Murray, pp. 3-4 in the author's copy.

<sup>60</sup> Penny Taylor, (ed.), *After 200 Years: Photographic Essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia Today* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage Paradigm'," p.127.

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#### iv Skilled providers

Clearly women like Aggie Edwards and Mary Moore were eminently resourceful, drawing upon a multitude of hand-skills and a broad knowledge of the plant and animal world to produce commodities for exchange, objects which decorated their homes and embroidered, knitted and hand-made garments for themselves and their families. The basis of their familiarity and understanding of fibre structures and skills in clothing construction came not only from basketry and feather flowers but from the production of possum skin cloaks which, in an earlier era, formed the main item of clothing in the south east. Production of such rugs required up to 80 pelts. Skins would be stretched with wooden or bone pegs, then dried and scraped with a mussel-shell or chip of basalt before being sewn together with sinew, or later, cotton thread.<sup>62</sup> Geometric and naturalistic designs, similar to those found in cicatrices, weapons, and dendroglyphs decorated the interior of the cloak. Such skin rugs were necessary for survival in the cool climate of the south east, but they were also used in burials, to transport babies and rolled up across the knees to form a drum during ceremonies.<sup>63</sup>

For white women living in a pioneering context, prior to the industrialisation of the post-war period and the greater social and political freedom gained by women in the past few decades, their work generally lay in the domestic sphere. For Aboriginal women, the situation was otherwise. As discussed already, a distinctively Aboriginal use of space undercut state attempts to assimilate Aborigines whether they lived in fringe camps or missions. Operating within conditions of oppression and racial discrimination, Aboriginal women's aesthetic expression adapted to achieve economic survival, practical necessity and personal pride. Eliza Kennedy grew up at the turn of the

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<sup>62</sup> Here I draw upon the research of Erika Block, "Possum Skin Rugs," B. A. Honours Thesis, ANU 1987; see also Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xxxix-xl, 271.

<sup>63</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xxvii, 168-170, 172.

century "camping about" in Bagundji country in central western New South Wales between Cobar and Ivanhoe. (Fig. 2) Her childhood memories reveal the conditions under which Aboriginal women lived and their skills in improvisation. Kennedy admired her mother who was equally adept at making string bags, possum skin cloaks and dressmaking. As Kennedy recalls,

Say, white people might've given them some old clothes, she'd unpick them. She'd copy off whatever garment she could unpick and cut out by that. After that she only had to look at what was on you. Say you came there with something she'd never seen before, she'd look you over and she'd sit down and cut that out and make it exactly the same.<sup>64</sup>

The ability of Eliza Kennedy's mother to conceive dress patterns from existing garments displays a visual facility in three-dimensional thinking directly attributable to an Aboriginal heritage in fibrecraft. Constructing possum skin rugs required women to assemble its constituent elements into volumetric sculptural forms. Other more ephemeral fibre practices, such as cat's cradles—the string games played by adults and children—similarly conceive and create complex spatial compositions of geometric elements and naturalistic motifs.<sup>65</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is an element of survival involved in these dressmaking traditions. In an earlier era, prior to the commercialisation of the fashion industry, all but the most wealthy of women, generally made the clothes for their family.<sup>66</sup> Even so, dressmaking was more than a matter of survival—as the testimony of Nellie Moore and Eliza Kennedy indicates. When mothers took pride in being autonomous and independent they retained their own

<sup>64</sup> Eliza Kennedy and Tamsin Donaldson, "Coming Up Out of Nhaalya: Reminiscences of the Life of Eliza Kennedy, *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 6, Part 1, June 1982, pp. 4-27. p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Caroline Furness-Jayne, *String Figures and How to Make Them: A Study of Cat's-Cradle in Many Lands*, (1906, New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1962), pp. xv-xvi, 1, 3-4; Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1 p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> Isaacs acknowledges this domestic heritage in *The Gentle Arts*, pp. 46, 58-61; Frances Derham's teenage diaries attest to the amount of dressmaking undertaken by women from relatively affluent circumstances. Melbourne University Archives.

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Aboriginal values. From a contemporary viewpoint, the recycling of old clothes—which also occurred at Lake Tyers during the depression—suggests another level of poverty than that which women in the wider community would have experienced.<sup>67</sup> But, as Smyth noted, women took pleasure in recycling as a means of accessing new resources.<sup>68</sup>

When the whites came the native women made variously-coloured twine from the old shawls and other garments that were given to them, and with this they netted bags, both for their own use and for sale. Some of these are very pretty.<sup>69</sup>

Women may also have recycled industrial materials for technical reasons. In the Mid-Murray region, production of cumbungi—used for string bags and nets—was so labour intensive that Aborigines thankfully relinquished its production within twenty years of settlement.<sup>70</sup>

Intriguing parallels emerge between this evidence from twentieth-century fringe camps and women's earlier, enterprising contribution to nineteenth-century Victorian missions. Coranderrk Mission, founded near Healesville in 1863, progressed rapidly under the leadership of the Presbyterian lay preacher, John Green. From the outset, Green contributed his own salary, men earned cash wages shearing and harvesting off the station during summer, whilst women tended subsistence gardens and sold the possum skin rugs and baskets they produced in cooperation with aged or infirm men.<sup>71</sup> In the following decade, earnings from women's crafts proved the most reliable and largest source of income. As already shown, when Aborigines pooled

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<sup>67</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 94.

<sup>68</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>69</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. lii.

<sup>70</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 48. Cumbungi had to be roasted, peeled, chewed, then softened in water before it could be plied into twine.

<sup>71</sup> This history of Coranderrk draws upon two significant papers by Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumerooogunga," and Dianne Barwick, " 'And The Lubras are Ladies Now,' " *Woman's Role In Aboriginal Society* (ed.), Fay Gale, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 36, Social Anthropology Series No. 6 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970), pp. 31-38.

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resources in this way, they maintained their Aboriginal values and resisted incorporation into mainstream Australian society.

But it was not just 'traditional' crafts which made a contribution. Dianne Barwick reports that from the 1860s onwards, women at Coranderrk, Framlingham, Ebenezer (Lake Hindmarsh) and Lake Tyers, "most eagerly attended" embroidery and dressmaking classes.<sup>72</sup> Their hand sewing was considered "exquisite," and far outclassed manufactured goods because it was "an adaptation of the traditional skill of making skin rugs."<sup>73</sup> With the money earned from their industry, Coranderrk women,

dressed with remarkable elegance. Most furniture was made at home, and skin rugs covered the floors, but many saved to purchase luxuries . . . Visitors during the 1860s and 1870s repeatedly commented that their homes and furnishings were equal to those of 'English workingmen' and superior to those of many small farmers in the district.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, clothing operates as a sign of social and political status. When Coranderrk residents farewelled their ally, Chief Secretary Graham Berry in 1886, Bain Attwood tells us they "donned their 'Sunday clothes' and put off their despised 'Government clothing'."<sup>75</sup>

Barwick's research further draws attention to the "genuine camaraderie" and intimacy that prevailed between Aboriginal women and missionaries' wives at Acheron and Coranderrk.<sup>76</sup> Her seminal paper, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now' " contends that, as a result of mission influences and the changing structure of Aboriginal society, women gained considerable equality and autonomy. Although few studies exist of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, her interpretation can be contrasted with the picture of

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<sup>72</sup> Barwick, "And The Lubras are Ladies Now," p. 34: see also Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Barwick, " 'And the Lubras Are Ladies Now'," pp. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," pp. 27-8.

<sup>75</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 94.

<sup>76</sup> Barwick, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now'," p. 35.

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racism and inequality which Myrna Tonkinson found on frontier pastoral properties in the far north.<sup>77</sup> Whilst Tonkinson does not doubt Barwick's meticulous research, she draws upon Attwood's parallel study of nineteenth-century Victorian missionary activity to hint that Barwick exaggerates women's status and power. This may well be. Influenced by feminism and in response to an existing androcentrism, women anthropologists working in the 1970s tended to exaggerate the autonomy and independence of Aboriginal women.<sup>78</sup> As Tonkinson points out, Attwood's detailed reconstruction of the life of Bessy Cameron highlights the way missions changed Aboriginal consciousness through their proselytising aims.

But one does not have to concur completely with Barwick's representation of women as independent, autonomous figures in order to appreciate the way she recovers meaning and importance for women's craft. Whilst missions gave support to patriarchal ideologies which ordered and disciplined the sexual division of Aboriginal labour into discrete spheres, Barwick's evidence together with that from Lake Tyers, indicates the degree to which Aborigines maintained their own engendered relationships by producing goods cooperatively and pooling their returns. A further aspect of Barwick's research focuses on the intimacy present in the close relationships which were formed between Aboriginal women and missionaries' wives. In understanding how women's crafts might have bridged differences between colonisers and colonised, one needs to acknowledge how the domestic arts traditionally brought women together on a regular basis in the public domain. Howard Becker's reconsideration of American women's nineteenth-century quilt-making groups, shows how they operate as a force for social interchange and coherence.<sup>79</sup> For Aboriginal women, such communal activities fulfilled the

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<sup>77</sup> Myrna Tonkinson, "Sisterhood or Aboriginal Servitude?: Black Women and White Women on the Australian Frontier," in *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 12, Part 1, 1988, pp. 27-39, pp. 27-28.

<sup>78</sup> Hamilton, "Daughters of the Imaginary."

<sup>79</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 247-258.

further role of maintaining existing patterns of socialisation. When Lake Tyers women recall with pleasure their time spent in dressmaking and embroidery with Hilda Rule, they recognise these social formations.<sup>80</sup> Oral histories such as Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* make the further point that Aboriginal women appreciated their friendship with mission staff in contrast to the loneliness and isolation they experienced as domestic servants.<sup>81</sup>

Barwick's evidence raises the further issue of Christian missions as agents of reform and domination. Nineteenth-century Protestantism is closely linked to a capitalist ethos. The studies of Jean and John Comaroff in South Africa and Attwood in nineteenth-century Victoria, show that indigenous identity was historically created and mediated through interaction with missionaries who inculcated the spiritual values which shaped consciousness through a temporal and material reordering of daily existence.<sup>82</sup> In their overview of Christian missions in Australia, Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose acknowledge that missions performed a protective and pastoral role.<sup>83</sup> however Ronald and Catherine Berndt take the more pessimistic view that Christianity represented "the hand-maiden of Europeanization" whose spiritual doctrines and paternalism have contributed to the disintegration of Aboriginal society.<sup>84</sup> Even in the south east, there are differences within Aboriginal society in relation to such questions.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Herma Pepper, tel. conv. 20 March 1993; Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Glenyse Ward, *Wandering Girl*, (Broome: Magabala Books, 1987), pp. 8, 125-130.

<sup>82</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, p. 78; Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*.

<sup>83</sup> Deborah Bird Rose & Tony Swain, "Introduction," In *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies* (eds.), Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Special Studies in Religions, No. 6, Victor C. Hayes, General Editor (Bedford Park, S. A., The Australasian Association for the Study of Religions at the South Australian College for Advanced Education, 1988), pp. 1-8 .

<sup>84</sup> Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, "Body and Soul: More Than an Episode!," In *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, pp. 45-59, p. 53.

<sup>85</sup> Aboriginal experiences differed. Malcom Calley, "Pentecostalism Among the Bandjalang," in *Aborigines Now: New Perspectives in the Study of Aboriginal Communities* (ed.), Marie Reay (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964), pp. 48-58 documents devout Christianity in one community. Many individuals found Christianity a great spiritual support. See Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker MBE* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1977); Mavis

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The idea of syncretism presents a possible solution to these problems.<sup>86</sup> For the Comaroffs, Christianity is never a discrete set of beliefs but a contested realm between consciousness and ideology; conversion "belied the fact that older modes of thought and action were never fully laid aside."<sup>87</sup> It follows that Christianity did not necessarily erase Aboriginal culture nor the political and social commitment to Aboriginal restitution and recognition.<sup>88</sup>

When Margaret Tucker, the singer and activist, reminisces about a wedding at Moonahculla reserve, she reveals how Christianity could work to prevent disintegration amongst Aboriginal communities. A central feature of her description is the importance given to her mother's dressmaking.

Aboriginal women could cook, and everyone would have a hand in making such a wedding celebration a joyous occasion. Mother would have a part in making the wedding dress. No one would see it until the bride wore it on her wedding day. . . [afterwards] The wedding feast would be held in a long green bough shed, freshly made for the occasion . . . Every family on that Reserve would contribute something to the feast, and believe me, in our people's opinion it was second to none. . . We children would look in wonder at the bride in her pretty dress, with lace and ribbon trimmings—how beautiful she looked! <sup>89</sup>

Tucker's fond recollection of the wedding highlights the way Aborigines selectively incorporated from mainstream Australian society in accordance with their own world view. The wedding feast was cooked using a combination of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal styles, the music combined gum

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Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls: Aboriginal Leader* (1965, rev. ed. Adelaide, Rigby, 1975); Other Aborigines experienced racism from the church, see Monica Clare, *Karobran The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, 1978), pp. 82-84.

<sup>86</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, pp. 243-251; cf Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 24-25, fn. 51 contrasts the evidence of two informants to suggest syncretism is impossible.

<sup>87</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, p. 247.

<sup>88</sup> Rose and Swain, "Introduction."

<sup>89</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 85-86, see also p. 87; Further evidence of the incorporation of Christian values is evident in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, pp. 96-97.

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leaves, violin and concertina and the dances included sets, lancers and 'corroborees'.

Christianity transformed Aborigines but was itself transformed in the process—as the wedding of Suzy Murray and George Patten demonstrates.<sup>90</sup> (Plate 45) This wedding marks a significant moment in the self perception of the Melbourne Aboriginal community. The bride, Suzy Murray, was a Kurnai; Patten and his brother Jack, were leading political activists from Cummeragunga. On 26 January 1938, Jack had organised the National Day of Mourning in Sydney with the Aboriginal leader, William Ferguson; the following year, he led the Cummeragunga walk-off. This rapid sequence of events indicates the growing level of political leadership amongst urban Aborigines and their community commitment to political resistance. At this wedding, which took place during the Second World War at a church in Oakleigh, a Melbourne suburb, Aborigines used the public context of a Christian ceremony as an arena of activity to signal their association with a local and national Aboriginality

Amongst her accoutrements, Suzy Murray wears a miniature boomerang. Miniatures do not exist in nature, they are a cultural construction. This miniature artefact operates as a quotation from the past redeployed within a new ceremonial context. Appropriating from the pomp and status of military ceremonies, Lake Tyers servicemen form a guard of honour using boomerangs in lieu of swords to create an arch over the bridal couple.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> The author wishes to thank Herbie Patten for his assistance with my research on his parent's wedding.

<sup>91</sup> As in the First World War, Aborigines experienced racial discrimination from the Australian army who considered their services, "neither necessary nor desirable." Robert Hall cites one incident when eighteen Lake Tyers men who enlisted in July 1940 were discharged in March the following year, together with volunteers from Point McLeay. Robert Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), Ch 2, esp. pp. 20-21, 113-4; cf Jackomos and Fowell, *Forgotten Heroes*, p. 14 puts the number of Lake Tyers volunteers at 25.

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Acknowledging the status of remote communities, the first pair of boomerangs are Central Australian fighting boomerangs probably loaned from a private collection held within the community.<sup>92</sup> The fact that Lake Tyers boomerangs at the rear are similar to those produced for tourists is further evidence that these artefacts were also meaningful within an Aboriginal milieu. In this display, Melbourne Aborigines recontextualise artefacts from remote and local communities to produce a bold and imaginative assertion of their public Aboriginality

### **v The politics of embroidery**

As already shown embroidery most particularly has been taken to imply Aboriginal acquiescence and assimilation. To understand why this should be so, one needs to examine how embroidery—as a sign of femininity—came to be conflated with Christian values. Initially, embroidery was associated with the leisured pursuits of the wealthy. By the nineteenth century, however, an air of punitive morality surrounded the craft and women were meant to undertake embroidery as an expression of their selfless duty toward husband and home. The next stage in the history of embroidery proved crucial, as Parker explains.

Once embroidery had become an accepted tool for inculcating and manifesting femininity in the privileged classes, with missionary zeal it was taken to the working class. Teaching embroidery to the poor became an aspect of Victorian philanthropy.<sup>93</sup>

Parker's use of the term 'missionary' is apt given that Christian ideology aligned heathens with the poor. Just as embroidery was taught to the deserving poor on the assumption they could raise their social station through

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<sup>92</sup> Many Aborigines owned collections. The President of the Aborigines Progressive Association, William Ferguson (1882-1950), owned four such boomerangs, acquired during his youth in the pastoral industry in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Co. 1974), p.4. The author wishes to thank Melanie Raberts of the Museum of Victoria for the identification.

<sup>93</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 173.

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diligence, persistence and patience, Christian missions encouraged such disciplined hand work in the belief that it contributed toward the process of self realisation involved in conversion.<sup>94</sup> At Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington), women's needlework represented part of the Reverend Hagenauer's pervasive attempt to alter Aborigines sense of time and space by dividing work from leisure. In particular, he "hoped to teach Aborigines how to 'occupy their time properly', pointing them to 'congenial amusement' which would enforce habits of steadiness and self-discipline."<sup>95</sup> The idea that embroidery constituted a sign of civilisation thus had profound implications within a colonial context. Inasmuch as embroidery implied class mobility and the gift of civilisation, it appeared to inscribe Aboriginal women within its hegemonic values. The crucial question is, To what extent do Aboriginal viewpoints concur with these existing interpretations? Is Aboriginal women's embroidery yet another instance where Eurocentrism has spoken for the other?

The inclusion of Aboriginal women's embroidery in an overtly political context, within the first land-rights petition lodged by south eastern Aborigines in 1863, suggests this may be the case. When Coranderrk was founded twenty-four years after the settlement of the south east, the native population of Victoria had already been reduced by eighty-five per cent. For the remnants of the Woi wurrung and Taungerong (Kulin) people, Coranderrk represented their seventh attempt to establish a permanent reserve.<sup>96</sup> Under the leadership of their headman, Simon Wonga, a delegation from Coranderrk attended the Governor's Birthday Levee on 24 May 1863 to present a petition that predates by exactly a century the bark petitions lodged by the Yolngu of Yirrkala in 1963. The presents they had prepared—maintaining Aboriginal values of

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<sup>94</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, pp. 64-8.

<sup>95</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 24.

<sup>96</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumerooogunga," pp. 15, 18-24. Assistant Protector Thomas established reserves at NarreWarren 1841-3, at Warrandyte and Mordialloc after 1852 and at Acheron and Mohican 1858-1860. With Green, the Woi wurrung settled at Warrandyte and Woori Yallock in 1862 and at Coranderrk with the Taungerong in 1863.

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reciprocity—thanked Sir Henry Barkly for food and clothing they had received and petitioned him, as the Queen's representative, to secure Coranderrk as a permanent reserve.<sup>97</sup> Most significantly, the presents forwarded to Queen Victoria included a crocheted lace collar, a rush basket and weapons.<sup>98</sup>

In her history of Coranderrk, Barwick suggests it was coincidental that the reserve was gazetted just as the Queen's letter arrived "guaranteeing her interest and protection," nonetheless it gave rise to the "enduring folk belief that the Coranderrk land was the gift of the Queen and Sir Henry Barkly, to be theirs in perpetuity."<sup>99</sup> At the time, Coranderrk residents accepted the contents of these letters at face value, unaware that pastoralists' greed for land would begin to revoke their rights by 1893. Barwick's point is that Coranderrk women gained their emancipation partly through the status vested in Queen Victoria.

These gifts, however, raise other issues. The presence of embroidery and basketry in this petition—as with the lyrebird tail and rush basket included in the gifts presented to Chief Secretary Sir Graham Berry at his retirement in 1886—indicate that women were not ostracised by their association with such fibre crafts.<sup>100</sup> Rather the Coranderrk community utilised women's craft to further their common goals. The petition was successful because the lace collar signified Aborigines' civilisation. Queen Victoria asked specifically that Ellen, maker of the collar, "*acquaint the other Aboriginal inhabitants of the interest that their Queen, however distant from her, will always feel in their advancement and welfare.*"<sup>101</sup> [emphasis in the original] Thus, in addition to the economic, social and aesthetic values incorporated in embroidery,

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<sup>97</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 24; Barwick, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now', " p. 36.

<sup>98</sup> Every attempt has been made to locate these articles in The Royal Collection—to no avail.

<sup>99</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 94, citing *The Argus*, 25 March 1886.

<sup>101</sup> Barwick, " 'And The Lubras are Ladies Now', " p. 36.

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Aboriginal women also gained political status through such accomplishments. The inclusion of a crochet lace collar as part of the petition to Queen Victoria suggests Aborigines implicitly understood the way embroidery signalled aristocratic connotations. The conclusion can be drawn that Aboriginal petitions for land rights are historically constituted through changing constructions of Aboriginality.

Marie Fels recent reinterpretations for the role played by the Native Police Corps established in the Port Philip District 1837-1853, bear out these suppositions. Overturning existing interpretations which have formerly cast these Aborigines as traitors, Marie Fels argues that such collaboration gained Aborigines status within their own community and from the majority culture.<sup>102</sup> To endorse such an interpretation entails waiving the assumption that harmonious and egalitarian values prevail in Aboriginal society.<sup>103</sup> As a culture structured around personal prestige, Fels suggests Aborigines understood and appreciated the status they gained through service with the Corps and used it to add to their cultural repertoire.<sup>104</sup> Both these reinterpretations recognise that the fragmented nature of Aboriginal society—prior to the emergence of public, pan-Aboriginal positions—meant Aborigine's diverse responses to colonialism might range from rebellion to various forms of accommodation.

Nevertheless, colonisation incorporated Aborigines within unequal power relationships. Mainstream Australian society assumed Aborigines would take their place as landless peasants prepared to work as domestic servants and manual labourers. Legislation introduced in Victoria after 1886 actively

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<sup>102</sup> Marie Hansen Fels, *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Philip District 1837-1853* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), Introduction, pp. 19, 87, 89, 91.

<sup>103</sup> For a reconsideration of these issues see Hamilton, "Equal to Whom", pp. 136-138.

<sup>104</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, pp. 16-20 recognises the importance of these re-interpretations but considers issues of social agency and Aboriginality remain unresolved.

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promoted the absorption of Aborigines by discriminating against 'half-castes' and welfare agencies were given the right to remove children from their families for industrial and domestic training. The importance given to displays of craft by Lake Tyers girls and boys suggests crafts were the focus of public attention as evidence of assimilation.<sup>105</sup> (Plates 46 & 47) Embroidery and Sloyd work—a Swedish method of woodcarving in vogue in Australian education—institutionalised sexual divisions of labour and a work ethic thought proper to a capitalist economy. In a recent reevaluation of public education, Zygmunt Bauman argues just this point, that education is not so much a site for learning and knowledge but a means of gaining control over social groups marginalised by industrialisation. Although Bauman's insights are compelling, the evidence already brought forward suggests he may exaggerate the degree of control effected by formal systems of education.<sup>106</sup>

The ambiguity and neglect which attends embroidery is highlighted in recent reevaluations of the Hermansburg School. Although the school included women artists, an irretrievable gap exists between the status and fame achieved by the leader of the school, Albert Namatjira, and the hiatus which surrounds the embroidery by his wife, Rubina. (Plate 48) The critical response this embroidery elicited from the designer and child art educator Frances Derham, when she visited Hermansburg in 1938, exemplifies embroidery's equivocal status. As an artist, Derham rebelled in a typically modernist way against the academic training she had received as a child that valued copying plaster casts and adherence to perspectival conventions. Influenced by Piaget, who recognised children's mental growth would be reflected in different stages of visual development, Derham came to value children's

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<sup>105</sup> Similar classes operated at Cummeragunga. Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*. p. 169.

<sup>106</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity Post-modernity and Intellectuals* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), Chs. 3 & 5, esp. pp. 68-76.

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original and free artistic expression.<sup>107</sup> At Hermannsburg, Derham found evidence of gender differences in children's drawings: whilst boy's drew pairs of animals, hunting scenes, landscapes and depictions of the pastoral industry, girls drew flower studies based on the Semco embroidery patterns used by their mothers. Semco was a brand name of a firm, popular in the 1930s, which manufactured and marketed embroidery supplies throughout Australia. Derham admired the boy's drawings as a direct response to their daily life within a colonial context but she lamented the influence of the Semco patterns.<sup>108</sup> When Derham enquired why Aranda women copied Semco motifs rather than using their own "native patterns," Pastor Albrecht explained that the embroideries from Hermannsburg met a popular demand that had earned the Mission £200 the previous year.<sup>109</sup>

The Hermannsburg evidence raises a number of critical issues. The modernist consciousness which informed Derham's response privileged originality and individual expression over the idea of the copy. Such aesthetic ideologies supported the modernist myth of the avant garde but in the process, they obscured the fact that all art builds upon prior forms. Copies occur universally; they extend our cultural repertoire by retrieving the past and gaining access to new imagery. To Derham, patterns implied domination and a restriction of creativity although she subsequently found that girls were equally creative when she encouraged them to produce their own designs. Significantly, Albert Namatjira's watercolour landscapes of the MacDonnell Ranges were similarly criticised as copies of a European artistic tradition. The emphasis which modernity placed upon originality and individuality and conversely, its concern with mimesis, is unique to the West.

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<sup>107</sup> Frances Derham, "A Place for the Handcrafts in Education," *The Recorder*, 1st ed. March 1929.

<sup>108</sup> Jennifer Hoff, *Drawings and Paintings by Children from Hermannsburg, Aurukun and Malabunga*, 14 April- 20 May 1984, Australian National Gallery, p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> Frances Derham quoted by Jane Hardy, "Visitors to Hermannsburg: An Essay on Cross-cultural Learning," In *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 137-176, p. 164.

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The general public would not have concurred with Derham's view that the Semco designs embroidered by Aranda women were a travesty. When Margaret Frances Strongman, an English tourist saw Hermansburg embroideries in an exhibition of Aboriginal Art and Craft at the Melbourne Town Hall in July 1938, she considered them ". . . much better than most white women could do. . ." <sup>110</sup> Equally, the fancy work submitted by Lake Tyers girls to the annual Bairnsdale agricultural show was greatly admired and readily bought. <sup>111</sup> Circulating within these particular regimes of value however, embroidery retained its dubious association with charity. A paternalistic desire to support Christian missions may have inspired those who purchased embroideries from Hermansburg. But, it would seem from Albrecht's comments that Aranda women gained status for the economic contribution they made to the Mission. At Lake Tyers, Aboriginal women took great pride in producing embroidery which raised funds for the Bairnsdale hospital. Under the auspices of Hilda Rule, who purchased cloth already printed with motifs, Lake Tyers women produced embroidery which was sold at the government shop on the station and at an annual fete. <sup>112</sup>

Irony abounds in Evelyn Johnson's embroidery of a Mexican asleep under a palm tree. (Plate 49) In one sense, the gaily dressed Mexican signals the extent to which Western primitivist stereotypes of an exotic other had permeated popular culture; conversely, Johnson's choice of design may well reflect her own interest in representations of other indigenous people. The elegant basket of flowers embroidered by Dolly Pepper sustains equally evocative and contested interpretations. (Plate 50) Embroidery frequently

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<sup>110</sup> Margaret Frances Strongman, MS12176, Box 2753/3, Diaries Dec. 1937-July 1939, pp. 1-157, p. 89, LaTrobe collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>111</sup> Australian Archives Series, B356, Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Managers Report for the period ending 30 November 1937.

<sup>112</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. conv. 26 October 1993.

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inscribed an ideology of the natural which alluded to the associations between women and nature, Christianity and the garden of Eden. It is perhaps indicative of the more heightened sense of class consciousness which prevailed in Europe than in the colonies, that Parker maintains, such a motif—symbolic of privilege—would never have been available for embroidery by the poor.<sup>113</sup> But the critical issue is, these embroideries do not signify assimilation.

Indeed one of the most interesting Lake Tyers boomerangs located during the course of this research was that made by Wally Pepper and painted by Dolly Pepper. (see chapter 4) Given the anonymity which surrounds so many Lake Tyers boomerangs, this single instance of collaboration raises the question whether other women were not also involved in painting artefacts? This evidence would mean that women were not ghettoised by their traditional associations with fibre crafts but, in keeping with the patterns which characterise Aboriginal productive endeavour, men and women worked in collaboration and both had access to the figurative and geometric imagery used to depict the land and its flora and fauna through totemic emblems and symbols of national identity.

## **vi Conclusion**

The skills and knowledge Aboriginal women possessed were readily adaptable to the changed circumstances of a colonial regime. Whether women lived on missions or reserves or, more independently in fringe camps or in the city, they demonstrate initiative and creativity in their ability to adapt and incorporate from the wider community. In so doing they maintained existing skills transmitted through patterns of socialisation, and they secured economic independence. The concept of a fibre continuum severed the ties

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<sup>113</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 174.

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which have, until now, restricted recognition for Aboriginal women's crafts producing a broader viewpoint which demonstrated that a small-scale society in a young settler colony undergoing industrialisation could exploit natural and industrial materials as a means of practical survival, economic gain and personal expression. Exchanged with the wider community, across all sectors of society, womens' fibre craft encoded several different constructions for Aboriginality: basketry and feather flowers evoked continuity with the past whilst embroidery operated as a sign of civilisation. The evidence from this study revealed that both were equally productive in gaining women dignity and status within their own society and that of the majority culture.

Several contemporary curators, Henrietta Fourmile in Australia, and Susan Vogel working in the area of African art, note that recognition for indigenous women artists has lagged behind that of men.<sup>114</sup> Their insights are predated by the findings of Frederick Rose who studied the impact of tourism on Aborigines at Angas Downs station in Central Australia in 1962. At the time, his somewhat deterministic approach argued that women earned less from production than men because they lacked technical skills.<sup>115</sup> In one of the few extended analyses of women's craft, Jules-Rosette establishes a more complex model. Her research in Africa found that women operated at a local level where they remained involved in repetitious, skill-based work. She found that women, unlike men, did not innovate, nor did they become involved in artistic, entrepreneurial ventures.<sup>116</sup> Her findings tend to support the theory that social distinctions between men and women influence the status given to women's production in many societies.

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<sup>114</sup> Henrietta Fourmile, "Aboriginal Women Artists—At Last," In *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, pp. 4-6, p. 4; Susan Vogel, Foreword," In *Africa Explores: 20th C African Art*, pp. 8-13, p. 12.

<sup>115</sup> Frederick G. G. Rose, *The Winds of Change in Central Australia: the Aborigines of Angas Downs*, (1962; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1965), pp. 76-80.

<sup>116</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Meaning of Tourist Art*, pp. 81-104.

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The evidence from this study, however, did not entirely accord with Jules-Rosette's evidence. In an earlier era, women were more constrained by their domestic commitments but they emerge here, and elsewhere in this study as equally involved in the process of cultural production. As discussed above, Aboriginal communities structured their productive endeavour differently so that it remained a collaborative practice, communities and households pooled their income from the sale of fibre objects and exploited its status to gain economically, socially and politically. Although fibre was generally located in the domestic sphere, fibre objects featured in the successful 1863 petition to Queen Victoria mounted by Coranderrk Aborigines. Western distinctions between public and private spheres are not as relevant to Aboriginal communities; consequently women were not ghettoised by their association with fibre, nor were they restricted to this discrete sphere of practice. There are distinctions to be drawn between the value and meaning Aborigines give to the crafts generally and their peripheral role within Western artistic hierarchies. In the West originality and individuality are associated with the status given to the fine arts whilst the crafts are linked to the idea of repetitious skills, function and the domestic sphere of women. One could usefully contrast the recognition given to the watercolour landscapes of the Hermannsburg School with the insignificant role allotted to craft produced at the Hermannsburg Mission.

The status given to women's crafts must also be considered within the broader relationships of power and knowledge which incorporate Aborigines within colonial relationships. Since south eastern Aborigines were deemed to have no traditional and authentic culture, neither women's nor men's artefacts were collected by the Museum of Victoria after the 1920s. Prevailing constructions of Aboriginality privileged objects from remote communities with an aura of authenticity and ethnographic significance. Melbourne Aborigines attempted

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to regain status and power for their community when they redeployed Central Australian boomerangs within a local wedding ceremony. But Aborigines in remote communities also appropriated from the south east. When Gretta Mathews, a missionary from Maloga Mission transmitted the coiling technique—indigenous to the south east—to Croker and Goulburn Islands at the turn of the century, Arnhem Land's rich social and ceremonial ties, absorbed the technique quickly.<sup>117</sup> The difference was of course, that the status given to remote communities allowed them to appropriate with relative impunity.

Modernity emerged as a key factor in this discussion. Whilst the evidence revealed that women were free to reinterpret the past and incorporate from Western technologies and imagery, their range of production was more broadly circumscribed by the restrictions imposed upon women in an earlier era. In retrospect it is apparent that industrialisation, combined with the resettlement of Aborigines into the cities, created a hiatus. These developments curtailed the production of items such as string bags and coiled baskets which were labour intensive and required skills to be transmitted from one generation to another. Aboriginal women living in the cities had to wait until the self determination movements of the 1970s before they gained access to the education and training which allowed them to extend their cultural repertoire into new arenas of artistic activity. Hence this study highlights the role played by the regional domain as a force for continuity within Aboriginal culture. Regional domains represented the land to which Aborigines were sentimentally attached through their kin and history; they also provided the resources necessary for the production of craft.

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<sup>117</sup> Lindy Allen, "Fibre Craft," In *Women's Work: Aboriginal Women's Artefacts in the Museum of Victoria*, pp. 11-18, p. 12.

## **6 Pastoral relationships**

### **i Introduction**

Aboriginal art produced in regional domains of the south east has a distinctive character. Like other Aboriginal communities, the Bagundji and Wiradjuri in the Murray/Darling basin suffered dispossession and dispersal following European settlement however geographical and historical factors mitigated the worst effect of this drastic upheaval, so that many Aborigines remained within their regional domains. The carved wooden artefacts and emu eggs which characterise the art from this area maintain many continuities with an Aboriginal heritage, transmitted within families through patterns of socialisation. The production of these art objects helped facilitate relationships with the wider community and the status artists gained from a local pastoral milieu enabled them to resist domination and assimilation and retain their independence. Aboriginality in the settled south east has been critiqued as only a nostalgic desire to return to the past whereas evidence presented here demonstrates Aborigines' dynamic interaction with the modern colonial world.

At settlement Bagundji and Wiradjuri (Fig 2) shared the common experience of gradual dispossession. Although their adjacent territories remained relatively isolated from capital cities, changing patterns of land use in the twentieth-century—associated with urbanisation—produced further radical disruption.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the dry grasslands of central and far western New South Wales were exploited as large sheep and cattle stations run by single companies. By the 1920s in Wiradjuri territory, east of the Darling, and by the 1950s in Bagundji territory, west of the Darling, the runs were broken up into smaller farms and soldier settlement blocks. Although subsequent rural depression returned

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<sup>1</sup> For the changing patterns of land use amongst the Bagundji see Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 12, 54-55; Beckett, "Marginal Men," pp. 93-94; For the Wiradjuri evidence see Read, *A Hundred Years War*: pp. 25-27, 48-51, 76; Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales 1909-1939," Ph. D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1982, pp. 21-26, 41-53, 87, 90.

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many into the ownership of companies, blocks generally remained smaller, worked by families who had less need for labour. Mechanisation further reduced the need for labour and the reliance upon bush skills, resulting in increased unemployment amongst Aborigines.

These historical perspectives form the background for a study of the art produced by three families in this region. Although many parallels are evident between Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists, their different situations in time and place influence the objects produced, their style, and, content. Whilst the Bagundji artists, Harry Mitchell and his son Gordon, experienced a considerable degree of continuity and stability in their association with the pastoral industry, the Wiradjuri artists—Joe Walsh and his son Hilton and Sam Kirby and his daughter Esther—encountered more pervasive and radical change. In Wiradjuri territory, closer settlement increased the effect of government legislation which aimed after 1909 at the forcible dispersal of all Aborigines.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the issue of cultural continuity is an essential concern. Whilst the research Jeremy Beckett conducted amongst the Bagundji from the late 1950s onwards established that there were many more continuities with a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle than formerly recognised, the contrast which his informants, like many others, drew between vestiges of a traditional culture—sustained through structural congruities with the pastoral industry—and the ‘culture of poverty’ which followed urbanisation suggested a gradual decline in Aboriginal values and pride. Peter Read's history of the Wiradjuri people acknowledges the devastation which occurred. He argues that increasingly authoritarian government intervention in the personal lives of Aborigines, coupled with the shame produced by racial discrimination, halved the number

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of this period, see Read, *A Hundred Years War*, Chs 2-6. In 1909 the Aborigines Protection Act began to restrict the entry of Aborigines on to reserves.

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of people of Wiradjuri descent who chose to identify as Aborigines.<sup>3</sup> He traces the regeneration of the Wiradjuri people from 1920s onwards to a number of factors including the growth in self esteem forged by Aboriginal leaders like William Ferguson, Aboriginal militancy and the importance of kin and regional domain to an Aboriginal world view.

The continuous history of cultural production examined in this chapter is tangible evidence that Aboriginal culture continued to reproduce itself and effect transformations through the ongoing practical activity of individuals in interaction with society and their changing environment.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question, Why was this history not evident to earlier informants and researchers? Typically, social actors are not reflexive about their day to day activities which they take for granted.<sup>5</sup> And, at the time Aborigines lived within conditions of oppression and racial discrimination prior to the emergence of contemporary ideologies of Aboriginality. Today Aborigines speak from a position of self determination and conceive of themselves as part of an imagined national community.

In the meantime, our understanding of the relationships which Aborigines maintain with their regional domain have undergone revision. John von Sturmer argues that our emphasis on Aborigines' spiritual relationship with the land produces a very generalised and abstract understanding of the regional domain.

Spirituality, religion, knowledge, affectivity, as expressed in land, can be seen as the history of practice, as the activity relations of people with each other, in the social, political and economic arenas, written onto the land. . . .[T]his history can change as a result of new patterns of activity

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<sup>3</sup> Read, *A Hundred Years War*, pp. 132-3. This estimate effectively doubles the present Wiradjuri population of 3000.

<sup>4</sup> Here I draw upon the theories of social action developed by Giddens, In *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 114.

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relations. . .in two ways—firstly, in its content; and, secondly, in its structures.<sup>6</sup>

Von Sturmer projects Aborigines' relationship to their land as mutable and flexible: through his interpretation the domain becomes an arena of practice, available for recolonisation, put to use by artists for economic, political, social and aesthetic purpose. In her research with Wiradjuri, Gaynor Macdonald found they now objectify their regional domain in the same fluid, relational terms. Thus the ties that bind south eastern Aborigines to their domain are equally as complex as those in remote communities. Relationships with the regional domain respond to changing historical circumstances: built up from a combination of tribal affiliations and the events of contact history they allow individuals and communities to continually renegotiate relationships with each other and with property.<sup>7</sup>

These insights inform this analysis of the art produced by the Bagundji and Wiradjuri: patterns of socialisation within families establish relationships with the regional domain. In turn, personal and historical experiences alter how land is conceptualised allowing local relationships with the regional domain to gradually accommodate pan-Aboriginal positions.

## **ii Pastoral artefacts**

As an elder of his people and a leading stockman on a property, Harry Mitchell typifies the adjustments and transformations which had taken place in Bagundji society since settlement. Aborigines had skills and knowledge that were readily adaptable to the bush-craft and horsemanship required by the pastoral industry and by the turn of the century, the majority of Aboriginal men worked in some form of rural labour.<sup>8</sup> Born about 1874, Mitchell grew up on

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<sup>6</sup> Sturmer, "A Critique of the Fox Report," p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Macdonald, "The Koori Way," pp. 432-443.

<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal contribution to the south-eastern pastoral industry is acknowledged by Edward S. Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks* (Melbourne: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1911), pp. 12, 23; Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 37-46, 54.

Cuthero station, at the top of Lake Victoria, living with the shepherds who were required on runs prior to fencing in the 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Young boys growing up in such camps often helped with the sheep in exchange for rations. In 1893, Mitchell gained renown for his participation in locating a 'lost tribe' of Aborigines who had lived in isolation in the dry mallee region of the Anabranche, a tributary of the Darling, for twenty years.<sup>10</sup> Little is known of Mitchell's life in the intervening years except that he worked intermittently at Nulla station in 1896 and again 1911-1913.<sup>11</sup> From about 1920 to 1944—when he died at Ivanhoe whilst absent from the station—Mitchell was employed as one of the leading stockmen on Nulla, the million-acre property owned and managed by the Armstrong family at Lake Victoria.<sup>12</sup> (Fig 3) Mitchell, and his wife, Ellen, and their 12 children lived several miles from the main homestead at Waterjili. In addition, Mitchell's sons, Gordon, Toodlie (Tom), Lochie and the twins, Harry and Alec, worked with their father on the station and one of his daughters, Heanie, was employed as a domestic for the overseer.<sup>13</sup> (Plate 51)

<sup>9</sup> Dick Palmer, tel conv. 19 April 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Various versions of the 'Nanya' story exist. The historian Hardy maintains Mitchell worked as a dingo trapper with Fred Williams and Dan McGregor whilst the Aboriginal leader, Ferguson, who met Mitchell in the 1920s, says Mitchell worked as a black tracker with McGregor and Bill Bell. The popular novelist, Ernestine Hill provides the most sensationalised account. Some twenty years previously, Nanya Dthareenai had absconded from his tribe to escape retribution for the death of a woman, and taken another woman with him. In 1893, the 'discovery' of this 'primitive lost tribe' created great excitement but the 'Nanya' affair appeared to confirm the settler myth of fatal contact. Hardy suggests several of the Aborigines died, some remained in the area working on stations whilst others were dispersed to Pooncarie and Raukkan (Point McLeay) Missions. Significantly, Ferguson suggests Mulga Fred (discussed elsewhere) was a descendant of the Nanya people. Ernestine Hill, *Water into Gold*. (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1937), pp. 274-278; Bobbie Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji: The Vanished Tribes of the Darling Rivers Region*, (Sydney: Alpha Books, 1976), pp. 111-2, 167-171; William Ferguson, "Nanya," In *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (eds.), Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin, Adam Shoemaker, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), pp. 175-196.

<sup>11</sup> ANU, Archives of Business and Labour, Series 6/25, Labels 11 & 12, Box Z180, Lake Victoria Station.

<sup>12</sup> This evidence contradicts, Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji*, p. 171, who maintains Mitchell died in 1915 in Mildura hospital.

<sup>13</sup> R. A. Johnstone, Letter to Terence Lane, NGV, 20 May 1980, Copy in the author's possession. The author wishes to thank Terence Lane for making this correspondence available; Dick Palmer, tel. con. 19 April 1993.

Incorporation within the pastoral industry did not necessarily imply the Mitchells had ceased to identify as Aborigines. We know from several sources that Harry and his eldest son Gordon spoke their own language—in 1964, for instance, Gordon recorded a corroboree song for Beckett.<sup>14</sup> The fact that both were initiated suggests these ceremonies continued later than formerly thought.<sup>15</sup> In many ways Harry and Gordon Mitchell are comparable with George Dutton who emerges as a significant figure in Beckett's research. Dutton's biography reveals the extent to which ritual life survived amongst the Bagundji through their travel into Queensland and South Australia for ceremonies.<sup>16</sup> Men such as George Dutton, Harry and Gordon Mitchell knew the mythological associations of their country, and through their work in the pastoral industry they retained knowledge of the *muras* or dreaming tracks; as they slowly drove sheep and cattle from one water-hole to another, they travelled their tracks and sang the country.<sup>17</sup> There were many similarities between the itinerant lifestyle of the shepherd, stockman, boundary rider and drover and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of Aborigines. Although dispossessed, Bagundji people were advantaged by their relative isolation: through the pastoral industry, men were able to maintain close ties with their regional domains.

The carved walking sticks and riding crops produced by Harry Mitchell represent an amalgamation of Aboriginal and European woodcarving traditions. (Plates 52 & 53) The basis of Bagundji and Wiradjuri art originates in the rich heritage of carved artefacts associated with the south east. As discussed already, the emphasis which ethnographers and curators gave to

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret J. Gummow, *Aboriginal Music of New South Wales: Accompanying booklet to five demonstration tapes*, (Canberra: AIAS 1984), Item 17, unpagged; Jeremy Beckett, Letter to the author 10 August 1992; R. A. Johnstone, Interview, 19 October, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Whilst Beckett cites 1914 as the date of the last initiation amongst the Bagundji, Morris found evidence that initiation ceremonies continued in northern New South Wales until 1935. Barry Morris, "Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence," p. 112, fn. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, "The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards," pp. 41-42; Beckett, "Marginal Men," pp. 97-9.

<sup>17</sup> Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 4-5, 17.

the cultural production of remote communities has tended to deny the cultural continuity of Aborigines in settled Australia and overlook their artistic traditions. In her analysis of south eastern artefacts, Carol Cooper found the geometric and figurative elements used in designs ranged from intricate compositions to repeated bands and simple longitudinal fluting—sometimes finished with oils or ochres.<sup>18</sup> That on a broad shield from the Murray river region of New South Wales, includes concentric diamonds, herring bone and small pecked incisions. (Plate 54) This weapon was probably incised with a possum-jaw engraver—a technique replaced by metal tools in a post contact era. Cooper argues the purpose of these weapons was not economic, rather, their designs fulfilled a powerful role in dances and ceremonial activities where they communicated individual and group identity. Within a colonial context, Aboriginal artefacts accumulated additional roles, as an expression of personal and communal identity in interaction with the majority culture.

Through his associations with the pastoral industry, Mitchell also came into contact with an English tradition of woodcarving or 'treen' ware. Emigrants were encouraged to carve bone and wood as a means of economising and 'making do' in the colonies.<sup>19</sup> Sailors contributed to this folk tradition of carved wooden artefacts: after they arrived during the gold rush they remained in the pastoral industry and gradually adapted their skills in scrimshaw to the carving of horn, wood and emu eggs.<sup>20</sup> By the turn of the century, Aborigines and non-Aborigines working as stockmen, boundary riders and drovers whiled away hours spent in camp in the production of plaited stock-whips and riding stocks which they later decorated and personalised. Amongst the sports and diversions of stockmen documented by Edward Sorenson in his 1911

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," pp. 32-33.

<sup>19</sup> *Colonial Crafts of Victoria: Early Settlement to 1921*: Catalogue of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, 4 November-1978- 14 January 1979, (Curated by Murray Walker), p. 104, pl. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Baglin and Wheelhouse, *Collecting Australia's Past*, p. 61; Walker, *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*: pp. 13, 104-105.

publication, *Life in The Australian Backblocks*, he cites tomahawk throwing and the carving of initials into stock-whip handles.<sup>21</sup> To Aborigines, the production of personal artefacts around a temporary camp and the displays of prowess they generated would be understood, appreciated and appropriated as an extension of their past way of life.

Such carved artefacts—whittled with a pen-knife and polished with a shard of glass—were a widespread tradition amongst Aborigines from the late nineteenth century onwards.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Worsnop, writing in 1897, cites examples of carved walking sticks and stock whips from Central Australia, Luise Hercus refers to walking sticks produced in the Flinders Ranges and missionaries encouraged the production of such artefacts at Ramahyuck and Coranderrk.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the repeating, two-dimensional pattern in Mitchell's artefacts is very reminiscent of earlier south-east artefacts. In her analysis Cooper draws attention to the "visual puzzles" incorporated in these artefacts—an exploration of space through permutations of patterns.<sup>24</sup> In a new context these interconnecting lozenges operate as a form of *trompe l'oeil* which mimicked leather plaiting. As with the turk's head knot that acts as a handle, Mitchell exploits optical illusions which demand that the observer willingly suspend disbelief in order to read pattern as if it is an illusion of reality. The choice of figurative elements in the walking stick are equally significant. The turk's head knot, hands clasped in friendship and belt buckle incorporated from popular culture symbolise continuity, trust and friendship.

<sup>21</sup> Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>22</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. conv. 19 April, 1993 describes the techniques used by Mitchell cf. Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc*, cites flint and shell as the technology used in the Central Australian artefacts.

<sup>23</sup> Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc*. pp. 46-47, pl. 25; Luise Hercus, "Eileen McKenzie," In *Fighters and Singers: The Lives of Some Australian Aboriginal Women* (eds.), I. White, D. Barwick and B. Meehan, (Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 68-75, p. 72. cites the walking sticks produced by Ted Coulthard at Mount Serle in South Australia; See *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*, p. 20, pls. 18 & 20 for the walking sticks produced on missions. Snakes are another recurring motif in Aboriginal walking sticks and one appears on a walking stick by Harry Mitchell held in a private collection.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," caption for S. 24, p. 84.

They suggest that Mitchell intended the walking stick to act as bridge between himself and the wider community—a sign that Aborigines either sought equality and reconciliation or saw themselves in accord with the majority culture.

We know of one other Aborigine producing similar artefacts at this time. Mulga Fred (c.1860-c.1950), the Queensland Aborigine who gave displays of boomerang throwing, buck-jumping and whip-cracking in the Coleraine-Hamilton area between 1930s-1940s, made similar stock whips exploiting trompe-l'oeil decoration.<sup>25</sup> Riding whips and stocks produced by Aborigines are rare: few have survived the vicissitudes of time and usage. And, unlike walking sticks, they arose out of an artist's material circumstances within the pastoral industry. As the lifestyle of Aborigines on pastoral properties underwent radical change and mechanisation altered the skills that were required, this production ceased. These objects were circumscribed by the utilitarian roles they performed prior to modernisation, whereas carved emu eggs proved more mutable, fulfilling another role as interior decoration.

### **iii A Bagundji lifestyle**

Aborigines continued to exploit their regional domain as a food resource which supplemented the wages and rations they received as station hands: whenever the Mitchell boys found emu eggs on the station, they were always brought home to be eaten.<sup>26</sup> When Aborigines carved the empty shell of an emu egg they recolonised their regional domain, utilising its economic

<sup>25</sup> Aboriginal informants maintain Mulga Fred came from the Lake Eyre region—not West Australia as is commonly believed. As noted earlier, Harry Mitchell told William Ferguson that Mulga Fred was a descendent of the Nanya people. Mulga Fred claimed he came to Victoria as a blacktracker for the famous Gatton murders of 1896 however these trackers are now identified as George Combo and Charlie Williams. A link might be established via Mulga Fred's alternative names: Fred Wilson and Fred Williams. In addition, Mulga Fred is important as the model for the Pelaco shirt advertisement, "Mine Tinkit They Fit" and the artist A. T. Mockridge (see chapter 3) completed a painting of Mulga Fred in 193[4?]. Mulga Fred is now emerging as a significant figure in the Aboriginal history of the Hamilton-Coleraine region and the Casterton Town Hall holds a collection of his artefacts. Jack Kennedy, tel. conv. 29 July 1993; Gary Presland, tel. conv. 17 May and letter to the author 19 May, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> R. A. Johnstone, Letter to Terence Lane 20 May 1980.

resources as a source of raw materials to produce commodities for exchange. For Aborigines emu eggs are charged with association as beautiful objects which resonate with the value Aborigines place upon flora and fauna and their relationship with particular sites.

The earliest known carved emu eggs attributed to Aborigines is dated to the late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The origins of this art form have sometimes been ascribed to the influence of missionaries at Maloga and Cummeragunga who may well have encouraged the production of eggs, for their association with the Christian ceremonies and as a form of dutiful labour which furthered assimilation.<sup>28</sup> But in point of fact, carved emu eggs cannot derive from any single point of origin: they occur throughout the Murray/Darling basin, and in West Australia.<sup>29</sup> More feasibly, carved emu eggs represent another widespread form of appropriation from the majority culture.

By the late nineteenth century, carved emu eggs were a common leisure pursuit amongst the itinerant workers of the pastoral industry. At the level of everyday life, carved emu eggs represented a skill which contributed additional income. Sorenson noted some itinerants,

never leave the rivers, except for short periods, and make a living by cutting out pipes, snobbing, tinkering, mending umbrellas, making water-bags, carving emu eggs, polishing bullocks' horns, and following many other trades that can be carried on under canvas.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, the fashion for carved emu eggs became part of a broader popular culture as townspeople appreciated how the large granulated shells—whose brilliant colours range from grey, to blue and green depending

<sup>27</sup> The Anthropological Museum in Dresden holds a pair of eggs acquired in 1881. (Acc. Nos. 54431A & 54432B)

<sup>28</sup> Larry Walsh, Interview 2 September, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Durack Miller and Florence Rutter, *Child Artists of the Australian Bush*, (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1952), p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks*, pp. 99-100. Snobbing refers to the 'cobbler' the sheep left to last as the most difficult to shear. G. A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1978), p. 307.

on the food eaten by the bird—could be carved away with a penknife to create a cameo which incorporated three or four colours and as many tones. Perhaps the strangest figure to emerge within this folk tradition was the Japanese artist, Jonaski Takuma, who sold carved eggs from a shop in Imperial Arcade in Sydney at the turn of the century. In a further ironic twist, the origin of his designs, reproduced on postcards, and in a publication, *Kookaburra (The Laughing Jackass) and Black Snake*, clearly lie in Aboriginal legends!<sup>31</sup> Significantly, carved emu eggs were also part of the elite world of silver smithing. Soon after the European silversmiths, Ernst Leviny of Castlemaine and C. L. Qwist of Sandhurst, settled in the heart of Victoria's goldfields in the early 1850s, they began to express their fascination with Australia's indigenous flora and fauna by mounting (un-carved) emu eggs.<sup>32</sup> Australian and English silversmiths copied their innovations and, in a further development, silver tableaus were inserted into the eggs. Carved and un-carved emu eggs thus represented a uniquely Australian artistic expression, present at all levels of society as an expression of late nineteenth-century nationalism.

Harry Mitchell, his sons Gordon and Toodlie and son-in-law, Cooperluke Johnson, carved emu eggs, but to date, only six eggs attributable to Gordon Mitchell (c.1894-c.1965) have been located.<sup>33</sup> Gordon Mitchell's style and subject matter encapsulate the élan and vitality of his Bagundji culture. (Plates

<sup>31</sup> Terence Lane, Letter to the author, 7 August 1992; "How a Japanese Upstaged the Australians and Turned a Craft into an Art Form," *Australian Antique Trader*, March 1983, pp. 10-13; Jonaski Takuma, *Kookaburra (The Laughing Jackass) and Black Snake* (Sydney: Geo. Robertson & Co, 1891?).

<sup>32</sup> J. B. Hawkins, *Nineteenth Century Australian Silver*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1990), Vol. 1, pp. 20-26; Vol. 2. p. 99, pls. 57, 58 and 374; J. B. Hawkins, *Australian Silver 1800-1900* (Sydney: The National Trust of Australia, 1973), p. 67, pls. 77-79.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon married Millie, a Ngyamba woman from Keewong Station whom he met at the Carowra Tank or Menindie. Jeremy Beckett, Letter to the author 10 August 1992. Of the six eggs, one pair is held privately in Mildura, another pair and a single egg are held by the NGV and a further single egg is held privately in Melbourne. The Wentworth Folk Museum holds four eggs which are similar in style to the work of Gordon Mitchell but the carving is rougher, their style less assured and they introduce new motifs suggesting they may be carved by a relative. Two other eggs, carved by an unknown Aboriginal artist in a more realistic style are in the Museum of Victoria collection. (Acc Nos X88509 & X88508).

55-57) Plants, animals and figures carved in a flat, two-dimensional style create a continuous narrative around each egg and stand out in bold relief against a heavily carved background. Oversize plants establish discrete divisions between each scene; their leaves and branches engraved with hatching and dots, spread out over the heads of Aborigines and animals to form decorative patterns. Although accurate identification of these plants has proved impossible, Aborigines suggest they may be wild spinach, lambs tongue and wild tobacco which supplied water, narcotics, medicine, and food.<sup>34</sup> Several of the eggs depict Aboriginal families journeying through the landscape: in one, the father carries a swag and a billy, in another, a kangaroo is carried back to camp. Vignettes of animals and birds suggest Aborigines are accompanied on their journeys; a kangaroo and a rabbit (or bilby) peer from behind foliage, pelicans and swans sit on nests of eggs and fledglings await the return of their parents. It would be simplistic to categorise Mitchell's idiosyncratic style as naive and primitive. Such terms deny the cultural context of Aboriginal artists, subsuming them instead within modernism's own constructions for a primitive Other.<sup>35</sup> In this instance, Mitchell's disjunctions of scale are centrally important to meaning: when he gives equal value to humans, animals and plants Mitchell reveals an Aboriginal viewpoint toward the natural world. Nor should Mitchell be accused of a nostalgia for the past. He portrays the contemporary reality of Aborigines living within a pastoral industry where they gained kudos as 'smart men' noted for their bush skills and knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Mitchell's dynamic image of the buckjumper has parallels with the vivid and accurate scenes of the pastoral industry portrayed by children from Hermannsburg.<sup>37</sup> Writing in the 1950s, Beckett found

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<sup>34</sup> Bill Ellwood, Interview 9 September 1992; May Walsh, Interview, 15 September 1992.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example Philip Jones, "Namatjira: Traveller Between Two Worlds," In *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 97-136, pp. 104-107 and John Kean, "Now Who is Being Naive?," *Artlink*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 1992/1993, pp. 49-52; An extended critical response appears in Sylvia Kleinert, "The Boundary Riders," *Artlink*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 1992/1993, pp. 9-11.

<sup>36</sup> The term "smart man" is used by Beckett, "Marginal Men," p. 99.

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Aborigines wanted to be thought 'smart men' to avoid the stigma attached to old Aboriginal people as 'Jacky Jackys'.<sup>38</sup>

Harry and Gordon Mitchell gained status and recognition from the majority society for the objects they produced but, significantly, these were usually presented as gifts. Harry Mitchell only produced stock-whips, riding stocks and walking sticks as presents for people he liked—those illustrated were given to Mrs Armstrong, the wife of the manager.<sup>39</sup> In another instance, Gordon Mitchell carved a pair of eggs for Bob Johnstone—a young jackeroo who had just commenced work at Nulla in 1926. Johnstone recalls,

Gordon Mitchell was a good stockman, [and] had quite a reputation for carving emu eggs. [He would] do a bit [of carving] in the evening. [One day Gordon said to me,] if you find a few eggs I'll carve them for you. It so happened that one day while mustering, I found an emu nest with fresh eggs, so I put two in my saddle bag, and brought them to the camp, and Gordon was good enough to carve them for me.<sup>40</sup>

As discussed already, when Aborigines chose to give objects which were highly esteemed and desired by their recipients, they maintained the exchange modality of a hunter-gatherer society. When Aborigines presented gifts, they incorporated members of the majority culture within their own exchange relations: operating outside the values of a monetary economy, gifts implicated individuals in future relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness.

This exchange of gifts raises further questions about the nature of the relationships between Aborigines and pastoralists. Although earlier, idealised accounts of these relations supported founding myths of egalitarianism and glossed over racism and violence; contact histories have since presented a

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<sup>37</sup> Buckjumpers are a common motif in carved emu eggs. See NGV collection, (Acc. No D17/1985) and *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*, p. 105, pl. 225 ; For the Hermannsburg drawings see Hardy, "Visitors to Hermannsburg," p. 158, fig. 4.13, p. 163, fig. 4.19.

<sup>38</sup> Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 49-50, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. conv. 19 April 1993.

<sup>40</sup> This quotation combines sections from a letter of R. A. Johnstone to Terence Lane, 20 May 1980 together with excerpts from the author's interview with Bob Johnstone, 19 October 1991.

more accurate picture of formal and distant relationships.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, these generalisations need to be tempered with the recognition that more friendly relations might operate in particular circumstances—in some instances, Aborigines view their relationships with pastoralists as representing an era of peace and security.<sup>42</sup> At Nulla, Mitchell received the same wage as other stockmen, together with sufficient rations to support his family—although not all Aborigines were treated similarly.<sup>43</sup> Dick Palmer, a nephew of the Armstrongs, had “tremendous respect for Harry Mitchell's bush skills.” [In his opinion, Mitchell] did a valuable job and the fact that he was black didn't make any difference.<sup>44</sup> It would be easy in hindsight to accuse the Armstrongs of paternalism, yet their support and respect gave continuity and stability to two generations of the Mitchell family. Whilst the work produced by many other Bagundji artists has slipped into obscurity, Mrs Armstrong ensured Harry Mitchell's memory would survive to posterity when she chose to donate his artefacts to the Mildura Art Gallery. Her action suggests the gifts she received from Harry Mitchell created an inalienable bond which she wished to see preserved.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of individual objects in the world of commerce is influenced by their period of life as commodities, and the status they attain within conflicting and dynamic regimes of value. Most of the items Harry and Gordon Mitchell presented to friends have remained in relative obscurity. But when, by happenstance, carved emu eggs by Aborigines came into

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<sup>41</sup> Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History."

<sup>43</sup> The debate on Aboriginal conditions in the pastoral industry is inconclusive. Mitchell's situation at Nulla contradicts C. E. W. Bean, *On the Wool Track* (Sydney: August & Robertson, 1945), p. 110 who maintains rations were not extended to wives and families; Penney says Aborigines were paid first in rations then at a current or slightly lower rate. "The Death of Queen Aggie," pp. 49-50, fn. 50, 79-80; Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 294-8. Read in *A Hundred Years War*, pp. 25-6 and Beckett in "George Dutton's Country," p. 10 maintain Aborigines represented a "pool of cheap labour". Elsewhere, however, Beckett cites two instances when Aboriginal stockman worked in similar positions of authority as overseers. "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. con. 19 April 1993.

conjunction with the status attached to silverware, their "cultural biography" shifted into the elite echelons of precious goods. One pair of eggs carved by Gordon Mitchell, in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria are now set in older, silver mounts.<sup>45</sup> The dissonance present between Mitchell's brilliant representations of a Bagundji lifestyle and the power, prestige and social status conveyed by their silver mounts, captures the very essence of the way art objects produced by Aborigines for exchange as commodities became entangled in the uneven power relations of colonialism.

#### **iv Illusions of reality**

Stylistic analyses of Aboriginal art have generally assumed that an increased tendency to realism represents a sign of acculturation. In her analysis of south eastern art, Cooper notes that, although geometric and naturalistic elements co-existed at contact, an increase in figuration accompanied acculturation. European observers—obsessed with tradition—interpreted this change as a sign of cultural disintegration.<sup>46</sup> Gaye Sculthorpe's research on a more recent art form—the carved boab nuts produced in the Kimberleys since the 1870s—takes account of regional differences and the role that boab nuts fulfil as rattles in a ritual context. Nevertheless, she found evidence of an increase in naturalism and decorative borders which enabled several scenes to be incorporated within a single object.<sup>47</sup> Although Sculthorpe does not pass judgement, she implies this change in style is associated with the impact of tourism.

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<sup>45</sup> In a letter to the author of 7 August, 1993, Terence Lane says the provenance of the mount is uncertain. Some marks indicate the silversmith may be Steiner who worked in the 1860s but stylistically the mount is dated to the late nineteenth century. Lane suggests the eggs carved by Gordon Mitchell were probably substitutes for earlier (un-carved)? eggs. The reference to a cultural biography for individual objects comes from Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, pp. 64-91.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, "The Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Gaye Sculthorpe, "Designs on Carved Boab Nuts," *COMA*, No. 23, 1990, pp. 37-47, p. 43.

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The pattern evident in the art of the Murray/Darling basin undermines these general assumptions and linear chronologies suggesting instead that a diversity of styles co-existed in adjacent regions in the south east. This heterogeneity is partly attributable to historical differences. Climatic factors ensured Bagundji people were more isolated—a situation assisted by fewer missions and the supportive structure of the pastoral industry. In her study of Aboriginal migrants in Melbourne in the 1960s, Dianne Barwick found Cummeragunga people predominated: few Aborigines came from the Mildura region.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the changing patterns of land use detailed earlier meant Wiradjuri artists lived in a more densely settled area, where they were exposed to more rapid change and a wider range of visual information: newspapers, illustrated journals and films.

The striking differences in style between the carved emu eggs by Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists emerge in the comparison between an egg carved by Joe Walsh, born in Yass about 1901, and those carved by Gordon Mitchell from the same period. Like Mitchell, Walsh is interested in depicting the plants, animals and birds of his regional domain: making a very apt choice for such a medium, he depicts an emu in the landscape! (Plate 58) But whereas Mitchell's eggs are two-dimensional, combining geometric and figurative elements in a continuous frieze around the egg, Walsh uses intricate and detailed naturalism.<sup>49</sup> The emu is represented with complete verisimilitude—an illusion heightened by the oval frame which separates the dark textured surface of the egg from the deep landscape created by diminishing trees and aerial perspective. The point deserves to be emphasised that Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists conceive their compositions from two quite different visual parameters: on the one hand, Mitchell works negatively in bas-relief, carving away the background to produce the design, on the other, Walsh carves in

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<sup>48</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," pp. 63-5, 141-3.

<sup>49</sup> The author is indebted to Hilton Walsh for this attribution.

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intaglio, to create a positive image—a cameo which exploits the shell's many colours and tonal layers.

Walsh remained outside the pastoral industry so, in all probability, the catalyst and source for the buckjumpers he often depicted came from popular culture—either from the American-style rodeos mounted annually in most country towns—or from films. (Plate 59) Indeed, his son Hilton (b.1923), recalls that, after seeing a film his father would return home and draw prolifically: "He was the type of chap that could go to the pictures and come home that night and before he went to bed he'd do several pictures of the leading artists."<sup>50</sup> Walsh is not unique amongst the Wiradjuri artists: Sam Kirby similarly took his visual ideas from reproductions in books and magazines whilst his daughter, Esther admires an even more eclectic range of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources including the Aranda watercolourist, Albert Namatjira, the cartoonist Eric Jolliffe and illustrator Ainslie Roberts. Realism raises many contentious issues within Western artistic traditions where mimesis is associated with Platonic truths of reality. Aboriginal artists, however, operate from their own world view: they selectively incorporate from the majority culture, and reinterpret these motifs in terms of their own values. Not surprisingly, the tendency towards verisimilitude occurs elsewhere in contemporary indigenous art because realism represents a new vehicle for imaging a contested colonial reality.<sup>51</sup>

The philosophy of practice which prevails amongst Wiradjuri artists supports my argument. Inside the community, the ability to carve illusionistically is not perceived as a sign of acculturation and domination: in this instance, Wiradjuri artists gain status for their ability to represent reality. Although children learn to carve by copying and observation, the choice to become an artist

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<sup>50</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March, 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Vogel, "Introduction: Digesting the West," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 14-31, pp. 24-26, discusses similar patterns in African art.

represents a personal challenge. Joe Walsh began carving as a young man to emulate his uncle, Dave Kennedy from Balranald. Hilton Walsh recalls, "My father taught [his friend] Sam Kirby but he wouldn't teach me. It's so tedious and laborious, you've got to want to do it."<sup>52</sup> Hilton was forty-four when he commenced carving. He began by copying themes developed by his father; a bird perched on a stump and a dog attacking a kangaroo. Plate 60 illustrates another recurring subject within Wiradjuri art, a lone Aborigine fishing in the river. It was only when Hilton Walsh devised an original composition—depicting an Aborigine sending smoke signals—did he realise he had been in competition with his father all along. (Plate 61) As a young woman, Esther Kirby (b. 1951) had no intention of becoming an artist until she carved two eggs left unfinished when her father died in 1978. In the philosophy she expresses, the ability to carve deeply and reveal the colours, tones and image latent in each egg, is a metaphor for self knowledge and self esteem.

You never get to do your best work, it's always ahead of you. I suppose you hope the person coming up behind you is better. You only learn a few tricks by doing it yourself. You've got to learn how to go down and learn all the depths.<sup>53</sup>

In this history of practice, the personal challenge of becoming an artist is closely linked to family status. Pride in the transmission of Aboriginal values from one generation to another is encoded through aesthetic judgements.

Such illusions of reality drew admiration from the wider community: realism ensured carved emu eggs would be understood and appreciated by mainstream Australians. Pastoralists commissioned eggs from Joe Walsh because they admired his talent. "I saw [Joe Walsh's eggs] and liked them [and] thought he was a very clever man. There's not many people who could draw like that."<sup>54</sup> It was possible, then, for a carved emu egg by Joe Walsh—

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<sup>52</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March, 1993

<sup>53</sup> Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

<sup>54</sup> Laurel Kelly, tel. con. 11 October 1992.

such as that depicting a kookaburra placed with a heart—to generate a similar aesthetic response from both Aborigines and the wider community, as a symbol of goodwill and as a reference to Australia's indigenous fauna. (Plate 62) To a modern consciousness, which values originality and creativity, the recurring themes in Wiradjuri carved emu eggs might be interpreted as a lack of vitality and evidence of cultural disintegration however Susan Vogel's analysis of contemporary African art reveals otherwise. She found that the repetition and reprise of familiar themes between artists and their audience actually holds in tension the play between expectations built upon memories, innovation and improvisation.<sup>55</sup>

Excluded from Cummeragunga by discriminatory legislation, Walsh supported his thirteen children by working sporadically in various rural industries such as hay carting and harvesting; during the Second World War, he burnt charcoal in the Barmah Forest with Hilton. Although changing patterns of land use meant Wiradjuri artists lived a far more precarious existence than the Bagundji, many artists supported themselves on the income from their production. In the mid 1950s, just prior to his death, Joe Walsh lived with his nephew, Amos Atkinson, who earned £7 a week in the pastoral industry: at the same time, Walsh received £10 for each pair of eggs he carved.<sup>56</sup> The paradox was, as an artist, Walsh could avoid the Protestant work ethic which aimed to inculcate in Aborigines a steady, regular habit of work as paid labour. For, inasmuch as Walsh was able to retain his independence, he remained semi-nomadic: art provided the means for Walsh to maintain affiliations to kin and regional domain.

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<sup>55</sup> Vogel, "Introduction," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 17, 19-20.

<sup>56</sup> Zelda Brown, tel. conv. 14 September 1992; These wages tally with others cited to the author by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal informants yet they are considerably lower than those suggested by Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 156, fn. 75, 204-208, 216-7 and Table V cites average earnings between £5 and £13.16.0 per week.

A particular pictorial structure characterises many of the Wiradjuri eggs: dividing them into two discrete images, creating a dark side and a lighter side—often carved in distinctive styles. A reference to race relations seems obvious but is denied by Esther Kirby. Rather, she suggests artists deliberately carve one side of the egg better than the other to gain the interest of their audience and, in "holding a bit back" retain their autonomy from market forces.<sup>57</sup> On a formal level, the bilateral symmetry and recurring mirror images present in Wiradjuri art are reminiscent of the designs on Lake Tyers boomerangs—a compelling symmetry observed elsewhere in Aboriginal art.<sup>58</sup> These parallels indicate the similarities which exist between the art of different Aboriginal groups. Nevertheless south eastern art is unique in the various ways symmetry operates between pairs of eggs and within a single object, dividing the form of the boomerang or the carved emu egg into spatial components. The combinations of geometric and figurative elements which form these complex compositions appears to support and extend Cooper's original stylistic analysis for the south eastern region.

In several pairs of eggs produced by Joe Walsh, he depicts nocturnal animals such as possums and koalas, birds or a buckjumper on the darker side of the egg. (Plates 59 & 62) These images are exquisitely carved, combining accurate observation with a lively and delicate contour. On the opposite side of each egg, Walsh repeats a stylised scene of the Murray River, depicting in text and image: 'Australia in early days' when Aborigines fished in the river from a canoe, and, 'Australia today' when the majority culture hunt from a motor boat armed with a gun and a dog. (Plates 63 & 64) The meanings generated by these twin images are ambiguous, on the one hand Walsh appears to depict Aborigines as the original owners of the land, utilising their regional domain, on the other, he comments on the passing of time and the

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<sup>57</sup>Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

<sup>58</sup> Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 59-88.

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way in which a former hunter-gatherer lifestyle has given way to a modern colonial world owned by others. In the post contact scene, Walsh seems to place emphasise upon the role technology played as the means by which colonisers gained control and maintained law and order.<sup>59</sup>

Not surprisingly, the image of Aborigines fishing in the river recurs throughout Wiradjuri art. Rivers represent an important focus of continuity and stability within the south-east. As in the past, Aborigines continue to exploit rivers as an economic resource. Until the turn of the century, the Murray represented a unique biotic environment which formerly provided such abundant and reliable food resources that Aborigines were able to live an almost sedentary existence.<sup>60</sup> During the twentieth-century, Aborigines continued to camp along the river and supplement their seasonal wages or rations from its resources. Mainstream Australians perceive the river as a physical barrier between two political states; to Aborigines it represents a resource and a refuge: a means of escape from the force of the law in one state and the opportunity to utilise rations and reserves offered in another.

To Aborigines, rivers are not associated with a past, hunter-gatherer lifestyle: rather, they represent significant sites within their regional domain. A site such as the river accrues meaning over time as individuals and communities continue to orient their lives and activities in relation to it. Margaret Tucker's autobiography describes how, as a child, she left Cummeragunga annually with her family to live along the Murray River, learning about bush foods, hearing stories from a pre-contact past melded with memories from contact

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<sup>59</sup> There are numerous references in oral histories to the presence of guns as a potential threat. see Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and its Aboriginal People* (Fitzroy: Fotoscreen Process Printers, 1952), p. 16; Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 93; For the recurrence of guns in African art see Julius Lips, *The Savage Hits Back* (1937, New York: University Books 1966), pp. 73-74, 139-146.

<sup>60</sup> For the unique environment offered by the Murray river until the first decades of this century despite the effects of steamers, irrigation and the depletion of flora and fauna, see Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie," pp. 10-27, 30, 68-69, 85-89 and Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 15, 19, 31-48, 57-70.

history. In retrospect, she projects the Murray as a tangible conduit to her ancestors and a symbol of their continuing protection. "It is a constant reminder of the past as it softly whispers its secrets of days gone by. . .[and] our people of long ago add their murmuring, conveying messages of encouragement and hope."<sup>61</sup> As already shown mothers and grandmothers fulfil a central role as a focus of sentiment and stability, passing on knowledge to their children. Hilton Walsh, who spends most days fishing in the river, recalls his grandmother, Annie Hamilton, "used to wake me in the middle of the night and tell me what I thought were weird tales about Aborigines. . .This was part of the way [Aborigines] would hand on their teachings."<sup>62</sup> He continues,

I can go to bed some nights and not sleep and almost live in the past. I can wipe the whole of civilisation out of my mind. It's not hard to do along the banks of the Murray.<sup>63</sup>

There is an element of nostalgia in the response of Tucker and Walsh which could be interpreted negatively. Yet the contemporary Ngarrindjeri painter, Ian W. Abdulla who depicts scenes from his childhood on the Murray similarly claims he is "doing river stories [because Aborigines are] more or less interested in the past, than . . . in the future."<sup>64</sup>

Alternative explanations suggest these idealised representations of a tribal past, an earlier era on missions and in the pastoral industry represent a cultural construction which mediates and selectively re-invents the past.<sup>65</sup> Evidence from communities in remote and settled Australia show that such constructions of Aboriginality counter colonial domination and rationalise colonial history through a "remaking of the cultural distance" between

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<sup>61</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 78.

<sup>63</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March 1993.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Jones, "An Interview with Ian W. Abdulla," *The Adelaide Review*, July 1990, pp. 18-19, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Jeremy Beckett, "Introduction," In *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, (ed.), Jeremy Beckett, (1981; Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), pp. 1-10, p. 2.

Aborigines and the majority culture.<sup>66</sup> The selective and discontinuous histories which are created transform relationships with non-Aborigines through an active process of forgetting and remembering which "differentiates the past from the present, . . . by defining different kinds of people and relationships at different points in time."<sup>67</sup> Thus the recurring image of the noble savage must be balanced against the evidence that many communities have chosen, for a variety of reasons, to delete the evidence of a violent contact history.<sup>68</sup> Nostalgia arises out of a desire for the past, inventing and distancing objects in a symbolic realm. Like any narrative, it fulfils an ideological role, positioned in the past and the future but denying the present.

There is an element of myth in these constructions. Myths are a second order semiological system, a metalanguage, which selectively appropriates in order to neutralise (or naturalise) history.<sup>69</sup> Surviving fragments of tradition reappropriate the past experientially to release its potency in the claim for ethnic identity within a modern nation state.<sup>70</sup> In so doing, they incorporate representations of Aborigines drawn from the majority culture. In an intriguing inversion of these narratives, Roper Valley Aborigines filter the past through a Golden Age associated with the recent past of the pastoral industry. Their readings of history render the myth of the 'wild black-fellow' negatively as part of earlier era of violence and confrontation.<sup>71</sup> By contrast, the image of the Aborigine alone, fishing in the river, recurs as a positive theme throughout Wiradjuri art. The point is not that these re-incorporations necessarily invalidate Wiradjuri art as inauthentic, rather that the trope of the Aborigine as noble savage operated as an enabling device: a representation which

<sup>66</sup> Morris, "Dhan-gadi Resistance to Assimilation," In *Being Black*, pp. 33-63, p. 47.

<sup>67</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History," pp. 460-461.

<sup>68</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History," pp. 461, 473; Claire Ahern, "Turkey Creek," In *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality* (ed.), R. Crumlin, (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1991), pp. 34-41, p. 34; cf. Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 25-6.

<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Tran. Annette Lavers, (1972 London: Paladin, 1984), pp. 109-134.

<sup>70</sup> Beckett, "Introduction," In *Past and Present*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History."

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empowered the Wiradjuri by sustaining continuity with the past during a period of continuing discrimination and oppression.

### **v Negotiating relationships**

Colonialism produced divided loyalties. An analysis of Sam Kirby's work reveals the dilemmas confronting Aborigines: loyalty to their Aboriginal identity within a colonial context, allegiance to sympathetic members of the majority culture and the negotiation of contemporary perspectives. Born in 1901, Kirby was orphaned as a young child, and placed into care at Kinchellah Home near Kempsey.<sup>72</sup> (Fig 1) (Plate 65) When he subsequently returned to Wiradjuri territory, as a teenager, he worked in the pastoral industry with his uncle, Alf 'Knocker' Williams. Kirby learnt to carve emu eggs from Joe Walsh, a close friend, but both men also produced artefacts. One boomerang by Walsh (as yet unlocated) was exhibited at the Australian Inland Mission Convention at the Melbourne Town Hall in 1934.<sup>73</sup> A surviving boomerang by Kirby is decorated with poker work—a laborious process which used fencing wire heated in ashes. (Plate 66) Although poker work was a well known craft technique in the nineteenth-century, it was also used in the pastoral industry as a means of branding animals and equipment.

This boomerang represents Kirby's most overt political statement. Significantly it was made as a present for Alick Jackomos (b. 1924), the Australian-born son of Greek migrants who has been a lifelong supporter of Aborigines.<sup>74</sup> In 1967—the year in which all Aborigines received full

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<sup>72</sup> This biographical information derives from several informants but a discrepancy exists between Kirby's birth date and the period Kinchellah was in operation (1924-1970). This problem has not been resolved.

<sup>73</sup> *The Australian Evangel*, Vol. 5, No. 5, October 1934, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> As a teenager, Alick Jackomos, (b. 1924) assisted Aboriginal activists speaking on the Yarra Bank and he played sport with Aborigines. In 1951, after his marriage to Merle Morgan of Cummeragunga, Jackomos raised funds for various Aboriginal causes before joining the Aborigines' Advancement League. In 1967 he worked for the Aboriginal Welfare Board before being appointed manager of Lake Tyers Station. Since retiring he has continued to research Aboriginal history and is the co-author of several publications.

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citizenship—Kirby presented this boomerang to Jackomos a few months after his arrival in Swan Hill as Welfare Officer. The circumstances surrounding this gift and the personalities involved, highlight how activists, whether black or white, could act as a catalyst in the production of art objects expressive of a changing Aboriginal consciousness.

At the apex of the boomerang, in the most prominent position, Kirby superimposes black and white hands clasped in friendship over the Australian continent. Text inside the continent and the boomerang below reads, 'Australia Friendship No colour bar'. Either side, Kirby depicts indigenous animals in a landscape. At four points, geometric elements, symbolic of the Wiradjuri domain, intersect the boomerang.<sup>75</sup> In a clever visual illusion, Kirby plays upon the similarity between their concave forms and concentric infill to suggest these geometric elements represent dendroglyphs—the carved trees associated with Wiradjuri burial sites. (Plate 67) Hence this unique artefact combines a rich and complex range of references. Kirby combines images of flora and fauna with geometric elements specific to his Wiradjuri heritage. Symbols of national identity—seen previously in Kurnai artefacts from Lake Tyers—situate his call for racial equality within the modern nation-state. In Kirby's imaginary construction, recognition for Aborigines is mediated through friendship.

The same complex sign system, combining elements from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources operate as a set of signatures for each egg carved by Kirby. At the top of every egg, Kirby incised his totem, the morning star and as infill either side, he carved several distinctive plants. (Plates 68 & 69) Typically, the darker side of Kirby's eggs depicts a lone Aborigine fishing in the river surrounded by animals, birds and dense forest. On the lighter side,

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<sup>75</sup> The author is indebted to Lucy Connelly for these insights into the meanings which Kirby gave for his imagery. Similar markings occur in the boomerangs produced by other Wiradjuri artists; Fred Bull, Alf "Knocker" Williams and his daughter, Lucy Connelly.

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Kirby selects from a range of motifs which make direct reference to post-contact history: a sailing boat, maps of Australia and linked friendship hands. (Plate 70) In a further unique development, Kirby asserts his own individual identity through a personal coat of arms composed of a shield (which is sometimes signed) crossed with spears and boomerangs—an appropriation from European heraldic conventions. Kirby's use of these devices to identify his eggs reflects the changing self perception of Wiradjuri artists and their growing awareness of market forces within the modern world.

With the exception of the boomerang sold to Jackomos, Kirby's compositions exploit a deliberate ambiguity which ensured they were meaningful to different viewing positions. To Wiradjuri, the image of the lone Aborigine fishing in the river operated as a metonym, a symbol of a broader Aboriginal heritage of which they were part. To members of the wider community such images resonated with discourses of primitivism which supported the myth of the 'noble savage.' Insiders like Lucy Connelly, Alf William's daughter, who sat with Kirby whilst he carved, understand the symbolism attached to the different totemic emblems Kirby depicted but these associations were doubtless lost in exchange; and read as 'decoration.' And even within the Wiradjuri community, different interpretations prevail. Lucy Connelly maintains Kirby was bitter about Captain Cook and the history of colonisation.<sup>76</sup> For her, these images represent a covert political message which address the founding myths of settlement. To Esther Kirby however, the image of the sailing ship is a "beautiful thing in itself."<sup>77</sup> Sam Kirby's recurring images of the Endeavour, like the corpus of Aboriginal stories which surround other key historical figures; Captain Cook, Queen Victoria, Ned Kelly and police trackers represents a "genre"—"a distinctive way for indigenous people to make sense of the major features of the colonial encounter" by reconciling the gap

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<sup>76</sup> Lucy Connelly, 10 September 1992.

<sup>77</sup> Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

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between their original dispossession and the egalitarian ethos which underlies Australian national identity.<sup>78</sup> The point is, Kirby tells and retells these narratives through images of great beauty where pale, billowing sails, clouds and rolling waves carved into the shell read like a contemporary petroglyph, or rock carving. Aesthetics create the bridge for cross-cultural understanding.

As shown earlier, Aboriginal artists maintained their own voluntaristic mode of action when they exchanged objects they had produced with members of the majority culture. Today, some of Kirby's eggs remain within the community as family heirlooms. Others Kirby presented to friends as a gesture of reciprocity. Often, the personal, localised audience of a small country town generated commissions. Such client-driven relationships sit uneasily within the aesthetic ideologies of modernism which are based on a credo of individual artistic freedom; artistic hierarchies reflect these value judgements in the lesser status often attributed to commercial art and design. But, as Janet Wolff demonstrates, cultural production is more usefully thought of as a collaborative process: it is the emphasis which the West places upon individual creativity which tends to skew our understanding.<sup>79</sup> Just as the model of the Renaissance offers historical precedence within the West of successful patron/client relationships, ethnographic parallels with other contemporary indigenous arts reveal that such interaction relocates art in the public realm and enables audiences to engage as receivers and respondents—producing further continuities with the past for indigenous artists.<sup>80</sup>

In one instance, when Kirby carved an emu egg for a family whose son had been killed on active service during the Second World War, he responded to

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<sup>78</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, pp. 118-9.

<sup>80</sup> Vogel, "Introduction," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 16-17, 20-21.

their sense of loss by juxtaposing on one side of the egg a drover in the landscape, on the other, a soldier guarding the Australian continent. In another commission for a friend who was a minister in the Church of Christ, Kirby illustrates a trinity of biblical scenes: the star of Bethlehem, the image of Christ and the Crucifixion; a miniature boomerang with the text, 'God is able' completes the tableau. (Plate 71) Kirby's commitment to Christianity motivated such projects: in the mid 1940s he was associated with the Australian Inland Mission at Balranald and after his marriage, he joined the Salvation Army and rejoined in old age.<sup>81</sup>

This particular project is also of interest as an ambitious and challenging piece of sculpture, improvised with a minimum of tools and resources. With assistance from his daughter, Kirby has mounted the fragile egg on a metal pin set into a mulga wood plaque: the tableau is completed by a miniature inverted boomerang.<sup>82</sup> Miniaturisation, together with repetition, is most often cited as a sign of acculturation and commoditization<sup>83</sup> yet, in her extended analysis of the miniature, Susan Steward suggests that miniatures derive from our desire to objectify past narratives of identity.<sup>84</sup> In the process of miniaturising the boomerang in a new context, Kirby is, in effect, quoting the meaning of these artefacts within Aboriginal culture, thus privileging their origins whilst re-framing them in a more ambiguous context where the tableau is destined to fulfil other, more restricted functions within the domestic interior.<sup>85</sup> Thus miniatures operate through the figurative tropes of metonym and synecdoche to suggest relationships between the part and the whole,

<sup>81</sup> "News of Others," *The Australian Evangel*, Vol. 14, No 7 July 1944, p. 3; Lucy Connelly, Interview, 10 September 1992.

<sup>82</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, p. 121 illustrates a contemporary tableau by Arthur Kirby.

<sup>83</sup> Howard Morphy, "The Impact of the Commercial Development of Art on Traditional Culture," In *Preserving Indigenous Cultures: a New Role for Museums* (eds.) R. Edwards and J. Stewart, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980), pp. 81-94, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Steward, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. ix-xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Steward, *On Longing*, pp. 19-21.

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relating private narratives of cultural identity, with a public sphere, where Aboriginal culture is incorporated into the constructions of national identity. The totems and artefacts included in this tableau are further evidence of the continuation of Aboriginal values within Christian religion. Support for Christianity did not mean that Kirby denied his Aboriginality, nor his concern with social and political issues.

Artists living in the mid-Murray region also benefited from the development of tourism. The prices artists could expect to receive for their carved emu eggs—from American tourists in particular—rose considerably in the post-war period.<sup>86</sup> Initiatives such as the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement founded in the mid 1960s provided a further encouragement to tourism, and Hilton Walsh and Sam Kirby were initially involved in this project. The settlement's first director, Ross Mellor, recognised that Aborigines retained many skills from their own hunter-gatherer lifestyle and their life in the pastoral industry: he considered Aborigines were great communicators who built a "bridge of nuance and understanding into history."<sup>87</sup> When the Pioneer Settlement was included in the itinerary of the Royal Tour by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1970, Hilton Walsh gave a demonstration of boomerang throwing and Sam Kirby presented a specially carved emu egg.(Plate 72)

Meetings between Aborigines and Regal and Vice-Regal visitors recur throughout this study: in the nineteenth century, residents of Coranderrk petitioned Queen Victoria and her representatives, Aggie Edwards was introduced to Lord Hopetoun and in 1954, Albert Namatjira met Queen Elizabeth II. A certain irony surrounds these ceremonial encounters which occurred in a separate realm, displaced in time and space from the reality of colonial relationships. Reigning English monarchs represented the original

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<sup>86</sup> At the time, Aborigines distinguished between locals and tourists: Kirby sold eggs for £15 locally whilst prices in the vicinity of £250 have been indicated for tourists.

<sup>87</sup> Ross Mellor, tel. convs. 1 February 1993 and 10 May 1993.

colonisers: they met Aborigines whose marginalisation as an ethnic minority was, in some cases, mystified by honorific titles. For the majority culture, these individual Aborigines operated as a metonym for all Aboriginal people: an exotic and romantic spectacle and a symbol of successful assimilation. For Aborigines, such meetings represented a moment in time and an arena where colonial conflict could be addressed, if not resolved. Although Kirby remained bitter about colonialism, he gained status for his local community when he presented a carved emu egg to Queen Elizabeth. Indeed one resident has commented, in retrospect, that local attitudes towards Aboriginal art changed as a result of Kirby's gift.<sup>88</sup> Walsh and Kirby relished the opportunity to meet Queen Elizabeth because they refused to perceive themselves as anything but the equal of other Australians. Such significant encounters with Royalty recognised their status as Australia's indigenous inhabitants.

Kirby's astute response to this commission negotiates these conflicting relationships. As usual, on the dark side of the egg, he represents a 'noble savage' fishing in river—reiterating Aborigines' pre-eminent position as the original owners of the land. On the lighter side of the egg, Kirby reinterprets colonial relationships through the events of recent history. In place of the sailing ship which he frequently superimposed over the continent of Australia, he depicts the Royal Yacht, *Britannia*. Somewhat subversively Kirby places the Union Jack on the one side of the continent—opposite the American stars and stripes. The changing political allegiances to which he makes reference through the friendship hands underneath, occurred during the Second World War when America emerged as Australia's strongest ally in the Pacific theatre—displacing England. Swan Hill Aborigines experienced these strategic re-alignments at first hand: in March 1942, just prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbour, America established the largest flying boat repair depot at

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<sup>88</sup> Reg Fiedler, Interview, 4 January 1992.

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Lake Boga, 10 miles from Swan Hill—hence the seaplane Kirby depicts above the continent of Australia.

Kirby's carved emu egg tells the story of the war from the viewpoint of Aborigines in Swan Hill and Lake Boga. The siting of the Depot meant that, for the remainder of the war, both country towns were transformed into small cities which billeted an influx of over 1000 personnel from the United States Air Force and Navy and the Royal Netherlands Air Force.<sup>89</sup> During the war, many Aborigines enlisted and served in the armed forces, but the Wiradjuri, like many other Aboriginal communities found themselves involved in the war on a daily basis. The comment has been made that the city, unlike the country, offers individuals a greater sense of anonymity and freedom enabling them to realise their personal potential more fully. Coupled with this sudden transformation of their small, provincial country towns into bustling cities, Aborigines experienced an egalitarianism and a freedom from racism which made them aware that alternative relationships were possible with whites. Joan Knight, a Wemba Wemba woman, recalls vividly the pleasure, excitement and sense of purpose the war generated amongst Aborigines.

Swan Hill was like a big city [there were] several thousand people boarded out. It was a very exciting time. . . . Everyone mingled with everyone at the time. Everyone was all friendly. Dancing was the main thing. My auntie played the accordion at dances, there was ballroom dancing and square dancing and Swan Hill was packed out with people all toffed up. . . . it was a wonderful time and a serious time because it was a base for the Americans [and everyone] felt they were important. [It broke down the racism in Swan Hill] When these blokes came out it was like a big friendship. Afterwards we were sad but at the time it was important.<sup>90</sup>

For the duration of the war, when Aborigines were treated with equality, they gained a temporary respite from the racism which prevailed in Australia. After the war ended, however, social relationships reverted back to their former

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<sup>89</sup> The author wishes to thank Brett Freeman, *Lake Boga at War* (forthcoming) for making his research available. Brett Freeman, Interview, 1 March 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Joan Knight, tel conv. 11 February 1993.

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state. Aborigines met American servicemen under particular circumstances when an egalitarian ethos temporarily prevailed but this was not an accurate picture of American race relations.<sup>91</sup>

## **vi Conclusion**

Where Aborigines remained on regional domains relatively isolated from the urban development of cities, they continued to develop dynamic and sustaining associations with their land. Patterns of socialisation built up relationships between individuals and their land which negotiated continuities between a past tribal life, relationships with the pastoral industry and the events of contact history. This allowed some elements of an Aboriginal world view to be maintained. The carved wooden artefacts and emu eggs which Aborigines produced gained regard and offered them a means of resisting incorporation into the labour force. In their exchange relations, Aborigines incorporated members of the majority culture into relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness. Within the philosophy of practice which prevailed, art represented a personal challenge and a means of transmitting Aboriginal values from one generation to another. The emergence of women as artists, in spheres of action formerly allocated to men, parallels the evidence from Lake Tyers and reflects changing patterns of employment and the greater social and political freedom gained by women since the 1970s.

Although there are many similarities between the art of the Bagundji and Wiradjuri communities, historical and geographic factors influence the objects produced, their style and content. The art styles of both regions employ geometric and figurative elements in complex compositions which encode totemic relationships with the land, past and present lifestyles and events from the modern world. Whilst Bagundji art is characteristically two-dimensional however, Wiradjuri art is three-dimensional. The carved emu eggs produced

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<sup>91</sup> Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation*, pp. 91-103 and Ch. 10.

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by Wiradjuri artists internalised the illusionism of Western artistic traditions as both an aesthetic criteria of quality and a means of gaining status from their patrons. Like the boomerangs produced at Lake Tyers and Aboriginal art elsewhere, symmetry is an important element in Wiradjuri art.

The uneven power relations and contested arenas produced by a colonial context created divided loyalties amongst Bagundji and Wiradjuri Aborigines. The rationalisation of these contradictions is evident in the juxtaposition of recurring themes of the noble savage with symbols of friendship, Christianity and national identity. In these narratives artists mediate between a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the events of contact history and international events and in the process, they begin to conceptualise local and national Aboriginal communities. As already shown the changes which occurred in the Swan Hill/Lake Boga region as a direct result of the war were a catalyst which significantly altered the perception of Wiradjuri and Wemba Wemba Aborigines. Cities contribute to the destruction of cultural traditions but they also offer individuals more opportunity to realise their personal potential. When Aborigines moved permanently to Melbourne, they lost direct access to their regional domains but in the process, the city, as a site of progress, contributed to further transformations in Aboriginal society.

## **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.

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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

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<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.

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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

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<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 Coranderrk 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).

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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.

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<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.

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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*.

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<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.

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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

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

<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.

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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.

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<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 fletcher 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 waggged 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.

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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

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<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.

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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

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<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.

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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.

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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

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<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.

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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

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<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 Kahlia 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 Kaporilya 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 once 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 Moët 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.

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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

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<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.

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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

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<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 Heysen 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.

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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

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<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 Gamerdi 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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11 Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, pp. 183-213.

12 Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," pp. 59-88.

13 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."