ABSTRACT

Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast of Australia have, since the early years of colonisation, been rarely considered within the realm of authentic Aboriginal arts practices. Such attitudes were a reflection of the colonial encounter and associated attempts to assimilate the Aboriginal population with the White. This thesis explores Aboriginal arts practices and asserts that there has always been Aboriginal art in the southeast and that, despite the overwhelming effects of colonisation, the work of Aboriginal artists provides a distinct and definite counter-history to that endorsed by the dominant culture. Using published historical and contemporary accounts and recent interviews from Aboriginal artists and arts workers, this thesis investigates the continuation of the knowledge and practice of southeast Australian Aboriginal art and its connection to culture, identity and wellbeing. It explores the corresponding adaptations and changes to these practices as Aboriginal people contended with the ever-expanding European occupation of the region from 1834 onwards. This project adopted a collaborative research methodology, where members of the Aboriginal arts community were consulted throughout the project in order to develop a study which had meaning and value for them. The collaborative approach combined an analysis of historical data along with the stories collected from participants. By privileging the Aboriginal voice as legitimate primary source material, alternative ways of exploring the history of Aboriginal art were possible. Although the story of Aboriginal art in the southeast is also one of tensions and paradoxes, where changes in arts practices frequently positioned art, like the people themselves, outside the domain of the ‘real’, the findings of this project emphasise that arts practices assist people with connecting and in some cases reconnecting with their communities. Aboriginal art in the southeast is an assertion of identity and wellbeing and reflects the dynamic nature of Aboriginal culture in southeast Australia.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

1) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD:

2) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

3) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

Signed

F. Edmonds
Sometimes I thought this thesis would never end and undoubtedly it would have taken a lot longer (perish the thought) if I had not had the assistance and input of many great minds.

I extend a very warm appreciation to the Reference Group, especially to Maree Clarke for her friendship and for inviting me on field trips (and for the many laughs along the way), for sharing her wealth of knowledge about arts practices in the region and for introducing me to many of the artists I have worked with. To Jason Eades for allowing me access to the Koorie Heritage Trust and for responding to my pesky emails; Genevieve Greeves, Kimba Thompson and Caine Muir, for participating in the early Reference Group meetings and providing encouragement for the project; and to Richard Frankland and Peter Rotumah for agreeing to be associated with the project.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Abstract** ........................................................................................................................................... I  
**Declaration** ...................................................................................................................................... II  
**Acknowledgements** ..................................................................................................................... III  
**Abbreviations** ................................................................................................................................ X  
**List of Figures & Plates** ................................................................................................................ XI  

1. **An Art Story** ............................................................................................................................. -1-  
   The story teller ................................................................................................................................. - 1 -  
   Research as an ‘outsider’ ................................................................................................................... - 4 -  
   The Project...................................................................................................................................... - 7 -  

2. **‘Ways of Knowing’** ................................................................................................................... - 11 -  
   Cross-cultural and collaborative participatory research................................................................. - 11 -  
   Some Indigenous perspectives about research in Indigenous communities ..................................... - 14 -  
   Decolonisation and a Decolonising Methodology ........................................................................ - 16 -  
   Implementing a decolonising methodology ................................................................................... - 18 -  
   Ethics Approval............................................................................................................................... - 18 -  
   Community consultation: The Reference Group ........................................................................... - 19 -  
   Aims and Outcomes of the project supported by the Reference Group......................................... - 22 -  
   Triangulated methods ................................................................................................................... - 24 -  
   Unobtrusive and Ethnographic methods........................................................................................ - 27 -  
   Documented Sources .................................................................................................................... - 27 -  
   Participation: Learning while working with and in the community. The ‘seen face’ ........................ - 31 -  
   Recruitment of participants .......................................................................................................... - 35 -  
   Purpose of individual and small group Interviews ..................................................................... - 36 -  
   Interviews as conversations, stories as oral histories .................................................................. - 37 -  
   Conducting interviews/conversations........................................................................................... - 39 -  
   How do participants benefit from this project? ............................................................................ - 39 -  
   Validation....................................................................................................................................... - 40 -  
   Analysis of Interview Data ........................................................................................................... - 41 -  
   Trust, Reciprocity and Accountability............................................................................................ - 43 -  

3. **‘Welcoming Strangers’** .............................................................................................................. - 47 -  
   Aboriginal artists in the nineteenth century................................................................................ - 47 -  
   Extinction or Continuity of Aboriginal art ....................................................................................... - 48 -  
   Europe, Empire and Science ......................................................................................................... - 48 -  

V
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stigma and cultural production: Basket makers</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity of cultural knowledge</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Primitivism’ and nationalism</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1929 Exhibition and ‘primitivism’</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Acts of Discrimination: 1930s-1940s</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist Art</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism at Lake Tyers</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomerangs and authenticity</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘half-caste’ problem and eugenics</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney McRae</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labelling and Categorising: The Cummeragunja children’s drawings</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation and change: Move to the cities and fringe camps</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emu Egg Carving</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Urban’ Aborigines: Revitalising culture and Identity</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances: Aborigines as spectacle</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Boomerangs</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalisation and Prison art</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Bull (1943-1979)</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mural in Prison: Art and Identity</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscapes: Continuing connections to Country</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **ACTIVISM AND ABORIGINAL ART** ..................................................... 177

Continuity and Change: 1960s-1988 .................................................... 177

‘New’ Assertions of Aboriginality ...................................................... 178

The formation of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (VAAL) 178

Land Rights, the Referendum and art: .................................................. 179

‘Black Power’ and Art .............................................................................. 181

Language as Empowerment ...................................................................... 182

Politics, Art and Identity: The 1970s .................................................. 185

Protests ..................................................................................................... 185

Nindeebya Poster Workshop ..................................................................... 187

Koori courses at Swinburne .................................................................... 188

Adaptation in the 1970s ......................................................................... 190

Recovery and recognition ....................................................................... 193

Classifying and labelling ....................................................................... 197

‘Postmodernism’ ....................................................................................... 197

Ambivalence and ‘cultural convergence’ ................................................ 199

Appropriation and Postmodern art .......................................................... 202

Reclaiming and Reinterpretation in the 1980s ...................................... 204

Collaboration and Exchange ................................................................... 207

Cross-cultural Exchange .......................................................................... 210

Keeping Places ......................................................................................... 216
The ‘authenticity’ of southeast Aboriginal art ................................................................. - 217 -
Collections: Aboriginal art and museums ...................................................................... - 218 -

7. ‘CAN’T SEE FOR LOOKIN’: SELF-DETERMINATION & ABORIGINAL ART .... - 221 -
Politics, Empowerment, Community-Control: 1988-2007 ........................................ - 221 -
Art and Survival: 1988-1990 ............................................................................................ - 224 -
    Bicentenary 1988 ........................................................................................................... - 224 -
    Printmaking and art boom and bust ........................................................................ - 225 -
    Dreamings 1988 .......................................................................................................... - 229 -
Exhibitions, Self-Determination and Community Control........................................... - 231 -
    Aratjara 1993 .............................................................................................................. - 231 -
    The Cologne Art Fair Affair ..................................................................................... - 236 -
‘Where is ‘Urbania’?’ ..................................................................................................... - 237 -
    Continuing restrictions of labels ........................................................................... - 237 -
    Can’t See for Lookin – Koori Women Artists Educating 1993 .............................. - 238 -
    A Community Controlled Arts Centre .................................................................... - 242 -
Space, Place and Reconciliation ................................................................................... - 243 -
    Another View Walking Trail .................................................................................... - 243 -
    ‘Scar’: A Stolen Vision ............................................................................................. - 246 -
Survival, adaptation and reclamation: 1996-2007 ......................................................... - 248 -
    We Iri, We Homeborn ............................................................................................. - 249 -
    Possum skin cloaks 1999-2006 ............................................................................... - 251 -
Repatriation and Keeping Places .................................................................................. - 261 -
    The Koorie Heritage Trust, Museums and Art Galleries ........................................... - 265 -
    Breaking down barriers between museums and galleries ................................... - 267 -
    Neglect of Victorian art still a problem ...... .............................................................. - 269 -
    Authenticity of Southeast Aboriginal art .................................................................. - 269 -

8. ARTISTS SPEAK ............................................................................................................... - 277 -
Continuity and Change ................................................................................................ - 280 -
    Connection to Country ............................................................................................. - 281 -
    Connection to Ancestors .......................................................................................... - 285 -
    ‘Art in the Blood’ and ‘Ancestral Memory’ ................................................................ - 287 -
    Continuity through ‘Mark Making’ ......................................................................... - 290 -
    Labelling and the Stereotype .................................................................................... - 292 -
    Connection as Healing ............................................................................................. - 295 -
Adaptation and Authenticity .......................................................................................... - 298 -
    Art as ‘traditional’ and dynamic ............................................................................. - 298 -
    Challenging inauthenticity ....................................................................................... - 301 -
    The art market and ‘authenticity’ ............................................................................ - 307 -
Reclaiming and revival: ................................................................................................. - 313 -
    Education and research .......................................................................................... - 315 -
ABBREVIATIONS

AAB - Aboriginal Arts Board
AAL - Aborigines Advancement League
BPA - Board for Protection of Aborigines
CBA - Central Board Appointed to Watch over the Aborigines
CPP - City of Port Phillip
PPD - Port Philip District
EGAAC - East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation
IAAP- Indigenous Arts Advisory Panel
KHT- Koorie HeritageTrust
MCC - Melbourne City Council
MV - Museum Victoria
NGA – National Gallery of Australia
NGV - National Gallery of Victoria
NMA – National Museum of Australia
VAAL - Victorian Aborigines Advancement League
VAHS - Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
# List of Figures & Plates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure/Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>A Triangulated Collaborative Methodology</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 2.2</td>
<td>Cummeragunja Drawings</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.1</td>
<td>Bunjil and his dogs, a painted 'All-Father' figure</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.2</td>
<td>Maiden's Punt, Echuca, possum skin cloak</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.3</td>
<td>Lake Condah possum skin cloak</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.4</td>
<td>Shields, Victoria</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.5</td>
<td>Aboriginal group at Coranderrk</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.6</td>
<td>Wooden pegs with incised markings</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.7</td>
<td>Basket, Victoria</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.8</td>
<td>Basket, Victoria</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plates 3.9</td>
<td>Or-re-keet or the Evil Spirit</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.10</td>
<td>Yaggip/Gaggip, or making friendship</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.11</td>
<td>Sketch of stone houses</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 3.12</td>
<td>'Natives' spearing a white man</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.1</td>
<td>Figure with headress</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.2</td>
<td>Hunting scene</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.3</td>
<td>Lake Tyrell Bark</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.4</td>
<td>Johnny Dawson. Women with parasols</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.5</td>
<td>Johnny Dawson. Cavalryman and family</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.6</td>
<td>A display of boomerang throwing</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.7</td>
<td>Barak throwing boomerangs</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.8</td>
<td>William Barak, Ceremony</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.9</td>
<td>William Barak. Fight scene</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.10</td>
<td>William Barak. Group hunting animals</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.11</td>
<td>Tommy McRae. Wm Buckley, Corroboree and Ship</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.12</td>
<td>Tommy McRae. Aborigines chasing Chinese</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.13</td>
<td>Tommy McRae. Ceremony; Group in European dress</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate 4.14</td>
<td>Tommy McRae. Squatters</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plate 4.15  Tommy McRae.  *Civilisation*  - 117 -
Plate 4.16  Tommy McRae.  *Ceremony with possum*  - 118 -
Plate 4.17  Captain Harrison.  *Corroboree at Coranderrk*  - 121 -
Plate 4.18  William Barak.  *Club*  - 122 -
Plate 5.2  Feather apron of emu feathers  - 132 -
Plate 5.3  Letty Nicholls (Wemba Wemba).  Feather flowers  - 133 -
Plate 5.4  Unknown.  Basket, Lake Condah  - 135 -
Plate 5.5  Connie Hart.  Basket from Lake Condah  - 136 -
Plate 5.6  Percy Leason.  *Australian Aboriginal Art*  - 143 -
Plate 5.7  Boomerang, Lake Tyers  - 147 -
Plate 5.8  Thomas Foster (Gunai).  Boomerang, Lake Tyers  - 148 -
Plate 5.9  Maude Nelson, Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve  - 156 -
Plate 5.10  Mick Morgan, Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve  - 156 -
Plate 5.11  Esther Kirby (Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta).  Emu egg  - 162 -
Plate 5.12  *Have you ever wanted to throw a boomerang?*  - 167 -
Plate 5.13  Ronald Bull (Wiradjuri).  *Prison Mural*  - 173 -
Plate 5.14  Ronald Bull (Wiradjuri).  *The Valley*  - 176 -
Plate 6.1  Lin Onus.  *Three-quarter time*  - 192 -
Plate 6.2  Valmai Heap.  Bag with wooden handles  - 195 -
Plate 6.3  Lin Onus.  *Fences, fences, fences*  - 198 -
Plate 6.4  Lin Onus, Michael and I are just slipping…  - 203 -
Plate 6.5  Les Griggs.  *Halfe-caste Dreaming*  - 207 -
Plate 6.6  Lyn Briggs and Lyn Thorpe.  Design of floor mural  - 209 -
Plate 6.7  Lin Onus.  *Kaptn Koori*  - 210 -
Plate 6.8  Lin Onus.  *Jimmy’s Billabong*  - 212 -
Plate 6.9  Ray Thomas.  *Krautungulling* (Two Crabs)  - 214 -
Plate 6.10  Ray Thomas.  *Land Rights*  - 215 -
Plate 7.1  Karen Casey.  *Land Rights*  - 226 -
Plate 7.2  Lyn Thorpe (Yorta Yorta).  *Timeless Li-lil*  - 228 -
Plate 7.3  Richard Mullett (Gunai).  *Justice not Tolerance*  - 229 -
| Plate 7.4 | Jirra Lulla Harvey (Yorta Yorta). *Self Determination* | - 229 - |
| Plate 7.5 | Les Griggs (Gourndidjmara). *White Line, Black Death* | - 234 - |
| Plate 7.6 | Karen Casey. *Got the Bastard* | - 235 - |
| Plate 7.7 | Ray Thomas and Megan Evans. *Another View* no.11 | - 243 - |
| Plate 7.8 | Ray Thomas, *Another View* no.9 | - 244 - |
| Plate 7.9 | Ray Thomas and Megan Evans. *Another View* no.1 | - 245 - |
| Plate 7.10 | Various Artists. *Scar: A Stolen Vision* | - 248 - |
| Plate 7.11 | Vicki and Debra Couzens. Lake Condah cloak | - 254 - |
| Plate 7.12 | Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch. Echuca cloak | - 254 - |
| Plate 7.13 | Treahna Hamm. *Barmah forest cloak* | - 256 - |
| Plate 7.14 | Vicki and Debra Couzens. Lake Condah cloak (detail) | - 258 - |
| Plate 7.15 | Treahna Hamm. *Wathauroung glass, Oxfam* | - 261 - |
| Plate 7.16 | Turbo Brown & Lorraine Connelly-Northey. *Exhibition* | - 267 - |
| Plate 7.17 | *Urbaninity*: Exhibition invitation | - 270 - |
| Plate 7.18 | Treahna Hamm, *Yabby* | - 272 - |
| Plate 7.19 | Uncle Herb Patten. *Gunnai Country* | - 274 - |
| Plate 8.1 | Cathy Adams & Faizel Bezuidenhout. *Fish Trapped* | - 283 - |
| Plate 8.2 | L. Darroch. *Pastel Drawing of Old Possum Skin Cloak* | - 284 - |
| Plate 8.3 | Vicki Couzens. *Ancestral Memory* | - 288 - |
| Plate 8.4 | Robyne Latham. *Spiral*, Clay pot | - 289 - |
| Plate 8.5 | Lyn Thorpe. *Standing Strong* | - 291 - |
| Plate 8.6 | Lyn Briggs. *My Birth Place* | - 296 - |
| Plate 8.7 | Uncle Sandy Atkinson. *Boomerang* | - 299 - |
| Plate 8.8 | Ray Thomas. *Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station* | - 301 - |
| Plate 8.9 | Julie Gough. *The sub-dividing Games* | - 304 - |
| Plate 8.10 | Ray Thomas. *Tatungaloong goonung* | - 314 - |
| Plate 8.11 | Various Artists. *Eel Trap* | - 321 - |
| Plate 8.12 | T.Hamm, V.Couzens, L. Darroch. Eel Trap Weaving | - 322 - |
| Plate 8.13 | Lorraine Connelly–Northey. *Dilly bags* | - 328 - |
1. An art story

*These artefacts and this artwork, that’s what we’ve got to learn from, from the past where art was an important way of life, where art was … a recording of history, it was a responsibility that the community gave to a person to record its stories. Our stories, everybody’s stories*

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004

The story teller

This is a story about southeast Australian Aboriginal art and how it has always been here. I begin with the quote from Uncle Sandy Atkinson above, as it illuminates the central role of art in Aboriginal society. His words also quietly infiltrate the body of this thesis, which relates the continuous, yet changing nature of southeast Australian Aboriginal art and its relationship to Aboriginal identity and wellbeing from colonisation until today. Implicated in these concepts is the survival, resilience, transformation and political importance of Aboriginal art in the southeast. His quote has also given me cause, as a researcher, to reflect on my own associations and understandings about Aboriginal art and the people responsible for its creation.

As a child growing up in country Victoria in the 1970s, I was largely ignorant about Aboriginal people from the area. Occasionally you would hear whispers around the town about which families were ‘Aboriginal’, but they weren’t considered ‘real’ Aborigines. Influenced by the stories of Douglas Lockwood’s adventures in the Northern Territory and the film *Walkabout*, I thought all ‘Aborigines’ were ‘Black’, living in some remote wilderness. There was little or no recognition of a local Aboriginal history or Aboriginal ‘art’. At

---

1 In this thesis, the southeast of Australia refers to all of Victoria and the country immediately adjoining the New South Wales and South Australian borders. This is a reflection of Aboriginal tribal associations with those areas (Clark 1990; Wesson and Monash University. School of Geography and Environmental Science. 2000). Apart from being a geographic region, the term ‘southeastern’ also refers here to interconnected cultural language groups. Such anomalies have arisen in part as a result of colonisation and Aboriginal responses to it.
school we learnt about the squatters and their pastoral enterprises, but nothing of the atrocities in the area which had caused the deaths of large numbers of Gourndidjmara. Popular myths prevailed, which endorsed the notion of an ‘extinguished race’, despite the Lake Condah Aboriginal mission being located approximately fifty kilometres away.

However, in the early 1990s, when I returned from some years overseas, Aboriginal issues, which had been largely ignored by mainstream Australia before I departed, were now on the public agenda. Aborigines in Victoria were referred to as Kooris and I became interested in discovering more about their history in relation to my own. I returned to university and pursued Australian studies, writing copious essays on Aboriginal literature and attempting to find out about Aboriginal history in general, but more specifically about the people from the region where I grew up. There were, however, few easily accessible published histories written by Aborigines and little that considered first-hand Aboriginal accounts. The histories available were those produced through the ‘filter of the white gaze’ (Moreton-Robinson 2003a: 128).

After being back in Melbourne for a year, I was eager to travel further afield, I needed an adventure, but I also wanted to visit the places and meet people like those I’d read about in Gularabulu by the Kimberley Elder, Paddy Roe. I didn’t make it to the Kimberley until some years later, instead I went to work as a teacher in Aboriginal communities in Central Australia, where I

---

2 Gourndidjmara Country is located in the Western District of Victoria, it is also known as, Dhuwurd Wurrung (Clark 2005). For further information on the linguistic and historical status of the Gourndidjmara language, see (Clark 1990). Today language groups are often associated with tribal and clan group names. Their varying orthography throughout the literature is a reflection of the history of frontier settlement (see Clark 1990). In this thesis the spelling of language group names usually conforms to Clark’s (2005). Some variations occur, which are a reflection of their common usage in the Aboriginal community, others are those encountered in the literature, these appear in direct quotes. For details of most language groups mentioned in this thesis go to Appendix 1, map 1.

3 Koori is a Wiradjuri word from New South Wales and commonly refers to Aboriginal people today from Victoria and New South Wales (Broome 2005). The use of Koori, with or without an ‘e’ is also reflection of the history of Aboriginal language orthography.

4 For example see (Christie 1979; Critchett 1984; Critchett 1990; Reynolds 1982).

5 I use the term Aboriginal community and communities, based on the definition by the Aboriginal researcher Judy Atkinson who recognises that: “the Aboriginal Community” …
began to understand and conceptualise the diversity of Aboriginal culture throughout the country, with its numerous communities, language groups and cultures.

During my time in the desert I became familiar with the significance of art to Aboriginal people. While living in the bush, I began a Masters degree and studied the history of remote area women’s centres. In the communities where I lived and worked (in the Warlpiri community of Willowra and later throughout the vast homelands of the Anmatyerre and Alyawarre people of the Utopia area), women’s centres were pivotal places for the production and marketing of women’s art. It was also at this time that Aboriginal art from the Central and Western Deserts was becoming widely recognised and commodified and was achieving acclaim on an international level. However, on these communities my experiences of Aboriginal arts practices were embedded in how people used art to communicate to me and other ‘outsiders’ their stories about history, their family and their associations with the land.

Following this I went to work as a historian for native title claims in the Northern Territory, then in Victoria and New South Wales. Working in native title provided opportunities for me to form many relationships with the Koori community in Victoria and to come into contact with art styles from this region. Initially, again through ignorance, I was dubious about the styles of Aboriginal art in the southeast, having mainly experienced art from the Central Desert, where I was more familiar with the dot and circular iconography from that region. Southeast Australian Aboriginal art challenged my sense of what Aboriginal art was supposed to look like. This, I now realise was related to my lack of knowledge and experience of southeast Australian Aboriginal history and culture. However, after spending only a few months working with people from urban and rural areas, I soon found that art was used in very similar ways to that in the north, where it was often a way of reinforcing associations

is in fact a “community of diverse communities” spread across Australia, and in some cases in other locations around the world… Communities … function separately and collectively, generally for the common good of the group’ (Atkinson 2002: viii-ix).
with past practices, and was also a way of telling Aboriginal stories about
country, family and everyday events.

This led me to where I am today, wanting to explore not just the
reasons behind the various styles of art in the southeast, but the survival and
revitalisation of arts practices.

RESEARCH AS AN ‘OUTSIDER’

Popular contemporary discourse about Aboriginal people, as reported in local
media, continues to focus on the impoverishment, dysfunction and corruption
of their communities throughout the country. If we believed everything we
saw or read in the news it would be easy to assume that Aboriginal people are
incapable of managing their own lives.6 Few mainstream7 reporters (or the
bureaucrats and Government ministers from whom the media obtain their
information) have spent extended periods of time in these communities
attempting to understand or communicate with the locals. While poverty and
discrimination are realities for many Aboriginal people, persistent negative
reporting only contributes to the well entrenched stereotype of violent,
displaced peoples. This does little to inform the general public of the diversity
or the complexities of the many ways Aboriginal communities are coming to
terms with the present-day consequences of colonisation and even less to
assist Aboriginal people in realising self-determination.

6 Since June 2007, following the release of the Little Children are Sacred report into the
abuse of children in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (Wild and Anderson
2007), the federal Government declared a ‘National Emergency’ and intervened to
change the predicament in remote Aboriginal communities. Over the following weeks the
media reported on these ‘desperate’ communities where police and army personnel had
been sent to ‘stem the tide’ of child abuse and violence. Most reports highlighted the
extent of despair and lack of control in these communities (Koch and Shanahan 2007;
Rothwell 2007). While a general consensus was articulated by many people, Aboriginal
and non-Aboriginal, agreeing that the alleviation of poverty, inequalities and the systemic
social problems that coincided with these issues on Aboriginal communities needed to be
addressed, many also agreed that the Government’s interventions, which ignored the
recommendations from the report were ill conceived, neo-colonialist pursuits undermining
Aboriginal self-determination and were denying people access to the same rights as other
Australian citizens. While these actions were confined to the Northern Territory, the
federal Government was also anxious to intervene in other States (see Altman 2007;
Altman and Hinkson 2007).

7 ‘Mainstream’ as used in this thesis means non-Indigenous.
The intentions of this project were to work with the Aboriginal community in ways that were collaborative and participatory, to investigate the practice and knowledge of southeast Australian Aboriginal art and its connection to identity and wellbeing. This project provides accounts that contradict the images commonly referred to in the popular media. It includes a series of approaches, which involve Aboriginal people in the research process, so that their perspectives and voices are pivotal in the analysis and reporting of the research findings. Chapter two describes the implementation of a decolonising methodology, which assisted with the incorporation of Aboriginal voices and epistemologies and ensured my continuing involvement as the ‘researcher’ with the Aboriginal community (National Health and Medical Research Council 2003 [2006]; Smith 1999b).

As a non-Aboriginal ‘outsider’ involved in cross-cultural research, who advocates a collaborative participatory approach, I am challenging dominant mainstream (mis)representations of Aboriginal people. However, my subject position as an ‘outsider’ researcher also challenges the perception that only Aboriginal people are capable of researching and reporting accurately on Aboriginal communities (Moreton-Robinson 1999 [2003]). My experiences of working with the community in this project contrast with such assumptions. They adhere more broadly to the Aboriginal academic and anthropologist Marcia Langton’s position concerning ‘outsider’ involvement, where she asserts that: ‘Most Aboriginal people involved in production of artforms believe that an ethical, post-colonial critique and practice among their non-Aboriginal colleagues is possible and achievable’ (Langton 1993: 26). She uses the examples of film and video production to illustrate this point:

There is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make ‘better’ representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives ‘greater’ understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other. More specifically, the assumption is that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on. It is a demand for censorship: there is a ‘right’ way to be Aboriginal, and any Aboriginal film or video
producer will necessarily make a ‘true’ representation of ‘Aboriginality’ (Langton 1993: 27).

This quotation also resonates throughout the whole project, but in ways which raise questions about how and if I have appropriately represented the people and communities I have worked with in order to illustrate the history of art and its connection to identity and wellbeing in the southeast. This is ultimately confirmed only through the research process itself, its acceptance by the community and the trust the community has instilled in me to tell their ‘story’ fairly.8

While I have presented alternative Aboriginal views concerning research conducted within the Aboriginal community, it is not my intention to promote one position over the other. Rather, I have presented arguments which assist me in understanding my role as an ‘outsider’ researching in the Aboriginal community. In understanding that there are many subject positions asserted within the Aboriginal community, which present alternative views and experiences, I am striving to avoid reinforcing a historically constructed essentialist paradigm, one that denies the diversity of Aboriginality and its multiple representations of being (Anderson 1993-94; Anderson 2003a). While ‘Black’ essentialisms, particularly when employed by the media, may appear to reinforce ‘traditional’ stereotypes of the Aboriginal Other, when adopted by the Aboriginal community they can assert Aboriginal perspectives for particular reasons. Sometimes this is political, where the use of such White essentialist paradigms (for example the media’s fixation with dysfunctional remote Aboriginal communities) can be ironically deployed by Aboriginal people to highlight a particular message or to make a specific political point. At the same time, ‘Black’ essentialisms such as notions of connections to Country and kin are representative of common Aboriginal experiences, and may be used by Aboriginal people both to promote Aboriginal difference from the dominant culture and to assert positive notions

8 Also see (Anderson 1996) regarding the ‘outsider’s’ role in the research process with Aboriginal communities.
of Aboriginality in a climate which is frequently hostile to the unique position of Aborigines in this country (see Haggis 2004).

**THE PROJECT**

The significance of this project is to tell the story of Aboriginal art and arts practices in the southeast and their connection to culture, identity and wellbeing. Using first-hand accounts of Aboriginal artists and arts-workers collected specifically for this project, alongside documentation of ‘traditional’, historical and contemporary arts practices, art is revealed as intrinsic to the survival of Aboriginal identity and wellbeing in the region. Art is discussed as a cultural phenomenon, which is ongoing and entwined with the diversity of Aboriginality. It is not a stand alone entity, but enmeshed in the everyday processes of being Aboriginal. Indeed, in southeast Australia, Aboriginal artists have been significant in reclaiming practices from the past, which assert distinct, yet diverse Aboriginal identities, representing Aboriginal modernity within the context of its history and culture.

In this thesis, the prominently held negative ideas about Aboriginal people and their art in the southeast, as ‘corrupted’, ‘inauthentic’ and ‘unreal’, will be rejected through an investigation of the published historical and contemporary records (see Broome 2005). Paradoxically these texts, while emphasising the absence and subordination of Aborigines in the colonising process, have contributed to the continuation and reclamation of arts practices across the Aboriginal-colonial encounter.

The adaptability and changing nature of Aboriginal society including arts practices existed before contact and continues today (Morphy 1998; Myers 2002). Understanding cultural change as an assertion of culture, I explore Aboriginal art and arts practices and their adaptations to the impositions of European contact in the southeast. As previously mentioned, chapter two provides a discussion of the decolonising approaches adopted in the research, where the Aboriginal community have been included in the research process, to ensure the ‘story’ of art in the southeast is a reflection of their understandings and is relevant and meaningful to them. Chapters three and four provide the initial analysis of Aboriginal-colonial relations from 1834
to 1900. It is here that we first encounter Aboriginal attempts to include the colonialists in Aboriginal processes of exchange. These processes resonate throughout the body of the thesis. The commodification of material culture is implicated in losses to cultural knowledge, but also assists in allowing other aspects of culture to develop, adapt and survive. Artists of the colonial era, significantly the two most renowned of the later nineteenth century, Tommy McRae and William Barak, symbolise transformations in cultural practices which assert the resilience of Aborigines in contesting the dominance of Europeans.

Today, it is possible for Aboriginal people to reveal many ‘untold’ stories, which were silenced during the years of assimilation. The impact of assimilation policies, implemented from the end of the nineteenth until the later decades of the twentieth centuries are discussed in chapter five. These policies were implemented in response to scientific notions of ‘race’, which advocated the inferiority of Aboriginal people. This affected the transmission of cultural knowledge which became ‘hidden’ from, or only covertly revealed to, younger generations, frequently to ensure people’s survival (Kleinert 1994). Artists of this era, such as the basket-weaver Connie Hart and later those who were removed from their culture and institutionalised, such as the landscape artist Ronald Bull, provide evidence that allows for reinterpretations of practices that contest those instilled in the popular imagination concerning the success of assimilation, the ‘dying out’ of the southeast Aboriginal population, and the ‘inauthenticity’ of their art.

Aboriginal people and their art continued to remain invisible for most of the twentieth century. This, however, was challenged in an era when Indigenous issues, locally and internationally, embraced an increasingly politicised and civil rights focused ‘Black’ agenda. These were articulated more forcefully following the 1967 referendum (Attwood 2003; Foley 2001). As discussed in chapter six, the political and social climate of the time enabled Aboriginal people to embrace their Aboriginality through their artwork, which reflected concerted attempts to have Aboriginal issues controlled by Aboriginal people. Many artists of this era, including Lin Onus, who became a mentor for an increasingly Western educated group of Aboriginal artists, were
activists and lobbied for Aboriginal rights. Onus’ legacy assisted in empowering other artists to reclaim the cross-cultural influences in their work (Leslie 2003; Neale 2000c).

In this process, art that allowed Aboriginal identity to be articulated in diverse ways also provided avenues for reconnections to and reclamation of past practices. This enabled a range of approaches to be adopted, which positively reinforced Aboriginality in the southeast. As discussed in chapter seven, art exhibitions, art galleries and museums, which had controlled how Aboriginal art and culture were viewed by the general public, were increasingly contested by Aborigines. Such challenges were implicated in the many ways Aboriginal people in the last decade of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries reclaimed and reinvigorated their art and culture. This has included the success of the possum skin cloak project by a group of Aboriginal women artists, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm, whose work symbolises the constantly evolving nature of Aboriginal culture and its capacity to provide alternative readings to the dominant narrative of Aboriginal history in the southeast (Reynolds et al. 2005).

While Aboriginal identity is viewed within its postmodern context as fluid, shifting and diverse (Attwood 1992; Hall 1993), its intersection with wellbeing is also embedded in the historical understandings surrounding ongoing Aboriginal-colonial relationships. While these have traditionally defined Aborigines according to a mythical ‘primitivist’ paradigm, arts practices assert broader understandings of Aboriginal identity and its connection to wellbeing. These connections are gradually being articulated more broadly in the literature where a diversity of worldviews and experiences are supported by those exploring alternatives to the Western physical and mental health models of wellbeing (see Manderson 2005b; Mulligan 2003; Mulligan et al. 2006; Taylor 2006; Vickery et al. 2005).

In chapters eight and nine, the concept of art as an assertion of culture, identity and wellbeing is positioned within the context of the stories told by Aboriginal artists and arts workers. They reveal the intrinsic place of art in asserting Aboriginal identities and Aboriginal understandings of their place in the world. The concepts of identity and wellbeing discussed by participants
reveal how their artwork and that of others engages with culture, identity and wellbeing. Many of the participants’ stories collected for this thesis emphasise this ongoing interconnection between culture identity and wellbeing, in contrast to that presented in the historical record.

These stories also highlight the ambivalent, shifting status of southeast Australian Aboriginal culture. While arts practices and the knowledge and meanings embedded in objects have been central to Aboriginality since well before contact, Aboriginal art in the southeast has consistently changed and in this process challenged Western notions of their culture as ‘obsolete’. Art continues to adapt and embrace societal change, yet maintains an Aboriginal articulation of time and place. The historical and contemporary stories of arts practices discussed in this thesis reveal the ongoing tensions between southeast Australian Aborigines and the diversity of Aboriginal culture, within the Australian community. Aboriginal people and their artwork, particularly in the southeast, reveal the dichotomous positioning of Aboriginality in Australia today.
2. ‘Ways of Knowing’

Yeah, art is about stories that everyone’s gone through, or experienced with other Kooris. They’re not only Koori stories, but they are relevant to other Aboriginal people, Indigenous people. It could be relevant to other Indigenous people from another country.

Caine Muir, September 2004

CROSS-CULTURAL AND COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Cross-cultural research has frequently involved colonised and disenfranchised communities. However, the processes of colonisation and imperialism have usually involved such communities in a history of being ‘researched’, which has excluded the participants from the research process. Today, however, partnerships that aim to be equitable between the researcher and communities are being formed in collaborative and participatory ways. These seek to empower community members and redress the hierarchical approaches of the past (Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Fine et al. 2000; Freire 1972).

Cross-cultural research demands reflexive and ethical approaches, where the choice of methodology and methods are significant in maintaining trust, transparency, respect and reciprocation between researcher and participant (Pyett 2001; Smith 1999b). Guidelines for implementing ethical research with Aboriginal communities around the country, stress the necessity of working in respectful and collaborative partnerships, where the research strategy is negotiated, along with any potential outcomes of the research for the community concerned (Australia Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000; National Health and Medical Research Council 2003 [2006]).

In this project I have therefore adopted a ‘collaborative participatory’ approach to the research, which maintains ‘the importance of partnership and participation’ (Pyett 2002b: 333). A collaborative and participatory approach
ought to involve the community at all stages of the research and community consultation ought to continue as part of the collaborative exercise. As a number of Aboriginal academics have noted, this has enabled the research to remain transparent and useful to the community in ways which are sanctioned and acceptable to them (Anderson 1996; Atkinson 2002; Eades et al. 1999; Smith 1999b; Vickery et al. 2004). The methodological approach adopted in this project has therefore been shaped by community aspirations and involvement.

In the context of the current research the word ‘community’ refers to the ‘Aboriginal community’ unless stated otherwise. ‘Community’ is acknowledged as a slippery notion, where the diversity of the Aboriginal community precludes a ‘one size fits all’ approach. However, there are distinct normative values which are considered to be unique to Aboriginal ‘ways of life’, such as connections to Country and extensive kinship networks. Hence ‘community’ as a ‘way of life’ approach becomes a flexible and broad notion, where the salient aspects of ‘community’ do not necessarily depend on being in ‘particular locales’ or with ‘particular groups of people’, but in this context with the individual’s consideration of one’s Aboriginality and a connectedness to others who share similar experiences and ideals (Mulligan et al. 2006: 20-21). So, for example as the Aboriginal academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues ‘through cultural protocols … we can be in place but away from our home country’ (Moreton-Robinson 2003b: 33).

Throughout this project I have also been aware that my experiences, cultural norms and values impinge on the way the research is conducted and ultimately understood. The concept of ‘doing research’ stems from and continues to be enmeshed within the framework of a Western education system where my subjectivity, as a white, middle-class, tertiary educated female continues to influence my work. As Michele Ivanitz, an anthropologist and proponent of ‘participatory research’, notes:

It is … important to acknowledge that researchers are never going to ‘get all of it right’ in cross-cultural contexts, as description and analysis can never be free of the interpretive frameworks that drive them (Ivanitz 1999: 50).
A ‘reflexive’ approach situates the researcher as ‘a participant’ in the process, one who ‘is responsive to the social context of the research’ and is significant in determining the way a project develops and how it is conducted (Pyett 2002b: 334). For research to be beneficial within disenfranchised communities, collaborative participatory approaches acknowledge that the input of both researcher and participants must be provided equal status in the research process. As sociologist Priscilla Pyett explains:

Collaboration implies reciprocity and works most effectively when the knowledge, skills and experience of both parties are equally valued and regarded with mutual respect (Pyett 2002b: 334).

Cross-cultural research, using collaborative participatory approaches, has for me been a rich and rewarding experience. However, cross-cultural research remains a challenging and contested space, as it confronts and demands changes to traditional academic research styles, which have historically been hierarchical, discriminatory and discordant with Aboriginal knowledge systems and beliefs (Smith 1999b). This project was designed to work against the hierarchical and often biased nature of these research approaches. It incorporates Aboriginal epistemological imperatives and participatory approaches, which as Ivanitz suggests continue to:

… contradict the orthodox scientific view of rigour that attempts to ensure validity by ruling out the influence of the researcher (i.e. subjectivity) through experimental or other positivist methods (i.e. objectivity) and clearly separating subject and object. (Ivanitz 1999: 51).

The location of the ‘outsider’ researcher in the research also raises epistemological issues concerning the power imbalance existing between researcher and participants (Ivanitz 1999; Moreton-Robinson 1999 [2003]; Smith 1999b). In cross-cultural research, the complexities of power imbalances ought continually to be acknowledged and addressed, especially when the community at the centre of the research has been historically marginalised from the dominant culture and subjected to a history of poor research methods (National Health and Medical Research Council 2003 [2006]). As Ivanitz notes:
Participation is only effective when power and culture are balanced through a research process that enables equitable power sharing between the researcher and the participants. At one extreme, participatory research amounts to little more than token involvement, while at the opposite extreme it refers to genuine power sharing. Between these two ends is a range of processes resulting in decisions and actions that reflect the perspectives of local people (Ivanitz 1999: 54).

In this project, a ‘balanced’ approach was sought by involving the Aboriginal community at all levels of the project, from its initial design to their involvement in the collection and interpretation of oral histories (completed), a community report and art exhibition (to follow on completion of PhD). Academic rigour was also maintained by implementing a series of triangulated research methods.

Collaborative participatory approaches to research create space for the research to be iterative, enabling it to be flexible, dynamic and responsive to community issues (VicHealth Koori Health Research and Community Development Unit 2001). In the current project, this approach has facilitated a broad sharing and exchange of knowledge within a cross-cultural context. It has also allowed for the research to be conducted in ways that are open and friendly. This, I believe, has contributed to a rich body of data reflecting the community’s perspectives and has contributed to the acceptance of the research within the community.

Some Indigenous perspectives about research in Indigenous communities

The word research, for many Indigenous communities throughout the world, conjures negative images, where research practices have invariably reflected Western scientific notions of the Other. These have generally ignored Indigenous ways of doing things. Indeed, research about Indigenous peoples in the past frequently constructed them as objects, where they were ‘researched’, with the aim being to acquire information that would contribute to academic knowledge, rather than implementing strategies which were beneficial to them and their societies (National Health and Medical Research
Julie Gough, a Trawoolway woman from Tasmania, an artist, academic and a participant in this project, contends that research based on scientific and anthropological methods of discovery disempowers Aboriginal people leading to a 'loss of …self' (Gough 2000: 91).

Karen Martin, a Noonuccal woman from Queensland and an Aboriginal researcher and teacher, advocates an ‘Indigenist research’ framework for increasing Aboriginal control of the research process. These include implementing ‘Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing’ (Martin 2003: 3). Such a process requires acknowledging an Aboriginal ontology, reflecting issues which are important to Aboriginal people rather than the researcher, and are inclusive of the Aboriginal community, rather than exclusive (Martin 2003: 6). An ‘Indigenist research’ paradigm attempts therefore to redress the effects of poor research in Aboriginal communities, which have included:

... mistreatment of ourselves and our lands; marginalisation from structures of governance and development of misguided policy and programs resulting in feelings of distrust, caution, fear of exploitation and misrepresentation (Martin 2003: 2).

The Maori academic and author of *Decolonising Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, in her study of research practices, endorses a similar position to Martin concerning research in Indigenous communities, where she argues that:

... the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’ (Smith 1999b: 1).

Non-Aboriginal academic and historian, Kim Humphery, has also acknowledged these sentiments. In a review of literature concerning Western research in Indigenous communities, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers, Humphery contends that the ‘Western’ concept of colonisation and its attempts to control Aboriginal Communities ‘across the globe’, ultimately affects the cultural practices of Indigenous people. This does ‘little
to recommend the broad spectrum of “Western” research traditions as potentially useful in addressing Indigenous concerns’ (Humphery 2000: 6).9

**Decolonisation and a Decolonising Methodology**

A decolonising approach to research challenges the historically established methods associated with Western scientific enquiry, European imperialism and its by-product colonisation. The effects of colonisation have reverberated around the world since at least the Renaissance, as Indigenous people were ‘discovered’ and located within a paradigm of the primitive Other, a notion established by the positivism of Western science, which positioned Europeans as intellectually superior (Gandhi 1998; Said 1995; Smith 1999b).

The essence of decolonisation, in a contemporary context, owes much of its conceptualisation to the cultural theorist Frantz Fanon. Fanon’s experiences of the Algerian war of Independence in the 1950s inspired his anti-colonial stance, in which he advocated the decolonising of European thought and its control of world history (Fanon 1990). The theories of decolonisation adopted by Fanon, which largely set out to ‘change the order of the world’, became critical in seeking the dismantling of colonialist power in European colonies (Young 2004: 158-159). This demand for a change in thinking about the history of colonised peoples and analysis of their cultures and cultural practices resonates throughout the current project.

For non-Aboriginal researchers (‘outsiders’), working in Aboriginal communities, the requirement to work in decolonising ways is essential if research is to be receptive to and inclusive of Aboriginal worldviews. Non-Aboriginal archaeologists Claire Smith and Graeme Ward, in a review of the impact of globalisation on Indigenous communities and its implication for research practices and Indigenous identity, acknowledge that for Indigenous peoples throughout the world, the process of decolonisation, which involves ‘not only the overturning of colonial assumptions and the reversal of colonial processes, but also the transformation of social and political orders’, has the potential to empower and provide a reconsideration of the way research is

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9 See also (Anderson 2005; Thomas 2004).
conducted in Aboriginal communities (Smith and Ward 2000:3). They note that by adopting a decolonising approach:

> [t]he Indigenous voices challenge the authority of colonial histories and propose other interpretations of both the past and present, as well as presenting alternative visions for the future (Smith and Ward 2000: 4).

Approaches to decolonising methodologies stem from the theories of postcolonialism and feminism. These have provided spaces for reinterpretations of the Other, including communities that exist outside prevailing hierarchies, specifically Eurocentric notions of Western male superiority, and have sought to include the oppressed and the marginalised (Ashcroft et al. 1998; Gandhi 1998).

According to health researchers involved in Indigenous issues, Aboriginal people continue to be marginalised in Australia. They have contended with being the subjects of much inappropriate research and remain among the most economically and socially excluded Indigenous peoples in the world (Carson et al. 2007; Thomson et al. 2003). The adoption of a decolonising methodology seeks to redress these outcomes by incorporating the Aboriginal voice in the research process and to endorse Aboriginal knowledge systems.

In the current project, Western methods were adapted, incorporated and amalgamated with ‘existing “Indigenous” forms of inquiry’ (Humphery 2000: 6). These forms of inquiry follow those advocated by Joan Vickery, Angela Clarke and Karen Adams, a group of Koori women researchers from Victoria. These women support the use of culturally appropriate methods, such as oral histories, which include storytelling, songs, dance and art, as an Aboriginal form of knowledge exchange. Such methods establish Aboriginal control of the research, by allowing Aboriginal people to do things their way.

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10 A number of Canadian studies involving First Nation people also refer to the prevailing sentiment of being over researched, they refer to is as being ‘researched to death’ (Hyndman 2003; O’Neil et al. 1998).
and in turn decolonise the research process (Vickery et al. 2005; Vickery et al. 2004).

A decolonising methodology, as Linda Tuhiwai-Smith acknowledges, applies Indigenous ‘cultural protocols’ and ‘values and behaviours’ in the research design. These consist of establishing respectful approaches to the research by declaring the intentions of the project openly to the communities involved, discussing the results of the study with them and ensuring that the information is ‘disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood’ (Smith 1999b: 5).

The purpose of this project was to conduct research into the practice and knowledge of art in southeast Australia and its relationship to community (and individual) identity and wellbeing. It also set out to tell the ‘story’ of arts practices since colonisation in 1834 until today, in order to establish the association between art, culture, identity and wellbeing. While the continuity of art and its significance to culture is intrinsically known by the Aboriginal community, to date, apart from the work of the art historian Sylvia Kleinert, there has been little systematic recording of southeast Australian arts practices across the historical continuum. The project was therefore developed in association with members of the Aboriginal community in Victoria, specifically those involved in the visual arts, to tell their ‘story’. The decolonising methodology prioritised the inclusion of an Aboriginal perspective in the development, design and outcomes of the project.

**IMPLEMENTING A DECOLONISING METHODOLOGY**

**Ethics Approval**

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee in 2003. This endorsed the methods proposed for acquiring information from members of the Aboriginal community, including interviews and observation strategies. While formal ethics approval is a standard requirement for human research, for this project it was also necessary to obtain approval from the Aboriginal community before the project commenced. Although ethical codes and guidelines are
acknowledged as important in any research process, a decolonising methodology recognises the significance of ethics not as ‘rules’ but as values, where the spirit of research and the integrity of the process are prioritised. Hence, ethics approval, while important is not where the real ethical process of this research is centred (see Manderson and Wilson 1998; National Health and Medical Research Council 2003 [2006]).

Community consultation: The Reference Group
In 2003 and 2004, via a series of informal ‘face to face’ meetings (often at art exhibition openings or community events), Aboriginal artists, Elders and arts administrators were consulted about the project’s potential benefits for their community, as well as their willingness to participate in the project. Although I initially approached members of the community about the potential for conducting the research, I consider that the Aboriginal people, whom I spent some years working and living with in remote communities and those from urban and rural regions, with whom I later worked on native title claims, informed my knowledge about the ‘gap’ in written material concerning the continuous practice of art in southeast Australia and its connection to cultural identity and wellbeing. In this regard, the project’s development follows many Indigenous researchers’ considerations that research ought to be initiated by the community and assist in supporting issues which are significant to them and from which they will ultimately benefit (Anderson 1996; National Health and Medical Research Council 2003 [2006]; Pyett 2002b; Smith 1999b).

The privilege of having contacts in a community where I had already established some legitimacy made approaching people about the project, from my perspective, a less stressful event. Having worked in native title research in the southeast, I was not only familiar with community protocol, but also with many of the family connections and language groups of the people I would be talking with. More importantly it also meant that many people were familiar with me, which assisted in establishing a basis of trust between myself, as the researcher, and the community.

11 Field notes were recorded following these meetings.
The benefits of community consultation mean that the topic is based around issues and outcomes that are relevant to the community. A Reference Group was established to ensure ongoing community consultation at all stages of the research (see Eades et al. 1999). This was formed after discussions with a number of individuals whom I already knew or met through attending meetings and making contact with Aboriginal arts bodies, such as the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT), a cultural and educational institution for the promotion and preservation of southeast Australian Aboriginal arts and culture, and the Indigenous Arts Advocacy Panel (IAAP) at the Melbourne City Council and Museum Victoria.12 Making contact with people from a wide range of Aboriginal communities and arts organisations provided opportunities for discussion and feedback about the project and for the recruitment of potential Reference Group members. Every attempt was made to have a broad section of the Aboriginal arts community represented in the Reference Group.

Members of the Reference Group verbally consented or replied in response to emails to be involved in the project. At the time of writing the Reference Group members continue to be:

- Peter Rotumah: Musician, Indigenous Arts Advisory Panel (IAAP), Melbourne City
- Richard Frankland: Filmmaker, Golden Seahorse Productions
- Jason Eades: Chief Executive Officer, Koorie Heritage Trust
- Maree Clarke: Exhibition Manager, Koorie Heritage Trust
- Kimba Thompson: Filmmaker, Multi Media and Arts Consultant and Curator, Sista Girl Productions
- Caine Muir: formerly Assistant Collection Manager, Australian Aboriginal Collection, Museum Victoria

12 Museum Victoria consists of four campuses in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Its main campus, prior to moving to its new site in 2000, was known as the Museum of Victoria. This site is located in the Carlton Gardens and is called Melbourne Museum. This is the site referred to in this study and includes the Aboriginal Keeping Place Bunjilaka.
While this group has been contacted regularly throughout the course of the project, it has not been possible to draw together all members of the group for meetings. For many Aboriginal people in positions of responsibility (including the members of the Reference Group), they are constantly in demand in their areas of expertise (see Bradfield et al. 2001; Dodson and Smith 2003). Ultimately this affects the amount of time people have to contribute to the project. However, throughout the course of the project all members were updated about the project via emails; they were also invited to any presentations that were given so they could be informed and had the opportunity to comment on the project’s progress to date.

The Reference Group were supportive of a number of methods suggested for obtaining information about the ‘story’ of Aboriginal art in the southeast and is relationship to identity and community wellbeing. Maree Clarke, a Reference Group member, became the project’s field supervisor. As the exhibition manager at the KHT and herself a practising artist and member of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) Koori Cohort, where she is pursuing her Master of Fine Arts, she was appropriately positioned to suggest artists and arts personal as potential participants. The importance of having someone from within the community, such as Maree who is respected in the arts field, was imperative in securing my legitimacy and trust with many of the artists eventually recruited as project participants.

The Reference Group continues to be the principal intermediary between the Aboriginal community and myself. At the beginning of this project, for me as a relatively naïve researcher with limited knowledge of southeast Australian art, individual members of the group provided welcome guidance in the field. This has proved essential for increasing my understanding of significant Aboriginal artists in the southeast, the history of art in the region and the development of arts practices as a dynamic example of cultural adaptation and community identity and wellbeing. The Reference Group also provided valuable advice concerning who I should talk to, the types of issues the project ought to address, the protocols involved in consulting broadly with the Aboriginal community and the outcomes of the project in terms of what it could ‘give back’ to the community. There were a
number of formal and informal meetings with the Reference Group and with individual members of the group throughout the course of the project.

At Reference Group meetings throughout 2004, members contributed to the design of the project, its aims and potential outcomes. At these meetings the Reference Group was informed that the project would be community controlled, that is the project could only be conducted with the community’s support, that the community would have input to the research process and ownership of data on completion of the project. To ensure that the community were informed about the project throughout the various stages, there was continual feedback of any findings (see Pyett 2002a). There was little resistance to any aspects of the project, with those consulted endorsing its intentions, processes and outcomes.

The more formal Reference Group meetings (when a specific time and place were set aside) ensured that people were given opportunities to have their opinions and suggestions about the project recorded in the meetings minutes. The minutes were returned to the members (those present and absent) for any feedback they wished to make and for the purposes of validity.

Apart from the Reference Group, accountability has also been maintained through the appointment of Aboriginal supervisors. Professor Ian Anderson was one of three academic supervisors for the project, in addition to Ms Maree Clarke who was the Aboriginal field supervisor and my mentor throughout project. Maree continues to be involved in subsequent events resulting from the project’s outcomes, including the co-authoring of a community report and a proposed exhibition resulting from the findings of this thesis.

**Aims and Outcomes of the project supported by the Reference Group**

The following aims and outcomes were discussed with the Reference Group and supported by them. Points five, six and eight were suggested as outcomes by the group, following completion of the PhD.

1. Tell the ‘story’ of Aboriginal art in southeast Australia
2. Reclaim and maintain identity through art and sustain cultural practices

3. Determine the link between art, identity and well-being

4. Advance Indigenous methodologies, and promote these as successful research tools

5. Provide data to support ongoing funding for arts programs

6. Keep stories for future generations at the KHT oral history unit

7. Compile a community report, which tells the ‘story’ of art in the southeast

8. Curate an exhibition of southeast Australian Aboriginal art from colonisation until today

The suggestions made by the Reference Group also benefit the community and endorse Indigenous methodologies, such as reciprocity and the dissemination of findings.

The Reference Group suggested that the ‘stories’ collected via participant interviews, would contribute to the overall ‘story’ of Aboriginal art in the southeast and would be an asset to the Koorie Heritage Trust’s oral history unit. The oral history unit at the Trust contains vital recorded information from the community and has programs which actively encourage community members to have their stories recorded and stored for access by future generations (Koorie Heritage Trust 2007). The oral histories about art collected for this thesis tap into the complex unwritten methods associated with cultural maintenance and transmission (Smith 1999b; Vickery et al. 2004).

A community report to be supported in kind by the Koorie Heritage Trust and co-authored by Maree Clarke and myself was another outcome endorsed by the Reference Group. This will entail translating the current thesis into a community friendly document, one which will outline the history of southeast Australian Aboriginal arts practices in plain language. Participant interviews are to be interwoven throughout the story to highlight the significance of art in maintaining community identity and wellbeing. The
report will tell the ‘story’ of Aboriginal arts practices since colonisation, and their relationship to identity and wellbeing. It will be written following the submission of this thesis. The publication of the report will assist in sharing the results of the research in ways which are accessible for the Aboriginal community and interested ‘outsiders’, potentially increasing public interest and funding support for southeast Australian Aboriginal art.

Another outcome of the project, recommended by the Reference Group, was inspired by the completion seminar for this thesis, which I delivered at the Koorie Heritage Trust in November 2006. The main objective of the seminar was to disseminate the project's findings back to the community. At a meeting following the seminar, members of the Reference Group suggested that an exhibition of artwork could be arranged at the Trust in 2008. This would be based on the historical and contemporary material discussed in the thesis and would highlight the dynamic nature of Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast. The endeavours of artists to reclaim arts practices from the past and locate them within the context of cultural maintenance and identity were also considered significant elements.

These suggestions support the outcomes in practical ways and potentially assist in opening avenues for the work of Aboriginal artists in the southeast to be more widely recognised as a significant cultural asset.

**TRIANGULATED METHODS**

This project applied a series of triangulated methods which were sympathetic to collaborative participatory research and assisted in the investigation of the research topic and its aims. As the sociologists Rice and Ezzy argue, triangulation enhances the rigour of qualitative research, where the use of multiple methods ‘develop a complex picture of the phenomenon being studied, which might otherwise be unavailable if only one method were utilised’ (Rice and Ezzy 1999: 38). The adoption of the chosen methods has reinforced ‘reflexive rigour’ on my behalf, which means that reporting on the project has been as honest and straightforward as possible.
The following table depicts the research methods used in this thesis (Plate 2.1). These include three distinct approaches; unobtrusive, participatory and ethnographic methods. These methods were wide ranging. Their implementation contributed to my capacity as a researcher to collect a broad range of data, which has assisted in producing an analytical history of southeast Aboriginal arts practices and knowledge from colonisation until today. Data collected through the collaborative participatory research process, guided by project participants and the Reference Group, provides empirical evidence to support Aboriginal beliefs in the continuity, adaptation and reclamation of arts practices, which impact significantly on issues of identity and wellbeing. This process enabled me, as the researcher, to draw on documentary sources, participant interviews and my participation in the community; along with a discussion of the participants’ reflections on the meaning of theirs and other Indigenous artists’ arts practices, to establish the ‘story’ of arts practices in the southeast.
Figure 2.1 Implementing a Triangulated Collaborative Methodology

1. Documented sources
   - Publications
     - Historical and contemporary material
       - Historical and ethnographic sources
       - Reviews (magazines, journals, newspapers)
       - Newspaper articles/scrapbook
       - Exhibition catalogues and invitations
       - Artwork and accompanying curatorial text

2. Participation
   (The ‘Seen Face’)
   - Learning while working with and in the community
     - Meetings with Reference Group
     - Meetings with artists/curators
     - Working at Koorie Heritage Trust
     - Community events
       - BBQs
       - NAIDOC week
       - Sorry Day
     - Field trips
       - Community visits
       - Artist/curator floor talks/presentations/conferences
       - Exhibitions/openings

3. Interviews and small groups
   - Conversations with:
     - Artists (Aboriginal)
     - Arts administrations/curators (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal)
   - Follow-up from conversations:
     - Return transcripts to participants for any changes
     - Feedback about how conversations are used in the thesis
     - Lodging transcripts with Koorie Heritage Trust Oral History Unit

Unobtrusive

Participatory

Ongoing community involvement (e.g. community report and exhibition)
Unobtrusive and Ethnographic methods

Ethnographic methods entail the researcher becoming involved to some extent with the community over an extended length of time. In this project my participation and involvement over a number of years allowed me to watch, listen, and learn from the community and to collect and record ‘whatever data available to throw light on the issues that [were] the emerging focus of inquiry’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). This also entailed learning about southeast Aboriginal art through general conversations with ‘key informants’ and ‘participants’\(^{13}\) and in formal conversations with the participants in interviews and small groups.

Unobtrusive research methods, as opposed to the more intrusive forms of research such as interviews and small groups, were paramount to this project. Such methods do not require the researcher to directly elicit data from participants or key informants. Instead, unobtrusively derived data can inform the researcher through accessing records, such as published and unpublished accounts, or through participating in community or public arts events, where the actors remain anonymous, yet the data retrieved can inform the researcher’s understandings of the topic they are investigating (Lee 2000; Webb et al. 1981).

In this project unobtrusive methods entailed the collection and reviewing of documented sources, including historical and contemporary literature and art work. Participatory methods included attending community events, particularly art exhibitions, working at the Koorie Heritage Trust and joining my field supervisor on trips to South Australia, New South Wales and rural Victoria.

Documented Sources

To establish the historical content, which has contributed to the four historical chapters in this thesis, numerous published sources were accessed and

\(^{13}\) While the ‘participants’ refers to those officially recruited to be interviewed, the ‘key informants’ are all those who contributed to the project and offered information and advice regarding southeast Australian Aboriginal art, especially the employees of the Koorie Heritage Trust and the Reference Group.
reviewed for any information they held concerning Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast.

The historical and contemporary sources accessed for these chapters were derived from rigorous searches of library catalogues and web based search engines. These searches were informed by my working knowledge as a historical researcher of native title claims in Victoria and New South Wales. This background provided me with in-depth knowledge of historical records, including nineteenth century ethnographies and other documentary sources relating to southeast Australian Aboriginal people, their language groups, connections to Country, customs and ‘traditions’, as well as the impact of both the colonial and more recent policies designed specifically to control the Aboriginal population. With this as a starting point, I then read more widely around sources which referred to Aboriginal arts practices, especially early ethnographic publications. In this thesis the colonial and early twentieth century sources, range from the journals of government officials, the published reminiscences of squatters, nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnographies and government reports, as well as letters written by Aboriginal people appealing for equal rights.

Working at the Koorie Heritage Trust also provided me with an insight into further historical and contemporary sources concerning art and arts practices in the southeast. While I was employed to provide background research for an exhibition of Aboriginal children’s drawings from the Cummeragunja mission, collected by the anthropologist Norman Tindale in 1938, I had access to Tindale’s journals. The originals are currently located in the South Australian Museum. Apart from material at the University of Melbourne archives relating to the expedition to Lake Tyers by the anthropologist Donald Thomson and the anatomist Professor Wood-Jones in 1934, Tindale’s journals are the only unpublished sources used in the thesis. Other published material located in the Koorie Heritage Trust’s library was also useful in assisting with descriptions of the historical context of Aboriginal arts practices in the early to mid twentieth century.

A recent publication and an invaluable source for the study of Aboriginal arts practices throughout Australia has been *The Oxford*
Companion to Aboriginal art and culture, edited by Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale. This consists of a compilation of material across a broad spectrum of arts practices, both contemporary and ‘traditional’ and includes essays and commentaries from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, practising artists and arts workers. Other publications by Sylvia Kleinert, as well as her PhD thesis, have also assisted in broadening my understandings of the extent of historical and contemporary material available concerning southeast Aboriginal art.

Other recent publications (by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors) which document the broad history of southeast Australian Aboriginal people, as well as that specifically relating to artists, art and arts practice were also accessed. Recent published oral histories, art magazines, newspaper articles, exhibition catalogues and invitations were reviewed.

The sighting of original artworks and artefacts, by Aboriginal artists from colonisation until today (including that of the participants), in exhibitions and in other public spaces, including commercial and non-commercial galleries, museums and Keeping Places around the Melbourne metropolitan area (and to a lesser extent in regional Victoria), also informed themes for the project. Many provided visual and written commentary on the ‘traditions’, history and politics of Aboriginal people in the southeast. Some of the most educational of these, from a research, as well as a visual perspective were held at the Koorie Heritage Trust. These included ‘what’s going on! contemporary indigenous art from the murray darling region’ in 2003, the Mission Voices exhibition in 2004, the launch of the possum skin cloak exhibition, gunya winya in conjunction with the Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak publication in October 2005 and Keerna, in 2006 a retrospective of works in the Koorie Heritage Trust’s collection to celebrate the Trust’s twenty-one years as a Keeping Place. Exhibitions, such as the annual Urbaninity exhibitions, which have been held at various venues in Melbourne between the years 2004-2006, including Parliament House, highlight the diversity of Aboriginal artists living and working in Victoria as part of the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week of celebrations. These along with my regular attendance at exhibition launches
at Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum, which included the spectacular *Biganga* exhibition – a more comprehensive exhibition and display of the possum skin cloaks in March 2006 – have contributed to my growth in understanding and embracing of Aboriginal arts practices in southeast Australia. The material accessed at exhibitions such as these has also provided substance and support to the documentary sources referred to previously.

Images of artworks used in the thesis were accessed from a number of sources, including published material, directly from participants or from the database at the Koorie Heritage Trust.

Much of the historical material collected for this project regarding Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast is limited by the extent of information available in the published historical and ethnographic record. This frequently reflects the interests of the European recorders in a particular location. For instance there is extensive published material available concerning the Coranderrk reserve near Melbourne, a reflection of the political events that took place there in the late nineteenth century. Many of the artefacts collected from around the southeast during the colonial period and early twentieth century also remain unprovenanced, revealing the European attitude towards the Aborigines. Such restrictions contribute to the patchiness of the historical record concerning southeast Aboriginal arts practices for much of the period since colonisation.

Only limited unpublished material was accessed. This was due to time constraints and the complexity of identifying, locating and obtaining permission from descendants of Aboriginal people and communities referred to in the unpublished document. The original empirical data collected for the project has contributed primary source information. However, future investigation of unpublished documents may contribute more information about arts practices in the southeast.

The textual analysis of material for the history chapters drew on postcolonial theory, where ‘new’ readings of ‘old’ texts were conducted. The literature was considered within the context in which it was written. This was commonly a manifestation of the Western scientific approach towards the
recording of events and people in order to sustain the colonialist trope of the Other (Gray 2003). When reviewing and analysing the literature, questions concerning the depictions of southeast Australian Aboriginal people and their arts practices in the nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century as ‘primitive’, degraded, inauthentic and effectively obsolete, were assessed against the political and social framework of the time.

While a postcolonial theory was applied to the analysis of texts to establish the connection between southeast Australian Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing, the intersection between gender, ethnicity and class was not specifically explored within this thesis, although there is a significant field of study concerning the interplay between these influences and identity (see Spivak 1988, 1993; Moreton-Robinson 1999 [2003], 2000; Mohanty 2003; Trinh 1989, 1991).

**Participation: Learning while working with and in the community. The ‘seen face’**

Community consultation also occurred on less formal grounds, and contributed to a process of friendly exchanges throughout the course of the project. This consisted of establishing relationships with community members that were respectful and collegial and reiterated the accountability and transparency of the project to the community. Visibility of the researcher within the community remains a significant aspect regarding the acceptance and appreciation of the project and its outcomes. A series of approaches were therefore implemented to ensure that I, as the researcher, became known as widely as possible among the Aboriginal arts community in Victoria. This draws on Smith’s concept of the ‘seen face’, where, she argues that:

> ... showing your face, turning up at important cultural events – cements your membership within a community in an ongoing way and is part of how one’s credibility is continually developed and maintained (Smith 1999b: 15).

Implementing the concept of the ‘seen face’ was achieved through *learning while working with and in the community* (Van der Sterren 2005). This is a more reflexive and collaborative approach than the conventional participant observation method favoured by anthropologists. Given the history
of government surveillance and poor research in Aboriginal communities, the term ‘observation’ implies a hierarchical and dominating approach. *Learning while working with and in the community* means that I acknowledge my inclusion in the research process, not just as a participant observer, but as one who is on a journey of discovery, with obligations to the community to learn from and with them (Smith 1999b).

In this project visibility at community arts events, especially at the Koorie Heritage Trust and at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria (these were mostly exhibition openings for artists from the southeast), was a way of networking and providing updates about the project to community members and was also significant in facilitating the project’s acceptance. Field notes were recorded to assist in contextualising the location of art in the community, including identification of the main ‘actors’. Field notes provided additional background information about artists, including many of the participants and verified art as a significant community custom, where the events are seen as cultural gatherings. An example of the use of field notes is provided below.

**Biganga Possum Skin Cloak Opening, Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria, 3rd March 2006**

This was the biggest turn out of community people for an opening I have ever seen. I was only able to catch the end of Treahna Hamm’s opening speech. This again was about ‘country’ and the longevity of culture. She spoke passionately about the ongoing attachment and association to land that her people the Yorta Yorta continue to have today. The opening had dancing from the Gourndidjmara community. Vicki Couzens is strongly associated with the revival of dance in that community and I think she is responsible for it being so successful. There was a strong emphasis on using ‘language’.

**Field Notes 3 March 2006**

The field notes have also been exposed to rigour through a series of triangulated methods. Participant interviews, such as that with the artist

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14 For a discussion of the use of field notes as an adjunct to the development of a ‘natural history’, see (Silverman and Seale 2005). For the current project field notes contributed to the development of my thinking about the ‘story’ of Aboriginal art.
Cathy Adams, October 2004

Along with recording field notes (an ongoing reflexive practice), I also kept a scrap book of newspaper articles about Aboriginal art, specifically southeast Australian Aboriginal art, including commentaries and critiques of the exhibitions I attended. These along with the interviews provided a range of perspectives, which allowed me to clarify or question my own perceptions.\textsuperscript{15}

The acceptance of the project by the community was accelerated by its endorsement from Maree Clarke. Her role in the project was a significant attribute, as her ‘insider’ knowledge was integral to the recruiting of participants. She also suggested field trips,\textsuperscript{16} as well as employing me as a part-time researcher for an art exhibition at the KHT from the end of 2004 until mid 2005.

My work at the Trust, and associated field trips to the community of Cummerringuua, New South Wales, in February 2005 and the Museum of South Australia, Adelaide in April 2005, were not directly associated with this project. However, the experiences provided me with the opportunity to

\textsuperscript{15} See (Pyett 2003) for a discussion of validity in qualitative research and the need for ‘critical compromises’ to facilitate rigour in the process.

\textsuperscript{16} See Appendix 2.
become part of the Koorie Heritage Trust’s community and to learn more about the significance of art for Aboriginal people in the southeast. It also facilitated ongoing relationships with the staff, who continue to be supportive of the project.

Working at the KHT also facilitated access to and provided me with exposure to the various styles of artwork from the southeast, as well as to the artists whose work is held and exhibited at the KHT. This was beneficial as it provided me with a greater depth of knowledge about the connectedness of art to family life, Aboriginal politics and the land. For instance, the project I worked on (as previously mentioned) was the *Cummeragunja Drawings* exhibition, showing children’s works collected from the Cummeragunja mission in 1938. This exhibition displayed not only the children’s drawings but also a brief history of the mission and the events that led to the Cummeragunja walk-off in 1939.17

**Plate 2.2** *Cummeragunja Drawings*. Exhibition Invitation, Koorie Heritage Trust July 2005

Image removed due to copyright.

Encounters with people at other exhibitions and through activities running at the same time as my employment at the KHT, provided opportunities to engage with artists and to liaise with members of the Aboriginal community at community events on a more familiar and friendly

17 See Chapter 4 for further details about art from this period.
basis (see Appendix 2). Learning while working with and in the community, enabled me to ‘go beyond’ just talking with the main ‘actors’ and to use the material I collected to complement my interviews with participants (Gray 2003: 82). For example, hearing artists (including participants) talk at exhibitions about their work, as well as sighting their art.

This methodological approach also enabled relationships to be formed with some members of the southeast Australian Aboriginal arts community, in ways that are ongoing and sustainable.

Recruitment of participants
Recruitment of participants was facilitated by the Reference Group. Maree Clarke provided a list of Aboriginal artists and suggested those who would be most appropriate. I contacted these artists and was also recommended others to interview, either through my own contacts within the community, or following recommendations from participants. Hence recruitment, while relying primarily on suggestions from the Reference Group, was achieved through a snowball process, where participants were drawn from a small and ‘well networked’ community (Rice and Ezzy 1999). As the Aboriginal arts community is well networked, many members of the community (both participants and non-participants alike) were aware of who had participated in the interview process.

Twenty individuals were interviewed between September 2004 and February 2005. The small number of participants is characteristic of qualitative research. However, this does not diminish the validity or accuracy of data analysis, if it is exposed to rigorous methodological approaches (Pyett 2003; Silverman and Seale 2005).

A limitation of the snowball process is that recruitment relies on a small network, generally stemming from few sources. In this instance, my relationship with Maree Clarke influenced the choice of my participants, as well as focusing my approach to the art world through the Koorie Heritage Trust. While I have endeavoured to access a wide variety of data and to visit the major galleries and museums involved in the exhibiting and promotion of southeast Australian Aboriginal art on a regular basis, including Bunjilaka at
Museum of Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria at Federation Square, along with smaller galleries and Keeping Places throughout the state, such as Brambuck in Halls Gap, I recognise that the limited time I spent in places other than the Trust, or in accessing people outside of Maree’s immediate network, is an artefact of the social relationships through which this project is realised. However, in addressing these biases and acknowledging that the snowball method of recruitment and participation is one of the project’s limitations, alternatively, I am also providing a lens through which to view the world of southeast Australian Aboriginal arts practices.

Despite its limitations, this project raises awareness of the value of conducting work in collaboration with the Aboriginal community. It also raises awareness of the need for further and wider ranging considerations of material still to be recorded, documented and recognised as significant to the history of not only southeast Aboriginal arts practices, but of Victoria.

Because of the limitations in the method of recruitment, the balance of representation in the gender of participants was also affected. While it was intended that equal numbers of male and female participants would be recruited, only five were male, two of whom were community Elders.

Altogether, thirteen participants were practising artists; the others were arts administrators, curators and gallery operators. Two non-Aboriginal women, with close ties to the Aboriginal arts community, were recommended by the Reference Group and included in the interviews. Their opinions concerning Aboriginal people and arts practices are based on their first-hand experiences of working in two of Victoria’s major publicly funded arts organisations. Although most participants were female, their recruitment was based on opportunity and contact. While this is only a small, closely networked group, it has not diminished the range of opinions, which reflect individual views on Aboriginal art, as the stories from male and female participants alike covered similar themes, which are discussed below (see Appendix 3).

**Purpose of individual and small group Interviews**
The interviews were conducted to provide first hand accounts of arts practices by Aboriginal artists in Victoria. Interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal arts workers also contributed to this process. The interviews enabled me to gain an insight into contemporary Aboriginal understandings of past and present arts practices, including how cultural information has been accessed by artists today or passed on to them through community networks.

One of the significant outcomes of the interviews was that they became the original, primary source data for the thesis. The interviews assisted in guiding and informing the collection and reading of documentary sources, interpreting the documented history of Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast and in identifying gaps and contradictions in the historical record. The interviews were also significant in revealing the place of art as one of the predominant identifiers of Aboriginality in southeast Australia and its importance in reclaiming connections to culture.

**Interviews as conversations, stories as oral histories**

Throughout this project the word ‘story’ is used to reflect more adequately Indigenous knowledge systems. This is apparent not only in Australia and New Zealand, but also in Canada, as the First Nations academic Judy Iseke-Barnes from the University of Toronto acknowledges when she writes:

> Telling stories is a practice in Indigenous cultures which has sustained communities and which validates the experiences of Indigenous peoples and epistemologies (Iseke-Barnes 2003)

The interviews were conducted as conversations and recorded using a digital audio device. These ‘stories’ are viewed similarly to the way Judy Atkinson, an Aboriginal academic from Queensland describes the word, where it is defined within its Aboriginal terminology as a ‘story place’ or ‘my story’ which ‘denotes a personal history, a narrative description of life events’ (Atkinson 2002: v).  

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18 For a further example of the way the word ‘story’ is used to depict life events, including mythology within an Aboriginal world view, listen to the Aboriginal actor from Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, David Gulpilil’s narration of the film *Ten Canoes*. He introduces
The ‘stories’ are also oral histories, which are culturally appropriate ways of recording significant events in people’s lives. In this project, oral histories concerning art and people’s connection to Aboriginal art and their own arts practices (if they were artists) were conducted through in-depth interviews (or conversations) (Rice and Ezzy 1999; Vickery et al. 2005). These were friendly and often humorous conversations, between the participants and myself.

The stories in the current project were part of the collaborative participatory research process and inform all the chapters in this thesis. However, they are the basis of chapters seven, eight and nine, where the stories are integral to allowing an Aboriginal voice to be prioritised concerning the relevance of contemporary arts practices for Aborigines in the southeast today.

Most interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, however, there were also three small group interviews; one with two participants, the others with three participants in each. The same question format was used in the individual and small group interviews. Although I directed the discussion, the interviews were conducted as conversations, where the participant(s) were given space to spend as little or as much time as they required in answering any question.

The small group interviews were cohesive groups. One group consisted of three art exhibition curators (one male and two female), another was of three female artists who work collaboratively on a number of projects; the final one was with two arts administrators (one Aboriginal, the other non-Aboriginal) from the Victorian government’s arts body, Arts Victoria. The benefits of conducting small group conversations enabled the participants to prompt and remind each other of additional details to particular issues. The small group conducted with the female artists was a particularly lively and stimulating discussion, which emphasised the close working relationship

the film with the words, ‘it’s not like your story, this is my story’. Go to http://www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/info.htm

- 38 -
between these three women. The small group interviews can be distinguished from individual interviews by the interaction of members of the group with each other, which contributed to a clarification of ideas and issues (Rice and Ezzy 1999:72).

All interviews were between one hour to one and a half hours duration. The location of interviews varied according to the participants' choice. Some were held at participants' homes, one small group was conducted at the Koorie Heritage Trust, while another was conducted during a field trip. Others were held at participants' work places or at the Centre for Health and Society at the University of Melbourne (where I am located as a postgraduate student). The participants were all involved in the visual arts, where many had similar experiences and told similar stories. The sample size of twenty was therefore considered adequate, as information reached theoretical saturation at this point, that is, very little 'new' information was being heard after completion of the twenty interviews (Ezzy 2002: 75).

**Conducting interviews/conversations**

The interview/conversation process and details of the research project were discussed with all participants prior to interviews. This included the signing of informed consent and confidentiality options, that is whether or not participants wished to remain anonymous, and have their recorded interviews and transcripts lodged at the Koorie Heritage Trust (see Appendix 4).

Unlike most qualitative interviews, the ‘stories’ recorded for this project were not confidential. Although confidentiality was discussed with participants, all declared that they would like to have the recordings of their stories and the accompanying transcripts lodged at the Koorie Heritage Trust’s Oral History Unit, where they could be accessed under their real names. One participant, for the purposes of the PhD thesis only, requested to be known by a pseudonym. That individual’s story, however, remains under their real name at the KHT where access is determined by protocols endorsed by that organisation.

**How do participants benefit from this project?**
Involvement in the project benefited participants in ways that were less tangible than the actual audio recording of their stories. Following the interviews many participants commented that this was the first time they had been given the opportunity to articulate their feelings concerning the direct link between art and culture and its impact on maintaining identity and wellbeing today. For example, after an interview with one artist, it was stated that although many of the issues had been thought about, rarely were they talked about. The artist believed that many of the topics covered in the interview should be discussed more often to ensure the survival of Aboriginal art and culture in the southeast (Field Notes, 10 November 2004).

Validation
The stories were transcribed as accurately as possible. Standardised spelling of words was most often adopted, so that if a participant dropped a ‘g’ from a word (which is common in spoken Aboriginal English), this was replaced in the transcript. This followed participants’ requests that their speech appeared as concisely and clearly as possible in the transcripts (see also Cowlishaw 2004).

Unanalysed written transcripts of stories were given back to participants; some made changes, while most were satisfied for them to be used as transcribed. For many participants, receiving a weighty unedited transcript can be daunting and impractical (Bishop 1997). This was the case for one participant who found the interview too long to edit and suggested that if any of her interview was used in the thesis, she wanted to be given the opportunity to validate it before the thesis was submitted. Only one participant chose not to engage in any of the validation processes offered. The informed consent signed prior to the interview affirms that participant’s willingness for their interview data to be included in the project.

The validity of the data remains bound by community acceptance. The validation process is viewed as ongoing and does not cease with the submission of the thesis. I have a responsibility and obligation, as discussed with the Reference Group, to ensure that the data collected in this project is
disseminated as widely as possible and is accessible to the broader Aboriginal community.

**Analysis of Interview Data**

Analysis of data was thematic, where themes were ‘induced’ from the interview content. Coding and recoding occurred across a series of systematic readings of the transcripts using a grounded theory approach. This entailed comparing the coding with theory that emerged from the data (Charmaz 2006; Ezzy 2002).

This approach requires a consistent and often tedious examination of the material to check responses in an endeavour to reflect as closely as possible the intentions of the participants. The strategies I describe below allowed for a rigorous interpretation of the data, which although drawn from my own subject position as researcher, also reveal a level of trust between the participants and myself, who agreed for the process to be undertaken. Participants also had an opportunity to comment on the interpretations of the data at the completion seminar given in November 2006 at the Koorie Heritage Trust.

Coding in the current project was achieved over four stages (Ezzy 2002). Stage One was a rereading of the transcripts, where a broad and open set of themes were drawn from the data and written in margins on the transcripts (marking up). In Stage Two the transcripts were summarised with themes allocated to each summarised section of the transcript, with the corresponding page numbers as they occurred in the original transcript. This formed the basis for the coding framework, which revealed fourteen theme clusters (that is main themes, with a series of sub themes). Stage Three required the construction of a table for each participant, where the themes, the page numbers where they occurred in the main transcript and the number of times they were found could be seen at glance. Stage Four involved copying the fourteen theme clusters into a word document for each participant, so that the quotes could be accessed easily. This did not, however, mean that I abandoned the original transcripts, as they were
constantly referred to in order to check and recheck the context of the quote as it applied to the thematic analysis.

Finally the themes were subjected to theoretical analysis. The fourteen theme clusters were collapsed into four main theoretical categories relating to southeast Australian Aboriginal art: continuity and disruption to arts practices; the adaptation and authenticity of art; the reclamation and revival of southeast Australian Aboriginal art; and the connection between art, culture, identity and wellbeing. These categories were generated, as Ezzy explains, following:

[c]areful coding [which] allows the researcher to move beyond pre-existing theory to ‘hear’ new interpretations and understandings present in the data (Ezzy 2002: 94).

The Maori education academic Russell Bishop, when writing about Indigenous communities, argues that control of the data in collaborative research can only eventuate if the coding of themes and the analysis are done together with the participants, in order to advance self-determination (in Indigenous communities) and ‘facilitate ongoing collaborative analysis and construction of meaning/explanations about the lived experiences of the research participants’ (Bishop 1997: 41). While I agree with this concept in principle, in the ‘real’ world, given time constraints and the potential for participant enthusiasm to dwindle when confronted with the demands of research over extended periods, it is difficult to see how such an approach is viable. This is especially problematic in small communities where people have many obligations, rather than just as participants in a research project.

While ‘multiple realities’ exist in the qualitative research process, my responsibility as a researcher is to ensure that the interpretations generated through the data reflect most ‘truthfully’ the participants’ stories, as they are assessed within triangulated methods of data collection and analysis. By bringing ‘critical understandings to the accounts given by participants’ I am attempting to reveal the most accurate version of people’s stories and assessing them across a range of variables (Pyett 2003: 1173-4). In this project my interpretation was informed by Reference Group and participant feedback, together with analysis of the material generated through my experiences of learning while working with and in the community and the
The collection and analysis of historical and contemporary literature. In this way, data from all sources informed the development and interpretation of themes generated by the interview transcripts. These themes in turn informed my reading and interpretation of history through the documentary sources examined.

Although I position myself as a ‘postcolonial’ researcher, I do so aware of tensions surrounding the use of the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postcolonialism’. The adoption of these words implies that for Aboriginal communities colonialism is a thing of the past (see Shohat 1992). However, within this study my position as a researcher intersects with the literary studies academic Anne Brewster’s interpretation of the ‘postcolonial’. She explains it in this way: ‘I would not use the term "postcolonial" to describe Aboriginal culture I would possibly describe my own position as a white Australian observing the process of decolonization in Aboriginal culture as postcolonial’ (Brewster 1993). Such a process, which calls for a better representation and ‘incorporation of minority histories’ within the metanarratives of the ‘nation state’ have therefore been considered in this thesis (Kleinert 2006: 61).

Hence, analysis of the historical and contemporary literature, along with participant interviews and field experiences contributed to informing the four history chapters in this thesis. By adopting a triangulated methodology, it was possible to assess the documentary sources against the other data, where similar stories and themes began to emerge within and between methods. This has allowed me to portray the history of Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast from colonisation until today as accurately as possible from the data available.

**TRUST, RECIPROCITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability in the current project relied to a large extent on the trust established between the community and myself, but also in the processes put in place. These included the establishment of the Reference Group, the inclusion of a field supervisor, the sharing and reporting back of information about the project, as well as my participation in the community, that is the
'seen face'. It was imperative that the participants were able to place me within the context of their everyday lives. Many were most comfortable knowing that I had been recommended to them by members of the Reference Group, especially Maree Clarke.

My experience at the Koorie Heritage Trust also meant that as an ‘outsider’ I had to remember the importance of working within the boundaries of cultural protocols, such as ensuring that the community (including significant people, especially Elders) were informed about developments in the PhD project, it also meant negotiating my way around politically difficult situations. The often politically intense nature of working with Aboriginal people in the southeast is one of the consequences of the long-term effects of colonisation. While the KHT is a vibrant and successful enterprise, people working there, as in most Aboriginal organisations, are contending on a daily basis with issues such as the effects of the stolen generations, health concerns and the struggles associated with achieving and maintaining self-determination for their organisations (see Behrendt 2006).

However, my continuing presence in the community, both at the Koorie Heritage Trust and at other community events, contributed to establishing trustworthy relationships between members of the Aboriginal arts community and myself. Support from the community and the project’s Reference Group were encouraging as I went about collecting data. My familiarity with the community ensured that people were able to situate me in relation to my previous role as a researcher in native title, as a postgraduate student from the Koori Health Unit at the University of Melbourne or as a KHT employee. If they were at all hesitant about my intentions, they could contact one of the Reference Group members or supervisors for confirmation of the legitimacy of the project.

Reciprocity continues to evolve as a positive concept throughout this project. Working collaboratively with the community enhances knowledge and skills which many researchers working alone do not have the opportunity to establish. It also contributed to the project’s aims of reflecting community perspectives. These are not only acknowledged through the tangible outcomes such as the recordings of oral histories or community reports, but
are reflected in more nuanced ways, such as the capacity for people to tell their art 'stories' for the first time.

Hopefully the stories that have been entrusted to me have been illuminated through this project's research process. While I recognise the necessity of arranging and editing the transcripts so that the story of Aboriginal art in the southeast can be told more coherently, and in order to meet academic requirements especially the theses word limit, I have attempted to adopt the philosopher Walter Benjamin’s advice about ‘translation’, which privileges and illuminates the ‘language’ of others.

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully (Benjamin 1986: 79).

This chapter has outlined the strengths of a collaborative participatory approach to research, which adopts a decolonising methodology and the way in which it was used in this project. The perspectives of the Aboriginal community have been listened to and have directed the research approaches applied here. This approach has prioritised Aboriginal control of the project, reinforcing Aboriginal agency. Implementing a collaborative participatory research process, which is open and transparent, has contributed to outcomes which are accepted and endorsed by the community. The methods of data collection have contributed to the historical and contemporary accounts of arts practices from colonisation until today. They have included documentary sources, which have influenced the interpretation of the history of arts practices, as well as the collection of oral ‘stories’ from participants to reflect on the contemporary nature of arts practices and their significance to identity and wellbeing in the Aboriginal community in southeast Australia.
3. ‘WELCOMING STRANGERS’

I am glad to see you and will give you what you want, and satisfy you, but you must behave quietly and not hurt me or each other.

Billi-billeri (aka Billibellary), c.1840s 19

ABORIGINAL ARTISTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Aboriginal art in the nineteenth century is indicative of a process consistent with a rapidly changing and adapting society. Within the Aboriginal communities of southeast Australia, art moved from a system of symbols with significant internal meanings for specific tribes, to work that was commodified for external consumption by and interaction with outsiders. Aboriginal artists, however, were also interpreting the changing world around them through their arts practices. Following colonisation the necessity for Aborigines to find new ways of surviving was entwined in the developments made in arts practices. The diversity of extant works, both manufactured in the ‘traditional’ sense, such as wooden artefacts and bark etchings, to those which embraced the European techniques of painting on paper, contribute to an understanding of the extent to which Aborigines adapted their art styles and practices after the arrival of Europeans.

Artists are renowned for their capacity to contribute to the cultural survival of their people. The two most acclaimed southeastern Aboriginal artists from the late nineteenth century are Tommy McRae and William Barak. Their art work, which displays an intense desire to relay information about their culture to outsiders, and significantly to their own people, attests to the intelligence and pragmatism of these artists and their ability to challenge the

19 Billibellary was clan-head (ngurungaeta) of the Woiwurrung tribe. This comment was overheard by his nephew William Berak (aka Barak) welcoming strangers who wished to exchange goods on Billibellary’s Country around the 1840s (quoted in Howitt 1904 [1996]: 312).
impositions of a dominant culture, whose intentions were primarily to dismantle theirs. But how and why did Aboriginal artists of the nineteenth century develop their styles and what were some of the influential historical markers that encouraged the adaption of their artwork for a wider audience during the colonial encounter? These are questions which will be explored in the following two chapters.

**Extinction or Continuity of Aboriginal art**
The following two chapters outline the continuity and adaptation of arts practices in southeast Australia from colonisation in the 1830s until the end of the nineteenth century. They focus mainly on the territory known today as Victoria, which at the beginning of colonisation was designated the Port Phillip District. These chapters will demonstrate that, despite Eurocentric constructions of Aboriginal society as static (where, by the end of the nineteenth century Aboriginal arts practices were considered inauthentic or obsolete), Aboriginal people constantly adapted their cultural practices to contend with the effects of invasion. This eventually ensured their survival. They are still adapting and surviving today.

I argue that the ‘gaps’ in the historical record surrounding southeast Aboriginal art were created by Western ‘science’ as demonstrated through historical and ethnographic methodological approaches. Art has continuously been practised within an Aboriginal paradigm, though often influenced by Western impositions and tastes, arts practices remain connected to Aboriginal identity and wellbeing.

**Europe, Empire and Science**
At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time when the initial White exploration of the region now known as Victoria was occurring, Europeans were rapidly expanding their empires throughout the world. As has been

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20 Colonisation in the Port Phillip District was rapid following the arrival of the Henty’s in November 1834. They crossed from Tasmania, illegally squatting near Portland, and dispossessing Aborigines from their land. White occupation and domination was almost complete within ten years of the Henty’s arrival (Broome 2005; Christie 1979; Clark 1990).
cogently argued by scholars such as Edward Said, Europeans justified these imperialist strategies by acquiring scientific evidence to position all living creatures on a hierarchical ladder, locating themselves, of course at the top (Said 1995). These endeavours were also justified as ‘civilising missions’ as Europeans encountered and began to acquire information and knowledge concerning the ‘primitive’ Other.

One of the important aims of these journeys of discovery was the collection of scientific data to assist with this justification. Artists were among those sent on these journeys to record information that could potentially develop:

… a universally extendable archive … within which every possible object of study might find its unique and proper place relative to all others. Every item might thereby be cited (and cited) as referencing or indexing another or others. A principal motivation for this massive labour over the past two centuries has been the assembly of material evidence for the construction of historical narrative of social, cultural, or cognitive development (Preziosi 1998: 16-17).

In these endeavours all objects and species were to be classified and categorised across time and space. European explorations of the Pacific highlighted the significance of artists in the collection of scientific data. As the art historian Bernard Smith remarks, when discussing the Pacific region, it ‘became one of the finest schools for scientists in the world and stimulated European thought concerning man and nature both in art and in science’ (Smith 1989: 7).

This era coincided with the Enlightenment, a period when people were concerned with the discovery of man’s place in a world that was represented primarily as a European construction. Exploration of the Pacific, including Australia, ultimately justified the establishment of the colonial order, which focused on a range of binary oppositions: the West was dominant, and the

21 Timothy Mitchell explains that this representation included constructions such as ‘museums and world exhibitions to architecture, schooling, tourism, the fashion industry, and the commodification of everyday life’ (Mitchell 1998: 455).
'Other' was subordinate. The political and cultural theorist Timothy Mitchell draws on Edward Said’s analysis of ‘Orientalism’, to reflect these binarisms, which also parallels the construction of the ‘Aboriginal’ in Australia. Mitchell notes that ‘Orientalist’ reality:

... is understood as the product of unchanging racial or cultural essences; these essential characteristics are in each case the polar opposite of the West (passive rather than active, static rather than mobile, emotional rather than rational, chaotic rather than ordered); and the Oriental opposite or Other is, therefore marked by a series of fundamental absences (of movement, reason, order, meaning, and so on). In terms of these three features – essentialism, otherness, and absence – the colonial worlds can be mastered, and colonial mastery will, in turn, reinscribe and reinforce these defining features (Mitchell 1998: 455).

Hence, the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia were rendered within the paradigm of the ‘Other’, where essentialised notions created a hierarchical ‘order of things’, subsequently locating Aboriginal people’s capacity for artistic endeavours alongside their so-called ‘primitive’ status. In contrast European artists and their works were considered significant in providing evidence of European supremacy (Preziosi 1998; Smith 1989).

**Aboriginal people at contact**

Over the past one hundred and seventy years a common misconception has prevailed within the predominantly European community of Australia that southeast Australian Aboriginal culture, including art, is virtually extinct. This chapter challenges the misconception of the ‘doomed race’, one that located Aboriginal culture in a ‘primitivist’ paradigm; a concept reinforced by a mythical past, which equated ‘real’ Aborigines with an exotic, unchanging, homogenous cultural group (Cowlishaw 1987; Langton 2003b).

Australia was written into history as ‘terra nullius’, land belonging to no one, an unoccupied continent, and therefore prime for the taking (Macintyre and Clark 2003). However, this notion denied the presence of culturally sophisticated groups of people who had developed specific ways of surviving in diverse and often harsh environments.
Prior to 1834, the time of the official European occupation of the Port Phillip District, Aboriginal people according to recent estimates had a population of between 50,000 and 60,000 people (Broome 2005; McCalman 2006). These were as the historian Michael Christie estimated, ‘divided among [approximately] thirty-eight tribes, which varied in size according to the richness of their environment’:

Each tribe occupied a recognised area, spoke a common language and called itself by a specific name, but the tribe acted as a whole only on those occasions in the year when it gathered together to settle social and ceremonial matters (Christie 1979:7). 22

People moved throughout their territory taking advantage of seasonal produce, sometimes establishing semi-permanent bases; others had more permanent dwellings where they lived for extended periods, constructing elaborate infrastructure, such as ‘stone houses’ and fish weirs (Clark 1990; Gerritsen 2000; Public Record Office Victoria and Australian Archives 1997).

Thus, Aboriginal people in the southeast maintained culturally sophisticated and ‘intricate social structure[s]’ (Broome 2005: xxii). Their social organisation consisted of refined ceremonial and artistic practices that designated groups and individuals, as well as ‘dense relations of kinship, trade and cultural exchange, developed over millennia’ (Broome 2005: xxii).

Following occupation in 1834, more and more squatters sought to acquire sections of the fertile land of ‘Australia Felix’.23 By 1839 Europeans had rapidly spread throughout the Port Phillip District, displacing Aboriginal people from their Country, and disrupting Aboriginal lifestyle. The influx of squatters and accompanying industries disturbed Aboriginal cultural practices to such an extent that Aborigines in the District were considered a ‘doomed race’ (Broome 2005; Christie 1979; Morgan 1852 [2002]).

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22 In a recent study of Aboriginal languages in the southeast, the linguist and geographer Ian Clark has found that there may have been 39 language groups spoken in the area (Clark 2005).

23 Major Thomas Mitchell surveyed the area now known as the Western District in 1836. He was impressed by the fertile nature of the countryside and described it as ‘Australia Felix’ (Mitchell 1839).
Early histories of the colony assumed Australia was ‘settled’ peacefully (Haebich 2005; Macintyre and Clark 2003). However, the colonisation of the Port Phillip District, like other regions of the country, did not go uncontested by Aboriginal groups. While there is evidence that many died after contact with the Europeans, either through disease, removal from their Country, or as a result of frontier conflict, others responded to the newcomers by adopting guerrilla warfare tactics in an attempt to protect their lands and by maintaining cultural practices (Broome 2003b; Clark 1995; Critchett 1990; Critchett 2003; Gardner 2001; Watson 1997; Wesson 2000).

However, for most Aboriginal people, survival depended on being able to modify culture in order to contend with the changing social and economic circumstances of the nineteenth century (Broome 2005; Lakic and Wrench 1994).

Following action by anti-slavery campaigners in Britain, in 1839, the Aboriginal Protectorate of the Port Phillip District was established by the Colonial Office. A Chief Protector of Aborigines and five regional Protectors were appointed throughout the Port Phillip District, to manage the welfare of the Aborigines.24 The protection offered was largely ineffectual and the Protectorate was abandoned in 1849. In 1851 the colony of the Port Phillip District became self governing and was renamed Victoria. This decade saw an influx of Europeans in response to the gold rush, which further contributed to the exclusion of Aboriginal people from their Country. In 1859 the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines was established, the first in a long line of Victorian government institutions which markedly changed the way Aboriginal people lived and practised culture, including their art, for the rest of the century (Christie 1979; Critchett 1992).

Use of the ethnographic record to record arts practice
The major source of evidence concerning Aboriginal culture and arts practices at the time of the colonisation of southeast Australia can be found in the vast

24 See Appendix 2, map 2 for the regions covered by the five protectorates and names of the corresponding protectors.
ethnographic record of the nineteenth century. Ethnography was not considered an academic methodology until the birth of anthropology as a ‘scientific’ discipline in the early twentieth century (Kuper 1988; Kuper 1996). In this thesis, however, ethnography is not confined to anthropology, but is located in its historical context, where it refers to the observation and study of a group of people invariably from outside the observers’ own culture. Hence, nineteenth century ethnographers recorded the habits and lifestyles of ‘primitives’, whose exoticism was enhanced by both their geographical and cultural distance from Europe. Recordings consisted of the observers’ first-hand experiences, as they encountered the Other in his or her ‘natural habitat’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The ethnographic record contributed to the advancement of European scientific knowledge and supported the contention that Europeans were the most enlightened civilisation. In southeast Australia, as elsewhere in the country, early colonial recordings of Aboriginal culture consisted of travel writings, missionary and administrative accounts, as well as personal reminiscences. These ethnographies dealt with direct observations of Aborigines, recounting the first-hand experiences of Europeans and their initial contact with the multiple tribes scattered throughout the southeast of the country. However, despite the lengthy descriptions of people and detailed accounts of their culture, including the use and manufacture of objects, the Aboriginal voice in the early ethnographic record is largely silent.

In the Port Phillip District ethnographic data was frequently compiled for official purposes. The written descriptions of Aborigines and collections of their artefacts were recorded, for example, in the journals and letters of the Protectors, including George Augustus Robinson and William Thomas; popular reminiscences, especially by pastoralists such as Edward Micklethwaite Curr and James Dawson; the written observations and collections of material culture by missionaries, such as John Bulmer and Frederick Hagenauer; and the substantial works of colonial bureaucrats such as Alfred William Howitt and Robert Brough Smyth. Although this material was intended to comment on Aboriginal life, it was primarily constructed by
Europeans for a European audience. As the historian Bain Attwood notes, it validated European notions of

... the primordial or primitive other, a paradigm of originality and antiquity. In this representational discourse, Aborigines figure as 'savages' or as 'an ancient people in an ancient land' or as a 'stone age people' ... Aborigines, or Aboriginality, thus represents a place which Europeans have left behind in order to assume 'civilisation' or enter into modernity whereby Aborigines stand for the past, for [Europeans] origins of beginnings, the childhood of humankind' (Attwood 1992: iii-iv).

While these recordings attempt to describe and depict cultural practices, they reveal more about nineteenth century European perceptions of Aboriginal people in the southeast than about the Aboriginal people themselves. The ethnographers were also intent on preserving 'authentic' Aboriginal material culture, as evidence of a 'dying race'. The record was based on European positivist attitudes, where Aboriginal culture was considered stagnant and unchanging. European accounts reinforced essentialisms of 'primitivism' and 'savagery', and later in the century, evolutionary theories, based on 'race' and biological superiority (Attwood 1992; Broome 2005; Smith 1989). Ethnographic practices, from the beginning of colonisation, translated the culture of the Other to fit a Eurocentric paradigm, which could be used to support and justify the processes of colonisation. ‘Classical’ ethnography was thus intent on interpreting and constructing, rather than accurately representing Aboriginal culture (Clifford et al. 1986; Niranjana 1992). However, early ethnographers, such as George Augustus Robinson, while intent on recording the ‘primitive’ within a colonialist paradigm, were also unique among their peers, many of whom had little inclination for liaising with or experiencing the culture of the Other. Although contradictory to colonialist ideologies, early ethnographers often provided insightful, rich and sometimes compassionate descriptions of Aboriginal society. These displayed their genuine fascination with Aboriginal culture, while the majority of Europeans simply denied Aborigines common human respect.
While Aboriginal arts practices changed to accommodate the various stages of colonisation, it remains one of the ironies of the colonial process that ethnographic data, collected to confirm European superiority, has recently been used by Aboriginal people to reclaim connections with their culture and Country. These reinterpretations of the past, for example oral histories that recognise culture as ongoing and cyclical, challenge the ‘dominant historical narrative’, which locates Aboriginal culture only in the past (Clarke and Paterson 2003: 49). In this way the interplay between coloniser and colonised is transformed through a reinterpretation of the original ethnographic text and provides an alternative and critical perspective on the past (Healy 1997).

Such reinterpretations are evident in interviews conducted for this thesis (see chapter eight), where Aboriginal artists from southeast Australia discussed the value of the ethnographic record in retrieving and reclaiming the knowledge and meanings associated with arts practices that were disrupted as a result of colonisation. Many of these artists are descended from various tribal groups in the region, where the use of ‘traditional’ designs in contemporary work reinforces the dynamic yet continuous nature of Aboriginal culture in the southeast today. For instance, the Gunai artist Ray Thomas (a participant in this project) expressly refers to the ethnographers Howitt and Fison whose texts he has used to source information for his artwork.

In addition, there is potential to reinterpret designs found in the ethnographic record and in surviving material culture today, through studying the similarities of cultural production in the southeast, with those that continue to be used for ceremonial purposes in the centre and in the northern regions of Australia (Morphy 1998). This is also discussed by participants in this project; especially regarding basket weaving techniques (see chapter eight).

**Corruption and extinction of Aboriginal culture? Challenging the ethnographic record**

Despite the survival of Aboriginal people, European ethnographies were frequently concerned with elaborating on the inevitable demise of the Aboriginal ‘race’. Consequently, the Aboriginal ‘gaze’ towards Europeans was largely unacknowledged, ignored, or used as an example of the ‘corruption’ of
Aboriginal culture. In so doing colonial observers denied that the imperial gaze was challenged (see Said 1995). As the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues, through mimicry of the coloniser’s language, skills and cultural practices the colonial subject begins:

… a process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and the ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence (Bhabha 1984: 129).

Indeed, within the construct of ‘white’ colonial society, Aborigines challenged the concept of ‘whiteness’ as the norm (see Dyer 1997; Moreton-Robinson 1999 [2003]). By directing the gaze back upon the coloniser, via their own adaptations of the colonising process they were implicit in challenging and attempting to reverse the colonial power-base.

The historian Liz Reed notes, in relation to Assistant Protector William Thomas’ allusions to the ‘blacks’ “mimicry” of his and other Europeans’ behaviour, that:

Little did it occur to him that such occasions enabled colonists to be subjected to the ethnographic gaze of the Aborigines whereby knowledge of ‘whiteness’ could be gained. As [the black feminist] bell hooks has argued, “black people” have acquired a “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people in order to help them “cope and survive in a white supremacist society” (hooks, 1992 #1333: 165 quoted in Reed 2004: 92).

While the Aboriginal ‘ethnographic gaze’ was simultaneously providing Aborigines with a means of resisting colonial intervention and embracing change as a means of survival, this reinterpretation of Aboriginal cultural practices and their lifestyle provided Europeans with evidence of Aboriginal inferiority and their inevitable extinction. One of a number of guardians of Aborigines in the 1850s, William Hull, emphasised these sentiments when he told the Argus newspaper on 8 November 1856 that it was the ‘design of Providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races’ (quoted in Broome 2005: 99). The devastation of southeast Australian
Aboriginal culture served to reinforce the notion of European ‘progressiveness’ and Aboriginal ‘degradation’ (Broome 2005: 99).

Meanwhile, arts practices enabled Aboriginal people in the southeast to interpret and confront the world around them and remained a means of communicating with others outside their culture. Although there is only fragmentary knowledge remaining about the meanings behind ‘traditional’ or ‘tribal’ art in southeast Australia (Morphy 1998: 340), the information that exists in the ethnographic record, including more recent archaeological records, when assessed alongside information from the Aboriginal community, potentially facilitates a reinterpretation of events from the past. These decolonising approaches reflect a continuation of Aboriginal culture (see Bird and Frankel 1998; Clarke and Paterson 2003; McBryde 1984; Smith 1999a). Thus, as Bain Attwood notes, today Aborigines are telling their own story of the past where they ‘interweave history, legend, and myth … showing that these can offer unique insights and different perspectives from those provided by the written record’ (Attwood 1989: 140).

The following section discusses Aboriginal art as recorded by ethnographers in the initial days of colonial occupation in the Port Phillip District. It focuses on specific Aboriginal visual arts practices, their significance to culture, and the Aboriginal people involved in these practices.

**ABORIGINAL ART AND COLONISATION: 1830S**

**Art prior to colonisation: Rock art**

Before embarking on the ethnographic recordings however, I begin with a review of rock art, which is unique because it exists largely outside the ethnographic record. Evidence of a rich and diverse arts practice prior to European occupation can be found in the extant rock art sites located throughout the southeast. Rock art reveals a culture adept at telling stories through line and form work, as well as a diversity of styles reflecting Aboriginal groups (Gunn 1984). Although rock art research undertaken by the Victorian Archaeological Survey (VAS) in the 1980s remains incomplete (Bird and Frankel 1998), the archaeologist R.G. (Ben) Gunn conducted extensive
studies on rock shelters throughout Victoria (see Gunn 1983b; Gunn 1983c; Gunn 1983d). He has suggested that many of the pictures excavated throughout the region have been retouched indicating an attachment and obligation to maintaining the sites. Gunn also asserts that evidence of repainting ‘tends to indicate that [a] site served a singular artistic function throughout its active history’ (Gunn 1983c: 33).

The historian Richard Broome, in his extensive account of post-contact Aboriginal history in Victoria, claims that rock art endured with the knowledge and practice of culture through millennia:

[R]ock art sites survive particularly in the Grampians-Gariwerd region of western Victoria, where 100 sites have been found containing animal figures, bird tracks, and stencilled hands. Recent dating … suggested the occupation of these rock shelters occurred 20,000 years ago. This art is often overlaid by other art, different in colour and style. Aboriginal art is traditionally refreshed as well. Layers upon painted layers exist suggesting a continuous but changing tradition (Broome 2005: xix).

The colonialisst considered rock art to be relatively insignificant to Aboriginal people, such were the Eurocentric notions and misunderstandings regarding Aboriginal culture. There is little description of the meaning of rock art in the ethnographic record. It has been argued that this is due to Aboriginal wariness of outsiders, especially the uninitiated. As the anthropologist Carol Cooper notes, this was most likely a ‘deliberate ploy to discourage European questioning, either because of the secret nature of the sites and their associations with ceremonies, or because of the convention for not speaking for sites belonging to others’ (Cooper 1997: 93-94).

Rock art was a practice characteristic of Aboriginal culture in the southeast. The ‘secret nature’ of this style of art and its association with specific sites attests to the symbolic value of these works and suggests that the practice and knowledge of art was an entrenched characteristic of the culture (Barwick 1984; Clark 1998; Morphy 2001). This example of arts practice demonstrates a long and established relationship between art and cultural identity, grounded within Aboriginal epistemologies, which have
changed, adapted and continued for thousands of years (Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999).

Plate 3.1 Bunjil and his dogs, a painted 'All-Father' figure. Photographed by Aldo Massola


‘Markings’

Ethnographic data from the first years of contact provides other evidence of artwork that distinguished Aboriginal culture and social organisation. There is consistency between the markings found on different surfaces, including rock art, body art, carved wooden objects and incisions in possum skins (Cooper 1997; Kleinert 2000a; Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999). Much of this art was used for social, religious, ceremonial and utilitarian purposes; it was part of everyday living. However, to colonialists this artwork indicated a ‘hunter-gatherer’ society, and was collected as ‘scientific’ evidence to categorise Aboriginal people on the ‘lowest rung of humanity’ (Morphy 2001: 44). Such attitudes further justified, in the minds of nineteenth century observers, European domination of Aboriginal culture (Griffiths 1996).

For Aboriginal people, arts practices have always been a cultural imperative, entwined in the life cycle of Aboriginal understandings of the past, present and future. Carol Cooper relies on the records of nineteenth century ethnographers to conclude that art in the ‘traditional’ or ‘tribal’ sense was ‘one of the ways in which information about culture and society was passed, and reinforced from one generation to the next’. The work consisted of intricate
depictions of ‘insider’ affiliations, where the meanings were for the ‘internal consumption of members of the artist's culture’. For instance, patterns incised on possum skin cloaks and wooden artefacts can be read as designs that were associated with a specific tribe or clan (Cooper 1997: 92-93). Historians and curators, working in the field of woven material culture, including Louise Hamby, Doreen Mellor and Lindy Allen, have also found that early weaving designs for items, including baskets and fish traps, were particular to the groups who created them (Allen and Hamby 2005; Hamby and Mellor 2000).

**Plate 3.2** Maiden's Punt, Echuca, possum skin cloak, 1853. Line drawing of original cloak. Museum Victoria (X16274).

Reproduced in Reynolds et al. (2005: 6)

Designs inscribed on objects (which also included body paint) often followed a uniform approach. For instance, those on possum skin cloaks consisted of two types:

... those employing the recognisable geometric forms such as interlocking and concentric diamonds, simple and complex cross-hatched patterns and zigzags; and those that displayed a striking style of free-form patterns, including both angular and curvilinear meander motifs, circular designs and stylised, representational figures (Cooper 1997: 100).
Markings, whether on cloaks or weapons, may have determined geographic locations and Aboriginal affiliations with ‘tribal’ areas, as well as identifying individual craftsmen. In some cases these patterns, especially on wooden artefacts, were used to carry messages within and between tribes, often over vast distances (Cooper 1981; Cooper 1997; Smyth 1878 [1972]).

According to Robert Brough Smyth, the secretary of the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines (CBA) and later the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA) from the years 1869-1876 (see Barwick et al. 1998), markings on wooden artefacts were a schematic version of figurative art, which:

… possessed the power of conveying ideas by a sort of picture-writing … the picture-writing indeed was common long before Europeans made encroachments in any part of the island-continent … The native not only was able to convey the ideas in this manner, but occasionally made pictures, intelligible to all, representing events in his life (Smyth 1878 [1972], vol.1:286).

Message sticks also served as a form of communication between ‘tribes’ (Curr 1883 [1965]; Dawson 1881 [1981]; Howitt 1889; Howitt 1904 [1996]). The messages and meanings on these wooden artefacts were
transformed after contact with Europeans; they became commodities that were sold or traded between the cultures (Curr 1883 [1965]).

Plate 3.4 Shields, Victoria Museum Victoria (X84459, X84460).

In a market economy after colonisation, these objects and the accompanying design work were located within a European hierarchy where they were recognised as ‘primitive’ art. This commodification meant that new meanings were attached to objects, providing ways of incorporating aspects of Aboriginal culture and society into the colonialist regime.

25 Also see (Cannon 1983; Clark and Heydon 2004; Lakic and Wrench 1994; Sculthorpe 1990).
Effects of Colonisation: Changing systems of cultural exchange

Cross-cultural trade between Aboriginal people and sealers, explorers, shipwrecked sailors and escaped convicts had occurred since at least the end of the eighteenth century (Barwick et al. 1998; Christie 1979). For Aboriginal people, exchange ‘traditionally’ assisted in establishing relationships (Cahir 2005). The ‘traditional’ ceremony of ‘Tanderrum’ provided opportunities to share information pertaining to social mores, such as ceremonial obligations, trade in commodities throughout the region, and significantly rights to and access to Country.

This ceremony was a formal procedure whereby approved strangers were guaranteed the host clan’s protection as well as giving and receiving allegiance and access to each other’s resources. By handing their guests token portions of foliage, water and available foods of their estate the owners signified “… that as long as they are friendly, and under such restrictions as their laws impose, they and their children may come there again without fear of molestation; the presents of boughs and leaves and grass are meant to

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26 For a first-hand account, see the recorded adventures of the convict William Buckley who lived among the Aborigines of the Barwon region (the Wathaurung) for thirty two years from 1803 (Morgan 1852 [2002]).

27 Also see (Barwick et al. 1998; Barwick 1984; Clark 1990).
show that these are theirs when they like to use them” (William Thomas [1852/54] quoted in Barwick et al. 1998: 24).28

While initial exchanges were based on ‘traditional’ reciprocity, the rapid dispossession of Aboriginal land, destruction of elements of their society, and diminishing food sources, forced Aborigines to adapt many of their cultural practices in order to survive.

Within the first five years of European occupation, Aboriginal people:

… exploited, where necessary, niches in the colonial economy. By 1840, Aboriginal people had developed a range of relationships with Europeans, so that they could sell bullen bullen (lyrebird) tail feathers, possum and kangaroo skins and baskets on the streets of Melbourne (Clark and Heydon 2004: 23).

By trading artefacts to Europeans, Aboriginal people were transforming their culture, which was both empowering and disabling. Many artefacts were sold for money or commodities, such as foodstuffs, tobacco, clothing and alcohol (Clark and Heydon 2004). Trade with Europeans meant Aboriginal creations infiltrated the colony.

Europeans appreciated the goods supplied and in turn mimicked Aboriginal ‘traditional’ uses. For example possum skin rugs were used as bed spreads, or wraps for burying bodies, and baskets were hung from mothers sides for carrying babies (Cahir 2005). Rereading the ethnographic text through the postcolonial lens, this recognition of the Aboriginal ‘gaze’ situates Aborigines outside the paradigm of the passive victim, and relocates them as a group who were simultaneously involved in ‘traditional’ notions of exchange, and in a market economy.

This commodification of culture facilitated cultural survival, but meant that cultural artefacts were transformed into economic artefacts. The production of material culture for sale also meant it increasingly lost its pre-contact meaning and was ‘manufactured’ for Aboriginal survival within a

28 For a description of the expansive social trade networks used for maintaining ‘arts’ practices in the Western District, which included trade in kangaroo skins and stone for making axes and other weapons see (Dawson 1881 [1981]: 78).
European economy (Jones 1992a). Through these transactions, material culture, once associated with utilitarian and symbolic objects, which functioned within the realm of the ceremonial and spiritual, were subsequently supplanted by objects whose meanings were now associated with material ‘production’. Hence Aboriginal culture became part of a consumer society\(^{29}\) as Aboriginal art and craft evolved ‘specifically to act as a currency between the cultures’ (Jones 1992a: 132-134).

Thus, through commodification, Aborigines were implicated in the … diverse ways Europeans determined Aborigines – ideological, economic, social, cultural and political – but also Aborigines’ responses, for they were not merely acted upon by these productive forces and relations but were themselves historical agents … As a result of this process we can see a transformation of traditional Aboriginal culture, the perpetuation of some components and the adoption of new ones, and accordingly the old and the new coexist and intermingle … (Attwood 1989: 150).

**The Batman Treaty and Aboriginal signatures as ‘art’**

Senior men from the Kulin nations in the Melbourne area, including Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung and Wathaurong groups, and including the head man (*ngurungaeta*) of the Woiwurrung, Billibellary, ‘signed’ a ‘Treaty’ with the businessman John Batman on 6\(^{th}\) June 1835. The transaction illustrates the complications Europeans brought to the processes of exchange (Barwick et al. 1998; Campbell 1987).

From Batman’s point of view it appeared that in exchange for blankets, knives, mirrors, tomahawks, scissors, clothing and flour he had purchased 600,000 acres (Cahir 2005; Clark 1990; Van Toorn 2001). However, this was a misunderstanding of the ‘Tanderrum ceremony’. The anthropologist Diane Barwick has emphasised that the written treaties:

\(^{29}\) As the communist philosopher Karl Marx later theorised, ‘Consumption produces production … because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed’ (Wolff 1993: 95).
…were fraudulent in that the Woiworung, Bunurong and Wathaurung men with whom Batman dealt could not have understood that the words, ‘Give, Grant, Enfeoff and Confirm unto the said John Batman, his heirs and Assigns’ meant a sale of their clan territories. Such an abdication of religious and other responsibilities was quite literally unthinkable to the Kulin. The men Batman met perceived his intentions in Kulin terms – strongly developed concepts of sharing rights in, and use of, territory – the Tanderrum ceremony (Barwick et al. 1998: 23).

The Batman ‘Treaty’ was the first European style document recording picture writing or designs as a means of transmitting authority and designating individual identity in the Port Phillip District. The markings of the eight chiefs on the treaty were those used to convey messages on wood between groups (Campbell 1987). These were often in the form of carved tree markings called dendroglyphs. (Van Toorn 2001).

Hence, some years later James Dawson recalled that:

The marks made by the chiefs on the parchment [the ‘Treaty’] were their genuine and usual signatures, which they were in the habit of carving on the bark of trees and on their message sticks (Dawson 1881 [1981]).

These pictographs, ideographs and dendroglyphs indicate that an elaborate communication system existed throughout the country. The system for conveying information through patterns and pictures allowed people from so-called ‘oral cultures’ to store and retrieve information (Clark 1990; Cooper 1997; Van Toorn 2001).

The ability of ‘pre-literate’ societies to communicate through pictures and patterns (markings) suggests that arts practice potentially plays a more significant role in the continued existence of those cultures than for literate societies. Thus Cooper notes:

[T]he criterion of pre-literacy is crucial to the definition of an art system in pre-literate societies, because art has more important functions in such societies than in literate societies. The other ways information
was passed down were through ritual, dance and song (Cooper, 1997:146, en.3).

Europeans took these markings to be symbols transmitting meaning, although they frequently took the wrong meaning from them (e.g. conveyance of property). The ‘signatures’ on the Batman Treaty, although not the first record of Aboriginal people in the southeast exchanging objects, which incorporated specific marks and designs, as ‘Tanderrum’ with Europeans, it was the first time in the Port Phillip District that the recognition of artwork as a means of identifying individuals (i.e. by their signatures) were used for incorporating ‘the natives’ into a European system which recognised marks of the individual as legally binding (see Van Toorn 2001).

**Plate 3.6** Wooden pegs with incised markings. Museum Victoria (X84455).

![Image removed due to copyright.](image)

Collected by George Augustus Robinson, c.1840s. Pegs used for stretching possum skins. Reproduced in Sculthorpe (1990: 62)

**The Protectors**

As the frontier encroached on Aboriginal lands, pressure from the British government influenced the establishment of the Protectorate. Between 1839 and 1849, Aborigines in the Port Phillip District were administered and overseen by five Protectors, each allocated a separate region. The Protectors were obliged to report regularly to the Chief Protector, George Augustus
Robinson. They also kept regular journals of their trips through their regions (Lakic and Wrench 1994; Rae-Ellis 1996).

The journals, letters and official reports of George Augustus Robinson (Chief Protector of Aborigines) and William Thomas (assistant protector in charge of the Melbourne or Westernport district) are significant first-hand accounts, which provide some of the most insightful descriptions of the customs and ‘traditions’ governing the way Aboriginal people lived at the time of the initial colonisation (Critchett 1990; Presland 1989).

The protectors’ records show that art was integral to Aboriginal culture through ‘traditional’ practices, such as ceremonies, the transmission of information, and the sharing of commodities, as well as in the design of everyday items such as baskets, eel traps, weapons, wooden artefacts and possum skins (see Koorie Heritage Trust and Museum of Victoria 1991; Sculthorpe et al. 1990). They occasionally provide the only extant information about Aboriginal art at colonisation (Morphy 1998; Presland 1989).

**ADAPTATION**

**Exchange with Protectors**

Artwork is often characterised as facilitating the sharing and exchanging of information by Aborigines with protectors, including information about aspects of Aboriginal culture and knowledge of Country. These exchange practices were not conducted naïvely, but were fixed social norms that provided a way of understanding the invasion from an Aboriginal perspective and assisted the integration of Europeans into an Aboriginal knowledge system. For example, protectors were invited to witness ceremonies and were given artwork showing Aboriginal people’s association with Country, such as designs on wooden artefacts and possum skins, and drawings in ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ mediums (Cooper 1997; Morphy 1998; Sayers 1997).30

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30 See (Sculthorpe 1990) for reference to Robinson’s collection of material culture. See (Cannon 1983) for information concerning collections by William Thomas and the assistant protector for the Goulburn District, James Dredge. For further details of
Archaeologist Isabella McBryde explains that the history of exchange in the southeast encompasses a diversity of activities and processes, including some which ‘must be defined loosely for they include both the tangible and the intangible – services, knowledge, even rituals as well as material items, consumable or durable’ (McBryde 1984: 134). The exchanges Robinson was involved in were part of an established and ongoing process of cultural ‘obligation’ and were associated with patterns of survival that had operated in the southeast well before contact.31

Robinson’s journals, consisting of six volumes covering the years 1839-1852, provide many examples of the tangible and intangible nature of exchange throughout the Port Phillip District. In exchange for food, clothing and other goods, Robinson received wooden artefacts, including many spears, as well as baskets and jewellery (see Plates 3.7-3.8). He also recorded styles of housing, dress and ceremonial body paint, and the ceremonies he witnessed, in written and in drawn form (Sculthorpe 1990). Robinson’s corpus of work reflects the colonialist fascination with the Other, by which the colonial subject was constructed.

31 McBryde discusses the ethno-historical record concerning exchange processes in the southeast and draws on more recent ethnographic research from the north to establish a better understanding of ‘exchange networks’ and processes in the southeast. Most of her article outlines the main historical sources for Europeans witnessing and participating in ‘exchange’ and ‘gift giving’ in nineteenth century southeast Australia (McBryde 1984).
Despite Robinson’s undeniable dedication to his work (albeit arguably ineffectual) (Lakic and Wrench 1994), his role as conciliator and protector, as well as his task to save, civilise and Christianise the Aboriginal population, reveal the ambivalence of the colonising process. Robinson’s detailed recording of information ironically facilitates a reading which ‘disrupts its authority’ (Lydon 2005: 7). This is a ‘process which simultaneously stabilises and destabilises the position of the coloniser’ (Young 2004: 188). For instance, Robinson’s perpetual writing and drawing were mimicked by Aborigines, both overtly and subtly.
Thus, on 17th October 1840:

Winberri [a ‘black’ from the Goulburn region] saw me writing and then sat down and pretended to write to the blacks … (Robinson 1998b: 16).32

Aboriginal mimicry of Robinson’s behaviour resulted in an ‘interpretive shift’, which provided a means of subverting the colonialist’s power (Lydon 2005: 7). As the cultural and political theorist Robert Young notes:

The imitation subverts the identity of that which is being represented, and the relation of power, if not altogether reversed, certainly begins to vacillate (Young 2004: 188).

In the act of disrupting colonial power, Aborigines were able to incorporate their own ways of representing themselves to the colonisers, simultaneously reinforcing their identity. As discussed previously, this can be aligned with Homi Bhabha’s idea that mimicry in colonial discourse displaces the gaze of the observer, whereby the observer becomes the observed (Bhabha 1994).

Hence, Robinson did not completely control the Aborigines he encountered. Aboriginal exchanges with him can be read as strategic attempts to interrogate his ethnographic gaze through mimicry which undermines his colonial agency. However, in challenging colonial power, Aborigines were complicit in cultural loss. Thus Aboriginal agency was simultaneously constrained, yet also resistant to colonial influences (see Bhabha 1994; Fanon 1991). Practices continuous with those of the past were often impossible to sustain, resulting in cultural adaptation. In addition, mimicry by the colonised was approved by Europeans, satisfying, as Homi

32 In the catalogue for the Sweet Damper and Gossip exhibition held in Benalla (in the Goulburn region) in 1994, Aboriginal drawings and other activities, including those by ‘Winberri’ (aka ‘Windberry’), which mimicked colonial behaviour, are contrasted with European colonial paintings and collections of artefacts. These frequently constructed the Aborigines as unchanging. The catalogue’s authors argue that Aboriginal mimetic behaviour and subterfuge ‘challenged the authority of the European eye and the space, time and geography allotted to them by the European narrative’, as they were recorded in the journals and letters of protectors and settlers (Fox et al. 1994: 7).

- 71 -
Bhabha explains, ‘the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite’ (Bhabha 1994: 87).

Robinson’s frequent and extensive journeys throughout the colony and his endeavours to encounter as many Aboriginal people as he could were only made possible through the processes of cross-cultural exchange. While Robinson appears to have viewed these situations in terms of his capacity to ‘protect’ Aborigines, for Aboriginal people they can be seen as attempts to persuade Europeans of their knowledge systems and rights to Country. These encounters suggest that Robinson was caught up in a system contrived by Aborigines that disrupted colonial representations of the Other. Thus, for instance, he was invited to a corroboree between the ‘Worrnerbul’ and ‘Elengermat’ (in the Western District) and noted in his journal for 13th of April 1841, that: ‘They were pleased at my coming …They were pleased at my sketching the figures’ (Robinson 1998b: 133).

Knowledge of Country and ‘spiritual’ beliefs displayed in artwork

Robinson’s journals include drawings, which are the earliest extant drawings by Aborigines in a ‘non-traditional’ medium in the southeast (Cooper 1997). Many of these demonstrate Aboriginal association to Country. In his entry for 9th July 1841, Robinson described eel trenches at Mt William, Gariwerd (Grampians) as:

….. resembling the work of civilized man but which on inspection I found to be the work of the Aboriginal native, and constructed for the purpose of catching eels. A specimen [sic] of art I had not before seen of the same extent (Robinson 1998b: 308).

Robinson was intrigued by the complexity of these constructions and found them ‘difficult to commit to paper’ (Robinson 1998b: 308). Later, on 19th of July, Aboriginal people from the Gariwerd (Grampians) provided Robinson

33 For examples of trade with Aborigines for the purposes of establishing relations, as well as for Aboriginal rights to Country and the significance of cultural artefacts, see Robinson’s journal entry for 18th July 1841(Robinson 1998b: 318-320).
with a drawing of the ‘vams’, as well as a map of the area (Robinson 1998b: 321). Robinson noted:

Went on top of the hill, Borumbeep, with the natives and verified the names of the hills of the Serra Range of the Grampians. The natives informed me, in reference to the trenches at Mt William for catching eels, they call them vams … The natives made a rude drawing of the vams or trenches for catching eels, they also in a sort of map, marked the rivers and the Victoria and Serra Ranges of the Grampians with the positions of the several and small stations, and named the hills. These tracings were first made with a stick on the ground. I then got them to make the same tracings on paper with a pencil… (Robinson 1998b: 321).

A few days later Robinson recorded three drawings in his journal: an eel trap and a mountain range, most likely the Gariwerd (Grampians); a cross shape with stick figures and eel traps; and a picture that appears to be of spirit figures, with a note: ‘Drawn by the Grampians natives, 21st July 1841’. According to the art historian Andrew Sayers, members of the Tjapwurong (Djab Wurrung) clan provided these pictures. Sayers states:

On two occasions Robinson asked his Aboriginal informants to draw maps of the complex eel-catching system. At the same time an Aborigine drew a representation of two figures, one with a boomerang and the other with a dilly-bag and spear. On this drawing Robinson wrote ‘or-re-keet or the Evil Spirit’ and he commented that the drawing was “for such a people, ingenious” (Sayers 1997: 76).

These pictures were about Country but also referenced people’s ‘spiritual’ beliefs. While the ‘spirit figures’ depicted in these drawings are different from the rock art figures in the Grampians region, the image of Bunjil at the Bilimina rock art shelter is similar to the body art Robinson sketched in his journal following the ceremony he witnessed in April 1841 (mentioned above). This reveals a clear connection between ceremony and place (Gunn

34 For further descriptions of the drawings made by Aborigines, see (Robinson 1998b: 324). For a copy of drawings of ‘eel vams’, mountain ranges and ‘spirit figures’, see figures 7.18-7.22 in (Robinson 1998b: 351-5).
It seems from the lack of recordings in Robinson’s journals regarding rock art that he was unaware of these sites (Sayers 1997).

Plates 3.9 Drawn by the Grampians natives, *Or-re-keet or the Evil Spirit*, 21st July 1841

Over a period of approximately ten years Robinson included examples of Aboriginal drawings in his journals and other papers, which show a people adept at providing visual replications of important features of their culture. As discussed below, Thomas’ records, which include representations of spiritual life made by Aborigines a few years after Robinson’s recording of the *Or-re-keet spirit*, also emphasise Aboriginal connections to Country and the ancestral myths and legends which continue to characterise Aboriginal art and its relationship to identity in the southeast.

‘Figurative designs’: Billibellary and Works on paper

In a subsequent development, the production of Aboriginal art and artefacts shifted from relaying ‘insider’ knowledge about spiritual beliefs through non-figurative, ‘decorative’ two dimensional shapes, to providing ‘outsiders’ with

35 For further examples of Aboriginal drawings on paper also see Robinson’s Miscellaneous papers at the Mitchell Library, State Library New South Wales (Sayers 1997: 138-139).
information about culture through figurative work, meant for new purposes (Kleinert 1992b; Taçon 1999).

Billibellary, the *ngurangaeta* (a head man) of the Woiwurrung, formed working relationships with Robinson and Thomas, it has been argued, ‘in order to gain access to colonial policy making’ (Clark and Heydon 2004: 44). Thomas recorded many instances where Billibellary shared and exchanged information, advice and commodities, as well as artwork, some of which is thought to be by Billibellary. These are among the earliest examples in the southeast of figurative designs in a ‘non-traditional’ medium.

According to Cooper, it is possible that at sometime around the great intertribal meeting at Merri Creek in December 1843, Billibellary provided Thomas with a drawing relating to a tribe who inhabited the Australian Alps (Cooper 1997: 102). The drawing is of a moth like creature which Thomas titled ‘*Yaggip [Gaggip] or Making friendship*’ (Cooper 1997: 103). It may also be possible that this drawing refers to the annual migration of the bogong moths in the Australian Alps, which Aborigines in northeast Victoria and southeast New South Wales continue to celebrate today.

36 The historian Marie Fels(1989) notes in relation to the Thomas collection in the State Library of Victoria that given the decontextualised filing of Thomas’ papers, it is difficult to discern which pictures were by Thomas and which were by Billibellary. However, Carol Cooper (1997) believes that the *Yaggip* mentioned in this section was most likely drawn by Billibellary given its ‘feathery’ style.

37 These drawings are located in William Thomas’ papers in R.Brough Smyth papers, State Library of Victoria, Box 1176/7b, 3, no.3 and Box 1176/7b, 3, no.2 (see Sayers 1997: 139). For further information of the *Yaggip* also see (Cooper et al. 2003: 31).

38 For example, see the present day ‘Ngan Girra’ (bogong moth) festival held annually in Albury. Go to [http://www.ngangirra.com/](http://www.ngangirra.com/), accessed 16 April 2006.
According to Thomas, the *Yaggip/Gaggip* related to another picture he collected called *‘Sketch of stone houses’* (Smyth 1878 [1972]:137). In relation to Thomas’ description, this sketch consists of, ‘a group of ascetic bards, who live high in the Australian Alps in special stone houses, teaching their dances and songs to visiting pilgrims’ (Cooper 1997: 104-105). As Cooper explains, Thomas’ report provides a rare explanation for the pictures, outlining the significance of the dance ‘to unite and make Blackfellows friends’ (Cooper 1997: 103-104).

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39 According to Cooper (1997:105) it is possible that this drawing is also by Billibellary.

40 Cooper (1997: 103-194) and Christie (1979: 19) provide the extract concerning the Yaggip/Gaggip ceremony as reported by Thomas in 1843. For further information regarding Thomas’ journal entry for the ‘Gaggip’ and ‘Stone Houses’ see (Public Record Office Victoria and Australian Archives 1997: 118-119).

41 A variation of this ceremony (Gayip) was also witnessed by Richard Howitt (a squatter from the Melbourne area) in the early 1840s, where he learnt about it in relation to Bunjil (the ‘all father’ mythical being). At this ceremony R. Howitt remarked that ‘images curiously carved in bark were exhibited’ (R. Howitt quoted in Howitt 1904 [1996]: 492).
Other pictures, such as maps of the Yarra River drawn by Billibellary, are examples of Aboriginal endeavours to share and exchange knowledge, as a way of ‘teaching’ about Country to ‘outsiders’ with whom they extended the practice of ‘Tanderrum’ (see Fels 1989).

**Figurative narrative styles**

**Pre-contact**

There is disagreement among the early commentators regarding the origin of figurative art in ‘traditional’ linear, abstract designs. Early ethnographers such as the botanist and explorer Daniel Bunce (Bunce 1859 [1979]) and the pastoralist James Dawson believed that they were a development since the arrival of Europeans. With regard to possum skin rugs made in the Western District, Dawson wrote:

> Previous to sewing the skins together, diagonal lines, about half-an-inch apart, are scratched across the flesh side of each with sharpened mussel shells. This is done to make them soft and pliable. The only addition to this kind of ornamentation is occasionally the figure of an emu in the centre of the rug. It may be stated that, although many of the opossum rugs of the aborigines [sic] are now ornamented with a variety of designs, some of which are coloured, nothing but the simple
pattern previously described, with the occasional figure of an emu, was used before the arrival of the white man. The figures of human beings, animals and things, now drawn by the natives, and represented in works on the aborigines of the colony of Victoria as original, were unknown to the tribes ..., and are considered by them as of recent introduction by Europeans (Dawson 1881 [1981]: 9).

In contrast, Robert Brough Smyth thought figurative designs were pre-contact work. These were part of the overall design of the article, which included abstract geometric and linear styles, and were consistent on wooden objects and possum skins (Cooper, 1997). Brough Smyth wrote:

The figures were the same [on the possum skins] as those on their weapons, namely, the herring-bone, chevron and saltire, with representations of animals in outline. When an animal was figured it was common...to fill in the space around it with lines (Smyth 1878 [1972], vol.1: 288).

Despite discrepancies between the reports left by Europeans it seems that figurative art styles were characteristic of southeast Australian Aboriginal art prior to contact, such as the portrayal of Bunjil and dogs in the Bilimina shelter (Gunn 1983a). However, the pre-contact meaning represented in ‘mythic Dreaming characters’, were connected to religious rituals, which stipulated that ‘emblematic figures and designs’ were consistently produced in the ‘way or ways’ they had been since the ‘beginning of time’. They were identified, ‘not so much by their facial characteristics as by the symbols shown in connection with them’, such as the abstract linear motifs (Berndt et al. 1998: 36).

Due to the rapid changes taking place following contact with Europeans and the imperative to make sense of these changes, this figurative art was transformed to depict experiences from the present. The sacred nature of art diminished, as information relayed in artwork could be read on different levels by people within and outside the culture.
Post-contact: designs in bark huts

Although Aboriginal people used ‘non-traditional’ mediums such as paper to transfer information, they also continued to transmit stories using ‘traditional’ mediums such as bark painting and etching. These ‘narrative’ styles of artwork were more accessible to Europeans as the meanings are in a realistic ‘figurative narrative’ framework, which allowed for outsiders’ interpretations.

In 1843 during Robinson’s trip to the Loddon region of the Port Phillip District, he found a number of huts displaying bark pictures of White intrusions into Aboriginal Country. These recorded observations are an attempt to make sense of the ‘highly traumatic’ experience of the initial intrusion of Europeans onto their lands (Cooper 1997: 105).

On 2nd April 1843 Robinson saw:

… rude sketches of men and emu done by the natives. There were a great number of figures; ninety in the attitude directed [to] dancing.
(Robinson 1998a: 142).

Two days later, he encountered a more harrowing depiction of several Aboriginal people surrounding a white man with spears protruding from him:

On the inside of the bark [of] one [hut] were rude sketchs (sic) of emu and other birds; and on another a picture of natives spearing a white man; he was pierced through and through with spears, some throwing, others picking them up (Robinson 1998a: 145).
These are examples of the new post-contact ‘narrative’ style. During the rest of the century, arts practices by Aboriginal people reflected their encounters with Europeans, while displaying distinctive Aboriginal interpretations. Culturally significant practices such as ceremonies were recorded, albeit adapted to incorporate contact with Europeans. These representations facilitated an understanding of Aboriginal encounters with outsiders. However, in the process, these changes to Aboriginal cultural practices reflected the increasing disparities between Aboriginal understandings of their place in the world and European attempts to control them.
4. THE LAST OF THEIR TRIBE: 1850-1900

... the native tribes have more or less died, and in the older settlements of South-East Australia the tribal remnants have now almost lost the knowledge of the beliefs and customs of their fathers.

Alfred Howitt, 1904: xiii

SCIENTIFIC ENQUIRY AND CLASSIFICATION

From the 1850s until the end of the century, Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast developed dramatically, further contesting European ideas of Aboriginality. The changes in art style Robinson witnessed in the huts in the Loddon region, illustrated the rapid developments Aboriginal people were exposed to throughout the Port Phillip District. The abandoning of the Protectorate due to poor administration in 1849 exacerbated the Aboriginal dilemma as they continued to suffer dispossession of land, with little or no recompense from the government (Clark 1990). In 1851, the District became self-governing and changed its name to Victoria. Few of these administrative developments were advantageous for Aborigines and survival became increasingly difficult. As the European invasion expanded, living conditions for Aborigines deteriorated. Ian Clark’s analysis of the decline in lifestyle in the 1850s of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, located around the Loddon River, at the height of the gold rush, appears typical of all Aboriginal groups throughout the western and central districts of Victoria, where a depopulation of people was due to:

... disease particularly venereal and respiratory; substandard nutrition; lower fertility rates; deaths resulting from drunken fighting; and a disruption of their general reproductive system. Traditional socio-political structures had collapsed, and depleted family units were camped either on stations where they were receiving seasonal employment and probably being underpaid, or were encamped at the fringes of mining settlements, of the small townships, where their main support was through begging and prostitution and they had greater
access to alcohol and sexual exploitation from drunken miners (Clark 1990: 147).

Many Aboriginal people resorted to more ‘dependent’ relationships with Europeans in order to survive (Clark 1990: 44).

When the government abolished the Protectorate it did not entirely abandon the notion of *noblesse oblige*. Influenced by political liberalism, the government appointed William Thomas to remain as ‘Guardian of the Aborigines’ for the central counties of Bourke, Mornington and Evelyn. In the other parts of Victoria, the local Commissioners of Crown Lands oversaw Aborigines (Lakic and Wrench 1994).

At the end of the decade, a Legislative Council Committee asked several ‘respectable gentlemen’ from all regions of the state (Clark 1990: 46), including squatters, police magistrates, crown land commissioners, businessmen and churchmen, to respond to a questionnaire, concerning the state of Aborigines in their districts.42 Although Aboriginal requests to remain on their own Country were considered, no Aborigines were consulted directly. This lead to the *Report by the Legislative Council Select Committee into the state of the Aborigines of Victoria, 1858-59*, which in 1859 established the *Central Board Appointed to Watch over the Interests of Aborigines* (CBA) (Victoria Legislative Council 1858-9). The Report recommended that Aboriginal reserves should be set aside on ‘the various tribes own hunting grounds’ in order to ‘ameliorate their extinction’ (Victoria Legislative Council 1858-9: 72). Further, Aborigines should be ‘civilized and christianized’ by missionary managers (Victoria Legislative Council 1858-9: iv-vi). From 1860 a system of reserves, with Local Honorary Guardians, was set up to ‘watch over the interests of the Aborigines’ (Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines 1861).

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42 The questionnaire was based on a style popular in Europe at the time. Although the main intention was to gauge the ‘condition’ of the Aborigines, there were also questions which were of ethnographic interest to ‘men of learning’, including the styles of art and artefacts that could be attributed to the Aboriginal people throughout the various regions of the colony. Few of those surveyed responded in any detail, some contending that there were no arts practices among the Aborigines in their region (Victoria Legislative Council 1858-9).
The 1850s also coincided with the development of theories of ‘race’ as an aspect of scientific enquiry. In her PhD thesis, the historian Marguerita Stephens provides an analysis and discussion of the growing popularity of racial theories after the 1850s. She argues that there was a substantial school of thought, which advocated that for some people there was little hope for their advancement, therefore justifying the increasingly discriminatory and racist policies implemented in Victoria throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. These supported the notion that those of ‘mixed-descent’, the ‘hybrid’, were corrupt and lacked moral fortitude (Stephens 2003).

These new ‘scientific’ theories of ‘race’ challenged previous theories about environmental influences on a species’ development, under which Aborigines were thought of as exotic noble or ignoble savages, reflecting their isolation from the ‘civilising’ influences of Europe (Smith 1989). The new theories, however, considered that humanity descended from ‘several separate “types” or species with independent histories and different moral, intellectual and biological capacities’ (Griffiths 1996: 45). Such theories meshed with those proposed by Charles Darwin, in his 1859 publication *Origin of the Species*, which proposed the theory of evolution, in terms of natural selection (Darwin 1859).

The racial theories led to classifications of humans according to ‘race’ and legitimised attitudes of racial supremacy amongst colonists in Victoria. To the colonisers it seemed inevitable, given the decline in the condition of the Aborigines throughout the 1850s, that they were ‘doomed’ to extinction (Stephens 2003). This led to a growing interest in preserving and recording Aboriginal material culture, including skeletal remains. Collectors sought to illustrate the linear development of mankind from the ‘primitive’ to the ‘civilised’ (Anderson 2005; Griffiths 1996). Collections of artefacts also reflected an increasing European fascination for international exhibitions and museum displays, intended to highlight the progress of Europeans and to showcase their capacity for development and industry as compared to the less progressive ‘races’ of the world.

The ‘scientific’ collection mentality and establishment of museums saw a decline in the popularity of exotic collections in ‘cabinets of curiosities’
In the 1850s the Western museum, was an institution of modernity ‘part of the ethic of progress’ and represented as the historian Tom Griffith notes, ‘extensions of the enthusiasm for collecting, classification and encyclopaedic knowledge’ (Griffiths 1996: 18).

Displays of Indigenous artefacts were often sourced from local exhibitions and showcased at the increasingly popular world exhibitions, such as London (1851, 1862) and Paris (1854, 1867, 1878) and from the 1870s in Sydney and Melbourne (see Griffiths 1996).

The three barks
Among the items collected by Europeans from the 1850s and later showcased at international exhibitions and museums were three bark etchings made by Aboriginal people from the Loddon/Mallee region of Victoria. The story of the ‘Three Barks’ characterises the culturally different perspectives towards art, and provides a poignant example of the way artworks were incorporated into the philosophies underlying early anthropology and the ‘modern museum’.

The bark pictures were collected over a period of some twenty years. In the early 1850s, the squatter John Kerr collected two barks, along with a wooden emu ceremonial piece from near his property Fernyhurst (aka Fernihurst), at Lake Boort (Willis 2003; Willis 2004). They were, according to Kerr, commissioned by him from the Dja Dja Wurrung, with whom he declared he had ‘always been on very friendly terms’ (Kerr 1872 [1996]: 13). Recently the Senior Curator of History and Technology at Museum Victoria, Elizabeth Willis has argued that giving the barks (or perhaps exchanging them for some ‘mutually-acceptable payment’) with Kerr was a signal of Aboriginal agency (Willis 2006). Her position, however, neglects to take into account the complexity of agency, which at once recognises that the colonialised has the ability to initiate action, yet their subject position is also constrained by the colonising process (Bhabha 1994; Fannon 1991). For Aboriginal people an undeniable power imbalance existed between the coloniser and the colonised, in this instance Kerr and the Dja Dja Wurrung (Fung and Wills 2006). These power imbalances were again played out 150 years later, when the barks and the wooden effigy were lent from their permanent locations in Britain for an
exhibition at Melbourne Museum in 2004 (Willis 2003; Willis 2004).43 Their return to Britain the following year was contested by descendants of the Aboriginal people from the Loddon area, reflecting ongoing tensions between the coloniser and the colonised (Fung and Wills 2006).44

The third bark (also included in the Melbourne Museum exhibition), known as the Lake Tyrell bark, was made later, sometime immediately prior to 1874 (Cooper 1997).45 It currently belongs to and remains in the collection of Museum Victoria.

The barks are naturalistic representations of 'traditional' life. They reveal an Aboriginal conceptualisation of the world through their depiction of cultural practices. For example (Plate 4.1) illustrates emu feathers used as a headdress, while the hunting scene in (Plate 4.2) retains a sense of fluidity, allowing the viewer to interpret what might be about to happen. While the etchings facilitate the transmission of information across cultures, they represent an Aboriginal attempt at showing 'how the world is seen by them', with meanings for that society and also for its descendants (Banks and Morphy 1997: 22).

43 One of these barks is held in the British Museum, London, and the other was ‘only recently … rediscovered’ in ‘a back storage area of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew’ (Willis, 2003: 43).
44 A discussion of the events surrounding the 2004 exhibition is continued in chapter seven.
45 Lake Tyrell is located in the northwest of the state, in the Mallee, only a short distance from Swan Hill and the Murray River.
Plate 4.1  Unknown. *Figure with headdress*, c. 1850s. Bark Etching. Centre for Economic Botany, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Kew EBC 55386).

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The third bark, from Lake Tyrell (Plate 4.3), displays aspects of 'traditional' life, which are easier to interpret as it consists of a stylised drawing of a European building, positioned alongside a waterway, perhaps indicating that Europeans had acquired the best pieces of land. Two non-Aboriginal figures, one smoking a pipe, the other holding a gun are juxtaposed against essentials of Aboriginal life, including wooden weapons, baskets, water, wildlife, and representations of hunting, fighting and a ceremony. This etching explains Aboriginal circumstances in order to make sense of the European invasion, while also visually transmitting Aboriginal culture and worldviews (Cooper 1997: 106-7).


The continuing debates surrounding the legitimacy or otherwise of the manner in which Aboriginal artefacts were collected and commodified, such as the barks Kerr received, reveal the contested meanings around objects, especially between cultures across time and space (Appadurai 1986b).

Thus, when Kerr exhibited the barks initially he did so:
... as examples of Aboriginal industry and because they illustrated how some of the other items [he] collected from the Loddon people were used (Willis 2003: 51).

At least one of the barks (and possibly two) were on show at the 1854 exhibition at Sandhurst (now Bendigo), and the following year in Melbourne (Willis 2003). They were then sent to the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1855 as part of a colonial endeavour to ‘spearhead international scientific enquiry’ (Griffiths 1996: 18), becoming artefacts of science.

These barks were displayed as representations of the Other. Their meaning and purpose were changed in that process, as Banks and Morphy note:

When material culture is removed from its context of production it is often recreated anew as a Western art object, with a meaning and value that bears little relation to its use in an indigenous cultural context, beyond the fact of the very existence of that context granting the value of authenticity. The object becomes associated with an aesthetic, a way of seeing that belongs to a quite different cultural tradition (Banks and Morphy 1997: 25).

The exhibitions and museum displays of the nineteenth century tended to require ‘authentic’ culture, such as displays of Aboriginal, wooden artefacts (especially weaponry) and utilitarian objects, which as the historian Philip Jones notes ‘supported the dominant and erroneous view of Aborigines as people with little leisure, preoccupied with internecine warfare rather than with ceremonial or artistic life’ (Jones 1989: 155). These displays also suggested that Aboriginal people were ‘frozen’ in time (Willis 2003: 53), representatives of the world’s most primitive human race and arranged accordingly at the ‘beginning of a linear sequence’ (Griffiths 1996: 54).

The salvage paradigm
Collections of Aboriginal material culture showcased the ‘industrious’ habits of the Aborigines as they moved from a ‘primitive’ savage race towards ‘civilisation’. The collector Reynell Eveleigh Johns, in the later half of the century, amassed one of the largest collections of Victorian Aboriginal artefacts and human remains for ‘scientific’ purposes. Unlike earlier collectors
and ethnographers, Johns did not know any Aboriginal people (Griffiths 1996: 53). He had little interest in pursuing the makers’ identities; the ‘second-hand nature’ of his collection represented the European belief in the ‘salvage paradigm’, which was based on the beliefs that the ‘original inhabitants’ of the colony had all but disappeared, and that each generation ‘was the last to be given the opportunity to preserve authentic information on Aborigines for the sake of posterity’ (Kleinert 2002:13). However, as the anthropologist James Clifford observes, ‘[m]ore than a few “extinct” peoples have returned to haunt the Western historical imagination’ (Clifford 1988:16).

Although collectors embodied the nature of the colonial enterprise, as they endeavoured to become experts on the Other, their collections also unwittingly displayed Aboriginal imperatives to adapt and develop their so-called ‘primitive’ artefacts, contesting ideas about the unchangeability and the inevitable decline of their ‘race’.

‘Black Johnny’ Dawson

‘Black Johnny’ was an Aboriginal artist whose art practices reveal how Aboriginal people were adapting new ways to comment on the changing world around them. His work however, also reveals the paradoxes between Aboriginal arts practice and a European aesthetic, as his art although ‘new’ and revelationary, also located him within a ‘primitivist’ paradigm.

Johnny’s work includes narrative figures, which portrayed and made sense of his encounters with Europeans. In 1855 at the age of fourteen or fifteen, ‘Johnny’, also known as Johnny Dawson, was working as a stockkeeper at the squatter James Dawson’s Kangatong station, near Port Fairy in Victoria’s Western District (Sayers 1997). It is likely that Johnny had to work for pastoralists in order to survive (see Clark 1990).

Johnny would have been a child during the post-contact conflict of the Eumeralla War near Portland and Port Fairy, and most likely aware of the impact of the European invasion on customary ways of life (see Cannon 1990; Clark 1990; Critchett 1990). It is possible that these changes influenced him to seek ways of explaining the disruptions. His drawings can be analysed by reference to the ‘elaborate visual conventions’ of Aboriginal culture, including
corroborees, where encounters with Whites inspired Aboriginal mimicry of European behaviour, demonstrating a desire to communicate across the cultural divide (Lydon 2005: 32).

During this era of severe disruption, it appears Johnny benefited from having James Dawson as an employer. Dawson was an advocate for Aboriginal people and took an active interest in learning about their culture, including dialects of the Gourndidjmara (Dawson 1881 [1981]). He also sponsored European artists, and in 1855 invited the German landscape artist Eugene von Guerard to visit his property. Von Guerard’s visit to Kangatong gave Johnny the chance to become relatively proficient in the use of watercolours. He was tutored to some extent by the artist, and each drew a picture of the other (Sayers 1997).

Johnny’s works reinterpret the way Aboriginal people encountered Europeans; his choice of subject matter and style were influenced by illustrated newspapers and books (Sayers 1997). However, his work contrasts with that of von Guerard. Von Guerard’s style was influenced by his classical European training, where mimesis and formal harmony produced a ‘successful imitation of nature’, a process reflecting a superior intellect and the ‘achievement of the civilized nations’ (Gombrich 2002: 184); Johnny’s style was aligned with the ‘uncivilised’, where his incapacity for mimesis in drawing was viewed as indicative of an intellectually inferior status.46

The works of Johnny Dawson show Aboriginal visual culture moving towards the figurative, and privileging the public domain, as opposed to the non-figurative, which was restricted to internal consumption (Kleinert 1992b). However, despite Johnny’s figurative representations, his works attest to the visual conventions of his people, emphasising the arrangement of forms in a linear fashion, as seen in the drawings of Women with Parasols (Plate 4.4) and the Cavalryman and Family (Figure 4.5). Of the five extant works by Johnny, two incorporate Aboriginal imagery: one displays an Aboriginal man with Europeans at a horserace; the other depicts a horseman and a kangaroo.

46 Unlike mimicry, mimesis is more than physical imitation and includes a mental and emotional relationship, see (Gebauer and Wulf 1995; Taussig 1993).
Although Aborigines and animals are depicted, his other works (Plates 4.4 and 4.5) also represent Johnny’s encounters with lavish European social gatherings. These are rare images of such encounters executed by an Aboriginal person from Victoria in the nineteenth century (Sayers 1997). While there is no clear evidence why Johnny chose to draw such gatherings, it is possible that he was attempting to make sense of his encounters with European ritual, ceremony and social gatherings, while his own people were increasingly denied opportunities to perform their own.

**Plate 4.4**  


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Reproduced in Sayers (1997: 3)

Johnny’s story demonstrates the European preoccupation with positioning Aboriginal people as the Other. His drawings, although exhibiting a capacity for change and ‘civilisation’, also locate Aboriginal people within a ‘primitivist’ paradigm. Within this paradigm Johnny’s work was considered ‘naïve’, ‘crude’ and ‘childlike’. Eugene von Guerard’s ability to portray landscape and figures showing perspective and three-dimensional form reflect the construction of the ‘artist as genius’ (see Kant 1790 [1998]). Such an ability located Europeans at the top of the intellectual and cultural ladder (Kleinert 1992b). Although Johnny’s two-dimensional naively executed works of art were the antithesis of von Guerard’s, they reflected the transformative nature of Aboriginal arts practice in the 1850s.

‘Primitive art’
Aboriginal people’s ability to adapt their arts practices to reflect changes in their communities ironically positioned Aboriginal art in the southeast as inferior. A factor in this was the increasing popularity of evolutionary theories that were gradually infiltrating the European scientific community. The art historian Ernst Gombrich notes that the consequent relegation of Indigenous people to the lowest rungs on the evolutionary scale, ‘uncritically assumed that members of “primitive” societies also exhibited a more primitive mind’ (Gombrich 2002: 199-200).
The English sculptor John Flaxman, writing in the early nineteenth century, advanced theories of intellectual and artistic development among humans, which pre-empted Darwin’s theories of evolution, and demonstrate an early fascination with art styles outside formal art. Such beliefs contributed to the birth of so-called ‘primitive’ art theory, which focussed on the decorative styles of ‘savage races’, as compared with their inability to accurately portray the human figure, which was as Flaxman argued, a skill that could be equated with the ‘artistic genius’ of the civilised (Gombrich 2002).

Flaxman associated these complexities of ‘style’ with the level of civilisation an individual or cultural group had achieved. This, he thought, determined their capacity to successfully create decorative and ornamental designs on handcrafted pieces (a skill that was gradually diminishing in the West as a result of industrialisation), as opposed to the more intellectually challenging task of realistically mimicking the human form in artwork (Flaxman and Westmacott 1838).

Flaxman’s discussion of ‘style’ illustrates the tensions surrounding Western art theory and practice. In the mid-nineteenth century ideas about ‘primitive’ Aboriginal ‘art’ were limited to the utilitarian and decorative, such as bark etchings, weaponry or wooden artefacts, where they represented the pristine and preindustrial work of the ‘noble savage’. Other forms were labelled second-rate, such as attempts to reproduce figurative works in a Western style, along with commoditised objects that revealed a ‘stylistic hybridity’. These interpretations complicated the ‘evolutionary histories’ around discourses of ‘primitive’ art. The ‘hybridised’ versions of ‘art’, while illustrating an Indigenous capacity for change, became examples of the ‘degeneration and weakening of a racial stock’ (Phillips and Steiner 1999: 10). Conversely styles reflecting the ‘traditional’ were considered authentic and valuable, yet revealed the lack of true creative and intellectual genius, as it applied to European ‘fine art’ (see Smith 1998).

For the rest of the nineteenth century Aboriginal people were increasingly classified and labelled, however, like their artwork they continued to resist the limitations imposed by Europeans.
ART AS A MEANS OF CLAIMING EQUALITY

The Reserves

In 1860 the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines (CBA) became the official body responsible for the welfare of Aborigines in Victoria, until it was replaced in 1869 by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA). By 1863 the CBA had established seven reserves on people’s ‘own country’. The establishment of reserves over the next decade reflected government efforts to control Aboriginal lives and eradicate their culture. The reserve system influenced the way Aboriginal people lived over the next eighty years (Broome 2005). These ‘institutions’ provided intersections between European and Aboriginal culture which Aborigines often used to their advantage. By acquiring European ‘habits’, some Aborigines ‘voluntarily embraced cultural enlargement and enrichment’ (Broome 2005: 127). While many Aboriginal people saw the acquisition of European skills, such as education, as a means of emancipation, as well as a means of reinforcing culture (Barwick 1978; Grimshaw et al. 2002), Europeans were adamant that the adoption of European values would alleviate Aborigines from their ‘miserable state’. This dichotomous interpretation of the benefits of European ways is illustrated in Aboriginal adaptations of European arts practices. In 1871 Brough Smyth, following one of his regular inspections of Coranderrk as secretary to the BPA expounded the virtues of Aboriginal children acquiring a European education:

Some of the children’s pencil sketches surprised me, and I advised Mr Johnston [teacher] to give encouragement to such boys as showed a desire to acquire instruction in landscape drawing (Robert Brough Smyth report to Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1871: 19).

By adapting their creative skills to fit within the European system, Aboriginal people were using their artistic talents to sustain cultural

47 These were also known as missions and/or stations; the words were used interchangeably. See Appendix 1, map 3 for their locations.

48 By 1868 there were six reserves remaining (Broome 2005: 132; Jackomos and Fowell 1991: 13).
connections and assert their independence. While to Europeans it appeared that Aborigines were becoming more like them, Aboriginal people were interpreting these new skills within their own cultural paradigm. The children’s interest in landscape drawings illustrates Aboriginal association with Country, similar to that revealed by the earliest records of post-contact Aboriginal art.

This Aboriginal re-interpretation of European skills was also demonstrated by their ability to engage in the politics and economy of the wider community. For instance, the establishment of the Coranderrk reserve, located near Melbourne, was significantly enhanced by the production of artefacts as gifts and later as items for sale in what became a burgeoning tourist trade in the 1870s and 1880s (Sculthorpe 2000).

Earlier reports by the CBA revealed that managers of many stations encouraged the production of material culture. Aboriginal people were actively engaged in a transformative process, where mimesis of European tastes and life style (in all aspects of life, not just artwork) were adopted, adapted and repositioned to reflect an Aboriginal ‘self-consciousness’. The historian Jane Lydon argues that Aboriginal people in this process were dextrously intervening in the process of colonisation and in doing so manipulating the White bureaucracy (Lydon 2002; Lydon 2005).

As few Aboriginal people in the 1860s were literate, photographic and other images became a source of information about how they were portrayed in the outside world. Jane Lydon’s history of photographs of Aborigines in colonial Victoria includes a discussion around Charles Walter’s 1864 Coranderrk photographs. Here she argues that the Coranderrk residents used these photographs and the mass media for decorative purposes, to better understand their position in colonial society, to intervene in the White world, but also to assert Aboriginal agency and manipulate the bureaucracy (Lydon 2005). This argument applies equally to the production and sale of

49 See the CBA reports from 1862-1869.
50 For example in 1864 the CBA reported that Simon Wonga and William Barak, both Elders on the Coranderrk reserve were: ‘very intelligent men, and in their behaviour would compare favourably with the better classes of other races’ (Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines 1864: 6).
material culture. The commodification of Aboriginal material culture also provides an insight into Aboriginal agency within the colonial process. This was rarely noticed by Europeans, who were more concerned with instilling the ‘habits of industry’, and crediting themselves with creating a more ‘civilised’ community, reflecting their own (Sayers 1997: 15). For example, Robert Brough Smyth, reported in 1871, after visiting women at Coranderrk station, that:

The forms of baskets are good and since I made designs for them they have improved rapidly, and [the women] are now capable of fashioning quite intricate patterns (Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1871: 9).

Belief in Aboriginal inferiority allowed Brough Smyth to credit himself with the ‘new’ basket designs, despite the fact that Aborigines in the southeast had been making and adapting baskets of various designs for trade with the Europeans since the early days of colonisation (see Cannon 1983; Lakic and Wrench 1994; Sculthorpe 1990). This instance provides yet another indication of the dexterity and adaptability of Aboriginal people.

The reports of the CBA and later the BPA show that the government actively encouraged creative skills on the stations, as they saved the government money. The anthropologist, Diane Barwick, in reviewing women’s roles on the mission stations, acknowledges the extent to which the traditional skills of women adapted in the 1860s and 1870s to support the economy of station life. Activities included the manufacture of baskets, hats, mats, crocheted collars, opossum rugs and other items, which they exchanged for luxury items, such as decorative pieces for their houses and cloth for sewing fashionable outfits. Their sewing enterprises attracted the admiration of Europeans and were regularly reported in the Boards’ Annual Reports (Barwick 1978).51

51 For examples of the commodification of women’s material culture at various reserves around the State, as reported by the BPA, see (Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1871: 19; Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1872: 20, 22).
Material artefacts were bartered with Europeans, providing Aboriginal women with a means of achieving a degree of economic and social independence, and equality with male residents. Women’s traditional skills, while infiltrating European homes in the form of utilitarian objects, also provided women with a subversive means of exerting control over the way their lives were ‘managed’ on the reserves. Women’s adaptation of their traditional skills and their embracing of Western education allowed them to become the ‘primary agents of social change’ (Barwick 1978: 56). This facilitated their inclusion in the political processes of station life, including lobbying the authorities for better conditions and the right to remain on reserves. Women’s involvement in political processes occurred despite opposition from colonial authorities, including station managers, who were frequently dismayed at the emancipation of Aboriginal women on reserves (Barwick 1978; Grimshaw et al. 2002). Aboriginal women’s involvement in the exchange of goods and services on reserves with Europeans also provided them with a means of actively participating in Tanderrum.

Tanderrum was understood in terms of ‘sharing rights in, and use of, territory’ (Barwick et al. 1998: 23-24). Hence, in May 1863, as part of the celebrations for Queen Victoria’s birthday and her son’s marriage, a deputation of Kulin men gathered at Government House in Melbourne. They addressed the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, about their need for land, as the Kulin viewed him as someone explicitly appointed by the Queen to protect their interests (Attwood 2003; Barwick et al. 1998). In keeping with the tradition of Tanderrum, on their deputation to Melbourne the men, who included the Elders Simon Wonga and William Barak, presented ‘a great number of weapons and articles of native manufacture’, including a large decorated possum skin rug and a number of elaborately engraved spears, a woomera, shield and a waddy (Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines 1863: 11). A crocheted collar made by a girl named Ellen from Mount Franklin was sent separately to the Queen. The following year the Queen wrote congratulating Ellen on her skill and ensuring the Kulin of her protection (see Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines 1864; Lydon 2005).
While this exchange symbolised Aboriginal ideas about their rights to land and freedom, it also reflected Aboriginal interpretations of White law, which were handed down through oral tradition. The historian Henry Reynolds suggests that ‘the black oral tradition was…closer to the truth than the version of events which gained ascendancy among the white community’ (Reynolds 1988: 146). Whites conveniently forgot the elements of their law which provided for the possibility of Aboriginal claims to land (Lydon 2005).

However, as Barwick acknowledges, a series of political coincidences, rather than royal intervention, probably hastened the gazettal of Coranderrk as a reserve. Nevertheless, given the Kulin’s respect for the sovereignty of the Queen and her acknowledgement of their gifts, the exchange reinforced a belief commonly held until the 1970s ‘that [Coranderrk] belonged to them and their heirs in perpetuity’ (Barwick et al. 1998: 66).

**Scientific rationalism: Definitions of culture according to ‘blood lines’**

The economics of the reserve system required Aboriginal people to continue with their ‘traditional’ activities, alongside more recently acquired skills, to support themselves and to subsidise the Board’s coffers.

The blacks still continue to hunt native game, and devote a day and half to the purpose every week; they also catch a great number of fish during the season. The men also make opossum rugs, spears, boomerangs, and other specimens of native art. The women also make hats, mats, and baskets, which they dispose of, and purchase numerous little domestic comforts and second hand clothing, and in various ways do what they can to provide for their own requirements (Report of William Goodall, manager of Framlingham station in Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1871: 19).

While the Board encouraged the use of traditional skills, it was also moving to policies that would merge the Aboriginal population with White society.

Further restrictions came with the *Aborigines Protection Act 1869* and the replacement of the CBA with the BPA. This Act was the first to officially define Aboriginal people ‘racially’ according to their degree of Aboriginal
Although some people were able to live away from the reserves and to participate to some extent in the European economy, life became increasingly difficult. A declining population meant that aspects of group social organisation were further disrupted. Difficulties in sustaining hunting and gathering practices were also exacerbated as Europeans continued to carve up the land. People increasingly sought government rations and the handouts issued on reserves to survive (Broome 2005).

Uprisings and arts practices as a means of sustaining culture

A Royal Commission into the condition of the Aborigines took place in 1877. It recommended that the Board implement programs aimed at restricting the practice of culture and replacing it with ‘worthwhile’ work. Such programs were designed to assist Aboriginal people to eventually integrate more successfully with the wider society, while at the same time encouraging the reserves to become self-sufficient (Broome 2005; Christie 1979).

In the early 1870s, the Government decided to close the reserve at Coranderrk and to sell the land to White settlers. For over a decade from 1874, following the removal of the sympathetic ‘manager’ of the reserve, John Green, the residents lobbied the Government through press statements, handwritten petitions and marches to Parliament, campaigning for their rights to remain on their land and for freedom from bureaucratic intervention (Attwood 2003; Barwick et al. 1998; Broome 2005; Christie 1979; Stephens 2003). This political action, as Broome notes: ‘appropriated the coloniser’s political forms and tactics’ (Broome 2005: 169-170).

One of the most vocal and respected lobbyists in this campaign was William Barak, the nephew of Billibellary and a significant ngurungaeta (Elder and leader) of his people, who had witnessed the signing of the Batman treaty as a child (Barwick et al. 1998). Barak was also a firm advocate for the

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52 The Aborigines Protection Act 1869 officially defined an Aboriginal person, as an ‘aboriginal native of Australia’ or an ‘aboriginal half-caste or child of a half-caste’. This Act also prescribed the places people could live, where they could work (the Act authorised the payment of wages to the local guardian or manager, rather than the individual) and the ‘care, custody and education of children’. It also authorised the removal of ‘any child neglected by its parents’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997: 611).
maintenance of cultural practices, which he exemplified through his drawings. These predominantly focused on ceremonial scenes and the arrangement of people in patterned possum skin cloaks (Cooper et al. 2003; Sayers 1997).

For the Government, the ‘Coranderrk Rebellion’ signified the need for legislation to prevent other such uprisings. They believed the problem lay with educated and easily corruptible ‘half-castes’ and not the ‘full bloods’, many of whom were elderly and in need of care. In the 1880s, as policy makers became increasingly influenced by ideas of ‘race’ and biology, the BPA adopted policies and strategies that were justified by evolutionism. The paternalism of previous decades faded to make way for policies for determining who could remain on the reserves, according to their degree of Aboriginal ‘blood’, rather than cultural and social ties (Attwood 2003; Barwick et al. 1998; Broome 2005).

Since settlement, colonial society had been concerned about the growing ‘half-caste’ problem and had begun categorising Aboriginal people according to skin colour (Broome 2005). The 1869 Act had begun the racial classification of the Aboriginal people. By 1886 the Victorian government, influenced largely by scientific interest in The Origin of Species, was classifying Aboriginal people on biological grounds. According to the 1886 Aborigines Act, ‘half-castes’ were no longer to be treated as Aborigines (Attwood 2003; Broome 2005; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997).

Aboriginal artists of this era, such as William Barak and Tommy McRae were seen as the ‘last of their tribe’. However, their work can be seen as an attempt to ensure the continuity of ceremonial and cultural knowledge, at a time when the Board was implementing policies based on ‘Darwin’s theory of survival of the fittest’ (Broome 2005: 178).

53 For example Charles Walters’ photographs of the residents of Coranderrk, were organised in categories according to the individuals ‘racial type’ for the Intercolonial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866, and in the following year at the Paris Universal Exhibition (Lydon 2005).
THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:

Exhibitions, ‘Primitivism’ and the Art and Craft Movement

At the same time, Aboriginal people were being represented in exhibitions and museum displays in terms of ‘primitivism’. The 1880-81 International Exhibition, at the new Exhibition Building in Melbourne, and the larger Centennial International Exhibition of 1888-89, showcased the progress of Victorian industry to visitors from around the world (Broome 2005; Edmonds 2006). Aboriginal art and craft was displayed at these exhibitions. Inevitably the works most frequently displayed were weapons and wooden items, which located Aboriginal culture in the hunter-gatherer paradigm, as the earliest examples of ‘primitive’ culture. More often than not the displays of such items were for decorative purposes; spears were arranged in exotic fan designs to set off the superiority of European manufactured goods. Few displays addressed the intricate designs found on artefacts, and even fewer the innovations in Aboriginal artwork since colonisation. They preferred to maintain a relativist distinction between evolved civilisations and the ‘savage’ (Edmonds 2006; Jones 1989).

While the exhibitions were exemplars of industrialisation, progress and modernity, they were also important for the art and craft movement, as skilled crafts people and their hand-made designs began to infiltrate the mass-produced market of the machine age. By the end of the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution had led to the standardised manufacture of artefacts, which then created a backlash and a return to the more decorative, individual designs of artisans and craftspeople, as well as those of ancient civilisations and Indigenous cultures (Kleinert 1992b). English architects, such as Owen Jones in the mid nineteenth century and later William Morris saw the benefits of decorative, symmetrical and hand hewn designs:

If we would return to a more healthy condition we must be even as little children or savages, we must get out of the acquired and artificial and return to and develop natural instincts (Owen Jones, 1856 quoted in Smith 1998: 59).

They challenged the concept of the ‘artist as genius’ by encouraging popular designs, which were reminiscent of the ‘primitive’. Europeans began
to embrace the patterns found in the Oriental and Arabic cultures together with decorative, ornamental, abstract and authentic original works (Gombrich 2002; Kleinert 1992b; Phillips and Steiner 1999).

This shift in styles was, as the art historian Bernard Smith declares, embraced by late nineteenth century European artists, intent on breaking from the restrictive realism of formal art practices.

[In the positivistic climate of the later nineteenth century, to be ‘decorative’ was considered a positive aesthetic value. … Gauguin and Matisse, for example, desired their art to be seen as decorative. But this involved a conflation of high art and decorative art, systems of value that were held to be separate and distinct for most of the century. It was in part a matter of social status. But towards the end of the century under the impact of William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau, a good deal of convergence began to occur (Smith 1998: 59-60).]

By the end of the century ‘primitive’ art was universal. Designs which reflected nature and adhered to ‘tradition’ were now transformed into fine art for the ‘markets and museums of Europe and its colonies’ (Smith 1998: 51). This trend in the ongoing commodification of art simultaneously included and excluded certain styles of Indigenous artwork. Some ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ art was seen as evidence of an ‘imaginary past lifestyle’, while newer innovations were viewed as corrupted versions of the past. Such ‘slippery notions’, served to further subordinate and exploit Indigenous cultures (Cohodas 1999:144-146).

The requirements of the Western notion of ‘primitivism’, where anything outside a ‘premodern’ aesthetic was corrupt, provided another basis for classifying colonised people, including Aborigines, according to biological determinants of ‘race’. Changes in the design of artwork, which had previously been valorised as examples of a ‘primitive’ culture’s ability to progress along the evolutionary continuum, were increasingly ‘rejected as evidence of contamination and degradation’ (Cohodas 1999: 145-146).
Museums, ethnography and authentic ‘primitive art’
Thus, the Aboriginal art displayed in museums was increasingly restricted to those works considered ‘authentic’ and ‘primitive’. The salvage paradigm, so intensely advocated by collectors in the middle of the nineteenth century, continued to dictate the types of art to be displayed later in the century as evidence of Aboriginal people’s ‘primitive’ status, justifying Europeans construction of the Other (see Russell 2001).

Museum collections also contributed to the construction of ethnography as a science that would further the classification and cataloguing of Aboriginal culture (Edmonds 2006; Jones 1989). By the end of the nineteenth century, Robert Brough Smyth and Alfred Howitt, who had spent many years collecting evidence of Aboriginal culture in Victoria, had published extensive works, which contributed to the ‘primitive’ stereotype of the Aborigine (see for example Fison and Howitt 1880; Howitt 1904 [1996]; Smyth 1878 [1972]). Smyth and Howitt endorsed theories of the inevitable extinction of the ‘race’, and were implicated in establishing the ‘authority of the colonial institution – the museum’ as the purveyor of the authentic (Russell 2001: 51). This also established the European collector as the expert on ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture.

Tourism
In the late nineteenth century, the European fascination with the lifestyle of the Other, manifested in exhibitions, museums and the development of ethnography as a discipline, extended to include tourism. In keeping with the notion of a ‘race’ on the verge of extinction, visitors to Aboriginal stations were encouraged to experience the ‘remnants of Aboriginal culture and to carry souvenirs – photographs and artefacts – away with them’ (Lydon 2005: 187-188).

The concept of the ‘primitive’ was sustained through these tourist visits; this had more to do with popular rather than scientific approaches to culture. In southeast Australia by the 1880s, ‘Aboriginal exoticism was domesticated and softened’ (Lydon 2005: 200). At Coranderrk, the ‘native’, was located in an ‘urbanised’ environment, where even corroborees were contrived for a
tourist market (Lydon 2005). Visitors’ enthusiasm for collecting artefacts symbolic of Aboriginality, such as boomerangs and spears, and baskets and rugs, demonstrated the changing attitude of European society to Aboriginal culture. In the early days of the reserves, the CBA and the BPA had highlighted the capacity for Aborigines to progress and change. By the 1880s however, tourists wanted to see ‘relics of the past’, where Aboriginal culture was stereotyped and objectified as a homogenous ‘primitive’ phenomenon (Russell 2001).
However, Aboriginal people, left with little choice as a result of colonial disruption and displacement, were able to use the tourist trade in artefacts and other cultural activities, such as boomerang throwing and ‘story telling’, to actively engage the colonisers in the process of Tanderrum. William Barak was among those who demonstrated boomerang and spear throwing, as well as story telling to tourists (Baessler 1895 cited in Sayers 1997).
The objects sold to Europeans enabled constructed images of Aboriginality to infiltrate European homes. This process of Aboriginal agency was again one of binary oppositions: simultaneously sustaining a White concept of Aboriginal culture as ‘primitive’ and unchanging, while allowing Aborigines to engage in a process which ensured that some aspects of culture would not be forgotten. This challenged the ‘doomed race’ myth, contributing to the process of cultural adaptation and change (Lydon 2005).

The commodification of Aboriginal culture for the tourist industry popularised it in the colonists’ imagination. Aboriginal artefacts also contributed to the adoption of aspects of Aboriginal culture (such as boomerangs) as symbols of an emerging national identity. However, tourism to Aboriginal stations and the commodification of Aboriginal artwork within European society, while popular pastimes, ironically contributed to the exclusion of Aborigines from Australian history (Lydon 2005; McLean 1998b; Smith 1980).54 In a broader sense, the appreciation of Aboriginal art during

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54 In the 1880s, the sense of growing nationalism also stimulated interest in discourses which expressed European relationships with the land in pristine ways. This is demonstrated through the paintings of the early Australian impressionist artists from the Heidelberg school. These paintings can be seen as another systematic way of leaving
this period emphasised the ‘paradoxes of “primitivism”’, where ‘Indigenous art was admired, whilst Indigenous cultures were treated with racism’ (Kleinert 1992b: 119).

By the end of the nineteenth century few examples of southeast Aboriginal art were deemed ‘primitive’ or pristine; they were more often considered corrupted and hybridised. The work of a few artists was designated ‘traditional’, as it reflected the European concept of a ‘primitive’ aesthetic (that is natural, repetitive in style and uniform in designs).

Although Europeans had begun to appreciate ‘primitive’ artwork, no Aboriginal people in Victoria at the end of the century were living a pre-contact lifestyle. Many had been relocated to missions and reserves, and most had some reliance on government welfare and the trappings of European lifestyle. Artworks embraced as ‘primitive’ can be juxtaposed against late nineteenth century Aboriginal lifestyles, which were on the verge of being ‘civilised’. Such dualisms were inherent in the colonial appreciation of Aboriginal art. While Aboriginal artists had outwardly adopted many of the conventions of European society, their art reflected the capacity of Aboriginal culture to instigate new ways of telling stories and relaying past practices.

**Two artists with consistent bodies of work: Barak and McRae**

Two artists who reflected the duality of Aboriginal existence following colonisation were the Wurundjeri artist William Barak, from Coranderrk, and the Kwat Kwat artist known to Europeans as Tommy McRae. Unlike other Aboriginal artists at this time, their legacy is a relatively large corpus of artworks that were located within the ‘primitivist’ paradigm. Their pictures were admired, collected and endorsed by European artists, ethnographers and philanthropists alike (see Sayers 1997).

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(or in this instance painting) Aboriginal people out of the landscape and consequently out of Australian history (McLean 1998b).

55 Kwat Kwat Country is in northeastern Victoria, around the Wodonga area.

56 Tommy McRae was also known as Yakaduna and/or Tommy Barnes (Cooper and Urry 1981; Fox et al. 1994).
Aboriginal art was frequently collected by Europeans for scientific purposes. Barak’s and McRae’s works were seen as evidence of the intellectual and cultural capacities of Aborigines generally, and as sources of ‘ethnographic, geographic or narrative’ information concerning Aboriginal culture (Sayers 1997: 69). Within this framework, Europeans witnessing Aboriginal culture first hand frequently interpreted what they saw as declining ‘traditions’, a culture on the verge of destruction, a mere ‘hybrid’ of European society. These concepts justified European paternalism and also policies of assimilation (Russell 2001).

The works of Barak and McRae portray their impressions of Aboriginal society before and immediately after European contact. Consequently, ethnographers, including Robert Brough Smyth and Alfred Howitt, were intrigued by their work; their ‘primitivism’ showed that they were worthy ethnographic specimens.

Brough Smyth included some of Tommy McRae’s drawings in an Appendix to his 1878 work, *The Aborigines of Victoria*. Phillip Chauncy, a landowner from Barnawatha in northern Victoria, showed McRae’s drawings to Brough Smyth (Sayers 1997). Chauncy declared that such drawings were a means of assessing the ‘mental characteristics’ of Aboriginal artists. He recognised that the works highlighted the keen observational skills of Aboriginal people; however, he added that their work was undeveloped, childlike and evidence of Aboriginal culture at the early stages of the evolutionary process. McRae was an example of an Aboriginal artist whose skills ‘if cultivated would enable him to draw well’ (Chauncy, in Smyth 1878 [1972]: vol. 2, 258).

William Barak was one of the main sources of information for the ethnographers. For instance, Brough Smyth used information provided by Barak to the Coranderrk manager John Green about Wurundjeri ‘traditional practices’. Howitt also quotes Barak about traditional ceremonies, including corroborees, across Victoria (Howitt 1904 [1996]).

In 1884, in an attempt to witness and record a corroboree in Gippsland near the Ramahyuck mission (which the mission manager Hagenauer had
banned), Howitt invited Barak to view a restaging of a *Jeraeil* (initiation ceremony) at Lake Victoria, in Kurnai country. Although this was outside Barak’s Kulin territory, \(^{57}\) Carol Cooper remarks that Barak’s ‘sage approval for the maintenance of strict rules during the ceremony’ were, for Howitt, evidence of the extent of knowledge Barak had regarding cultural practices (Cooper et al. 2003: 22). Three years later, in 1887, when Howitt attempted to stage another ceremony at the request of the governor Sir Henry Loch, the authorities, concerned about the disruptive effects such performances had on the Aboriginal population in the region, banned any further corroborees. Instead, the governor was provided with one of Barak’s paintings of a corroboree (Broome 2005; Cooper et al. 2003; Lydon 2005).\(^{58}\)

According to Cooper, it is possible that Barak’s recounting of ‘traditions’ and stories to Howitt sparked his creative endeavours to reproduce these images and ‘traditions’ on paper. In addition, Howitt may have encouraged him to do so (Cooper et al. 2003: 22).

\(^{57}\) See Appendix 1, map 4.

\(^{58}\) In the 1860s a memorial to the young Wurundjeri man Thomas Bungaleen was made, most likely by Simon Wonga at Coranderrk. It incorporated an Aboriginal aesthetic, using traditional markings and designs (including Mooroops (spirits), flora and fauna, and groups of people), into the Christian context of a tombstone. This can be seen as another way in which Aborigines recontextualized European beliefs and imposed restrictions to accommodate their own increasingly restricted customs and perspectives (see Barwick and Barwick 1984; Howitt 1904 [1996]; Kleinert 2000a; Smyth 1878 [1972]).
Material concerning Barak and McRae is among the most detailed recorded about Aboriginal artists in the late nineteenth century. Their works tell the viewer much about Aboriginal society at that time and, according to Sayers, Barak’s activities ‘in a number of areas can all be interpreted as strategies for maintaining cultural continuity’ (Sayers 1997: 5).

**Barak (c.1820s-1903)**

The present day Senior Curator of Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Judith Ryan also comments on the significance of Barak’s contribution to the maintenance of cultural continuity. His work reveals an ability to embrace new materials, such as gouache and watercolour, and to combine these with natural pigments including ochre and charcoal. These adaptations were incorporated in his renderings of ‘traditional’ body markings, which evidence the importance of design to Aboriginal culture. As Ryan declares, Barak’s paintings show:

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59 A collection of McRae’s drawings are catalogued in the Museum of Victoria’s Guide to Victorian Aboriginal Collections. Also see the catalogue of McRae’s works in (Sayers 1997: 124-130). Sayers also includes a catalogue of Barak’s works. Others works of the two artists are located in overseas museums, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Koorie Heritage Trust (Cooper et al. 2003; Sayers 1997).
[t]he emphatic marking on the cloaks, on the faces of elders and
dancers and on the bodies of native animals [and] are the equivalent
of Yolngu miny’tji (sacred designs),60 emblematic of identity and place.
These totemic designs, emboldened with black, stand out strongly in
the composition and project across space, liked the red ochre designs
on Victorian broad shields (Ryan 2003: 12).

Barak’s art is distinguishable from that of other Aboriginal artists of the
time not only in form and style, but in his choice of topic. Unlike McRae, in his
extant works, apart from two landscapes, Barak solely depicts Aboriginal life.
These include ceremonies with people dancing, frequently in possum skins
with markings, often using boomerangs and spears and other wooden
artefacts. He also depicted fighting scenes with weapons, hunting scenes,
and animals of totemic significance.

Plate 4.9 William Barak. *Fight scene* c.1880s. Earth pigments and
pencil on paper. Wurundjeri Aboriginal Co-operative,
Melbourne, courtesy of Museum Victoria

Image removed due to copyright.

Reproduced in Cooper et al (2003:54)

60 Ryan is referring to designs of clans in Arnhem Land. People from northeast Arnhem
Land, in the Northern Territory are known collectively as Yolngu. The miny’tji designs
(cross-hatching and linear patterns), until recently were used only for ceremonial
purposes, but are now found on yidaki (didgeridoo), bark paintings and ceremonial poles,
which are sold as artworks. They are painted with natural earth pigments (Keen 2000).
Also see (Morphy 1998).
Barak also recorded ceremonial exchange practices. For instance, according to Cooper, in one painting (now located in the Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde in Dresden, Germany⁶¹), it appears that he depicted the ‘Yaggip’ ceremony, conducted at Merri Creek around 1840, which he provided details of, some years later, to Howitt (Cooper et al. 2003).⁶² As discussed earlier, details of this ceremony were initially told to William Thomas by Barak’s uncle, Billibellary. As Cooper notes:

> It is thus very possible that the Dresden drawing, with its compelling central figure, array of artefacts for trade, semicircle of listeners and large number of tribesman, is yet another retelling of this same story in Barak’s picture ‘words’ (Cooper et al. 2003: 31).

The ethnographic record allows some inferences to be drawn about the paintings’ subjects. However, it is impossible to know the exact meaning of the paintings, and the markings in them, and why they were painted. As Cooper suggests, the works of Barak and McRae do not illustrate specific events from the past, but rather are the artists’ interpretations of stories from

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⁶¹ For a copy of this picture titled Figures wearing cloaks; Artefacts see (Sayers 1997: 18).
⁶² For Barak’s ‘Yagipp’ story as told to Howitt see (Howitt 1904 [1996]: 718).
the past and what was significant to them and their audiences (Cooper et al. 2003).

Tommy McRae (c. 1830s-1901)

By the 1880s, Tommy McRae was living an outwardly European lifestyle. While Barak remained on Coranderrk reserve, McRae lived relatively independently of the BPA, supporting himself and his family from the sale of his paintings. McRae remained on his 'traditional' Country around Wahgunyah on Lake Moodemere\(^{63}\), with his immediate, and some of his extended, family. Europeans from around the district supported his arts practice; he was able to purchase a horse and buggy, which to Europeans looked as though he had adopted the accoutrements of European respectability (Cooper and Urry 1981; Fox et al. 1994; Sayers 1997).

The works of McRae were drawn in pen and ink, frequently as silhouettes, and most often in sketchbooks (Sayers 1997). Although McRae’s drawings extend back to the 1860s, his main body of work is from the 1880s until his death in 1901. His pictures record ceremonial life, including corroborees and body paint, wooden objects, such as boomerangs and shields, hunting and fighting scenes, as well as humorous recollections of cross-cultural encounters. He frequently portrayed images of Europeans, including the escaped convict William Buckley interacting with Aboriginal people (Plate 4.11), and groups of ‘drunken revellers’, as well as wry depictions of hostile encounters between Aborigines and Chinese immigrants (Plate 4.12). While it is unlikely that McRae encountered Buckley or Chinese workers, these works attest to the imagery passed on through oral traditions (see Bird Rose 1991; Healy 1997; Nugent 2003).

\(^{63}\) Near Rutherglen in northeastern Victoria. He also resided in Corowa, New South Wales.

Caption reads: 'Buckley ran away from ship'. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Image removed due to copyright.
McRae’s pictures also reflect an Aboriginal ability to mimic Europeans’ obsessive observation of Aboriginal culture, especially in his rendering of European ‘frontier gentlemen’ as objects of humour, with their long riding sticks, pipes and exaggerated top hats and tails. In some pictures the squatters are positioned on the periphery of the pictures, casting their gaze over an Aboriginal performance (Plate 4.13). At other times, it appears McRae has positioned them in animated conversation with each other, posturing and gesturing, seemingly without the need to work. One picture shows a group of six figures, five in morning coats and top hats and one in work clothes, with a squatter gesticulating animatedly towards the worker, which suggests that McRae was aware of power imbalances in European society (Plate 4.14). The details of early colonial dress enable the viewer to reflect on McRae’s observational skills and memory, as the fashion for morning coats and top hats had changed by the end of the century when he was depicting these events (Cooper and Urry 1981).
Plate 4.13  Tommy McRae. *Ceremony; Group in European dress*  
nd. Corowa and District Historical Society Inc. NSW

Image removed due to copyright.

Caption reads: 'Murray tribe oldin (sic) times Corrobery (sic) NSW'.  
Reproduced in Sayers (1997: 28)

Plate 4.14  Tommy McRae. *Squatters*, nd. Mitchell Library,  
State Library, New South Wales (Acc. no. ML A364)

Image removed due to copyright.

From Brough Smyth *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878). Reproduced in  
Sayers (1997: 42)

Mcrae’s drawings comment on Europeans, but also reverse the  
European gaze and reposition Aboriginal people as active participants in  
colonial society (Plate 4.17). Aboriginal cultural practices are depicted by  
McRae (Plate 4.16); they reveal his interest in the ‘traditions’ of the past, as
well as the adaptations to culture as a result of European impact. Although confined to information for public consumption, such events are the central theme in his work, reflecting a preoccupation with maintaining stories and arts practices unique to Aboriginal culture (see Fox et al. 1994; Sayers 1997).

Plate 4.15  Tommy McRae. *Civilisation*, nd. Pen and ink. National Museum of Australia (Acc. no. 52.1)

Caption reads: "'Civilisation'. This picture represents a few natives who have been employed at shearing time on some station and taken out their wages in "plenty good fellow clothes" and made themselves "along a white fellow swell". The Australian natives are very fond of copying white men's manners in dress when they can manage to do so.' Reproduced in Sayers (1997) - Colour plate 13
McRae’s art did not, however, protect him from colonial government bureaucracy. The income McRae received from his art provided him with a degree of economic freedom,64 which meant he did not have to live at the Cummeragunja station on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, but could live at an unsupervised reserve near Lake Moodemere (Sayers 1997). However, the BPA monitored McRae’s movements by issuing travel passes, and oversaw his appeals for building materials. While McRae appears several times in the Board’s reports, there is no acknowledgement of his artwork (Cooper and Urry 1981). This reflects the Board’s imperative to eradicate Aboriginal culture and merge the Aboriginal population with Europeans.

McRae’s family did not escape the BPA’s policies of ‘absorption’. The 1890 Regulations conferred power on the Board to remove children from their

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64 According to a visitor to Lake Moodemere in 1886, McRae also supported himself through other means such as ‘raising poultry, selling Murray cod and making possum-skin rugs’ (Sayers 1997: 47).
parents and commit them to institutions (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997). In 1891, two of McRae’s children were removed to Lake Tyers. In 1893, in order to protect his remaining children from removal, he crossed over the border with his family to Corowa in New South Wales. McRae continued to paint to subsidise the family’s income. However, on their return to Lake Moodemere in 1897, the police took the rest of the children (Cooper and Urry 1981; Sayers 1997: 48).  

McRae’s pictures and his life exemplify the way Aboriginal people fought for independence in the face of adversity. His drawings reflect not only his impressions of Europeans, but more significantly his experiences of Aboriginal culture, including images from oral stories, body markings aligned with ceremonies, weaponry and hunting practices. They also reveal his subversion of European dominance, through his rendering of squatters as the Other. Many of his pictures show an affinity for ongoing narratives, as revealed in his pictures of corroborees and fighting scenes. These were popular, but not completely understood by his European patrons, as the inadequate (and often banal) titles written by Europeans at the bottom of many of the pictures indicate. Tommy McRae’s life also reflected the dichotomous positioning of Aboriginal culture at the end of the nineteenth century; decorative, ‘primitivist’ and ‘authentic’ artwork was highly regarded, yet Aboriginal people were ostracised and considered second-rate (Cooper and Urry 1981; Sayers 1997).

**Aboriginal works on paper and the dynamic nature of Aboriginal art in the nineteenth century**

Apart from the work of Barak and McRae, two other late nineteenth century artists, who both lived at Coranderrk, ‘Timothy’ (aka Garrak-coonum) and Captain Harrison, originally from Ebenezer Mission in Wotjobaluk Country (northwest Victoria), have one extant work each, which attest to the

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65 Regarding the number of McRae’s children, one of McRae’s patrons, Dr W.H. Lang from Corowa, writing on the inside of an 1886 sketchbook of McRae’s, noted that he had ‘three or four children’. Given that two were removed prior to the McRae’s moving to Corowa and another in 1883, before Lang acquired the sketchbook, it is possible that he had at least six or seven children (Sayers 1997: 128).
significance of ceremonial practice for southeast Australian Aborigines as both Timothy and Captain Harrison depicted ceremonial scenes (see Gough 2006; Lydon 2005). Captain Harrison’s picture of gouache, watercolour and pencil on paper, shows people performing ceremonies with boomerangs, women in possum skins located around humpies and trees, with animals of totemic significance including dogs, a kangaroo, goanna and porcupine. The work is highlighted by a spray like feature of hundreds of tiny blue dots in the background. These enhance the people and items depicted, giving the work a feeling of action and movement (Plate 4.17) (see Gough 2006). Timothy’s picture, *Scenes of Aboriginal life*, is similar. It includes details of cosmological events across the top; planets, the moon, stars and the sun drawn in their various phases. Under these, four pencil drawings depict people and animal life enacting various scenes, including hunting and ceremonial gatherings. He has also it appears, depicted himself in the picture holding a bible. It seems that Timothy has deliberately used the photograph Charles Walter took of him to comment and perhaps embrace his position within the framework of nineteenth century Aboriginal life at Coranderrk. Also unique at this time (for Aboriginal artists) is his signature written in English. Here the words ‘Timothy, Coranderrk’ are inscribed in the top right hand panel. As Lydon observes, ‘Timothy self-consciously names himself as the white photographer saw him, as an Aboriginal man who had adapted to new circumstances’ (Lydon 2005: 120).
Like Barak and McRae, Captain Harrison and Timothy’s artworks were executed at a time when many of the practices they depicted were rapidly fading as a result of government incursions, as well as increasing European impositions on Aboriginal life.

Although drawing and painting on paper and board were secondary artistic enterprises, compared to the manufacture and decoration of wooden and woven artefacts, by embracing these ‘new’ styles Aboriginal artists emphasised the enduring, yet dynamic nature of Aboriginal identity in the nineteenth century. Aboriginal people were simultaneously resisting, while working out ways to coexist with European society. Aboriginal artists of this period, but especially Barak and McRae, contribute to our understandings of Aboriginal perspectives and their responses to a rapidly changing society.
Thus, despite widespread disruption and attempts at ‘civilising’ the Aborigines, Aboriginal artists in the nineteenth century were interpreting their world from within their own cultural paradigm, commenting on life as they experienced it and embracing the old alongside the new. Throughout the later half of the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century, however, Europeans considered these works, like the artist themselves, inauthentic and corrupted. Apart from the work of McRae and Barak, which achieved a degree of notability, largely because of the extent of their works and the depiction of scenes which Europeans perceived to be representative of ‘traditional’ ways of Aboriginal life, Aboriginal art was generally considered ‘hybrid’, ‘a kind of degraded expression, neither traditionally Aboriginal nor fully European [it was] ‘half-caste’ art’ (Sayers 1997:9).

It would be almost one hundred years until a safer and more accepting environment could exist, which would support the reclamation of arts practices, and potentially assist in providing Aboriginal people in the southeast with ways of overcoming the devastating attempts at dismantling theirs and their Ancestors’ ways of life.
5. Resilience and Survival

Victorian, southeastern Australian art was unknown … even when we started off in the language areas they even laughed at us you know, they’d say ‘You haven’t got a language’. But it does show you that ignorance plays some horrible games with people. I mean, lots of things don’t die they just end up back on the back shelf so to speak, and unless somebody finds them and brings them back that’s where they’ll sit…

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004

By the twentieth century, Aboriginal art in the southeast was rarely considered ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art. Increasingly Aboriginal artists were relegated to the status of craftworkers, producers of kitsch second-rate objects and aligned with the tourist trade. To an increasingly academically trained body of White ‘experts’, especially those involved in collections found in ethnographic museums and fine art galleries, the works of William Barak and Tommy McRae signalled the last authentic Aboriginal artists in the southeast. This intervention by the dominant society in determining what was or was not ‘good’ or ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art, however, denied Aboriginal agency, which operated within the constraints of a colonialist hegemony. Across the State people continued to create works associated with the past, alongside those that embodied commentaries about place, despite many during this era being removed from their ‘traditional’ Country.

The popular view which considered that there were few remaining Aborigines in Victoria was bolstered by ‘scientific’ ideas concerning the ‘hybrid’ and their inevitable absorption into dominant society. No longer were southeast Aborigines considered authentic. This contrasted with the fascination White observers continued to hold regarding Aboriginal people. For many, Aboriginal culture in the southeast was sufficiently different to remain a spectacle. Thus, Aboriginal objects became collectable pieces of ‘craftwork’ and were purchased and displayed in domestic settings as evidence of this difference. This coincided with an increase in the popularity of tourism to places where displays of the perceived last vestiges of Aboriginal
culture could be found. Lake Tyers became a popular destination and later Aboriginal performers began to attract audience’s attention in the city, as they played out ‘traditional’ and contemporary versions of Aboriginality. Meanwhile, as attempts to assimilate the culture increased and Aboriginal artists were accused of creating only kitsch art and craftwork, others began to adopt the landscape style of painting in watercolours.

One artist was Ronald Bull from Lake Tyers, whose paintings seemingly reflected the influences of the White landscape artists who were his mentors. While to outsiders, Bull’s work was viewed as an example of the successes of assimilation, paradoxically, for Aboriginal people his paintings reveal an artistic talent with an affinity for telling stories that are Aboriginal, despite living a life largely confined to White institutions. As an artist, Ronald Bull poignantly reflects the way Aborigines in the southeast continued to assert their Aboriginality through their art.

ACTS OF DISCRIMINATION AND THE SURVIVAL OF CULTURE
The various Victorian Aborigines Acts of the late nineteenth century were driven by an imperative to ‘breed the colour out’ (Fink 1957: 101). This was to be achieved by restricting interaction between those of ‘mixed race’ and ‘full blood’ Aborigines and by removing people from their land and families. The aim was to absorb Aboriginal people into the wider population by erasing culture and identity. The legislation did not consider the social nature of Aboriginal culture or the degree to which people would resist the policies. Despite many people being removed from reserves, they frequently contrived ways of remaining close to family and Country, often finding work in the vicinity (Broome 2005: 190-195; Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Landon and Tonkin 1999). They found new ways to be different.

66 In 1889 the Framlingham reserve near Warrnambool was closed. Several families refused to leave and it continued as an unmanaged reserve. Those who remained and who were ‘eligible’ for rations, because they were ‘full bloods’, secretly supported family members who were considered ‘half castes’ and ineligible for BPA assistance. Others
This chapter will discuss how Aboriginal people contended with discriminatory government policies from 1900 to the referendum in 1967. Throughout this period Aboriginal people in the southeast sustained arts practices that were simultaneously Aboriginal and becoming ‘Australian’. As outlined in the previous chapter, the ‘new’ social processes that were deliberately embraced by Aboriginal society set the scene for multiple reinterpretations of identity and cultural practices during the twentieth century.

By 1900, southeast Australian Aboriginal people had undergone enormous social and cultural changes. Rarely were people living in defined ‘tribal’ groups. Indeed the invasion of Country by Europeans, their establishment of reserves and missions, and the intentional dismantling of visible Aboriginal customs, such as performance of corroborees and speaking language, contributed to a breaking down of Aboriginal knowledge and culture.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ‘culture’ developed as a concept to encapsulate the growing interest in the labelling and categorising of species; all the world’s societies came to be seen as having some form of culture. These were invariably pitted and assessed against European understandings of their own culture (Clifford 1988).

By the nineteenth century, culture also came to be associated with the ‘arts’. In this context art and culture were considered as the pinnacle of ‘a refined sensibility and expressive “genius”’ (Clifford 1988: 233). By the early twentieth century anthropological definitions gave culture more liberal meanings. These were developed in response to earlier openly racist classifications of human diversity and were considered ‘a sensitive means for understanding different and dispersed “whole ways of life”’ (Clifford 1988: 234). Such concepts of culture, however, maintained their underlying elitist connotations, where distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture persisted in relation to a set of values constructed by the West (Clifford 1988).

who had been excluded from Framlingham, camped in the adjoining forest to remain near their kin and Country (Birch 2001; Broome 2005; Critchett 1990).
Aboriginal culture inevitably changed as a result of colonisation. However, for many Aborigines today, like their ancestors, culture remains within a system that encapsulates a whole worldview, where all daily processes and their associated activities are related. Participants in this project attest to these notions:

In the old days before White people came, art wasn’t a separate thing. It was just our life …

We lived it, art was all aspects physical, mental, emotional, spiritual [these] were part of culture and enacted and lived.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

I mean there’s no word for art in our culture … So it’s more of our culture than art.

Treahna Hamm, October 2004

These statements reveal that art and culture are inseparable; that despite continuous transformations they remain Aboriginal. This contrasts with Western perspectives that continue to essentialise the notion of Aboriginality, so that Aborigines are frequently constructed as pre-modern. Aboriginal people were (and continue to be) burdened with a totalising concept of culture, which, as the cultural studies scholar Stephen Muecke declares, has ‘imposed unnecessary limits on being Aboriginal’ (Muecke 1992: 40).

These limits have, for most of the twentieth century, located Aboriginal art and culture in the southeast outside the context of Western art history, where art styles are viewed as developing and changing across time and space (see Schapiro 1953 [1998]). Within the construct of Western art history, Aboriginal innovations in art styles and arts practices were not seen as culturally authentic. For Westerners, ‘good’ non-Aboriginal art reflected progress, while ‘real’ Aboriginal art was ‘primitive’, stuck in the distant unchanging past, rather than viewed as a demonstration of different forms of cultural survival (see Clifford 1988).

For Aboriginal people in the southeast, the essentialising of Aboriginal culture by the West denied the devastating consequences of the discriminatory assimilation policies. These restricted peoples’ rights and
frequently punished people for practising their culture. Such impositions meant that while Aboriginal culture inevitably changed, they were commonly viewed as a cultureless ‘race’; there was little space to have their culture assessed on their own terms. Throughout most of the twentieth century, daily survival for Aborigines in the southeast was contingent on encounters with the dominant society. Cultural practices were developed, often subversively, in accordance with outside restrictions.

1900-1920s

‘Half Caste’ policies and silences in the source material
In 1901 the colonies became States and federated as the Commonwealth of Australia. The Australian constitution excluded Aboriginal people from the census, and the new States retained control over Aborigines (Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900).

In Victoria, the Aboriginal reserve system continued to be hampered by economic concerns. Some people were removed from reserves (because of closures or the colour of their skin); others left voluntarily in order to be relatively free of government restrictions. These actions increased the number of fringe camps outside townships (Broome 2003a; Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Landon and Tonkin 1999).

The limited sources concerning Victorian Aboriginal art in the first half of the twentieth century reflect the peripheral location of Aboriginal people and their culture within the discourse of Australian history. These silences remain an ‘effective technique for subjecting and suppressing the colonized’ (McNiven et al. 1998:53). According to the art historian Sylvia Kleinert, ‘gaps’ in the history of this era reflect government polices, aimed at ‘rendering Aborigines invisible’, as well as the demographic obscurity of Aboriginal people (Kleinert 2000c:78). These attitudes also extended to Aboriginal arts practices, where considerations of authenticity determined that only artwork made by ‘real’ Aborigines, such as Barak and McRae could be applauded. Their descendants, however, were written out of history, as they no longer reflected Western ideas of authentic Aboriginal culture (Morphy 1998).
Kleinert’s work is the most extensive contribution to the history of southeast Australian art during this period. She challenges misconceptions about the authenticity of Aboriginal art at this time and argues that a ‘cultural vacuum’ did not exist among Aborigines in the southeast (Kleinert 2000c:78). By critically developing Kleinert’s main argument, I will demonstrate that the ‘hidden history’ of Aborigines and their arts practices relies not only on cultural innovation, but on the multiple and complex approaches Aborigines took to reclaiming their contested identities.

‘Craft’ and ‘Art’ in the early 20th century
While Aboriginal people in the early decades of the twentieth century were being ‘written out of history’, their arts practices continued in new and different ways. Ethnographers and collectors rarely acquired Aboriginal ‘art’ from Victoria at this time. The European ‘art and craft’ movement, which gained increasing acceptance in Australia from the late nineteenth century, was influenced by the decorative skills and artistry of Oriental and Arabic design. This movement also inspired a consideration of work by Indigenous peoples from the European colonies of Africa and Oceania. However, only Indigenous craftwork designated ‘pure’ and associated with some imagined unchanging past was defined as ‘art’ (see Graburn 1999; Jones 1989).

In contrast, by the twentieth century, following the growth of tourism, Aboriginal crafts were designated as ‘handicrafts’ or ‘curios’, which assumed a lower status. Although tourists collected them for decorative purposes, they did not equate with the ‘decorative’ style promoted in Britain. Nor did they correspond with the growing interest in the ‘primitive’ arts of Africa, which was popularised from as early as 1905 when Pablo Picasso appropriated African styles in his work (Ashcroft et al. 2002; Clifford 1988; Shiner 1994; Torgovnick 1990). ‘Decorative’ and so-called ‘primitive’ styles gained favour from the 1920s among Euro-Australian modernists, who appropriated Aboriginal geometric and linear inspired designs in their art.

However, the fascination for ‘primitivism’ provided little consideration of the socio-political context in which Aboriginal arts practices in the southeast were developing. Arts practices shifted from their ‘traditional’ functions and
were increasingly modified for outsider consumption. While the availability and knowledge of new resources and consumer taste influenced the production and style of objects, Aboriginal agency in creating more innovative art was rarely considered (see Clifford 1988; Graburn 1999; Kleinert 1992b; Phillips 2002; Shiner 1994).

Aborigines in the southeast continued to be defined by discourses of ‘race’ and increasingly in evolutionary terms of ‘hybridity’ (see Phillips and Steiner 1999). Arts practices were further marginalised, misunderstood, and undermined. Works were seldom considered within a developmental context, as adapting in conjunction with changes in society. As the anthropologist Nelson Graburn writes:

[A]ll art traditions are temporally limited and yet exhibit internal change over time, and … nearly all cultural contexts, when examined in detail, exhibit some level of subcultural, regional, or national discontinuity and exchange (Graburn 1999: 344).

Southeast Australian Aboriginal arts practices were not considered authentic but hybridised, ultimately associated with kitsch craft and souvenirs. Kitsch artefacts were contentious areas of Aboriginal art. Objects such as poker worked boomerangs or carved emu eggs with contemporary (or stereotypical) images were criticised for lacking authenticity. However, the adaptation of art forms which embraced modernity, often made using modern equipment, would ultimately become associated with a modernist aesthetic. In the early to mid twentieth century these provided a tangible means for Aboriginal artists and craftworkers to develop their practices alongside an increasingly globalised art trade, where their artwork continued to be a marketable commodity.

Kitsch items were frequently constructed with a degree of skill reliant on Aboriginal knowledge of material culture and arts practices. While not all craft objects were kitsch, such as woven baskets which incorporated features reminiscent of ‘traditional’ styles, like the word ‘craft’, kitsch objects had an ambiguous status, reflecting the maker’s alterity, and also the acculturation of Aboriginal society in the southeast (Graburn 1999; Jones 1989; Jones 1992a). The production of objects for decorative and functional purposes continued to
be relevant to the Aboriginal community for their ‘economic, aesthetic and political’ contributions to the present, as well as their association with the past (Kleinert 2000c:88).

**Plate 5.1** Unknown. Basket/Wallhanging c.1900. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (00620)

![Image removed due to copyright.]

Adapted basket weaving. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Craftwork reflected knowledge of Country and embraced practices which had been associated with Aboriginal culture for generations. Craftwork contests the assumption that ‘authentic’ arts practice in the southeast had disappeared. As Philip Jones declares:

> Aborigines have, in common with indigenous peoples elsewhere, produced objects which coincide with outsiders’ versions of them. Yet these apparently nondescript tourist objects may simultaneously contain vital expressions of Aboriginal culture and art – even representing a new locus for displaced ‘authenticity’ (Jones 1992b: 62-63).

**Craftwork: Fringe camps and feather flowers**

Aboriginal people, especially those living in the fringe camps, adopted alternative strategies for survival. Many were exiled from reserves and received no rations from the Board. Living in the fringe camps allowed them to remain on Country where they retained a degree of autonomy and control over their lives.
Agnes Edwards (c. 1873-1928), a Wemba Wemba woman, with cultural connections to the Swan Hill area, lived at a fringe camp at ‘Speewa’ on the Murray River. Agnes and her husband Harry were classified as ‘full-bloods’, which entitled them to rations from the BPA. Following her husband’s death in 1912, Agnes supported herself by engaging in a process of exchange with the wider community, earning a living selling produce to Whites, such as fish, ducks, rabbits and rabbit skins, but also decorative and functional pieces of craft, such as rush baskets, small drawstring purses made from rat skin and feather lures. However, she is primarily recognised for her artistic skill as a feather flower maker (Kleinert 2000c; Penney 2005).67

Agnes Edwards’ ability to turn feathers, once associated with ceremonial practices, into commodities used for display purposes by Europeans, enabled a form of ‘aesthetic expression’, which was purely Aboriginal, to be incorporated into the non-Aboriginal world (Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 2000c; Penney 2005).

According to the ethnographic record of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, feathers had ‘traditionally’ been used in the design of ceremonial headdress, as feather aprons and as ritual dress (see Howitt 1904 [1996]: 679-80; Krefft 1862-1865; Robinson 1998b; Smyth 1878 [1972]; Worsnop 1897). Feathers were later sold to tourists in the form of feather skirts at Coranderrk (Massola 1971).

67 Examples of Agnes Edwards’ feather flowers can be found in the collections of Museum Victoria, and the Mildura Arts Centre.
Plate 5.2  Unknown. Feather apron of emu feathers, c.1869. Museum Victoria collection (X16251)

Location: Lower Richardson River, southwest Victoria.
Comments: ‘...made by Aboriginal women to be worn by the men when dancing corroboree. Reproduced in Sculthorpe et al. (1990: 99)

The construction of feather flowers seems to have spread from the Murray River regions throughout the southeast (Kleinert 1994). Such knowledge was accelerated by the 1915 Aborigines Act, which entitled the BPA to close most of the reserves and concentrate the Aboriginal population of Victoria at Lake Tyers in Gippsland (Birch 2001; Broome 2005; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997). By 1924 Lake Tyers was the only station where people could receive assistance (Broome 2005; Grimshaw et al. 2002; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997). By doing so, the BPA inadvertently encouraged the sharing of cultural knowledge and skills, including feather flower making.

Not everyone moved to Lake Tyers. At Coranderrk, for example, Elders refused to be forcibly removed. Others remained in fringe camps along the Murray, where the sale of craft items contributed to family income. The manufacture of domestic items was a creative response to acculturation, but was also implicated in the transformation of ‘culture’. Nellie Moore, a Wemba Wemba woman, whose grandmother, Mary Moore, had made feather flowers in the 1950s near Swan Hill, told Sylvia Kleinert in 1993 that the importance of such craftwork was an ‘industry thing’, as opposed to being an
'art thing' (Kleinert 1994:157-158). Thus, while it was functional and utilitarian, Moore also notes that it was a means of deploying an Aboriginal aesthetic at a time when ‘traditional’ cultural practices, including languages, were increasingly restricted.

**Plate 5.3** Letty Nicholls (Wemba Wemba). Feather flowers, 1992. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (00639)

Description: Stem of seven feather flowers, made in similar style to Agnes Edwards’. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Aboriginal women’s functional and utilitarian craftwork was assigned to the general view of craft as ‘low art’. Since the advent of ‘modern aesthetic discourse’ in the eighteenth century, craft was most commonly associated with the working classes, artisans, non-western cultures and women, groups who were perceived to lack the intelligence and ‘free thinking’ capable of producing art works of genius (Shiner 1994: 225). However, the introduction of feminist and postcolonial discourses in the 1970s provided ways of reclaiming ‘handicrafts’ as three-dimensional ‘art’ objects, which celebrated the creativity of artisans and women craftworkers, especially their contribution to cultural production (Kleinert 2000c; Mellor 2000; Phillips 2002; Rowley 1992).
Stigma and cultural production: Basket makers

While an aesthetic cultural production continued among Aboriginal people, as indicated by the making of feather flowers, the stigma associated with being Aboriginal also constrained cultural practices.

The story of Connie Hart (1918-1993), a renowned Gourndidjmara basket maker, from the Western District of Victoria illustrates this contradiction. As a youngster in the 1920s, she was prevented from watching her elders create baskets. Connie, however, observed their skills surreptitiously.

No one taught me to make my baskets. I used to watch my mother do it and when she put her basket down and went outside, I’d pick it up and do some stitches. When I heard her coming back, I would shove it away real quick and run away I was a great one for sitting amongst the old people because I knew I was learning something just by watching them. But if I asked a question they would say, ‘Run away, Connie. Go and play with the rest of the kids.’

They didn’t want us to learn. My mum told me we were coming into the white people’s way of living. So she wouldn’t teach us. That is why we lost a lot of culture. But I tricked her. I watched her and I watched those old people and I sneaked a stitch or two (Jackomos and Fowell 1991:74).

Connie’s mother, Frances Alberts, had grown up at Lake Condah under the mission manager, Reverend Stahle. He was adamant that all vestiges of Aboriginal culture should be removed and that they should become ‘civilised’.

Paradoxes, however, existed within the policies that sought to repress cultural practices. Stahle’s 1877 report to the BPA stated that their ‘old customs and superstitions have almost entirely vanished’, but also admitted that ‘the women have been employed during their leisure hours in making baskets, mats, etc for which they find a ready use’ (Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1877; Robson 1986). Stahle’s intention to remove the ‘old customs’ reveals his misunderstanding of cultural production. While it
appeared to the missionaries and other authorities that the ‘blacks’ were acquiring the ‘habits of industry’, Aboriginal people were adapting their techniques, such as those used in basket making, to maintain their knowledge of Country and culture.

Plate 5.4  Unknown. Basket, Lake Condah, c.1900. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (00894)

Frances Alberts was among those forcibly removed from Lake Condah in 1913 as a result of the ‘Half-Caste’ Acts (Robson 1986: 47). Her reluctance to pass on cultural practices was most likely influenced by her first-hand experiences of the policies of removing children and assimilating them within the wider community (Grimshaw et al. 2002; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997). However, the continuing practice of basket making indicates that Aboriginal people continued their culture in subversive ways.

Connie’s story of cultural transmission through her indirect learning of basket making reveals how Aboriginality is transformed across time and place. Craftwork, as a cultural process, is implicated in the complexities of resistance and survival. In the early twentieth century, choices for Aborigines were limited, as they were subjected to the assimilation policies. However, the circumstances in which material culture was created reveal the conscious choices people made to ensure that the most sustainable elements of culture would endure. The designs and uses of fibre craft, including baskets, may
have changed, yet the knowledge of the environment from which the grasses and reeds were accessed continued.

For example, Connie Hart told the curator Merryl Robson in 1986, that the baskets of the Gourndidjmara are made from the local Puung’ort grass (Robson 1986). Another fibre artist, Thelma Carter (1910-1995), a ‘traditional’ Gunai weaver from Gippsland (West 2000), also demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of Country, as she described the environmental destruction caused by land clearance and the effect this has had on the availability of the right species of grasses for basket-making (Jackomos and Fowell 1991).

**Plate 5.5** Connie Hart. Basket from Lake Condah, 1992. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (00875)

![Image removed due to copyright.](image)

Description: Flat circle basket with five pointed star in the centre.

Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust collection (00875)

The continuing production of craft illustrates active engagement in culture, which relies on knowledge of the environment and sustained links to the past (Kleinert 1994; Robson 1986). Conversely, the transformation of these practices, whether through restrictions on the direct transfer of skills or through loss of elements of cultural knowledge, reveals the detrimental impact
of colonisation on Aboriginal lives. The colonial constructs of Aborigines firmly embedded their culture in the past, but ignored the rapidly developing nature of Aboriginal society. Aboriginal art in the southeast (usually viewed as domestic craftwork, curios or tourist souvenirs) was frequently considered second-rate, relegated to the periphery of cultural and artistic practices.

The rendering of southeast Australian Aboriginal culture as inauthentic was supported through colonial institutions such as museums. As noted in the previous chapter, museums provided Europeans with a continuing authority to suppress and subjugate Aborigines, which justified their role as ‘the expert on the culture of the Other’ (Russell 2001: 11). This attitude was reflected in the National Museum of Victoria’s collection policy. From 1900 few examples of Victorian material were acquired. The museum remained a repository of ‘traditional’ ethnographic collections until the 1980s (Kleinert 2002; Sculthorpe et al. 1990).

Attitudes to ‘authenticity’ and ‘tradition’ are complex. Philip Jones argues that continuing commodification and exchange of artefacts renders hybrid objects no less authentic than ‘primitive’ ones. However, in the early twentieth century, museum collection protocols and ethnography rendered items such as Barak’s drawings or baskets and wooden artefacts, which were acquired through ‘exchange or commerce’, as ‘primitive’. Objects became ‘ethnographic commodities’ and therefore ‘authentic’. Once commodified, such items begin a trajectory based on the assumption that Aboriginal culture is different, one that ‘represents the “other”, marginal in space and, more importantly, in time’ (Jones 1992b: 60, 62).

Vicki Couzens, a Kirrae Wurrung artist, discussed her great-grandmother, Harriet Couzens-Wyslakie, a basket maker from Framlingham for this project. Harriet refused to leave Framlingham when it was officially

68 For further details on Harriet Couzens-Wyslakie, see (Grimshaw et al. 2002: 329).
closed. As previously noted, basket making was a significant source of income in the early years of the twentieth century.69

You know, my great-grandmother used to make baskets and sell them to make a living ... they were practical and the women loved them. I’ve got one that’s 100 years old and there’s nothing wrong with it. Not a thing, you could still use it and that wasn’t about doing southeast Australian Aboriginal art ... [it was about] maintaining skills.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

Vicki’s great-grandmother’s baskets were not considered Aboriginal ‘art’, but were utilitarian or decorative items for Europeans, and mechanisms for cultural and physical survival for Aborigines. However, Vicki’s acknowledgement that they continued cultural knowledge is evidence of their ‘authenticity’. The capacity for an object’s meanings to adapt and change is associated with its transmission across time and place. While early twentieth century baskets and feather flowers were not seen as ‘art’ initially, they required specific skills to construct. They were material culture, connecting the past with the present, rendering them examples today of ‘authentic’ arts practices (see Appadurai 1986a).

This connection between the past and the present is explicitly revealed through the experiences of Caine Muir, another project participant, who has cultural connections to the Swan Hill area. Like Vicki, craftwork is significant to Caine’s identity. Generations of women on his mother’s side, including his great-grandmother, grandmother (Letty Nicholls), mother and aunts made feather flowers and baskets. Today, many of their artefacts are held at Museum Victoria and the Koorie Heritage Trust (Caine Muir, interview September 2004). Caine’s family’s work shows that artwork endures, and can challenge colonial endeavours to prevent the continuation of cultural knowledge.

69 Between 1902 and 1910 the Annual Reports of the BPA consistently record women’s involvement in basket making to supplement income at Framlingham and Coranderrk.
Continuity of cultural knowledge

Oral histories also reveal Aboriginal reinterpretations of cultural knowledge. The late Aunty Iris Lovett-Gardiner, a Gourndidjmara woman, told the story of the missionaries at Lake Condah threatening people with punishments such as withholding rations if they did anything to contradict the authorities. The Elders:

… knew things and they talked about it to each other but we never knew. It would have been a dangerous thing for us to find out. They were trying to protect us. That's the main reason, I think, why they never passed anything down (Lovett-Gardiner 1997: 16-17).

Her Elders were discreet in passing on information, only alluding to 'traditional' practices and past atrocities in a convoluted fashion. The special nature of particular places was revealed through silences, rather than stories of actual massacres and sacred sites:

The culture wasn't passed on in secret. We were only told not to go to this place or that place but we weren't told why and we never asked because that's the way it was with us, we never questioned the Elders when they told us something (Lovett-Gardiner 1997: 17).

Similarly, Ray Thomas speaks about the loss of culture as a result of government control:

Mum is 85 years old … she remembers as a child the old people talking in language and … seeing the old people dance, corroboree. But her grandparents … used to hunt the kids away, they weren't allowed to see that sort of thing, 'cause that was the times … and the constraints that they lived under … with government and authorities … well that's part of the breaking down of culture … no language and not being able to practise dance and ceremonies, you lose a lot of it.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ray has been able to reclaim some arts practices through researching the ethnographies of Fison and Howitt.
These stories reveal cultural loss, but also resilience in maintaining practices. The generational transformation of culture, whether the result of dislocation, displacement, fear or innovation, does not indicate cultural demise. Given the overwhelming impact of colonisation, some losses and cultural transformations were inevitable, but they frequently resulted in cultural diversity and change.

Lee Darroch, a Yorta Yorta woman and another project participant, reinforces this notion. At a conference in 2004, she spoke about the continuation of cultural knowledge across the years, despite restrictive government policies leading to people, including her grandmother, being reluctant to practise culture overtly. Lee's grandmother was considered 'half-caste' and was taken away from her family. However, as Lee declares, despite these restrictions, people ‘didn’t lose culture, it was just hidden away for a time’ (Field Notes 23 October 2004). Vicki Couzens, speaking at the same conference, concurred revealing that ‘traditions are not lost but sleeping’ (Field Notes 22 October 2004).

The stories told by Connie Hart, Aunty Iris Lovett-Gardiner and more recently by participants in this project, provide evidence of the Board’s attempts, in the early 1900s, to stifle Aboriginal agency. Their stories, along with those of others involved in the production of material culture, reveal the tensions surrounding any consideration of Aboriginal identity. The controls applied to Aboriginal behaviour resulted in Aboriginal resistance, but also in suppression and loss of aspects of culture. Therefore, non-Aboriginal people generally viewed being ‘Aboriginal’ in southeast Australia in the early 1900s as neither authentic and ‘traditional’, nor European and ‘civilised’, but rather hybridised and ‘dying out’. Nevertheless, Aboriginal adaptations to cultural practices were constructed (whether consciously or not) in ways that contributed to an ongoing sense of ‘Aboriginality’.

70 This was the Regional Arts Conference, *Meeting Place*, Horsham, 21st-24th October 2004.
‘Primitivism’ and nationalism
As the century progressed, the ‘primitising’ of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art revealed more about White sentiments towards Aboriginal art, than about Aboriginal understandings of art and culture. The categorising of people according to their skin colour continued to highlight difference and ensured that the processes of assimilation decided who was or wasn’t eligible for inclusion as an Australian citizen, depending on how easily they could be blended into the broader community. Aboriginality was increasingly defined by anthropology, which by the beginning of the twentieth century was popularised as a ‘science’. As a discipline, it focussed on cultural essentialisms, such as the ‘authentic’ and the ‘traditional’, and drew on ethnographic methods to ensure that Europeans remained the experts on the Other, including what was or was not Aboriginal ‘art’ (Anderson 2003a).

In the early 1900s, anthropologists such as Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, influenced by popular evolutionism, were ‘discovering’ Aborigines, yet Aboriginal culture, especially in the southeast, was neglected and ‘written out’ of history (Burn and Stephen 1992: 260-1). As the cultural theorist, Marianna Torgovnick, notes, the most ‘aggressive’ ‘primitivisers’ of this era were the doyens of ‘high culture’, including artists, authors and ethnographers. In the 1920s, the ‘primitive’ continued to be aligned with tropes of child-like, mystical and backward ‘races’. Hence, the West was able to continue its ‘primitivist’ value judgements regarding the Other. These differences now existed within a modernist paradigm, where ‘primitive’ objects and designs were fetishised in ways that allowed them to be embraced and elevated alongside the concept of ‘art’ (Torgovnick 1990).

Before the 1920s, artists in Australia had infrequently referenced Aboriginal art, preferring to seek inspiration from the European avant-garde, including Cezanne, Matisse and later Picasso, whose works of abstract formalism were influenced by the ‘exotic’ arts of Africa and the Orient (Burn and Stephen 1992; Smith 1998). However, by the mid 1920s, a ‘politics of representation’ was reflected in the search for a nationalist discourse that revealed an Australian aesthetic. Non-Aboriginal artists became increasingly aware of and inspired by Aboriginal artists who incorporated ‘traditional’
designs on utilitarian objects. These so-called ‘primitivist’ designs inspired a style of art which gave Euro-Australians their ‘own distinctive idiom’ (Kleinert 2002: 5).

Modernist artists, craftspeople and arts educators, such as Margaret Preston, Frances Derham, Allan Lowe and Violet Mace, often working in the applied and decorative art field, appropriated Aboriginal designs in their artwork as part of a nationalist agenda (Isaacs 1999; Kleinert 2002; Smith 1998; Smith 2002). These artists’ endeavours were also encouraged by anthropologists, including A.P. Elkin and Norman Tindale, who were eager to develop anthropology as ‘a science of immediate practical value’; Aboriginal art was to be ‘a source of inspiration in Australian art’ (Burn and Stephen 1992: 261).

The interest in Aboriginal art also coincided with the formation of the Jindyworobaks, a literary movement, which advocated incorporating ‘Australianness’ into an otherwise European dominated culture. The Jindyworobaks and modernist artists alike sought visions of a landscape that was wild and untamed, at a time when Australia’s landscape was being cultivated and cleared for development. They adopted Aboriginal imagery, words and myths to evoke a pristine wilderness, and appropriated Aboriginal culture to instil a sense of Australian uniqueness, while Australian society was simultaneously neglecting and denying Aboriginal culture (Dally 1986; Elliott 1979).

The 1929 Exhibition and ‘primitivism’
Modernist Australian artists’ ‘discovery’ of Aboriginal art was also inspired by the 1929 Australian Aboriginal Art exhibition, *Primitive Art*, held at the Museum of Victoria. The items exhibited were mainly drawn from the Museum’s collection. Although this exhibition was the first to acknowledge the existence of Aboriginal art, it was constructed in terms of ‘primitivist’ discourse, and excluded contemporary forms of Aboriginal art, such as craftwork. It included items deemed pristine and ‘traditional’, such as work from the more remote areas of northern Australia. While, the items from the southeast reflected the ‘salvage paradigm’ of the previous century,
representing Aborigines in their pristine, precontact state (Griffiths 1996; Kleinert 2002). The cover of the catalogue for this exhibition was indicative of such an aesthetic. Painted by the non-Aboriginal portrait artist Percy Leason, it revealed a man painted in an ape like position, drawing a picture on bark torn from a tree (Morphy 1998).

Plate 5.6 Percy Leason. *Australian Aboriginal Art*, 1929, Melbourne

![Image removed due to copyright.]

Cover design for the exhibition catalogue. Reproduced in Morphy (1998: 372)

As previously mentioned, notions of ‘primitivism’, legitimated through popular evolutionism, led to the Museum of Victoria’s decision to cease its collection of southeast Aboriginal material culture by the 1920s (Kleinert 2002; Sculthorpe et al. 1990). This effectively excluded southeast Australian Aboriginal culture as ‘real’ from the minds of the public, and confirmed Baldwin Spencer’s 1898 assumption that: ‘In Victoria there is not a single native who really knows anything of tribal customs’ (Spencer et al. 1932).

The collection of anonymous artefacts continued the stereotyped image of the Aborigine as relatively unchanged since first contact. ‘Pure and authentic’ so-called ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’ art was positioned above the adapted and acculturated art of the contemporary southeast. The works of Barak and McRae were exhibited, but rather than being seen in terms of ‘evolution’, their works were viewed in art historical terms which confirmed that Aboriginal culture in the southeast was becoming ‘civilised’. Barak and
McRae were now relegated to ‘almost complete obscurity… marginalised by a growing concern with authenticity and tradition’ (Kleinert 2002: 17).

The 1929 exhibition, while emphasising the exotic over the ‘civilised’, began a tradition of locating Aboriginal art within the colonial paradigm of nationalistic pretension. The great irony of this situation, as Ian McLean suggests, was that a:

… colony which had brought its Aboriginal population to the brink of extinction now began to lionise Aboriginal culture as an emblem of nationhood … for the Aboriginalisation of Australian identity was a type of appropriation which paralleled in its aims and methods the assimilation policy of the Australian government (McLean 1998b:82).

CONTINUING ACTS OF DISCRIMINATION: 1930s-1940s

Tourist Art
The marginalisation of Aboriginal art in the southeast emphasised by the 1929 exhibition can be related to discriminatory policies, which rendered Aboriginal people silent and invisible. However, Aboriginal agency, including the production of art, continued to resist colonial stereotypes of Aborigines as ‘half-caste’ and ‘cultureless’. One of the most influential and enduring methods of Aboriginal agency was tourist art. As Uncle Sandy Atkinson, explains:

Lots of times they did [art] for tourists, but lots of times they did it for themselves … this was like a way of life … They weren’t out on the road with a stall waiting for tourists to come along.

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004

Tourism at Lake Tyers
During the 1930s, moves towards assimilation threatened to further disenfranchise Aboriginal communities. Increasing numbers led to the Commonwealth Government seeking solutions to the ‘half-caste problem’. The Government’s primary intention was to ensure that Aborigines would ‘assimilate and adapt’ into the mainstream (Attwood 2003: 101). Although the word ‘assimilation’ was not officially used in policy until the enactment in
Victoria of the 1957 Aborigines Act, the effects of assimilation had resonated since at least the introduction of the 1889 ‘half-caste’ Act. Increasingly, the results of assimilation were felt in the deteriorating administration and conditions of reserves from the 1930s (Broome 2005: 312-318). Lake Tyers became a ‘hothouse’ of tension; people often fought amongst themselves, or retaliated and protested against management (Broome 2005: 226; Pepper and De Araugo 1985). The Cummeragunja reserve, in NSW near Echuca, also became a site for protest against the poor conditions people were forced to endure (Attwood 2003; Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Jackomos 1972). These campaigns arose from Aboriginal imperatives to be recognised as citizens and to advocate for their rights as Aboriginal people.

In a similar way to Coranderrk, in the nineteenth century, the production of art for tourists became a focus for people at Lake Tyers, as more people relocated there from other areas of the State from the 1920s (Attwood 1989; Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Landon and Tonkin 1999; Pepper and De Araugo 1989). By the 1930s, the Lake Tyers residents had acquired a reputation for the production of artefacts and performances that reflected a southeast Australian Indigenous aesthetic. Tourism became a way for the community to resist the oppressive policies of the BPA and provided a means of participating in a market economy, giving people some degree of autonomy (Kleinert 1994).

The tourist industry contributed to attitudes which assumed that Aboriginal people were acquiring ‘White ways’, but enabled those at Lake Tyers to exploit their Aboriginality, although many felt resentful of ‘being on show’ (Landon and Tonkin 1999: 181). The production of tourist art, originally seen as a ‘commodification of culture – a sign of colonial domination and capitulation to capitalism’ – has more recently been articulated as a ‘form of cultural production expressive of a new social context’ (Kleinert 1994: 105). Aboriginal culture in the southeast, while viewed as corrupted, had adapted

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71 The Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference held in 1937 led to policies designed to assimilate the ‘mixed-blood’ population into the wider community. For further details see (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997:32)
within the constraints of the dominant society. Tourists collected these pieces to be reminded of a time prior to invasion; Aborigines symbolised the last vestiges of the 'exotic' and 'primitive'. Tourists also unconsciously helped preserve Aboriginal culture through their collection and display of kitsch and souvenir art, and in doing so 'shaped and reshaped Aboriginal art and artefact markets' (Jones 1992b: 71).

The production of art for tourists reinforced connections to Aboriginal identity and culture, preserving skills and knowledge of arts practices and designs. Conscious decisions to display their culture’s capacity for change were exemplified in the production of baskets, boomerangs and other wooden implements such as spears, parrying shields and clubs, which had originally been used as 'hunter-gatherer' weapons. Their production for tourists reveals the binaries of art production; some incorporated patterns associated with 'traditional' designs rendered in 'new' ways, while others were manufactured using contemporary techniques, such as the use of saws, planes and metal technology (Kleinert 1994; Robson and Cooper 1987). These artefacts were unique examples of Aboriginality, sometimes produced collaboratively, sustaining links with Aboriginal cultural heritage and also challenging modern Western notions of 'authenticity', as they were not the product of a single individual, or an expression of the maker’s 'originality' (Appadurai 1986a; Baudrillard 1988). These 'new' artefacts challenged the 'primitivist' discourses that were popular at the time; they also facilitated cross-cultural exchanges with a public who remained intrigued enough by Aboriginal 'difference' to visit and purchase goods representative of a 'dying race' (Kleinert 1994).

**Boomerangs and authenticity**

Aboriginal people at Lake Tyers were aware of the capacity for boomerangs to attract tourists. The boomerang's dual purposes as a weapon (which could be demonstrated in performances at the station) and as a decorative item, highlighted Aboriginal awareness of the need to modify cultural production to meet market demand, even though once purchased boomerangs were frequently relegated to 'curio status' (Kleinert 1994: 120).
The decorative elements of boomerangs had developed from abstract geometric or linear designs, which denoted clan and regional differences, to incorporate more figurative elements (Kleinert 1994), which included contemporary interpretations, such as pictures of the Sydney Harbour Bridge or the Australian coat of arms, as well as traditional designs, or both (Kleinert 1994). They were ridiculed by European ‘experts’ such as Percy Leason, who painted the last remaining ‘full bloods’ of Lake Tyers in 1934, as examples of the inauthentic work of ‘half-castes’ (Leason 1934: 5).

Plate 5.7 Unknown. Boomerang, Lake Tyers 1939. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (01262)

Description: Two birds with inscription ‘Good Luck from Lake Tyers 1939’. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Image removed due to copyright.

By combining the ‘primitive’ with contemporary arts practices, Aborigines were providing tools for outsiders to mediate their culture. They were influenced by tourists in the development and transformation of boomerangs, just as tourists felt they were experiencing a ‘cultural practice’ (Jones 1992b: 71).
Plate 5.8  Thomas Foster (Gunai). Boomerang, Lake Tyers
c.1930s. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (02160)

Description: Australian coat of arms with emu and kangaroo. Inscription reads: 'From Australia Lake Tyers'. On reverse side states: 'From Thomas Foster or Jerom (sic) Thomas Foster, Last of the Yarra Yarra'. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

By adapting their work for tourist art, Aborigines contested the policies and practices associated with assimilation. When the Museum of Victoria abandoned collecting southeast Australian artefacts in the 1920s, marked by the exhibition of 1929, it effectively declared that there was no such thing as Aboriginal culture, and therefore no Aboriginal art in Victoria. The BPA and the managers of the Lake Tyers reserve disapproved of the interaction between tourists and Aborigines, believing that the tourism trade undermined their attempts to promote a productive protestant work ethic, and disrupted the absorption of the Aboriginal populace into the wider community (Kleinert 1994).

While the boomerang had been an important symbol of national identity since the late nineteenth century, by the 1930s boomerangs had also assumed a symbolic status as a metaphor for the universalism of Aborigines (Jones 1992b). For example, Hartley's Sports Store in Melbourne, in 1934 requested a commission of boomerangs from the manager at Lake Tyers. The store was endeavouring to meet popular demand for boomerangs as the celebrations for the Centenary of settlement in Victoria approached. A letter written by Hartley's management reveals that boomerangs were also in demand in England and by overseas visitors (Public Record Office Victoria
and Australian Archives 1997). Hartley’s were adamant that they wanted the ‘real thing’ and that the Aborigines at Lake Tyers could provide it.

The manager of Lake Tyers, Major Ronald Glen, denied the request, condemning the enterprise from the beginning, and asserting that the Aborigines were incapable of making boomerangs of an adequate quality in the designated time. They were, he stated, intent on gambling all their money away, before beginning any new project. Glen’s comments ‘doomed the project’, as he suggested that: ‘it is possible that more satisfactory arrangements could be made with natives in other States, where the aborigine is not so well catered for’ (Public Record Office Victoria and Australian Archives 1997: 166).

Glen’s comments highlight a number of binaries. The modernist imperative for a national symbol, embedded in notions of the ‘authentic’ and the ‘primitive’, was positioned against the evolutionary paradigm, under which, in order to ‘civilise’ the ‘natives’, it was necessary to provide them with tools appropriate for Western behaviour, while simultaneously denying their capacity to participate in modernity. Such restrictions reveal the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the BPA’s endeavours to control the Aborigines at Lake Tyers, and to equip them with skills which it considered to be more practical for everyday survival, such as ‘saluting the flag’, ‘bathing once a week’ and ‘physical drill’ (Public Record Office Victoria and Australian Archives 1997:165-166).

Managers, prior to and including Glen, were disgruntled with the opportunities that tourism brought to the community, as they took Aboriginal people away from their work on the station and compromised the authority of the BPA. The station managers were also aware of the potential for resistance, as Aborigines interacted with outsiders in ways which contributed to their economic independence and exposed them to opinions other than those expressed by the Board (Kleinert 1994).

The managers believed that the sympathy of some tourists with the plight of the Aborigines promoted dissatisfaction amongst the Lake Tyers inhabitants, while the money they received from tourism saw many refuse to
do work prescribed by the Board (Kleinert 1994). Hence, tourism at Lake Tyers reveals a systematic response to the dominant culture's attempts at assimilation. The work produced for tourism mimicked the dominant culture's styles of representation, while simultaneously providing a means of exploiting the Board's attempts to erase Aboriginality, by continuing 'traditional' arts practices in new ways. In doing so Aboriginal people consciously contradicted the perceptions of the day, as articulated by Professor Wood Jones, professor of anatomy at the University of Melbourne, following a trip he made to Lake Tyers in 1934:

At the present time the whole of the native culture of Victoria is practically obsolete. One man still retains a memory of the craftsmanship of making the Victorian bark canoe; but, beyond this, the remaining natives are too "civilized" to have any knowledge of their useful arts. Basket work, but not of true aboriginal design, is practised by some, and many are able to make faked boomerangs, ornamented with designs of Sydney Harbour bridge, in poker work, for sale to tourists. It is greatly to be regretted that all their crafts have been neglected, and that the younger people on the station know nothing of their racial material culture (Wood-Jones 1934:140).

Although Wood-Jones laments the loss of 'traditional' knowledge, his comments fail to see connections between transformations in arts practices and cultural resilience. His remarks, while primarily about loss, also reveal that the production of material culture by people at Lake Tyers was bounded by the constraints they lived under. Wood-Jones, like many academics and anthropologists, bemoaned moves by Aborigines towards a modernist aesthetic, preferring practices to remain in their pre-contact state (see Megaw and Megaw 1992). However, in a cross-cultural context, as the cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai argues, it is in the transformation of the objects for commodity exchange that their meanings and value become decentred (see Appadurai 1986a; Appadurai 2006).

By the 1930s Aborigines in Victoria were not constructing work that conformed to a 'primitivist' aesthetic. For Aborigines at Lake Tyers, the conceptualisation of an object reflected the social and historical contexts in which it was to be exchanged (see Appadurai 1986a). In this process the
meanings, value and aesthetics of the objects also changed. Objects, from places like Lake Tyers were constructed as commodities and were relevant in any number of ways to Aboriginal society; as assertions of agency, as well as for their economic and cultural signifi cance. However, once acquired by outsiders such objects were treated as kitsch and reflected ‘racist’ notions.

The ‘half-caste’ problem and eugenics
During the 1930s, the Aboriginal population at Lake Tyers faced extreme social problems; many people living away from reserves were unable to find work as a result of the depression. This, along with the influx of people from the various missions and fringe camps around the State, saw numbers increase and a corresponding deterioration in living conditions. The removal of children and the banishment of people from the reserve at the manager’s discretion, or because they were considered too white, compounded discontent among the residents (Broome 2005; Bunj Consultants et al. 2002).

Sydney McRae
Sydney McRae, grandson of Tommy McRae, was the son of Alex McRae, who had been taken from his parents under the ‘half-caste’ policies of the 1890s. According to Kleinert, Sydney grew up at Lake Tyers and, like his grandfather, displayed artistic talent.

Although it is unlikely that any of Sydney McRae’s artworks are extant, it is possible to formulate an idea of his pictures, as the journalist and art critic E.H. Cox wrote an article in 1929 describing his work. Cox was dismissive of the way McRae depicted the modern world (Kleinert 1994). He revered the ‘traditional’ as the ultimate form of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal artistic expression:

Instead of drawing a corroboree … [McRae] 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 (Cox, E.H. ‘An Aboriginal Artist: Inherited Genius at Lake Tyers,’ The Argus Camera Supplement, 8 June, 1929:4 quoted in Kleinert 1994:62).
Such views ignored the policies of concentration and absorption, which saw people living in deplorable conditions, as well as Aboriginal experiences of modernity. McRae’s drawings of sportsmen also reflected the prominence of sport among Lake Tyers residents. For people who were often ostracised within the wider community, their participation in sport (like their tourist art) was a relatively successful means of displaying Aboriginal skills to outsiders (Broome 2005; Pepper and De Araugo 1985).

Sydney McRae was also among the young men of Lake Tyers who retaliated against the Board’s policies and management of the reserve. Convicted of ‘housebreaking and criminal assault’ in 1931, and later in 1934 for breaking into a store, Sydney McRae was eventually incarcerated at Pentridge Prison (Kleinert 1994).72 Sydney was the son of a ‘stolen child’ and grew up amid the social traumas at Lake Tyers. He lived under conflicting policies, which attempted to confine Aborigines in one place and remove them from their homelands and extended kin, yet at the same time assimilate them into the wider community. Sydney McRae’s situation was affected by the deteriorating conditions on the reserves, and aggravated by a series of bad managers and the discriminatory policies of the BPA. However, what is known of his art, expresses his perception of the ‘modern world’. It did not dwell on the hardships of the colonial encounter, revealing instead the dynamism of Aboriginal culture and its ability to endure in complex and adaptive ways (Kleinert 2002). His art embraced the hybrid in ways that were sympathetic to the general public’s perception of Aborigines as acculturated. However, such perceptions emphasised the ambivalent nature of colonial attitudes; Aborigines continued to be perceived in contradictory terms, considered ‘virtually extinct’, yet also becoming ‘civilised’ (Attwood 2003: 101).

These constructions of Aboriginality underline the problems associated with the policies of assimilation, where Aboriginal culture was continuously defined by non-Aborigines, including anthropologists, academics and

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72 Letters revealing the severe penalties at Lake Tyers for misdemeanours, including canings and expulsions from the reserve, are published in (Public Record Office Victoria and Australian Archives 1997: 108-112).
politicians. Such constructions were exemplified by Professor Wood-Jones’ expedition to Lake Tyers with the anthropologist Donald Thomson in 1934. The objective of this trip was to take measurements and photographs of the ‘remaining full-blood Victorian Aborigines’ for biological and anthropological purposes. This expedition also included the artist Percy Leason, who made portraits of the ‘remaining full-bloods’, which were subsequently exhibited under the title *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*. The expedition was influenced by a salvage paradigm where evolutionism, supported by the theories of social Darwinism, informed the practice of anthropology (Kleinert 1994).73

These attitudes were also responsible for supporting the eugenics movement, a system of racial theories, which relied on a combination of hereditary, physiological and environmental influences to make sense of the development of humans (Anderson 2005; Peterson 1990). The growing interest in eugenics from the 1930s further defined and categorised the Aboriginal population in ways which compounded the already discriminatory practices implicit in the ‘half-caste’ and assimilation policies (Anderson 2005; Thomas 2004).

**Labelling and Categorising: The Cummeragunja children’s drawings**

By the late 1930s concerns about the ‘problem’ of miscegenation and the absorption of those of ‘mixed blood’ into the wider population had increased. It was estimated that throughout the country the ‘half-caste’ population had risen to 23,000 by 1936, compared to 9,000 in 1911. The first Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference, held in Canberra in 1937, recommended that:

[T]he destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth,

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73 For primary source evidence of this expedition, see Melbourne University Archives/Accession no. 93/168. This includes material collected by Professor Wood-Jones of the University’s Department of Anatomy, such as notes on Aboriginal culture, as well as photographs and diagrams of twenty-four Aboriginal men and five women from Lake Tyers with their names and ages.
and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997:32).

These problems drew the attention of the anthropologist Norman Tindale, of the University of Adelaide, to study the ‘scientific aspects’ of the ‘half-caste problem’. In 1938-1939, Tindale embarked on a nationwide survey with the American anthropologist Joseph Birdsell. The *Harvard and Adelaide Universities Anthropological Expedition* aimed to measure the degree of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry in Aboriginal communities throughout the country. Anthropometric, ethnological and genealogical information was gathered about the Aboriginal population to assist the government in absorbing ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal people into the white population (Anderson 2005).74

In May and June of 1938, at the height of multiple problems occurring at the Cummeragunja reserve on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, Tindale, Birdsell and their wives arrived to begin their study of ‘half castes’.75 Tindale gathered genealogical information and local knowledge, took photographs of the residents, and performed a series of intelligence tests on the children (Anderson 2005; Tindale 1938a). The children were then given the opportunity to participate in ‘free drawing’. Tindale’s journal records the circumstances in which these drawings were made:

> We furnished each child with four crayons, red black white and yellow; nearly everyone asked for green and we were assisted in supplying them by Mr Austin. The results were of much interest because of the fact that while boys are taught drawing as part of the schooling, girls once they leave the kindergarten are not given any opportunity to

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75 The enactment of the NSW *Aborigines Protection Act 1909*, which was influenced by the Victorian *Aborigines Act 1886*, meant that many people left the Cummeragunja reserve to avoid the new restrictions and the forcible removal of their children as a result of the ‘half-caste’ policy (Broome 2005). Cummeragunja is located across the Murray from the Victorian township of Barmah. From 1915 onwards people left Cummeragunja and established humpies on the outskirts of Barmah and other townships in the area (Attwood 2003; Barwick 1972).
make drawings in school. Half an hour was allowed for the drawing and extra time allowed for those who wished to continue, most of the children worked till the last moment and a dozen continued working for from 10 to 25 minutes longer to finish designs they had commenced (Tindale 1938a: 110-111).

Like Sydney McRae’s work, these drawings display an emerging art style that reveals the colonial imperative to assimilate the Aboriginal population into the White.

The pictures include colourful images of birds, flowers, houses, ships and aeroplanes, and also the ‘genetic constitutions’ of the children, recorded at the top of each drawing (Plates 5.9, 5.10). This indicates how Tindale and his wife Dorothy collected their data. While the subject of the drawings appear to be similar to Sydney McRae’s, representing the everyday, as well as images from newspapers and books, from an anthropological perspective the collection provided evidence of the assimilation of children. Although the children were graded according to their ‘genetic make-up’ in order to discern their ‘degree’ of Aboriginality, for Tindale, success in absorbing children into a Western education system was evidenced through the children’s natural preference to ‘mimic’ Western art styles. This supported his data concerning their ‘genetic constitution’, showing that the ‘half-caste’ was capable of becoming white and therefore of absorption into the general population (Anderson 2005; Tindale 1938a; Tindale 1938b).
Plate 5.9  Maude Nelson, Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve 1938. Original in South Australian Museum (AA 338/1/15/1, Series 338/01)

Image removed due to copyright.

Children's drawing collected by Norman Tindale 1938. Copies reproduced courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Plate 5.10  Mick Morgan, Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve 1938. Originals in South Australia Museum (AA 338/1/15/1, Series 338/01)

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Children's drawing collected by Norman Tindale 1938. Copies reproduced courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

From Tindale’s anthropological perspective, these drawings revealed that assimilation and the absorption of the Aboriginal ‘race’ into the wider population was inevitable. However, the drawings also show the representational skills of the Aboriginal children. In the 1930s and 1940s Aboriginal children’s art became something of a preoccupation around the
country among European artists, teachers and anthropologists, in their endeavours to assimilate children. While many of these child artists mimicked European images, or images for the tourist trade, they were later recognised for their ability to transfer their knowledge of landscape, flora and fauna into an aesthetic representation of Aboriginal understandings of country. These artists included Nyoongar artists from the Carrolup School in southwest Western Australia, such as Revel Cooper, and Arrente children from ‘The Hermansburg (Namitjira) School’ in Central Australia, such as Ruben Pareroultja (Durack and Rutter 1952; Hardy et al. 1992; McLean 2003).

At the time of Tindale’s expedition, the people of Cummeragunja were fighting to maintain their community, which, like Lake Tyers, faced gross mismanagement, policies designed to take children away, and serious health issues (Goodall 1996; Jackomos and Fowell 1991). From the 1920s the Aboriginal activist William Cooper, a former resident of Cummeragunja, had campaigned for the rights of Aborigines, both on and off reserves, throughout the country (Attwood 2003; Attwood and Markus 2004; Barwick 1985). In February 1939 the situation had deteriorated to such an extent at Cummeragunja that campaigners associated with Cooper’s Australian Aborigines League (AAL), organised a walk-off (Aboriginal Community Elders Service and Harvey 2003; Attwood 2003; Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Jackomos 1972). Between 200 and 300 residents left; many moved to fringe camps across the Murray at Barmah and Mooroopna. Aboriginal people managed to survive at these camps, obtaining itinerant work, often in the local fruit-picking industry (Aboriginal Community Elders Service and Harvey 2003; Jackomos and Fowell 1991).

While academics and politicians sought to classify and control Aboriginal people in order to eliminate the ‘full blood’ and assimilate the ‘half-caste’, Aboriginal people continued to define themselves through kinship and their Aboriginality. This is so clearly and passionately articulated in a letter William Cooper wrote to a newspaper only a few years before the Harvard-Adelaide Expedition, that it is worth quoting at length:

My League very definitely appeals for a fair deal for the whole race, full blood or coloured. We definitely protest against discrimination in
favour of any one section. Might I submit our claim in brief? The full-blood is the descendent of the race that has peopled this continent for many hundreds of years. The coming of the white race and the passing of the sovereignty should not have affected the title to his share of the soil, and his coming, by conquest, under British rule, should have brought him British citizenship with all the rights and privileges thereof. The attitude that only by virtue of some white blood can a native claim some consideration is definitely wrong. The aboriginal has a right to the best. The half-caste or preferably the coloured native, is descendant also of the aboriginal, and heir to all that such descent involves. He is also son of the white man and I submit, heir to all that involves.

The supposed superiority of the half-caste is not admitted, and in fact, all thought of breeding the half-caste white, and the desire that that be accomplished, is a creature of the white mind. The coloured person has no feeling of repugnance toward the full blood, and in fact, he feels more in common with the full blood than with the white.

We dark folk have no regrets that we are coloured, nor do we admit any fundamental superiority in being white. We are proud of our race. We know that a dark person, full blood or half-caste, can do anything he is shown how, and can do it as well as a white man. Our plea and aim is that the whole dark race be lifted to full modern culture, and be granted full equality in every way with the white race (Letter from William Cooper to the Editor, *Ladder*, 5 November 1936 quoted in Attwood and Markus 2004: 58).

**ADAPTATION AND CHANGE: MOVE TO THE CITIES AND FRINGE CAMPS**

From the 1930s, following the ‘official’ closure of most reserves in Victoria between 1889 and 1924, there was a steady rise in the number of Aborigines living away from reserves in cities, towns and fringe camps. Many resided in fringe camps such as those near Swan Hill, Barmah and Mooroopna on the Murray and Goulburn Rivers, or in Gippsland around Orbost, Newmerella Hill and Jackson’s Track (Barwick 1964; Broome 2005; Landon and Tonkin 1999).
Others chose to move to urban locations, where arts practices once again adapted to take account of new living requirements and lifestyles.

At the time of the Second World War, government regulations to enforce assimilation were placed on hold as the country focussed on the war effort. Restrictions on Aboriginal people were reduced, as they were required for the workforce and for the war itself. Wartime saw a decline in overt racist attitudes as many Aboriginal men served in the Australian army, while others became involved in the war effort. Aboriginal people worked alongside Whites in munitions factories in cities, while others worked in provincial centres as demand for their services increased, due to an influx of army personnel from around the world (Broome 2003a; Broome 2005; Kleinert 1994).

While the Second World War provided a degree of economic and social freedom, most Aboriginal people still endured low standards of living and prejudice. This was evident in both the fringe camps and the city slums. People moved to the cities to access relatively better employment opportunities, where they supported political action to improve the situation of Aboriginal people throughout the country (Attwood 2003; Broome 2005; Bunj Consultants et al. 2002; Goulding and Menis 2006).

In Victoria, these political activities were often based around the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, which in the 1940s had the largest Aboriginal community in Victoria. The large number of Aborigines living in that area allowed them to maintain cultural and kin connections, despite being disassociated from their regional communities (Broome 2005).

In the 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1960s, people from country areas visited and stayed with relatives for short periods of time in order to find work (Clarke and Chance 2003; Lowe 2002). These visits also reinforced artistic practices in the city; for example, Richard Broome recalls an old Gunai man who made boomerangs from wood he brought from Gippsland, and sold them in Fitzroy and at the Victoria Market (Broome 2005).

Similar events occurred across the State as boomerang makers and basket weavers continued to make and sell their artistic wares to tourists. For
instance, the Mullett family, who had established a fringe camp at Jackson’s Track in Gippsland, sold their baskets and boomerangs to tourists visiting the district (Landon and Tonkin 1999). Emu egg carving also became symbolic of Aboriginal artistry, as European consumers acquired them as decorative items. In the 1940s emu eggs reflected an Aboriginal aesthetic which revealed the transformation of culture in response to the various manifestations of colonisation. Within ‘the uneven power relations of colonialism’, emu eggs are examples of Aboriginal attempts to adapt iconic elements of their culture when threatened by the processes of discrimination and assimilation (Kleinert 1994: 192-193).

Emu Egg Carving
Uncle Sandy Atkinson was born at the Cummeragunja reserve in 1932. In a recent interview, he discussed the significance of emu egg carving as a transformative arts practice, connecting the past with the present, and revealing the connectedness between Aboriginal art and culture:

   Even on a mission [Cummeragunja] where I was born and raised there may not have been this great thing of art, but there were people always making boomerangs and burning in those days with a piece of wire in the hot coals and also carving emu eggs. And emu egg carving is a very recent sort of art. If you went back three hundred years you wouldn’t have found an emu egg being carved because there wouldn’t have been an implement or instrument that would have been good enough to carve an emu egg with. I mean if you’ve got an emu egg the first thing you want to do is break it open and eat it

       Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004

   Thus, emu egg carving was a skill, like boomerang making, that developed with advances in technology. Initially viewed as kitsch and mere craftwork, emu eggs fell outside the ‘primitivist’ paradigm. However, the practice of carving eggs is an authentic Aboriginal arts practice which challenges Western ideas about authentic Aboriginal art.

   Despite being ‘collectables’ for Europeans, like boomerangs and baskets made for the tourist market, carved eggs can be seen as objects, which, as the art historian Julia Kelly argues, allow the Other to ‘intersect with
colonial power structures'; they embody ‘technological processes’, becoming bearers of ‘agency’ (Kelly 2007: 6-7; also see Gell 1998). Thus, as referred to by the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas, these ‘entangled objects’, when exchanged between cultures, become something other than they were initially intended to be (Thomas 1991). These objects ‘occupy positions in the networks of human social agency that are almost equivalent to the positions of humans themselves’ (Pinney and Thomas 2001: 5).

Joe Walsh’s carved eggs are examples of this ‘agency’. During World War Two, Walsh, a Wiradjuri man and semi-permanent resident of the Barmah Forest fringe camp, carved eggs to supplement his income. The sale of eggs assisted him and his family to remain on Country. His egg designs included everyday events, such as Aborigines fishing from a canoe, as well as ‘exquisitely carved’ animals; koalas, birds and possums. He also depicted more recent practices of Aboriginal people fishing from motor boats, with guns and a dog (Kleinert 1994: 197-198). These egg carvings remain valuable records which express narratives specific to Aboriginal identity.

Joe Walsh passed his skills on to his contemporary Sam Kirby, another Wiradjuri man, who like Walsh became a respected carver of designs that reflected contemporary Australian life from an Aboriginal perspective. Both also created other artefacts, boomerangs being the most prominent (Kleinert 1994).

The legacy of Walsh and Kirby has endured. Their skills have survived and continue to be practised among their descendants today. Hilton Walsh, Joe Walsh’s son, also carved eggs, which display similar themes and styles to his father, from whom he acquired the skill by watching. Like Connie Hart, Hilton was also aware that ‘Aborigines are quick to learn by watching’ (Jackomos and Fowell 1991:78-80). Sam Kirby’s daughter, Esther Kirby from Swan Hill, also continues the process today. She learned the techniques by watching her father, and is acknowledged as a prominent carver. Her eggs have been collected by art galleries, Museum Victoria and the Koorie Heritage Trust. She continues to tell the stories of her people and to carve distinct
Aboriginal imagery, including Aboriginal mythology, figures and landscapes (Mildura Arts Centre 2002; Museum of Victoria 1992).76

**Plate 5.11** Esther Kirby (Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta). Emu egg, woman with dilly bag, 1988. Koorie Heritage Trust collection (01603)

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Image removed due to copyright.

Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

Emu egg carving continued the approach of reinterpreting and remaking cultural practices as a means of representing Aboriginality across time and place. Not only were skills passed on between friends and to descendants, but the process of acquiring the skills through watching, rather than direct teaching, indicates the durability of arts practices in continuing culture in new and varied ways. The manufacture of craftwork with connections to the past, in a contemporary context, highlights the tensions which surround the continuation of artistic practices among a community disrupted by colonialism. The capacity for craftwork to become a marketable

76 In a recent interview the Yorta Yorta man Wally Cooper provides an account of emu egg carving and also acknowledges the legacy of learning to carve eggs by watching his Elder, Uncle Same Kirby. His story can be found at the Culture Victoria website, [http://www.cv.vic.gov.au](http://www.cv.vic.gov.au), accessed 17 October 2007.
commodity, facilitating cross-cultural exchange with the dominant culture, demonstrates the ability of Aboriginal artists to communicate with an audience who are often ignorant of Aboriginality (Kleinert 1994). Carved emu eggs display the artistic skill of Aboriginal people who chose to remain on Country and create ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art within the dominant culture. The duality of these objects challenges the hierarchies of colonial power, which historically divided craft from art and denied and obscured the presence of Aboriginal people in the southeast for most of the twentieth century (see Kleinert 1992a).

‘URBAN’ ABORIGINES: REVITALISING CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Following the campaign led by William Cooper for full citizenship rights, and the Cummeragunja walk-off, a ‘conscious strategic shift’ occurred among Aborigines in Victoria, in line with other campaigns for equal rights throughout the country during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (McLean 1998b). These new strategies articulated a continuing Aboriginal presence in a society with increasingly assimilationist agendas.

In the late 1940s, as activism within the Aboriginal Community gained momentum, the necessity to promote southeast Australian Aboriginal culture also became important if equality was to be achieved. Following the Second World War, returned service men and other Aboriginal workers, who had been received favourably overseas and at home, found that they were again relegated to the ranks of second-class humans (Kleinert 1994).

Performances: Aborigines as spectacle

In April 1949 the Australian Aborigines’ League (AAL) performed *Corroboree Season 1949*, at Wirth’s Olympia in Melbourne (Broome and Manning 2006:119), followed by *An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark* in 1951. In 1954 Bill Onus offered the name ‘Moomba’ for Melbourne’s newly conceived autumn festival. The name reflected the politicised nature of the event for
Aborigines, and later became shrouded in controversy (see Bellamy et al. 2006; Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 1999a). 77

These productions were inspired by Bill Onus, then president of the AAL. Bill and other members of the AAL, including his brother Eric and the prominent Aboriginal civil rights advocate Doug Nicholls, were among the Cummeragunja activists who had lobbied for equal rights for Aborigines around Australia for more than a decade (Attwood 2003). Onus was ‘convinced that the best way of [Aborigines] getting recognition is to present them culturally to the public’ (Australian Aborigines League 1951 quoted in Kleinert 1999a: 349).

Corroboree highlighted the extensive adaptation of Aboriginal skills, including ‘[t]ribal ritual dances, boomerang throwing, fire lighting, roping, whipcracking, [a] gum leaf band, choir, comedians, vocalists and other novelties’ (Kleinert 1999a: 216). 78 The preface to the program stated: ‘the object of this presentation of an all-Aboriginal entertainment is to show Australia that, given an opportunity, the Aborigine is quite capable of development along cultural lines’ (Broome and Manning 2006: 119).

This did not revamp an Aboriginal traditional past, but displayed the amalgamation of selective ‘aspects from their past hunter-gatherer lifestyle with skills from the pastoral industry and an appreciation for popular culture’ (Kleinert 1994: 216).

77 Controversy concerning the name Moomba, especially the ongoing question surrounding its real meaning is discussed by Kleinert. She notes that while it was initially conceived as a word meaning ‘Let’s get together and have fun’, more recently it has been taken to mean ‘up your bum’, (‘moom’ meaning buttocks and ‘ba’ a suffix meaning ‘at’ or ‘in’ or ‘on’), (Kleinert 1999a: 354), also see (Blake 1991:84). These various meanings, however, highlight the history of colonial domination and reveal how colonial constructions of Aboriginality were frustrated by Aboriginal reconstructions of their culture, which were invariably misunderstood within the wider community, but also created disruptions within the Aboriginal Community itself.

78 For further information about the history of gum leaf playing and gum leaf bands on Aboriginal reserves in the southeast, as well as in the performance Corroboree, see (Ryan 2004b).
In 1951, a more professional and dramatic staging of these repertoires was performed as *An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark*,\(^79\) which was presented in two parts: ‘The Past’ dramatised Aboriginal myths and legends; and ‘The Present’ dealt with dismantling notions of ‘primitivism’ (Kleinert 1994: 222). The program acknowledged that Aboriginal people ‘whilst maintaining their inherent characteristics of courage, endurance and imagination had adapted themselves to the new customs and culture of the white people’ (Kleinert 1999a: 350). The performances challenged stereotypes about the ‘primitive’ and the contemporary existence of Aborigines in the southeast.

*Corroboree* and *An Aboriginal Moomba* were hits, and were praised as ways of ‘getting the Aboriginal message’ across, highlighting Aboriginal concerns about assimilation and contributing to new and different expressions of Aboriginal identity. Later, (the late) Lin Onus, Bill’s son and a renowned Aboriginal artist, recalled *An Aboriginal Moomba*:

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 home ... 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 (Lin Onus quoted in Kleinert 2000b: 26).

While some Aborigines warmly embraced these new strategies, others were unhappy with these reinterpretations, viewing such changes as corruptions of culture. Policies that sought to dismiss Aboriginal culture as a thing of the past had created tensions within the Aboriginal community. Some people lamented the adoption of contemporary practices, which they saw as undermining culture. Others chose not to identify as Aboriginal and attempted to assimilate in order to curtail the effects of racism, while yet others were

\(^{79}\) Broome mentions that *An Aboriginal Moomba* came about as an Australian Aborigines League protest concerning the lack of Aboriginal involvement in the centenary of Victoria celebrations (Broome 2005).
struggling for acceptance of their Aboriginality within the wider Australian community (Broome 2003a). The anthropologist Diane Barwick noted that Aboriginal observers of corroborees at the Moomba festival in 1959 said ‘it doesn’t mean anything, it is just mumbling. It is a shame gabas[^80] think this [is] our real dancing’ (Barwick 1963:324).

**Manufacturing Boomerangs**

Performances were also significant in the later expansion of *Aboriginal Enterprises*, an arts and crafts factory established by Bill Onus in 1952 in the outer Melbourne suburb of Belgrave. Here, Bill Onus was renowned for his boomerang throwing displays (Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 2000b). However, *Aboriginal Enterprises* concentrated largely on tourist souvenirs; boomerangs, which continued as populist tourist kitsch, were the main items produced.[^81] Their adoption as symbols of national identity and their diversity of shapes and uses meant that they moved from the museum to the lounge room, which provided Aborigines with new ways of engaging Whites in their culture and relocating Aboriginality in a modernist context. The artist Lyn Thorpe, a Yorta Yorta woman and participant in this project, also recognises the significance of reinterpreting boomerang designs in this era:

> My grandfather ... made boomerangs and he got me to do some designs on them. He made boomerangs and clap sticks and different artefacts ... His name was Geof Atkinson. Pop loved telling yarns, stories about the old days. He taught us a lot about culture and the old ways...

> Pop was always doing something. I remember he used to always be out back shaving a boomerang or making something out of wood. Nan was similar but she used do things more like crocheting, and different handcrafts ... I remember Nan used to have a nest of three boomerang shaped tables, her cousin Uncle Bill Onus ... made them

[^80]: Aboriginal term for White people, also spelt ‘gubbah’

[^81]: Bill Onus was a renowned boomerang thrower, who received a medal from the Queen in 1954 for his boomerang throwing performances (Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 2000a).
and painted landscapes and Aboriginal people on them, I really liked those tables (Thorpe 2004).

This ‘contemporary boomerang kitsch’, including tables, ashtrays, wall plaques, vases and bowls (Jones 1992b: 70) can be viewed as an extension of the boomerang displays of the nineteenth century. These boomerang shaped tables, while produced in a kitsch fashion, were instantly recognisable as Aboriginal. In doing so, through these objects people were reclaiming ‘kitsch’ as a way of embracing modernity and contesting ‘primitivism’, yet the items retained links with the past and meanings associated with authentic arts practices.

Plate 5.12  Unknown. *Have you ever wanted to throw a boomerang?*, 1959. Monash University Library ephemera collection, Melbourne, Victoria


Bill Onus’ boomerangs were manufactured using a ‘band-saw, sander and buff-wheel’ (Kleinert 1994: 226). These manufacturing processes reflect
the practicalities of competing in the market place, as well as highlighting the contemporaneity and adaptability of Aboriginal culture. Onus employed both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and attracted artists from many backgrounds, including Aborigines from other regions of the country and non-Aborigines to contribute to the designs on the boomerangs and other artefacts (Kleinert 1994). He was also instrumental in promoting and encouraging designs which did not distinguish between ‘art and craft’ and ‘fine art and souvenir art’ (Morphy 1998: 387). The enterprise was in effect a community outlet which ‘represented a form of cottage industry: [where] Aborigines worked collaboratively, contributing to the production as manufacturers, demonstrators, designers or sales people’ (Kleinert 1994: 229).

One of the workers was Auntie Iris Lovett-Gardiner:

I was working for him [Bill Onus] when the Olympic Games was here. He was world-wide ... used to send stuff to the US and England...

We was on the tourist route at Belgrave. We’d have three or four big buses pulling in. Then we’d all be working selling stuff...

But at first I felt horrible working with my culture. I did! There was these artefacts that was for sale to overseas tourists. I felt real bad about that, seeing things that belonged to my people going away ... I didn’t think about the other side of the story – that Aboriginal people were making a living from making artefacts. All I could see was these things with our motifs on them going overseas. I wondered, where was the culture if you sell something? But then I thought different later on. It was a business. I feel strong because I know I can talk about my culture now and those things don't worry me. I know that it wasn't the selling of the culture, it was the selling of objects... Artefacts don't make the culture. Your culture is in your heart (Lovett-Gardiner 1997: 84).

In her thesis, Kleinert includes many oral accounts of the enjoyment, pride and respect people felt when working in or visiting the boomerang factory. She emphasises the degree to which this was a form of ‘active resistance to assimilation’, as southeast Aboriginal culture asserted an alternative identity to European interpretations (Kleinert 1994: 230). This
became possible as a growing interest in a unique national identity ‘founded on the imagined relationship between Australia’s indigenous minority and a settler society’ gained momentum (Kleinert 1999a: 248). These Aboriginal artists and craftworkers challenged notions of ‘primitivism’ and positioned their culture within the binary of the past (in the form of the boomerang) and the present (the power tools and modern Aboriginal designs), revealing the transformative role of culture in a market economy where ‘cross-cultural exchange’ was used within the limits of an ‘assimilationist regime’ (Kleinert 1999a: 355).

Aboriginal Enterprises was part of a continuing Aboriginal art production. Lin Onus was employed in the business, and learnt to manufacture and paint boomerangs and other artefacts, including Mimi spirit figures from the top end of the Northern Territory (Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 2000b). The use of designs from someone else’s Country would today be seen as appropriation. However, Bill Onus was promoting Aboriginality in a region where cultural destruction was widespread as a result of the long term devastation of colonisation (Kleinert 2000b).

Not only was appropriation from outside the culture encouraged at this time (Kleinert 1994), but the cultivation of a tourist industry in the Victorian Aboriginal community fostered cultural awareness and was a form of cultural resistance. As in earlier periods, the commodification of objects changed the nature of Aboriginal art and in turn challenged the wider community’s assumptions about Aboriginality (Kleinert 2000b). As noted by Lin Onus, during this time:

[I]ssues of survival and family unity took precedence ... Artistic and cultural practices declined dramatically, yet in isolated pockets some traditions survived. Inspired principally by the need to earn some extra money some groups and individuals produced boomerangs and other artefacts for the tourist market. In an ironical fashion, the area of the market that is widely perceived as the traditional enemy of fine art managed to keep the threads of a few ancient traditions intact (Onus 1993b: 290).
The tourist market also reflected the dominant culture’s continuing treatment of the Other as spectacle, where artefacts as well as photographs of the ‘Aborigine’ were collected and treated as paraphernalia, their difference manifested as a result of the collection process. Like pictures taken of people from Coranderrk in the 1850s and 1860s, tourist pictures taken in the 1950s continued to reinforce stereotypes of Aborigines as the ‘natives’. Paradoxically this continued at a time when Aboriginality in Victoria was assumed to be more or less obsolete. The Gunai Elder and renowned gum leaf player, Uncle Herb Patten explains his experiences of being part of the spectacle, where as a younger person he and his peers, like the boomerang manufacturers, subversively exploited their Aboriginality to receive some financial reward, but were also (perhaps unconsciously) reinforcing their presence in the national conscience.

Well, the tourist trade … Now there was another interesting thing. Where we were camped [near Orbost] there was a place where a few of us, before you come to the Snowy River flats you’d come to a place called the Grand View lookout. And that’s where we lived on that road. During the fifties I could remember numerous Pioneer buses coming through there on scenic trips through the Princes Highway, probably down as far across to the Gippsland bush, and probably back to Melbourne. And I could remember these buses pulling up to take photos of us for years - that went on for years. And all us kids there were interested in getting the pennies and threepence off them and posing for photos for them. There was no traditional sort of dress up or corroboree dance or face painting, none of that. We were just black kids at that camp as you’ll see in those photos of the fifties and sixties.

Uncle Herb Patten, October 2004

**INSTITUTIONALISATION AND PRISON ART**

**Robert Bull (1943-1979)**

Another artist with close ties to Gippsland, Ronald Bull, remains a major transformative figure in the history of southeast Australian Aboriginal art. His art reflects his Aboriginality in ways which were misunderstood or generally
ignored by the dominant culture. His life story illustrates the effects of institutionalisation as a result of the assimilation policies. His art has remained almost completely unknown, yet reflects the ‘hidden history’ of Aboriginal art during the assimilation period.

Bull was born at Lake Tyers in 1943, one of seventeen children. As a young boy, he was removed from his family with his older brothers to Tally Ho Boys Village in Burwood, Melbourne (Kleinert 1994). At fifteen, he was placed in foster care at the home of Pauline Edmonds at Lilydale. Edmonds helped Bull gain access to the local art world, and the National Gallery of Victoria. Eventually, he met with and obtained critical responses from the artists Ernest Buckmaster and Hans Heysen. Heysen was one of the leading exponents of landscape art during the 1960s; it is reported that Bull spent time with him at his home in South Australia (Kleinert 1994; Kleinert 1999b; Koorie Heritage Trust 2000). Bull also worked with Bill Onus in Belgrave, along with Onus’ son Lin. The Arrente artist Albert Namatjira was also among the artists who visited Onus’ Belgrave factory (Kleinert 1999b). All three artists, Namatjira, Bull and Lin Onus, influenced the development of Aboriginal landscape art in Australia.

While his artistic endeavours were supported by prominent non-Aboriginal artists, Bull’s experiences were symptomatic of those who were subjected to child removal policies. Between 1959 and 1971 he was imprisoned a number of times for minor offences (Kleinert 1994).

**Mural in Prison: Art and Identity**

Ronald Bull’s years of imprisonment corresponded with a period in Australian history when Aboriginal people were contending against assimilation policies, which were further enforced following the recommendations of the McLean Report. In Victoria, the Bolte Government employed Charles McLean, a retired Chief Stipendiary Magistrate, to:

82 This is no relation to myself.

83 As Kleinert reports, Bull stated that he would ‘get a great relief from just sitting looking at pictures…I feel a lot better in myself just looking at them’ (Kleinert 1994:257).
…evaluate the current *Aborigines Act 1928* and its operation, and inquire into the number, distribution and living conditions of permanent Victorian residents who are “believed to be of not less than one-fourth part aboriginal blood”.* [McLean] was to assess their employability, their capacity to maintain themselves and families according to the “general standards of the Victorian community”, and assess what factors militated against their absorption into the community (Broome 2005: 314).

McLean’s report resulted in the enactment of the *Aborigines Act 1957* and the replacement of the BPA with the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB). This Act redefined an Aboriginal person to mean ‘any person of Aboriginal descent’ (Broome 2005:316). Despite the reconstitution of the Board, little had changed; its aim was ‘to promote the moral, intellectual and physical welfare of aborigines (full blood and half-caste) with a view to their assimilation in the general community’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997: 615). Ultimately the AWB sought to eliminate Aboriginality (Broome 2005).

While studies show that the removal of children (such as Ronald Bull) from their families had long term and devastating consequences (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997; Johnston 1991), the extent of Aboriginal agency, in disrupting racially discriminatory and oppressive conditions, should not be overlooked. Hence, according to anecdotal evidence collected by Kleinert, Bull’s early works, including those painted in prison, can be seen to have ‘deliberately challenged racial paradigms and the canon of universal values contained within Western humanist traditions’ (Kleinert 1999b: 94).

During his imprisonment in 1962, at Pentridge Prison in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg, Bull was involved in the production of a mural in one of the prison’s hallways. This mural has little in common with any of Bull’s other surviving works, being the only extant example of his figurative work; otherwise he is best known for landscapes (Kleinert 1999b).

The size of the mural and its subject matter attest to Bull’s skills. Further, his ability to reflect his Aboriginal heritage in prison is a significant act
of Aboriginal resistance (Kleinert 1999b). The assimilation policies had resulted in significantly increased rates of institutionalisation of Aboriginal children and incarceration of young Aboriginal offenders in the 1950s (Broome 2005). Thus, Bull’s choice of subject matter in the mural, which depicts a hunter-gatherer scene, ‘…operated productively to empower Aborigines through the depiction of a scene which may have heightened their self esteem and sense of solidarity’ (Kleinert 1994: 263).

Plate 5.13  Ronald Bull (Wiradjuri). Prison Mural (Pentridge Prison), 1962.. Photo Andrew Thorn

Artists’ ability to express their Aboriginality through their work is seen in the art of other imprisoned artists, such as the late Jimmy Pike, a Walmajarri man from the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia; the late Leslie Griggs, a Gourndidjmara man from the Western District of Victoria; the late Kevin Gilbert, a descendant of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi peoples in New South Wales and Gordon Syron, from the north coast of New South Wales (see Isaacs 1989; Canberra Contemporary Art Space 1996; Koorie Heritage Trust 2000; Neale 2000a; Leslie 2003). For these artists, ‘it was the introduction to art practices gained through their experiences in prison that enabled them to regain self-esteem and re-identify as Aborigines’ (Kleinert 1999b:95).

Bull’s use of European pictorial conventions in the mural can be seen as an attempt to undermine the processes of assimilation, by using Aboriginal
techniques of ‘mimicry’. While seeming to privilege Western artistic tropes, the mural adapts Aboriginal iconography in the ‘non-traditional’ context of the prison. This included half a dozen hidden kangaroo heads, indicating Bull’s attempts to depict Aboriginal totemic beliefs within a White institution (Goulding and Menis 2006; Kleinert 1999b). When considered from an Aboriginal perspective, Bull’s mural runs counter to European notions that Indigenous appropriations of a Western style were ‘characteristic of extreme cultural domination and hence a desire to assimilate’ (Graburn 1976:7).

Ronald Bull’s prison mural locates Aboriginal reinterpretations of figurative art within the context of cultural exchange and resistance; it challenges the dominant culture’s perceptions of Aboriginality, by communicating ‘expression[s] of identity and difference’ (Kleinert 1999b: 95). It allowed Bull to display his Aboriginality within an institution which promoted European values and norms. The prison has now closed, but the mural’s continuing presence, and the intention of including it in a heritage museum, demonstrates the significance of art in sustaining identity in institutions. Further, recent conservation assessments of the site highlight the growing interest in viewing ‘urban’ Aboriginal art within the context of significant sites of Victorian Aboriginal cultural heritage (Thorn 2006).

**Landscapes: Continuing connections to Country**

Ronald Bull’s landscapes were an inspiration for Lin Onus. While Onus’ art was political and sometimes urban, addressing Aboriginal self-determination issues, Bull worked at a time when ‘to introduce any element of Aboriginality into one’s work would have rendered it unfashionable and unsaleable’ (Onus 1990 [2003]: 93). However, the landscapes of Ronald Bull, like those of Albert Namatjira, challenged the dominant culture’s perceptions of landscape painting and reflected Aboriginal imperatives, including connection to Country.

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84 Kleinert goes on to explain that ‘[m]ore recently, we have come to understand that ethnic minorities, out of necessity, operate as *bricoleurs*, extensively incorporating from the cultural forms of the dominant settler culture to avoid subjection and to assert their autonomy. In the writing of Homi Bhabha, for instance, mimicry is explored in more complex terms as a “process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition” – expressive of the fundamental ambivalence of colonial relationships’ (Kleinert 1999b:103).
Albert Namatjira and Ronald Bull both painted predominantly in watercolour, and were influenced by renowned non-Aboriginal landscape artists. Namatjira contended with negative responses including that he was ‘just a clever copyist’ (Burn and Stephen 1992: 274), while Bull’s work was viewed as a response to a nationalistic sentiment, which rejected Aboriginality as obsolete in the southeast. Both artists fell within a paradigm where for non-Aboriginal audiences their work represented the success of the assimilation policies. However, the historians Ian Burn and Ann Stephen argue that ‘mimicry’ in Aboriginal art is effective, especially for the colonised, where the potential for ‘camouflage’ emphasises ‘slippages’ between the Western ideal and the colonised Other. They state:

> [G]iven the importance of acting and mimicry in many Aboriginal cultures … the ritualistic nature of imitations and repetition can imply different purposes and values. The role of imitation has also been analysed in terms of resistant or disruptive strategies within non-Western culture, which points to other ways of discussing the role of mimicry in [Aboriginal] art (Burn and Stephen 1992:275).

Namatjira was considered a nationally important artist during his lifetime, and his work has become a symbol of Aboriginal artistic talent. His paintings were seen as Aboriginal representations of Country, rather than country as seen from a Western perspective (see Burn and Stephen 1992; Hardy et al. 1992). Meanwhile, Bull received little public acclaim for his works and was restricted to exhibiting in department stores and commercial galleries (Kleinert 2000b:29). His work is located within the genre of European landscape art, and is influenced by a life lived mainly within the confines of Western institutions. Bull’s images have therefore been less easily identified as Aboriginal. More recently, however, they have been ‘recognised as driven by an Indigenous imperative’ (Kleinert 1999b:106).
Although Ronald Bull has remained relatively unknown, Aboriginal people have always contended that his landscape paintings represent Aboriginal knowledge of land and ‘reaffirm connections to country in the same way as do the acrylic “dot paintings” produced by Aboriginal artists in Central Australia…’ (Kleinert 1999b:106)

In reassessing his art, in a postcolonial context, Bull’s paintings (like those of Namatjira) can be interpreted as showing an adaptation of art styles, which reflect Aboriginal identity, communicate Aboriginal ‘traditions’ to outsiders via cultural exchange and resist the dominant cultures’ notions of Aboriginality. Thus, Bull’s work, along with that of so many Aboriginal artists, including those involved in the reinterpretation of ‘traditional’ objects, such as boomerangs, feather ornaments and baskets made for a market economy, contradict the paradigm of assimilation. The adaptation of various arts practices (including the development of Aboriginal landscape painting) are evidence of Aboriginal resilience to attempts by authorities to redefine Aboriginal people as White. Assertions of Aboriginal identity were sustained and continued through arts practices, which responded to changes in the world around them.
6. ACTIVISM AND ABORIGINAL ART

Now I’d say since Lin Onus and onwards there has been an explosion of art, artists in Victoria

Uncle Herb Patten, October 2004


From the early 1960s contemporary Aboriginal art in southeast Australia was increasingly politicised. In 1967, a national referendum gave power to the Commonwealth Government to make policy for Aboriginal Australians, and overturned constitutional barriers to citizenship rights for all Aborigines (National Archives of Australia 2007). Within the Aboriginal Community there was an increasing awareness of the effects that collective activism could have on the wellbeing of Aborigines nationally. In addition, an international focus on ‘Black rights’ provided a basis for Aboriginal people to lobby for self-determination and the right to control and operate their own organisations (Attwood 2003).

Southeast Australian Aboriginal art from the 1960s to the Bicentenary in 1988 changed dramatically. This reflected the concerns of a growing number of highly politicised and educated Aboriginal activists, including many artists, who contested mainstream perspectives of the history of colonisation, and promoted Aboriginal stories as a way of reasserting their culture.

Much of this activity challenged previous anthropological notions of Aborigines as the remote or ‘primitive’ Other, an essentialist and enduring stereotype that situated Aboriginal people and their culture on the lowest rung of humanity (Morphy 2001). From the late 1960s, this challenge produced a ‘new Aboriginality’, highlighting the positive effects of cross-cultural interactions and their impact on perceptions and understandings of Aboriginal identity (Attwood 2003).

This chapter discusses the effects of Aboriginal politics on arts practices and art’s influence on a ‘new Aboriginality’. The changes in society during the last decades of the twentieth century and its effects on Aboriginal
people were later acknowledged within the construct of postcolonial discourse, which provided theoretical space for southeast Australian Aboriginal people to reconnect with their cultural heritage.

During this period Lin Onus emerged as an artist whose works captured a broader audience while simultaneously challenging the dominant culture’s concepts of Aboriginal art. Onus’ work (both politically and artistically) coincided with the political gains made by Aboriginal people, and the growing popularity of contemporary Aboriginal art in the mainstream. Other activists and artists besides Lin Onus are acknowledged as proponents of continuing arts practices, which reflected these changes, especially in terms of equal rights and social justice. These arts practices reveal how Aboriginal people told their own stories, in opposition to those which declared that Aboriginal people in the southeast had all but disappeared.

‘NEW’ ASSERTIONS OF ABORIGINALITY

The formation of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (VAAL)

From the late 1950s, Aboriginal Victorians advocated for changes to the restrictive policies imposed by the Aborigines Act 1957. Concerned groups in Victoria were raising questions about the health, education and living conditions of Aboriginal people. Housing in many Aboriginal Communities in Victoria was substandard, especially in fringe camps such as Rumbalara, Mooroopna, and other places along the Murray, where many people lived in humpies. The AWB controlled the implementation of new housing and was unwilling to consult with Aboriginal people to improve conditions. This resulted in inadequate and culturally inappropriate buildings (Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985).

In 1957 the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (VAAL) emerged under the leadership of the Aboriginal pastor and equal rights activist Doug Nicholls (see Clark 1972). The formation of the VAAL provided Aboriginal people with a politically powerful base for instigating changes in Aboriginal affairs. The organisation also actively criticised the assimilation policy (Broome 2005; Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985).
1959, in the magazine *Smoke Signals*, published by the VAAL, it defined its role as an organisation:

“…to work towards the complete integration of people of Aboriginal descent with the Australian community with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make”. It defined “integration” as the ability of a minority to retain its identity. Aboriginal self-reliance and self-respect were other key aims (Broome 2005: 331).

VAAL supported the Hermannsburg landscape painter Albert Namatjira, who had been imprisoned for six months in late 1958 for supplying alcohol to an Aboriginal ward of the state. VAAL initiated the idea of free legal aid for Aboriginal people (Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985).

In 1963 the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) was reformed, and, in 1964 it was affiliated to VAAL as its ‘Aborigines-only branch’. Aboriginal people were seeking Aboriginal control of decisions that affected their communities, and were advocating for more ‘all-Aboriginal’ groups to ensure self-management (Attwood 2003; Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985). They lobbied for the establishment of Aboriginal controlled organisations associated with housing, health and education, and they frequently criticised the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB) (Broome 2005).

**Land Rights, the Referendum and art:**

In the mid 1960s Aboriginal affairs became increasingly militant, as the Aboriginal community and its supporters advocated nationwide for Aboriginal input into government policy, for equality, and for land rights. This action ultimately influenced the way Aboriginal people throughout the country produced their art. The politicisation of art reflected a growing ‘pan-Aboriginal consciousness’ (McLean 1998b: 105). Political events included the making of the 1963 bark petition at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land in support of land rights; ‘protest art’ in support of equal rights and land rights, which emerged in the 1960s and became more prominent in the 1970s; the 1972 Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra; and the distinctive yellow, black and red Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Thomas in 1971. These images and events challenged mainstream perspectives on equality and fairness, and illuminated the
disjunction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society (Arts Victoria 2004; McLean 1998b; Neale 2000a: 707; Sykes 2000).

Land rights campaigns also affected action in Victoria. In 1965, there were five Aboriginal members of the Victorian Aboriginal Welfare Board (AWB), including Doug Nicholls. Among their concerns was the struggle to retain Lake Tyers as an Aboriginal reserve. Intensive lobbying saw it declared a ‘permanent reserve’ in May 1965 (Broome 2005: 334).

Increased activism throughout the 1960s directly challenged the AWB’s assimilationist agenda. Aboriginal representatives on the Board included Margaret Tucker and Con Edwards, along with the white South African Monash University academic, Colin Tatz, and the anthropologist Donald Thomson. A redefinition of the assimilation policy was sought in 1965 ‘bringing an end to the eighty years of hard-line assimilationism’ (Broome 2005: 335). Richard Broome asserts that the 1967 Report of the AWB, rather than defining the assimilation of Aboriginal people as attaining a lifestyle like most Australians, now stated that Aboriginal people ‘will choose to attain a similar manner of living to that of other Australians’ and recognised ‘Aboriginal customs, cultural values, beliefs, manner and place of living’, as opposed to the previous insistence that Aborigines conform to European expectations. The report recommended:

…minimum rights and standards for Aboriginal people and included policy statements on education, health, employment and training, and housing. Lake Tyers was to be retained and developed, and Framlingham made a permanent reserve (Broome 2005: 335).

In May 1967, in a Federal referendum, almost ninety-one percent of the Australian population voted for two discriminatory references against Aboriginal people in the Constitution be removed (i.e Section 51 (xxvi) and Section 127), granting the Commonwealth government responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs (National Archives of Australia 2007). In the same year, the Aborigines Act 1967 ended 108 years of Aboriginal people in Victoria being under the control of a ‘Board’. Following the abolition of the AWB, a Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs was created (Broome 2005). The Federal
Government took some years to finally assume full responsibility for Aboriginal affairs (Attwood 2003).

While the referendum initially did little to change the administration of Aboriginal affairs around the country, it represented for many Aboriginal people the beginning of a process towards their acceptance as full members of the Australian community. The referendum’s passing prompted Bill Onus, as the Victorian representative of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) (an ‘all-Aboriginal’ national organisation which campaigned assiduously for the referendum) (Attwood 2003) to comment:

In this year of our Lord, nineteen hundred and sixty-seven…we cannot help but wonder why it has taken the white Australian just on 200 years to recognise us as a race of people (Bill Onus quoted in Attwood 2003: x).

‘Black Power’ and Art

The outcome of the 1967 referendum reflected growing global concern for equal rights for ‘Black’ and other colonised peoples. This coincided with and was largely inspired by the Afro-American ‘Black Power’ movement in the United States, which was influential in irrevocably changing Aboriginal politics in Australia. Aboriginal people in Victoria also called for equal rights and the elimination of discrimination based on ‘race’. This movement advocated that Aborigines have control over their own lives rather than relying on the often racist and culturally inappropriate determinations of government(s) (Broome 2005; McLean 1998b; Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985).

The writings of the Martinique born psychiatrist and revolutionary activist, Frantz Fanon, who was involved in the Algerian war of independence in the 1950s, became influential in challenging the hegemonic status of colonialism on an international level (Fanon 1990; Fanon 1991). McLean notes that Fanonism influenced moves towards a ‘pan-Aboriginalism’ in Australia in the 1970s, urging a decolonising approach to political reform (McLean 1998b). National Aboriginal activists included the Wiradjuri artist Kevin Gilbert, Charles Perkins, a university educated Aboriginal activist and
Canberra bureaucrat from Central Australia, while in Victoria, people such as
the activist and educator Bruce McGuinness and his cousin Lin Onus also
agitated for reform.

Although a notion of decolonisation was in its infancy at the time, the
endeavours of Aboriginal activists provided Aboriginal Australians with a
construct with which to reconnect to their history and reinforce their cultural
identity and survival. Through the arts Aborigines could share their life
stories, and embrace the multivariable influences of colonialism. This was not
without tension. While Aboriginal art is distinctive and can be read as a form
of resistance, it also reflects people’s responses to mainstream attitudes. As
discussed previously in relation to Ronald Bull, Aboriginal landscape art
remained the only form of ‘saleable’ work for Aboriginal artists for three
decades after Albert Namatjira came to prominence (Neale 2000b; Onus 1990
[2003]).

However, by the end of the 1970s, the continued pursuit of an
Aboriginal aesthetic in art began to challenge more actively the dominant
colonial discourse of ‘settlement’, and provided many urban-based Aboriginal
artists with a means to highlight the cross-cultural influences on their lives. By
incorporating new theoretical perspectives and a new language into the
framework of Aboriginal arts practices, art highlighted Aboriginal activism and
provided a means for implementing ‘a distinctive field of discourse’. In this
context Aboriginal artists (many of whom were activists) responded to the
‘postcolonial world and the problematic issues of cultural identity’, using their
own words and images (Morphy 1998: 381-382).

Language as Empowerment
As the 1960s drew to a close, Aborigines used their culture, art and language
in ‘new’ ways to assert their identity as distinct from the majority of Australians
(see Fanon 1990). Such strategies provided Aborigines with a means of
articulating their history from an Aboriginal perspective. The incorporation of
terms for self-identification into the language of Aborigines, defied the
hegemonically imposed subjectivities concerning their culture and their arts
practices, and supported the creation of artworks which questioned Australian history and preconceived ideas of Aboriginal culture.

Many Aboriginal activists in southeast Australia during the 1960s adopted the term ‘Koori’ or ‘Koorie’, ‘a Wiradjuri word from north of the Murray River’, to describe themselves (Broome 2003a: 337). While not a new word, it provided Aborigines from New South Wales and Victoria with a means of challenging externally imposed stereotypes and definitions of Aboriginality, as well as a way of asserting their ‘autonomy and continuity’ and ‘integration rather than assimilation’ within Australian society (Morphy 1998: 321). The use of the term was influenced by one of the younger members of the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League, Bruce McGuinness, who had worked with his uncle Bill Onus at his boomerang factory. Bruce was politically influenced by Bill’s involvement in Koori issues until Bill’s death in 1968.

In the late 1960s radical members of the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League, agitating to make the League an all-black organisation, began using the traditional south-eastern Aboriginal word, “Koorie” (now generally spelt “Koori”), as a racial slogan of empowerment. They established the “Koorie Club”, and called its newspaper, edited by Bruce McGuinness, the *Koorier*. The label has since proved effective in creating a cultural and ideological focus for many urban Aboriginal people, and has been emulated by Aboriginal groups across Australia… (McLean 1998b: 107).

Use of the word Koori helped Aboriginal artists to locate their work within the contemporary realm. It provided a link with the past, so art could reconnect people with their history, and challenged the notion of authentic Aboriginal art as ‘primitive’. Urban-based artists such as Lin Onus, the South Australian artist Trevor Nickolls, and Robert Campbell Junior from Kempsey in New South Wales, produced work which is now ‘recognized as being an expression of their Aboriginality, a product of their particular history and a symbol of the survival of their Koori identity’ (Morphy 1998: 321).

While the word ‘Koori’ provided urban-based artists with a regional expression of identity, the term ‘Aboriginality’ was also being coined to
express a universalising concept of Aborigines’ contested realities within the
dominant culture. As McLean notes, '[p]ride in one's Aboriginality became a
principal strategy of black power' (McLean 1998b: 107). Like the word 'Koori',
‘Aboriginality’ was not new. However, in the early 1960s Aboriginal people
were using it to affirm their own interpretations of culture, which built on the
precolonial concepts of ‘antiquity, spirituality and relationships to the land’
(Attwood 2003: 316). Such assertions located Aboriginality within a discourse
which enabled a politics of identity to emerge that expressed a paradigm shift
from 'race' to culture (Foley 1997; McLean 1998b).

For Aboriginal artists, the articulation of Aboriginality initiated a ‘new art
market’, which negated the anthropological notion of Aborigines as a timeless
people (McLean 1998b: 108). However, today, the word ‘Aboriginality’
articulates a constant identity, alongside a realisation that culture adapts and
changes (Dening 2003).

Terms such as ‘Koori’ and ‘Aboriginality’ disrupted colonialism. Although their adoption was often contested within the Aboriginal community
(Broome 2005), their incorporation into the ‘new language’ contributed to
campaigns for self-determination and for acknowledgment as citizens.

From the late 1960s, Aboriginal identity was articulated through this
‘new language’. It was culturally specific, enabling passionate responses of
the Aboriginal experience to be visibly reproduced through arts practices. As
Lin Onus wrote, this ‘new language’ provided:

… the foundation upon which a cultural revival can be built, not just
something that describes or gives information. Language encodes
meanings and perceptions of the universe … each language brings
with it a unique set of perceptions and understandings of the
individual's relationship within the greater society (Onus 1990 [2003]:
94).
POLITICS, ART AND IDENTITY: THE 1970s

Protests
Coinciding with the political upheavals of the 1970s, an embryonic Aboriginal arts movement was established among artists from the more colonised regions of Australia, including southern Western Australia, southern Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria. Many of these artists had grown up in urbanised areas where they were exposed to a range of influences and had shared similar experiences (Onus 1990 [2003]). Through their arts practices they challenged mainstream perceptions of Aboriginal art, and developed techniques which explored the ‘visual relationship between traditional Aboriginal imagery and European visual realism’ (Onus 1993b: 290). Their art provided space to explore issues of cultural identity and change.

As a more radical Aboriginal identity politics emerged, the notion of Aboriginal culture as static and ‘primitive’ was questioned by an increasingly Western educated body of Aborigines, who repositioned Aboriginal identity as dynamic and diverse. This politics was taken up by the burgeoning Aboriginal arts movement, which reflected the ideals of the political activists and exposed the challenges facing an Aboriginal community living within a colonialist regime. Lin Onus wrote:

This new class was a group of people who had received access (in varying degrees) to education and mobility. This class broke upon the political scene in the late 1960s. Many were young, many were articulate, but they were all angry. It is against this background that the art movement in these regions evolved (Onus 1993b: 290)

In the 1970s Aboriginal issues became more contentious nationwide. Aboriginal activists born in the 1940s and 1950s (such as Lin Onus 1948-1996) used their artistic skills to advocate for change. This was reflected in their art styles, especially ‘protest art’ with its associated imagery and slogans (Kleinert 2000b; Neale 2000a; Sykes 2000).

Lin Onus was known for campaigning for equal rights, including land rights. Like other Aboriginal artists at this time, his art enabled him to present
Aboriginal grievances in ways that were culturally appropriate, yet also accessible to a wider public. In 1975, he held his first exhibition at the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League; these were a series of landscapes (Neale 2000c). The launch of this exhibition was symbolic for Onus as it continued a long history of Koori political protest, including the Australian Aborigines League campaigns of the 1930s (Foley 2000).

Victorian campaigns in the 1970s included the fight for land rights at Sherbrooke Forest in 1971, in the Dandenong Ranges near Melbourne, where Lin Onus was a leading advocate. This provided a ‘seminal moment’ in land rights history (Broome 2005: 348). Onus’ actions were significant in establishing a platform for other protests, including the fight to regain the forest near Framlingham Aboriginal reserve, which was handed back in 1987 (Critchett 1992). National campaigns included the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which was erected outside (old) Parliament House in Canberra on 26 January 1972 (Australian Parliament 2000). Many other protests ensued, most concerned with forging Aboriginal people’s rights to maintain and foster their Aboriginal identities, as well as acknowledgement of Aboriginal people as previous owners of the land. Self-determination became a priority for many activists at this time and campaigns such as the Sherbrooke Forest protest provided an incentive for advocating for Koori control of Koori organisations (Foley 2000; Nathan 1980).

Among those involved in lobbying were people with a history of political activism, who had been involved in the ‘Black Power’ movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Victoria, apart from Lin Onus, these included men such as Bob Maza (born on Palm Island, Queensland, of Torres Strait Island descent), Harry Penrith (born at Wallaga Lake, New South Wales, of Woiwurung and Yorta Yorta descent) and Bruce McGuinness. All participated in the formation of Aboriginal run organisations and were prominent artists and educators, whose contributions as film makers, actors, writers, craftsmen

85 In 1971, the communities of Lake Tyers and Framlingham were granted 1600 hectares and 240 hectares, respectively which was to be ‘permanently reserved’ (Critchett 1992: 73).
and visual artists gave ‘voice’ to Aboriginal issues and concerns (Attwood 2003; Message Stick Online 2004; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc. 2003).

**Nindeebiya Poster Workshop**

From 1973 Aboriginal-controlled service providing organisations were established in Melbourne, including the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, Aboriginal Legal Aid, education groups and housing co-operatives (Foley 2000; Nathan 1980; Vickery et al. 2005; Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). These were established in and around Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, many of them in one building. While these organisations struggled for funding, they offered services such as language and cultural programs, and sport and recreation services (Broome 2005; Bunj Consultants et al. 2002). One of the programs was the Nindeebiya Aboriginal Workshop, which was set up to encourage Aboriginal people to express themselves creatively. It offered programs in screen-printing, poster making, leather work and pottery, as well as mural design and painting. It worked closely with the health and legal services to provide a meeting place for those with drug and alcohol related problems (Firebrace 1977; Hall 2000b). It was initially part of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service’s holistic approach to Indigenous health (Nathan 1980). Sharon Firebrace, one of the early staff members, wrote that the aim of the Nindeebiya program was ‘...to encourage the re-development of self-esteem and self-determination amongst our people and to re-establish pride in our rich culture...’ (Firebrace 1977: 71).

Nindeebiya was a community-run ‘drop in centre’, a ‘meeting place’ that provided people with the opportunity to learn about art in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. The Yorta Yorta artist Lyn Thorpe explained this in an interview conducted for this thesis in 2004:

In the old days there used to be Nindeebiya workshop, where people could just drop in and be artistic …

I used to go there often and visit. You could go there and if you wanted to throw a pot … it wasn’t like everything’s [about] training you know, or you have to come here and do a course so we can tick you
off and it's legitimised or whatever, it was seen as a real community place, and [Aboriginal] people owned it and that's why there wasn't the pressure … there weren't other agendas …

That's why the community thing is good because … it's an informal relaxing environment [people] feel like it's their place. And you're saying to them, don't be scared to do what you think, you know you're encouraging them to do what [they] think.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Koori courses at Swinburne
The arts workshop at Nindeebiya allowed Kooris to share their experiences through arts practices. The Koori community also recognised that in order to gain self-determination, more formal education was required, especially addressing issues that were important for Aboriginal people. Bruce McGuinness was instrumental in establishing Koori-run courses at Swinburne College in Melbourne in 1974 that included arts training. Lin Onus also participated as a part-time art lecturer. Other courses provided people with the skills necessary for work in the new community controlled Aboriginal organisations, such as the Legal and Health Services (Broome 2005; Message Stick Online 2004; Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002).86

The artists Lyn Thorpe and Lyn Briggs were both students at Swinburne in the 1970s. Lyn Thorpe, who today is a secondary school art teacher, discussed the impact of the Swinburne course on her life:

I came here [Melbourne] as a young woman [from Mooroopna] and did the Koori Community Organisation course at the Swinburne Institute of Technology on the Hawthorn campus. Bruce McGuinness, Gary Foley87 and John Morrison (a gubbah teacher) basically ran the

86 For further information about Aboriginal organisations established in Victoria in the 1970s, see the timelines in (Vickery et al. 2005; Victorian Aboriginal Health Service 2006).

87 Gary Foley is a Gumbainggar man from northern New South Wales, who has made substantial contributions, from the 1970s until today, to political campaigns for equal rights and Aboriginal self-determination. For details see his personal website: The Koori History Website http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/indexb.html.
course and for me it was an amazing journey. As a young woman who came from a fairly strict and sheltered upbringing, it was exciting to meet other Aboriginal people from different places and learn a Black view of history in this country. We learnt about the real history of our country, massacres, forced assimilation, removal of children, etc. I have strong memories of when I was a child, how I hated being fair. When I was growing up people would ask what my nationality was, Greek, Italian. You could see they were surprised when I’d say I was Aboriginal. I always remember thinking, ‘I wish I was dark’. I realised after doing the course with Bruce Mac that skin colour wasn’t important, what was important was how you felt inside. The strength of your Aboriginality is not about skin colour, it’s about how strongly you identify as an Aboriginal person in your heart and your mind.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Lyn Briggs, a contemporary of Lyn Thorpe, who continues to work at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), where she manages the Women and Children’s Program, and designs health related posters and artwork. In her interview for this project she commented:

I never did a formal art course ever, I’m self taught. When I came to Melbourne … I went through Swinburne College. I did the Aboriginal Community Organisation course, and I was doing a bit of art in there as well. But when I started with the Health Service that’s when I really started to put a lot of stuff into being creative. Just the flexibility in the Health Service, the way they allowed me to use my art to get messages across, especially about health programs or any health promotion sort of resources. This is where I really got involved and started using art in that way. I mean that’s my only sort of formal training, being allowed to do that sort of thing here and as you can see in the Health Service there’s so much art around, everything. The murals, the resources, posters, floor design. Myself and Lyn Thorpe did the floor design [at VAHS]

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

Lyn Briggs’ artwork is directly related to her career at VAHS. It reflects the views of several prominent Aboriginal commentators, including Lin Onus,
that Aboriginal art is about community concerns (see Neale 1995 [2003]; Onus 1993b; Yunupingu 1993).

The courses developed by McGuinness and others at Swinburne enhanced the young Koori artists’ understanding of cultural identity. Many of these urban-based Aboriginal artists were ‘untrained’ and perceived as second-rate, an essentialised notion situating many Aboriginal artists outside the arts establishment. However, the success of Lyn Briggs’ and Lyn Thorpe’s arts practices in their respective professions contradicts the mainstream perception, as pointed out by the Aboriginal artist, Brenda Croft (who is currently Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra) that ‘great art’ comes from academically trained artists (Croft 1992). Lin Onus also relied on his many experiences to inform his arts practice later in life, including his training as a motor mechanic (Neale 2000c). He was also subjected to mainstream exclusivist attitudes, which have recently been viewed as a way of keeping ‘untrained’ artists outside the ‘high art’ establishment, while perpetuating notions of southeast Australian Aboriginal art as second-rate and inauthentic (Neale 2000b; Neale 2000c).

**Adaptation in the 1970s**

Lin Onus was a major transformative figure and mentor for Aboriginal artists in the southeast. However, he was slow to achieve success (Megaw and Megaw 2000; Neale 2000c). During the 1970s, there was growing interest nationally and internationally in Aboriginal art from the Western Desert, in Central Australia. In 1971 and 1972 a group of Pintupi male artists, based in the remote Aboriginal community of Papunya, began painting with acrylics, telling their ‘Dreaming’ stories on board, canvases and most famously the school building (Bardon 2000; Johnson 2000b). This adaptation of ‘traditional’ arts practices to a contemporary acrylic art form inspired other Aboriginal artists from the desert to develop their practices in new and innovative ways. This also encouraged Aboriginal artists elsewhere in the country to create work, which could potentially tap into the burgeoning Aboriginal art market (see Bardon and Bardon 2004).
However, despite the achievements of remote area artists in the 1970s and the later recognition of urban-based artists, such as Onus and Nickolls, the arts practices of most Aboriginal artists in the southeast remained a ‘hidden history’. As in previous eras artists continued to adapt ‘traditional’ practices, often carrying on skills that had remained in families for generations. The lack of recorded information concerning community based artists during most of the twentieth century reflects the continuing attitudes concerning Aboriginal art in the southeast.88

As discussed in the previous chapter, for much of the last century, southeast Australian Aboriginal art and culture were marginalised, considered virtually non-existent, second-rate, and frequently associated with ‘tourist kitsch’. The fact that Lin Onus had learned many of his skills in his father’s boomerang factory meant that his work was categorised as commercial. It was associated with tourist art and therefore perceived as ‘low art’ (Neale 2000c). These sorts of attitudes continued throughout the 1970s, contributing to the devaluing of domestic style arts, and those which had functional as well as aesthetic purposes.

The reconfiguring of Aboriginal politics led to new approaches to arts practices, many of which were based on ‘traditional’ skills. For example, Lin Onus’ art in the 1970s reflected his attempts to come to terms with the plight of Aboriginal people across the country. His work, such as his portraits, which he began working on in the mid to late 1970s, became highly politicised (Neale 2000c)89. Onus’ life and work became a role model for visual artists in the 1980s. His politically active parents had provided a supportive environment for Onus and others to develop their artistic endeavours, as well as first-hand access to events, such as theatrical productions and political

88 Neither Nickolls or Onus received real acclaim for their work until the 1980s (Neale 2000c).

89 For example Onus’ ‘Mosquito’ series (1978-82) highlights his depiction of the nineteenth century Aboriginal activist and resistance fighter, the effects of colonisation on his people and his mistreatment by the authorities (Neale 2000c: 62-62). Also see Onus’ ‘Jandamarra/Sandiwarra’ series (1984-85), which depicts another nineteenth century resistance fighter. This series was first exhibited at Burrinja Gallery in Melbourne at the Gi Ji Bigi exhibition in 2005 (see Burrinja Gallery 2005)
campaigns, which enhanced their knowledge of issues affecting Aboriginal people. With this background Onus was able to embrace his culture and confront racism and discrimination. These issues were later explored through his artwork (Leslie 2003; Neale 2000c).


Image removed due to copyright.

Other Aborigines from the southeast, who did not have the relative stability of Onus’ upbringing and relied on the ‘welfare system’ to survive, faced many new hurdles in the 1970s. Prior to 1967, welfare policies had denied Aboriginal people their cultural heritage, and attempted to disempower them. The new policies, which ended ‘handouts’ and policies of assimilation in the southeast, meant that many people struggled to survive independently (Jackomos and Fowell 1991; Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. 2004; Victorian Aborigines Advancement League 1985). Racism continued to hinder people’s chances of long-term employment. Some continued to suffer the trauma associated with having or being ‘stolen children’, while others were coming to terms with their Aboriginality after years of ‘passing as white’ and denying their identity in order to avoid the intrusions of the authorities and discrimination from the broader community (Foley 1997; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997; Jackomos and Fowell 1991;
The survival of the new Aboriginal-controlled organisations was also problematic, since most relied on government funds and were subject to government intervention. During the 1970s, the bureaucracy had little experience of working with Aboriginal people and did not provide appropriate training for groups who had spent years living under the restrictions of the welfare system, whose education levels were low, and employment experiences limited.

Arts practices continued to develop and adapt in the 1970s. Although, most Aboriginal artists remained unknown, recent exhibitions, however, have assisted in recovering this art, and the public recognition of the artists.

The growing number of art exhibitions in the southeast over the last fifteen years means it is now possible to read about and see the work of artists from earlier periods. Two exhibitions held recently, which provide first-hand evidence of the continuing production and adaptation of visual and material culture during the 1970s have stimulated this awareness of arts practices during this time.

**Recovery and recognition**

The catalogue produced for the *Tribute* exhibition at the Koorie Heritage Trust in 2000 paid tribute to the works of fourteen deceased southeast Aboriginal artists (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000). The *Deadly Expressions* catalogue, a collaborative venture between the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria, reproduced selected works and biographies of over thirty artists, many of whom have been producing art since the 1970s. Works featured in *Deadly Expressions* were shown in the *Tribal Expressions* exhibition series held in Melbourne in 2003-2004. The *Tribute* and *Deadly Expressions* exhibitions are among recent initiatives which have uncovered the ‘hidden history’ of southeast Australian Aboriginal art from the 1970s until today.

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90 While the artworks in the *Deadly Expressions* catalogue are recent, these artists have been working over the past thirty to forty years, many having learnt their skills as youngsters while residing on missions with their Elders.
As the introduction to the *Tribute* catalogue declares, the collection at the Koorie Heritage Trust:

... is a showcase of the many different communities, as well as the diversity of media, all the works have one thing in common: each artist uses their work to express their experiences as Aboriginal people. Experiences are expressed either within traditional cultural practices and their interpretation, or by dealing with experiences of issues such as social justice, racism, deaths in custody, stolen children, spirituality and the continuing struggle for land rights and recognition in our own country (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000: 6).

Both the *Tribute* and *Deadly Expressions* catalogues include artists who were learning their skills before the political developments of the late 1960s. Some of these people were significant, not only for their art, but also for their work in advancing Aboriginal initiatives. The *Tribute* exhibition featured textile work by children’s rights advocate, Mollie Dyer (1928-1998), the daughter of the activist Margaret Tucker. Also included were sand paintings by Ralph Nicholls (1949-1996), a Yorta Yorta man and son of Sir Doug Nicholls. He was among the earliest to revive the designs used by his ancestors on possum skin cloaks. Other artists featured included Valmai Heap (1943-1991), a Yorta Yorta woman, and Emma (Emily) Karpany (1912-1988) from the ‘Tatiara language group’, whose Country is immediately over the Victorian border in South Australia. Their weaving reflected the contemporary colours and designs of the late twentieth century (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000).
The *Deadly Expressions* catalogue also featured people who, in the 1970s, were continuing the skills they had learnt from their Elders and interpreting them in new ways. They included Aunty Dot Peters, a Wurundjeri91 woman who grew up at Coranderrk, and learnt her basket weaving skills from her grandmother. Today, her work is featured in exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria. Aunty Zelda Couzens, a Kirrae Wurrung woman who grew up at Framlingham, was another prominent basket weaver in the 1970s and is still influential in reinterpreting the basket weaving practices from her area. Sam Kirby’s daughter Esther Kirby started designing emu eggs in 1977, and like many of her contemporaries continues the skills learnt from her Elders today (Arts Victoria 2004).

91 The Wurundjeri are a clan of the Woiwurrung, whose country lies within the vicinity of the Melbourne inner city and extends to the west. William Barak was a Wurundjeri man. For details go to: [http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/kulin/woiworung.html](http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/kulin/woiworung.html), accessed 12 June 2007.
At a recent conference held in Melbourne for Aboriginal artists, *Deadly Arts Business*, the keynote speaker Dr Richard Walley, an Aboriginal artist and arts advocate from Western Australia, applauded the contribution of southeast Australian Aboriginal artists in the 1970s to the development of a blossoming arts movement, acknowledging that at the time it was difficult for people in the southeast to have their arts practices recognised as authentic:

> [I]n the ‘70s…they were thinking, hang on you’re not supposed to do this, it’s only people up there in the north who are supposed to do it. Now it’s all over Australia and it’s accepted, but in those days it was quite novel. The arts can actually remember these people and their contribution and what they’ve done (Walley 2002: 10).

Although many of the artists featured in these exhibitions became more prominent in the 1980s, as attitudes towards Aboriginal art practices evolved, the people mentioned above continued to develop their arts practices throughout the 1970s. Their stories, while hidden from the public for much of their lives, are revealed in the exhibition catalogues, in the oral histories recorded by Alick Jackomos in 1991 (Jackomos and Fowell 1991), and on the recently constructed *Mission Voices* website. Many of the people whose stories are recorded in *Mission Voices* continue their arts practices and are respected community Elders, such as Uncle Sandy Atkinson, from Cummeragunja, who makes carved canoes and boomerangs; the wood craftsman, Gunai/Kurnai Elder, Uncle Albert Mullett; and the Gunai weaver, Aunty Eileen Harrison, whose grandmother was the prominent Lake Tyers basket maker Thelma Carter (Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. 2004).

Aboriginal arts practices throughout the 1970s existed in the everyday and were pursued within families and communities. The continuation of these practices in a domestic setting challenged essentialised notions about cultural disintegration. However, during the 1970s, the Aboriginality of people in the southeast was further contested. Their art remained peripheral to the

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92 The *Mission Voices* website contains significant first hand accounts by Aboriginal people who grew up on, or who had close associations with, the various missions throughout the State. Their stories reflect the effects of government policies on Aboriginal lives throughout much of the twentieth century. See http://www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/
emerging ‘contemporary Aboriginal art’ movement from the Top End and the Western Desert. Artists in the southeast had to contend with being excluded from the ‘high art’ world, as their artwork, including craftwork, continued to be marginalised as either kitsch or a degraded hybridised style that was indicative of the success of assimilation. The continued exclusion of Aboriginal art from the southeast arose from a Western art history preoccupied with ‘pigeonholing’ (Morphy 2001).

CLASSIFYING AND LABELLING

‘Postmodernism’

In the 1970s Aboriginal arts practices continued to adapt, reflecting moves away from assimilationist policies to those emphasising self-determination. Aboriginal communities in the southeast were also becoming more diverse as a result of increasing migration of Aborigines from elsewhere in the country. This inflow provided space for alternative interpretations of Aboriginality, further disrupting the dominant society’s notion of the ‘primitive’.

Despite being largely discredited as second-rate, Aboriginal artists from the southeast continued to create works reflecting the effects of colonisation; dispossession, alienation from land and kin, and disruption and change to culture. For instance, Lin Onus initially painted landscapes,93 which illustrated connection to land, but also reflected the limited choices available if Aboriginal people were to succeed as artists (Onus 1990 [2003]). By the 1970s, however, urban-based artists, such as Onus and Trevor Nickolls, were reinterpreting their original styles, deliberately embracing the hybrid status of their Aboriginality. The new and vibrant work of these ‘revolutionary’94 artists reflected the increasingly diverse nature and ‘mixed-heritage’ of Aborigines, as well as the politics of the day. According to Onus, Nickolls was ‘the great

93 Onus remained primarily a landscape artist until 1986, although he had painted portraits and political images from the late 1970s (see Onus 1990).

94 Use of the term ‘revolutionary’ follows Donna Leslie’s use as an alternative to the imposed labels of ‘traditional’ or ‘urban’ to describe Aboriginal artists working in a contemporary setting. She contends that it better represents the lived experiences of Aboriginal artists, especially given the political nature of much of their art (Leslie 2003).
innovator of the 1970s’, as he was the first to merge ‘European and Aboriginal imagery within his work’ (Onus 1990 [2003]: 93).

For Onus, his work’s hybridity reinforced his Aboriginality. ‘Mimicry’ of colonial landscapes allowed him to come to terms, to some extent, with his ‘yella fella’ status:

 Titles like half-caste were used and you didn’t fit anywhere at all and this gave me a lot of problems, because I couldn’t quite resolve the extent of my Koori-ness and I couldn’t quite resolve the extent of my whiteness95 (Lin Onus quoted in Neale 2000b:18).

Onus described his art as coming from ‘the Bower Bird School. You know the one – picking up bits and pieces, here and there, with no particular plan or formula’ (Lin Onus quoted in Neale and Art Gallery of New South Wales 1994: 116).


Image removed due to copyright.

Reproduced in Neale (2000c: 65)

This approach was symptomatic of southeastern artists’ endeavours to incorporate their Aboriginal and their non-Aboriginal heritage into their

95 Onus’ mother was Scottish. He remained strongly connected to his Scottish heritage throughout his life (Neale 2000c).
artwork, which contributed to reclaiming their diverse heritage and cultural understandings.

However, according to the art theorist Ian McLean, the strategies of Onus and Nickolls can now be described as ‘postmodern’:

Their relationship to identity and place becomes shifting, hybrid, pragmatic and inclusive. They become *bricoleurs*. In other words, they become all those things that postmodernists try to be (McLean 2000:43).

Their art in the 1970s adopted strategies which are today seen by the mainstream as representative of an early Australian postmodernism. Such practices influenced non-Aboriginal contemporary artists who by the 1980s were employing the techniques of ‘cultural convergence’ (or appropriation) in their art (McLean 2000). These techniques, which referenced Aboriginal imagery and appropriated it alongside the artist’s own work, were, as McLean had previously acknowledged, not without problems. He stated: ‘[p]robably the most contentious aesthetic strategy of postmodernism from an indigenous perspective is appropriation. It smells too much of imperialism’ (McLean 1998b: 132).

**Ambivalence and ‘cultural convergence’**

Although Aboriginal art might appear to display some of the elements of postmodernism, including appropriating imagery across cultures, it remains something different. The discourse of ambivalence posits that mimicry is a powerful tool in subverting the colonisers’ gaze. By adopting mimicry and thereby embracing hybridity, Aboriginal artists in the southeast cut across and destabilise the cultural divide. On hybridity, Ian Anderson notes:

> Aboriginal identities are formed within the context of colonial relations. Consequently, it would be unreasonable to expect Aboriginal people to ‘re-invent’ their self-representation without any reference to hegemonic language of race. The language and ideas of the colonial tradition would inevitably have echoes in Aboriginal self-representation. Otherwise we would be expecting people to form identities in the context of an ongoing experience of cultural racism,
and at the same time render the impact of such an experience totally without meaning (Anderson 1997: 11).

The term ‘postmodernism’, when applied to Aboriginal art of the 1970s, reveals yet another Western imposed label. Categorising Aboriginal artwork in this way once again locates it within a paradigm of Western art theory that is not driven by an Aboriginal imperative to depict the experiences of colonisation, but is another attempt to ‘pigeonhole’ artwork. The West by denying that it labels and interprets art within a colonialist paradigm denies Aboriginal art its own essentialism, where the artwork, rather than being defined by the West, is a concept which has been constructed within its own social and historical context. Thus, McLean explains that while some Aboriginal artists benefited ‘from the influx of postcolonial theory into art practice,96 others … see in postcolonial theory only the incorporation of Aboriginality into a postmodern neocolonialism’ (McLean 1998b:131). According to the theorist Robert Young’s analysis of the dichotomous nature of colonial power, postmodernism may be yet another way of stereotyping and representing the Other so that the artists can be ‘appropriated and controlled’ (Young 2004: 183).

Rather than defining and classifying Aboriginal art as ‘postmodern’, perhaps it is better to reflect on Homi Bhabha’s critique of the ambivalence of colonial encounters, where the Other, in the process of reclaiming its identity, at once embraces and denounces the coloniser, in order to disrupt the authority of the colonial gaze. This is achieved through mimicry (deemed admirable by the coloniser, since the Other is becoming more like them), while the Other is mocking and reinterpreting the experience of colonisation. This is a disturbing prospect, for ‘mimicry is at once resemblance and menace’ (Bhabha 1984: 127). Bhabha contends that mimicry of colonial discourse is compelled to be ambivalent, as the coloniser never really wants

96 Urban-based artists such as Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett and Destiny Deacon have embraced postmodern techniques. Moffatt and Bennett particularly argue that ethnicity marginalises and would prefer to be known as Australian, rather than Aboriginal artists. However, these artists are able to comment on their Idigeneity in ways that non-Aboriginal or Western artists cannot (McLean 1998b).
the colonial subject to be an exact replica of the him/herself. The colonised Other is attracted to the coloniser's interventions (as it is enmeshed in the colonial encounter), yet resists and opposes them, thus subverting the assumed power and control of the West over the identity of the Other (Young 2004: 188). This is represented in the works of Lin Onus, who adopted Western painting techniques to critique colonisation. Thus, Aboriginal art in the southeast, through the processes of mimicry, has enabled Aboriginal agency. Mimicry is ‘a process which simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes the position of the coloniser’ (Young 2004: 188). As Young argues, it initiates:

… a loss of control for the coloniser, of inevitable processes of counter-domination produced by a miming of the very operation of domination, with the result that the identity of colonizer and colonized becomes curiously elided (Young 2004: 188).

The concept of mimicry contrasts with hybridity, which ‘decentres’ the authority of the coloniser. Southeastern Aboriginal art in the 1970s positively acknowledged the power of cultural hybridisation, which as Bhabha notes, is a ‘strategic reversal of the process of domination’. It resists the authority of the colonial power, by intervening subversively and reclaiming the process as a way of recognising the diversity of Aboriginality (Bhabha 1985: 154). For Aboriginal artists in the southeast, a hybrid art style was not necessarily about postmodernism, but may be, as the cultural theorist Leela Gandhi argues, the recognition of ‘an in-between space of cultural ambivalence’ (Gandhi 1998: 153). For urban-based Aboriginal artists, their hybridity appears to be a powerful means of resisting colonial control. The cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis states:

Being an urban Aboriginal is not a contradiction in terms. The authentic pulse of Aboriginal culture is not automatically stunted by the ‘contact’ with city life ... Hybridity, as a concept for the process of cultural exchange has lost its earlier stigma, it is no longer an indicator of faked personas, declining values, or corrupted culture. Hybridity has also been the perspective with which the violent relations between cultures has been highlighted (Papastergiadis, 1998: 91).
Labelling Aboriginal art as postmodern imposes a Western construct on the art and ignores the multiple influences on and cultural diversity of Aboriginal identity, rather than allowing Aboriginal artists to define the work themselves in ways meaningful within their culture.

Hence, it is argued, Aboriginal artists in the southeast knowingly ‘mimicked’ the dominant culture, deliberately highlighting the multidimensional nature of Aboriginal culture through hybridisation. Their art emphasised, yet simultaneously transformed the coloniser’s gaze: a form of resistance which has allowed their stories to be told in new and powerful ways, highlighting shifting and multiple identities within specific social and historical contexts (Neale 2000c; Schneider 2006). Such strategies acknowledged the loss of many aspects of Aboriginal culture, while recognising the diversity and influences of contemporary Australia on Aborigines (Caruana 2003; Sykes 2000).

Onus’s work reflects the challenges he faced in representing his cross-cultural heritage. Postmodernism, while initially denying Aboriginal artists in the southeast a place alongside other artists in renowned gallery exhibitions (McLean 2000), allowed them, by turning the ‘hybrid’ into a form of ‘high art’, to assert their sense of place and self.

**Appropriation and Postmodern art**

By the 1980s, many non-Aboriginal artists embraced postmodernism. They were breaking down boundaries in the broader art world by questioning ‘high art’. However, urban-based Aboriginal artists had been using a hybrid style for some years, as a response to colonial discourse. By the 1980s artwork was becoming more universalised. For instance, Lin Onus used imagery from nineteenth century European landscape painters, such as Eugene von Guerard, northern Australian Aboriginal iconography including rarrk, and later, Japanese woodcuts such as Hokusai’s *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, alongside his own signature styles (which included portraiture, landscape and individual totems such as the dingo), to portray Australian culture. Non-Aboriginal artists, including Juan Davilla and Immants Tillers, began to do the same (Kerr 1999; Kerr 2000).
During the 1980s non-Aboriginal artists, who were embracing postmodern strategies, and including Aboriginal imagery in their work, became acclaimed as ‘avant-garde’ and innovative. These techniques were challenged in the 1980s as paradoxically Aboriginal artists in the southeast continued to remain invisible, their art largely misunderstood and marginalised (McLean 1998b; McLean 2000; Morphy 2001). Aboriginal artists and art historians in the 1980s and early 1990s vocalised their dismay about the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery under the guise of ‘postmodernism’. The Queensland Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley accused the ‘postmodernists’ Tim Johnson and Immants Tillers of ‘[s]tealing from Aboriginal culture’ (Fiona Foley quoted in McLean 1998b: 132). The Aboriginal art curator and daughter of Charles Perkins, Hetti Perkins, with curator Victoria Lynn pointed out that:

… rather than seeing it as a post-modernist strategy that suggests the modernist notion of progress towards some ideal point, Aboriginal
artists see it in the context of colonialist power relations between dominant and oppressed groups. It becomes a form of symbolic colonization (Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn quoted in Morphy 1998: 416).

Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal artists associate different meanings with postmodern styles. Postmodernism for non-Aboriginal artists provides the space to appropriate images from other cultures. However, for urban-based Aboriginal artists, the term is restrictive. It can be viewed as another justification for the dominant culture to control Aboriginal identity, this time within a postcolonial aesthetic reminiscent of a form of cultural imperialism, one that risks ‘an Australian art history that look[s] far too white’ (Kerr 1999: 237). In later years such arguments became further politicised as the right to paint images from Aboriginal culture intersected with the contentious issue of copyright (Johnson 2000a).

Reclaiming and Reinterpretation in the 1980s
The trend to postmodernism in the Western art world provided an opportunity for Aboriginal artists in the southeast to explore their stories in a contemporary ‘postcolonial’ context (Morphy 2001). After the election of a Labor government in 1972 which increased resources to Aboriginal affairs and organisations, various government initiatives were continued under the conservative Liberal government led by Fraser and later Labor governments led by Hawke and Keating (Sutton 2001). These included the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) of the Australia Council, which provided Aboriginal artists with a degree of autonomy, as some limited funding became available. The increasing marketability of Aboriginal works also reflected contemporary tastes for a diversity of aesthetics. Artists were now freer to refer to ‘traditional’ forms and tell contemporary stories reflecting an Aboriginal perspective of Australian history and society (Caruana 2003; Myers 2002).

The art of contemporary Gunai artist Ray Thomas (b. 1960) reflects these influences. He developed a style that allowed him to reclaim his Aboriginal history by blending cross-cultural aesthetics. He was heavily influenced by the photorealist landscape style of Lin Onus:
[In the] mid 70s about '74, I was introduced to Lin Onus. … This period in Lin’s career he called his ‘landscape days’ and that time spent with Lin was what ignited the spark in me for painting … He set up an easel for me beside his easel and I attempted to sort of copy the painting that he was doing, giving me a few pointers as we worked through stages of this particular painting.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

However, it wasn’t until after the appointments of Charles (Chicka) Dixon as the first Aboriginal chairman of the AAB, in 1983, and of Gary Foley as Indigenous Director in 1984, that funding for urban-based arts programs became more accessible for artists in the southeast, including Thomas (Foley 2000; Myers 2002; Neale 2000b; Rowse 2000). In the 1980s, the growing Aboriginal arts movement began to be articulated by government as an ‘industry’ rather than as a form of ‘cultural preservation’ (Myers 2002: 186). For Thomas, increased funding meant more involvement in arts related projects as well as in training programs. One of the earliest projects Thomas was involved in, as a trainee on the Aboriginal Advancement League’s Community Employment Program in 1983-4, was the League’s Northcote Koori mural (Ray Thomas, interview October 2004), which remains a local icon. This project allowed him to work on a large scale design collaboratively with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists for almost a year (Darebin City Council 2000; Darebin City Council c.2000).

The emerging artist Les Griggs (1962-1993) was also involved in the community-based project. Griggs, a Gourndidjmara man, had been institutionalised since childhood; his life reflected the policies of assimilation and the removal of children from their families. At the time of the mural project he was a prisoner in Pentridge Gaol in Melbourne, and was released

97 Bernard Luthi discusses the involvement of Gary Foley, Lin Onus and Bruce McGuinness in the AAB in the 1980s. Their diverse interests and ‘individual inclinations’ were influential in creating awareness of urban Aboriginal art. Chicka Dixon and Gary Foley replaced the formerly white panel with an Indigenous one, a step towards self-determination that was met with suspicion from the white establishment (Luthi 2000).

98 The council land was sold some years later and the mural relocated to the AAL’s current location in Thornbury, Melbourne (Darebin City Council 2000).
to pursue the artwork. Lin Onus had met Griggs in prison while he was working with Koori prisoners interested in art (Leslie 2003).

Under Onus’ encouragement, Griggs found an artistic voice for his experiences, developing a distinctive iconographic style that incorporated elements of his Gourndidjmara background and the effects of colonisation, such as drug abuse, dispossession of land, and imprisonment (Griggs 1990a; Neale 2000c). For Griggs, painting was a political act; his works continue to carry powerful messages. In 1990 he stated that: ‘I paint about the lifestyle we’ve been forced to choose rather than the lifestyle we could have had by choice without colonisation’ (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000: 14).79 After his premature death, Griggs left a legacy of images, which were a reminder of the effects of colonisation. These images included ‘syringes, coffins, handcuffs, locks, keys, and prison bars – representing drug addiction and incarceration’ – painted symbolically in a style that is ‘a visual declaration of the artist’s cultural heritage’ (Leslie 2000b: 597). In 1990, Griggs stated:

I think it’s important for me to communicate with people who have no concept of what that kind of life is about; to try and paint so that they can stand in front of it, and read it, and understand it, and maybe put a bit more thought into what they’re doing next time they sit in a jury or next time they start labelling people without knowing the full facts behind the situation (Griggs 1990a: 83).

79 For more information on Les Griggs, see (Griggs 1990a; Griggs 1990b; Leslie 2003).
Collaboration and Exchange
The Northcote Koori Mural project was one of several initiatives in the Melbourne area in the mid 1980s, which resulted from persistent struggles for Aboriginal self-determination. These initiatives led to the development of organisations to assist Aboriginal artists, including the Koori Information Service, the Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), which had been operating since 1973, and the Koori Kollij, which emerged in 1982 from the VAHS and Swinburne College courses of the 1970s (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. and Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Victorian Aboriginal Health Service 2006).

Through these organisations, Lin Onus continued to contribute to the development of arts practices amongst a younger group of Aboriginal artists, including Ray Thomas and Lyn Thorpe. In 1983, he was appointed artist in
residence at the Koori Information Centre in Fitzroy (Foley 2000). Lyn Thorpe remembers the influence Onus had on her as an artist there:

Lin was our artistic mentor. One day he asked me why did I do Aboriginal painting? I wanted my work to reflect who I was and how I saw things as a Black woman. I remember thinking at the time why he asked that. Lin was teaching us how to do landscapes and how to use different mediums


These young artists were deploying arts practices that reinforced identity and provided an alternative view of history. A conceptual shift in the practice of art was occurring in the Aboriginal arts sector, which applauded the appropriation or ‘quotation’ of images from the dominant culture and allowed a ‘transfer of meaning – even ownership – from the imperial maker to the colonised subject’ (Kerr 2000: 484). As the art historian Joan Kerr argues appropriation or ‘quotation’ as practiced by Aboriginal artists provides an Aboriginal view of history, as it gives people a language in which to articulate an identity politics, which reclams and positively promotes difference and hybridity. By including symbols that are obvious to the Western world alongside others which are less readily identifiable, such as Aboriginal totems, Aboriginal artists are using ‘quotation’ (rather than appropriation) to reclaim history and reconstruct colonialist views of themselves (Kerr 2000).

This ‘transfer of meaning’ was also incorporated within the Aboriginal worldview of art as accessible to all. Thus, the murals reflected Lin Onus’ belief that ‘real art is for everyone and something to be shared’ (Neale 2000c: 120). The AAL mural and later the mural at the VAHS in Gertrude Street (1984-1985), emphasised community ownership and participation, and also established Aboriginal histories for a wider audience. The VAHS mural also provided another opportunity for Thomas to work with Onus.

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100 At the Koori Information Centre, Onus was once again involved with Bruce McGuinness who was Chairman of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service. McGuinness asked Onus, along with artists from the Koori Kollij and The Koori Information Centre, to coordinate a mural for the Health Service (Foley 2000: 37; Neale 2000c: 120-121).
Onus was also interested in developing comic strips, which drew attention to Koori issues and provided Koori kids with positive role models in the form of superheroes, such as Onus’ cartoon character, ‘Kaptn Koori’. These cartoon images, developed alongside Onus’ paintings of Aboriginal resistance fighters, were intended ‘to portray the plight of his people and an understanding of “things Koori” to the viewing public’ (Neale 2000c: 121-122). In 1988 Onus was able to lead the ‘first-ever cartoon workshop for Aboriginal artists’, including the emerging artists Ray Thomas and Karen Casey, along with others who were experts in this form of work. At this workshop Onus began to embrace the humorous elements in his work as they coincided with the political (Neale 2000c).

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101 See footnote 89.
102 Karen is also a participant in this project.
Cross-cultural Exchange

The event that had perhaps the most significant impact on Onus’ arts practice occurred in 1986 during his time as the Victorian representative on the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. The Board held meetings throughout the year in various Aboriginal communities around the country. He made his first trip to Arnhem Land as a representative of the Board, and went sixteen times over the next ten years to the Community of Maningrida. His ongoing relationship with that Community secured his understanding of the
meanings and values of certain stories and accompanying iconography, to such an extent that he was adopted into the Wunuwun family.  

Onus’ involvement with Jack Wunuwun specifically led to a ‘spiritual and linguistic revival that greatly assisted with the rediscovery of those lost things’, which were then reflected in Onus’ art. He also noted that:

After spending time with Jack I found that I no longer looked at the landscape in the panoramic sense, although that still happens occasionally. I discovered that there had been a change in perception – a change in vision. I was to become much more aware that I was looking at the ground and noticing the foot-marks, looking up in the trees and really seeing for the first time what was there. In addition, I also noticed that I developed a sense of humour (Onus 1990 [2003]: 94).

The trips were not only significant for Onus’s arts practice, but were also defining moments in his cultural development. For Onus these trips, which were often reciprocated when his adopted Maningrida family and other artists from the community visited Melbourne, provided opportunities to work collaboratively on a range of projects (Neale 2000b).

While working in collaboration with the Maningrida community, significantly with his adoptive father Jack Wunuwun, Onus was granted knowledge and rights to incorporate symbols and designs from that region into his art, including the rarrk designs (also known as cross-hatching), a ‘traditional’ feature of Arnhem Land artwork (Neale 2000c).

103 For further details see (Jordan 2000; Neale 2000c; Onus 1990; Onus 1990 [2003]).

104 For Lin Onus, like Trevor Nickolls, the ‘quotation’ by these artists of other Aboriginal communities’ iconography followed the practice of ‘traditional’ exchange. As Morphy explains: ‘Aboriginal artists who incorporate elements from other regions in their works do so with due regard to the network of rights within which they are embedded ’ (Morphy 1998: 415)
Lin Onus’ Manangrida experiences were a significant factor in the reclamation of his own culture; they enabled cross-cultural collaborations which assisted greater understandings about southeastern arts practices (Onus 1990). His works were often ‘major collaborative projects’, which illustrated ‘a pattern of shared influences’ (Eather 2000: 56). Onus himself explained, ‘I hope … that history may see me as some sort of bridge … between … cultures’ (Lin Onus quoted in Neale 2000b: 21).

By the end of the 1980s, Lin Onus’ work was significant in encouraging Aborigines in reinterpreting their art in the context of contemporary life. Also, in the 1980s, Aboriginal-run organisations assisted in the development of individual styles, which contributed to a Koori aesthetic amongst Aboriginal artists in the southeast.

105 Collaboration and exchange were conducted in several ways, which illustrate the importance of exchange in gaining rights to use particular images. For example Eather notes that Onus used his mechanical knowledge to fix trucks in Arnhem Land as another form of reciprocity and exchange (Eather 1990).
These Aboriginal-run organisations grew out of earlier campaigns in the 1970s for self-determination. The introduction of Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) was also instrumental in providing funds. For instance, Koori Screen Printers in Fitzroy; a place where T-shirts were screenprinted with original Koori designs, sponsored Thomas in the mid 1980s, providing him with $500 to acquire a ‘heap of quality paints, and a decent easel’ (Ray Thomas, interview October, 2004). However, the incorporation of images that were distinctively Aboriginal in design was not without challenge, as Ray Thomas explains:

[In the ] mid ’80s to late ’80s … I didn’t know what our ‘traditional’ art was down here in Victoria. So I, like a lot of other people, urban artists, straight away jumped on the dot painting market bandwagon, and also I started doing the ‘cross-hatch’ from Arnhem Land, the x-ray art style, believing this is Aboriginal art and thinking this is how we painted all over the country … Here’s Lin incorporating the ‘Top End’ style and animal imagery so I thought it must be all right as I looked up to Lin as a leading mentor. One time I remember speaking to Lin and he mentioned the people up north having concerns with people down this way, the southeast mob, using all the dot painting style and the cross-hatching. So that sort of made me think, ‘Ah! maybe our artwork was different down this way’. So then I began to try and look at some other type of designs which were going to be my own… And then late ’80s somebody said ‘Oh you should come into the Museum in Melbourne here (the old Museum)... because there’s these shields … from Gippsland in our collection ....’ So ... I went in there and ... had access to all these shields from Gippsland ... I sketched them into my sketchbook which I’ve still got at home…and from that day on it was like switching on the light. ‘Cause I thought well this is traditional from my area. They were absolutely stunning design[s], the lineal work. Fine etched line work into the wood …

That just completely changed my thinking about my art and myself as an artist and from that day on I never painted dots again and the cross-hatching style, because I’d found something which was mine. Part of my culture, my identity and who I am and from my area...
At this point of time Lin developed a hybrid style with his own work. By this time he was a leading mentor to many Indigenous artists. By combining the two cultures, traditional Aboriginal art and the Western landscape genre together, [this] took his art career to another level. So I was thinking how I could incorporate that concept into my work. I came up with this, like a little signature thing now recognised in my work, which is a tear … with the landscape in the front, with the corners peeling down and then I’ve got the traditional line work behind it, so I’m saying ‘Well this is a different landscape and this is our traditional culture, our artworks from that area’, so I … began to paint with more integrity in my work. Even though I didn’t know a lot about what the designs meant, the patterning, because a lot of that information wasn’t gathered with the shields when they were handed in or collected.

Ray Thomas, October 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

Description: Crabs and background n cross-hatching syle. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust
The use of ‘hybrid’ styles and ‘quotation’ was enriched by the Aboriginal concept of exchange, which provided a means of reinterpreting and reclaiming Indigenous practices in the south. In this way, artists in the southeast, such as Onus, and later Ray Thomas and Les Griggs, were able to assert a ‘resistant collective identity’, which, as argued by the postcolonial theorist Ella Shohat, provides a means for colonised peoples to reclaim their histories in ways that are significant to their communities (Shohat 1992).

Thus, art practices in the southeast that were initially driven by a colonial imperative, where an Aboriginal view of history was denied, were disrupted through the adoption of what have become known as postmodern practices, which provided alternative representations of history and opened discourses about cross-culturalism, denial and oppression. By the mid-1980s publicity surrounding Aboriginal art and culture facilitated the appreciation of difference, rather than the ‘scientific’ approach of cultural anthropology (see Luthi 2000). For non-Aborigines, the unknown elements of Australia’s past were gradually infiltrating the wider community, as self-determination
demanded that Aboriginal people be heard from their own perspective. The establishment of community-controlled organisations which allowed Aboriginal people to voice their concerns within a culturally sympathetic environment reflected the way art was used to facilitate discussion and tell stories about Aboriginal history (Luthi 2000).

**Keeping Places**

Ray Thomas’ interest in designs from his own area reflected a wider Aboriginal concern for the protection of their cultural heritage. The establishment of Keeping Places and cultural centres as storage houses for cultural artefacts, bases for tourist enterprises, and arts and crafts enterprises, evidenced the increasing popularity of Aboriginal art and culture, both nationally and internationally.

One of the first Keeping Places in Victoria was established in Shepparton in 1980, to educate and foster awareness of local Aboriginal culture and to be a tourist outlet for Koori artefacts (Sculthorpe 2000). Keeping Places were established by many communities in the 1980s. The repatriation of artefacts and human remains from museums became a pressing concern, which led to the establishment of one of the most important places in the protection, growth and development of southeast Koori art and culture. 106

In 1985 the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) was established by Jim Berg, a Gourndidjmara Elder and a case worker at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, after contentions arose over human remains held in the Murray Black collection at the University of Melbourne (Auty 1995). 107 Berg, with the assistance of two White lawyers, Ron Merkel and Ron Castan, was successful in having the remains returned to communities on the Murray

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106 Uncle Sandy Atkinson, a participant in this project, was one of the founders of the Bangarang Keeping Place at Shepparton (Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. 2004; Sculthorpe 2000). He was also one of the first Board members for the Koori Heritage Trust (Uncle Sandy Atkinson, interview November, 2004).

107 Since Jim Berg’s initial success in the repatriation of human remains, (see Berg v University of Melbourne 1984), there have been a number of other successful actions to control cultural heritage, see (Du Cros 2002).
This led to a working group being set up to deal with repatriation issues and with finding somewhere for repatriated items to be stored. The formation of the KHT was also guided by the imperative to buy back and collect heritage items and significant sacred objects. The launch of the Trust and the repatriation of cultural heritage from museums to other appropriate Keeping Places in the southeast also challenged the Western scientific model of collection, by replacing colonialisit values with those drawn from Indigenous perspectives that considered Aboriginal control of Aboriginal knowledge and materials (Lennon et al. 2001; Turnbull 2000).

The Koorie Heritage Trust has been one of the most successful Aboriginal-controlled enterprises in Victoria. It has the explicit intention of preserving the culture of southeast Aboriginal people. The influence of the Trust on the development of artists and the continuing development of artists in the southeast today will be discussed in the next chapter.

The ‘authenticity’ of southeast Aboriginal art
The 1980s was ‘a time of unprecedented Indigenous cultural revival all over Australia’ (Altman 2000b: 395). Towards the end of the decade, Aboriginal art was increasingly seen as a way of representing Australia internationally. The Aboriginal curator and scholar Margo Neale, in her section of the Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture, writes of the growing interest in Aboriginal art that saw it become a highly prized commodity, nationally and internationally, as it moved from the relative obscurity of the 1970s to become an international phenomenon by the 1990s (Neale 2000b).

However, art in the southeast continued to be considered disparagingly. As Neale writes, the ‘gaze was directed northward’ and only work from the Centre and Top End of the country was considered truly authentic Aboriginal art. Hence, in 1984, following the continued under-representation of their art in the mainstream, an all-Aboriginal exhibition was promoted in Sydney, called Koori Art ’84. This was the precursor to several

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108 These remains had been collected by a pastoralist George Murray Black from the Renmark and Swan Hill areas between 1930-1951 (Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 9).
exhibitions where southeast artists were, for the first time, given the opportunity to demonstrate ‘the possibility of infiltrating white art spaces’ (Neale 2000b: 267-270).

These exhibitions raised the profile of artists who were previously unknown to the public and each other. The Koori Art ’84 exhibition was a major turning point in relocating Aboriginal art from the ethnographic to the contemporary. The Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative established in Sydney in 1987 grew out of this exhibition (Caruana 2003; Sutton et al. 1988). It was established by ten Aboriginal artists, including Bronwyn Bancroft, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley and Jeffrey Samuels to create opportunities for ‘urban’ Aboriginal art (Croft 1990).

Boomalli became a significant resource for Aboriginal artists in the southeast. As Lin Onus stated, it was probably ‘the most exciting initiative to develop during the 1980s [where a] seemingly eclectic group of young Aboriginal people … were … united in the political struggle as both Aboriginal people and artists’. While it was primarily for artists living in and around the Sydney area, it became ‘an important outlet and focus for artists all over the country’ (Onus 1993b: 292). However, despite Boomalli’s achievements, no equivalent in Victoria was forthcoming. Aboriginal art from that region remained a paradox. Aborigines in Victoria had been among the leaders of political and social reform, however, their arts practices, like many of the people themselves continued to be perceived as anomalies.

Collections: Aboriginal art and museums
Despite general concerns surrounding issues of authenticity, in the 1980s the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and Museum of Victoria (now Museum Victoria) began collecting Indigenous art from the southeast more intently. While the Museum had ceased collecting work from Victoria in the early twentieth century, the reinvigoration of cultural practices in the later decades of the century saw it reappraise its collections policies. The Museum also employed Aboriginal staff, allowed people to access its collections and repatriated significant material culture, including human remains, to communities, as a practical contribution to early attempts at reconciliation.
(Altman and Hunter 2003; Greenwood 2005; Sculthorpe et al. 1990). The NGV only began to seriously consider collecting Aboriginal art (mainly from the more remote areas) in 1984, after it was recognised as a separate entity to the Museum; this also evidenced changing attitudes, as previously most Aboriginal ‘art’ had been transferred to the Museum’s collection (see Ryan 2004a; Vaughan 2006).

Changes in the appreciation of Aboriginal art saw the conception of Aboriginal art gradually move from the ethnographic to an art history approach. While the changes had meaning for Aboriginal artists in the north, in the southeast a prevailing lack of interest in their artwork continued. Hence, southeast artists and their art practices remained outside the ‘high art’ world. Despite the dramatic gains in Aboriginal self-determination and an awareness of issues confronting Aboriginal people in the southeast, discrimination continued to isolate artists until almost the end of the century.
7. ‘CAN’T SEE FOR LOOKIN’: SELF-DETERMINATION & ABORIGINAL ART

I believe it’s time that we put the work of Victorian Aboriginal art and craft on show in this State. Our Stories, Our History, Our People

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004


From the end of the 1980s, Aboriginal people, like their predecessors continued to contest mainstream attempts at controlling their lives. Their ongoing demands for self-determination and self-management, in which they had achieved some success in the 1970s, had by the 1990s embraced Aboriginal concerns and endeavours more broadly. There was a ‘realignment of social policies’ including more extensive rights for Aboriginal people within a legislative framework’ (National Native Title Tribunal (Australia) and Australian Government Solicitor 1998: 1). Such frameworks fell within a paradigm of social justice, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Many of these endeavours were structured to support the wellbeing of groups and individuals against discrimination and disadvantage, by increasing their capability and capacity to make flexible choices about the way they lived their lives (see Nussbaum 2005). In reflecting on these initiatives, this chapter reviews this period and asks the question: how realistic were these approaches for Aboriginal people, specifically for Aboriginal artists in the southeast for sustaining and developing arts practices?

By the 1990s a number of government funded bodies controlled by Aboriginal people had been established. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) set up in 1990, funded Aboriginal art and tourist enterprises, Keeping Places, and other organisations, among many other initiatives to assist Aboriginal people in achieving some degree of equality. The report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was released in 1991, following nationwide investigations into the
disproportionately high number of incarcerated Aborigines. This inspired the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation under the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991. In 1992 the rejection of the notion of terra nullius resulted in the Mabo decision, leading to the Native Title Act 1993. By 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission had reported on the ‘stolen generations’, about children taken since the protectionist policies were enacted in the nineteenth century (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997; Johnston 1991; National Native Title Tribunal (Australia) and Australian Government Solicitor 1998).

However, the shifts in policy based on international human rights and social justice did not address the continuing daily disadvantages that Aboriginal people contended with. Adequate health programs, education, decent housing, and employment prospects continued to be less accessible than for the majority of the population (Sutton 2001). While there were significant gains made by Aborigines, as a group they remained embedded in colonial constructs of the Other. In the southeast, Aboriginal identity was consistently denied as Aborigines from this region did not fit the universal view of Aborigines as ‘traditional’ and surviving in their ‘natural state’ (Gray 2000).

The contradictions and misinterpretations regarding Aboriginality in the southeast contributed to continuing misunderstandings about Aboriginal art. Apart from a handful of people, including Lin Onus, Aboriginal artists in Victoria remained largely unknown and their works unexplored by mainstream art historians and curators until the 1990s.

Aboriginal artists sought to determine how their communities were recognised and portrayed by reinterpreting and recontextualising images from Australian history. Artists from northern Australia, particularly Central Australia, were becoming widely acclaimed internationally, while the majority of artists in the southeast received limited recognition. Their marketability remained entangled in debates about ‘authenticity’ and the ‘traditional’. Urban-based artists contended with continuing essentialisms, which endorsed a fixed Aboriginal identity, locating their art in the ‘ethnographic’ and ‘primitivist’ mould.
These poorly conceived constructions of Aboriginality were challenged by artists, who attempted to integrate their art in the dominant culture by reclaiming their status as the Other and constructing artistic expressions of their hybridity. This was also emphasised in Aboriginal communities, where, although embracing their differences, they were also beginning to reflect an increasingly multicultural Australian society.

Artists, many of whom were becoming art school trained, reread history, introducing new technologies in their arts practices, including ‘conceptual art’ and ‘photomedia’. Their work challenged assumptions concerning ‘real’ (that is ‘remote’) Aboriginal art, and attracted a broader and more receptive audience (Benjamin 2000; Perkins 2003). Thus, the art historian, Roger Benjamin noted that:

The politically contentious nature of much urban art, which in the 1980s seemed to discourage the attention of art critics, in the 1990s attracted a vital stream of sophisticated writing … Indeed, the cultural logic and visual techniques of younger urban Aboriginal artists find a match with the criteria of postmodern art critics. Along with Fiona Foley, Destiny Deacon, and Julie Gough, [Tracey] Moffatt and [Gordon] Bennett reuse kitsch and historical imagery in vivid appropriations that interrogate Australian history and identity. For many critics their formulations have a grand ethical resonance (Benjamin 2000: 469).

Aboriginal urban-based artists were actively contesting the restrictive assumptions about how and what they should create. Many, such as the ‘postmodern’ artists Moffatt and Bennett (as well as artists interviewed for this thesis), prefer to have their art seen as ‘art’, rather than being confined to the category of ‘Aboriginal art’ (Benjamin 2000). However, for most artists, especially those from outside the remote areas, whose work did not equate with a Western essentialised ideal of ‘Aboriginal art’, they continued to struggle to have their art appreciated on its own terms. Inherent racist attitudes prevailed, denying Aboriginal artists the capacity for their work to be recognised as ‘contemporary art’ (Langton 2003b). Such attitudes provoked Lin Onus to raise the question, ‘When does an Aboriginal become an Australian?’ (Onus 1990 [2003]). Hence, from the late 1980s onwards a
series of events and a number of Aboriginal artists, writers and curators highlighted and challenged attempts that continued to restrict Aboriginal art to a 'primitivist' paradigm.

**ART AND SURVIVAL: 1988-1990**

**Bicentenary 1988**

The Bicentennial year in 1988 saw a greater focus on Indigenous affairs and the arts. While it was essentially a celebration of two hundred years of European nationhood, Aboriginal people around the country contradicted the long-held notions of *terra nullius* and peaceful settlement. Lin Onus remarked on the irony of the Bicentennial celebrations:

> 1988 represented the two hundredth anniversary of the so-called discovery of the Australian continent. Aboriginal people were alternatively puzzled and indignant, pointing out that they had been here for many tens of thousands of years … (Onus 1993a: 11).

For Aborigines the celebration came to be known as Survival Day (Goodall 2000). Protests and ‘unofficial’ art exhibitions provided alternative views of history. Many of the protests were devised for political embarrassment (Beckett 2000).

Aboriginal art was used as part of the official celebrations, often controversially. Lin Onus observed that:

>T]he dominant culture sought to involve Aboriginal participation in the bicentennial in one way or another. A series of Aboriginal art postage stamps was commissioned, large touring exhibitions were organised. One objective, no doubt, was to signal to the outside world the erroneous notion that white Australia lived in harmony with its indigent [sic] population. Many artists, for example, were heard to complain when they discovered that works that had been acquired at another time were turning up in some form of bicentennial exhibition, thereby
implying that the artist approved of this situation (Onus 1993a: 11-12).109

Significant issues of copyright also arose; mainstream exhibitions often used ‘stolen designs’ that were incorporated into marketable products to meet increasing tourist demand for Aboriginal images, which was a direct consequence of the bicentenary and subsequent celebrations (Johnson 2000a: 476).

Throughout the year, Aboriginal artists challenged the ‘official’ view of Aboriginal art and culture by staging a counter-analysis of events. Their exhibitions showed contemporary Aboriginal art as part of a living culture, and presented an Aboriginal interpretation of history that contradicted ‘the colonial accounts of Australian history being celebrated during the bicentenary’ (Neale 2000b: 272). Margo Neale comments that the chosen forms of media were the most ‘democratic’ used in the production of ‘popular culture’ including cartoons, printmaking and photography (Neale 2000b: 273).

Printmaking and art boom and bust
Printmaking became one of the most effective means of expressing issues of identity and history. The significant Aboriginal Australian Views in Print and Poster exhibition, first produced by the Print Council of Australia in Melbourne in mid 1987, was curated by the art historian Christine Watson and the Aboriginal artist from New South Wales Jeffrey Samuels. It provided a forum for artists from the north and the southeast to showcase the diversity of Aboriginal designs and art styles in a form that relied on Aboriginal understandings of arts practices and not on mainstream notions of printmaking. Hence, it provided urban and regional artists with opportunities to explore their Aboriginal heritage in ways denied during the years of assimilation, and to reclaim their identity through innovative techniques and adaptations of art forms (Samuels and Watson 1987b: 29).

109 For details of events and exhibitions Lin Onus participated in throughout 1988 and 1989 relating to the Bicentenary, see (Neale 2000c: 122, 130). This included print workshops and exhibitions, as well as the ‘Cummeragunja Walk On’, in commemoration of the ‘Walk Off’ in 1939.
However, Jeffrey Samuels realised the difficulties involved for artists from the southeast in reclaiming knowledge of arts practices and their Aboriginality. Like Lin Onus and Ray Thomas, artists from the southeast who incorporated ‘traditional’ style designs in their work required new systems for interpreting and reviving their cultural practices. Often these comprised ‘communication and agreements’ with Aboriginal artists around the country, as well as researching arts practices from ethnographic texts. The exploration of Ancestral southeastern art, and the use of ‘traditional’ practices from elsewhere, as well as relaying contemporary experiences, assisted in reinvigorating contemporary southeastern Aboriginal art (Samuels and Watson 1987b: 29).

In the Print and Poster exhibition, artists focused on political messages. Karen Casey’s ‘Land Rights’ poster was about ‘oppression and near genocide’ of Aboriginal people (Samuels and Watson 1987a: 31). ‘The Fitzroy Postermakers’, who lived in the Fitzroy high rise flats in Melbourne, Melissa Jones, Alan Mow and Eddie Sweeney, designed their poster to ‘shock’ the public by confronting them with the continuing injustices towards Aboriginal people. It was based on a photo of John Pat, a sixteen year old Aboriginal youth from Roebourne in Western Australia, who had died in custody in 1983 (Samuels and Watson 1987a).

Plate 7.1    Karen Casey. Land Rights, 1987

Image removed due to copyright.

Poster. Reproduced in Luthi (1993: 325)
The rapid rise in the appreciation and marketing of Aboriginal art during the Bicentenary year could not be sustained in the economic recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Isaacs 1992). However, printmaking helped to secure some economic reliability. The ‘democratic’ nature of printmaking, with its collaborative approaches and reasonable prices, allowed Koori art from the southeast to reach a wider audience. Some artworks were created as limited edition fine art prints; many became valuable historical documents, including posters produced for land rights campaigns (Hall 2000b: 284; Tremblay 1990; Watson 1990).

By the end of the 1990s, Aboriginal artists were renowned internationally for their printmaking skills. The Australian Print Workshop in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, continues to host Aboriginal artists on a regular basis (Hall 2000a). In 1999, it collaborated for the first time with Bunjilaka (the new Aboriginal Centre at Melbourne Museum), to bring artists together in a workshop with the Museum’s collection of Aboriginal artefacts. The subsequent exhibition *Ulambara* (‘meeting place’) was among the first to showcase the diversity of contemporary reinterpretations of ‘traditional’ southeast Australian Aboriginal designs in print form (Carter 2000). The workshop also reflected a growing interest by artists in the southeast to familiarise themselves with the ‘traditional’ designs from their Country and to incorporate them in their art. Although this work contrasted with more overtly political printmaking, which had assisted in reinforcing identity in the previous decade, these new styles continued to challenge the notion that Aboriginal cultural production in the southeast had ceased.110

110 For a discussion of the rise of poster art as a medium for communicating Aboriginal issues to the broader public, and breaking down barriers between ‘high art’ and ‘popular culture’, see (Hall 2000b: 281-283). Also see anthropologist Maggie Brady’s analysis of the use of posters in the social marketing of Aboriginal health (Brady 2000) and Lin Onus’ comments on the importance of posters in allowing Aboriginal commentaries on social and political issues (Onus 1993b: 294-295).
Today posters continue to advertise political issues concerning health, land rights and the survival of Australian Aborigines. Such an example is the development of posters for the annual National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebrations, which began in 1957. NAIDOC has used posters to promote the event from at least as early as 1967. While a poster is chosen by one Aboriginal artist from around the country each year (this has included artwork by Richard Mullett, a Gunai man, from Orbost in 1995 and Jirra Lulla Harvey, a Yorta Yorta woman in 2004), a visible progress from photographic depictions of Aboriginal political struggles in the 1970s and early 1980s, to a revival in the power of depicting images through drawing and painting, parallels the increasing awareness and confidence in an Aboriginal aesthetic from the late 1960s onwards (see Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2007).111

111 The Koorie Heritage Trust held an exhibition Looking Blak from 11th July – 24th August 2007, a retrospective of NAIDOC posters, to celebrate NAIDOC’s fifty year anniversary.
**Plate 7.3** Richard Mullett (Gunai), Orbost Victoria, *Justice not Tolerance*, 1995

![Image removed due to copyright.]


**Plate 7.4** Jirra Lulla Harvey (Yorta Yorta). *Self Determination: Our Community - Our Future - Our Responsibility*, 2004

![Image removed due to copyright.]


**Dreamings 1988**

The *Dreamings* Exhibition, with anthropologist Peter Sutton as head curator, toured the United States in 1988-89. Its aim was to highlight Australian culture and tourism by focussing on the growing phenomenon of Aboriginal art (Myers 2002: 240). It challenged ‘traditional’ notions of Aboriginal art by
locating Aboriginal artists within a postcolonial paradigm that reflected the contemporary face of Aboriginal Australia. The exhibition became renowned for raising international awareness of Aboriginal arts practices (Wright and Mundine 1998).

While the accompanying catalogue was a scholarly work, which discussed ‘traditional’ and contemporary Aboriginal art including southeast Aboriginal artists, there were no southeast Australian artworks in the exhibition, nor Aboriginal writers of catalogue sections (see Morphy 1998; Morphy 2001; Sutton 1989). Funding issues meant that the exhibition was scaled down and that Sutton had to use the catalogue to cover many issues left out of the exhibition (Myers 2002).

However, funding aside, one factor in the omission of urban-based art from the exhibition was the political nature of the work. The exhibition organiser, Andrew Pekarik from New York, told the American anthropologist Fred Myers that:

There is too much pain. They [the audience] don’t like accusatory art. People want something they can feel more positive about (Pekarik quoted in Myers 2002: 242).

Thus, ‘urban’ art was too politically challenging for the Dreamings exhibition, while the inclusion of art from remote areas reinforced notions of the ‘traditional’ Other, authenticity and the benign Aborigine.

The exhibition featured many acrylic works on canvas from the Western Desert alongside barks from Arnhem Land. Both were exhibited as contemporary Aboriginal art, employing distinctly Aboriginal iconic images. As Morphy remarked: ‘Such Aboriginal art seemed to be simultaneously ‘primitive’ and ‘avant-garde’ (Morphy 1998: 376-377; Morphy 2001: 47). However, the positioning of the works in the exhibition, with the barks at the beginning and the acrylics later, led more than one reviewer to comment on the evolutionary nature of the art (Myers 2002).

Although the contemporaneity of the art was emphasised, to the average viewer it remained ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art, a product of the Other. The curators justified the exclusion of southeast Aboriginal art on the grounds
that ‘[t]he number of Aboriginal artists in the cities is still small, and in quantity
and quality their work, on average, does not compare with that of people from
remote areas’ (Sutton and Anderson 1989: 1). This attitude reinforced ill-
conceived notions of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture as being from remote
areas. As the cultural theorist Toby Miller explains, such notions cater to
national and international misperceptions that Aborigines cease to be
interesting once they become ‘modern’ (see Miller 1994). The work of
southeastern Aboriginal artists continued to be confined to kitsch, tourist or
folk art, misunderstood as a corrupted version of the ‘traditional’ and ‘taken as
a sign of their assimilation’ (Morphy 2001: 47-48). Aboriginal ‘contemporary’
art could only be classified as ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art provided it met some
obscure measure of exoticism. Marcia Langton describes this as a lingering
perception within the popular consciousness that sees ‘indigenous
Australians’ cultural practices as exotic, primitive and “unknown”’ (Langton
2003a: 46). Previously she had remarked that this was a sign that ‘the
“otherness” of Aboriginal art remains virulent’ (Langton 2000: 11).

EXHIBITIONS, SELF-DETERMINATION AND COMMUNITY
CONTROL

Aratjara 1993
In 1989, the economist Jon Altman observed that Aboriginal art sales had
steadily increased throughout the 1980s. There were also more Aboriginal
controlled arts centres, mainly located in remote areas and to a lesser extent
in the southeast. Most sales of Aboriginal art overseas were tourist or
ethnographic art; only a small percentage was ‘fine art’. Selling and exhibiting
Aboriginal art was complicated by these labels and also by categorisation as
authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ (Altman et al. 1989: 22-23).112 Aboriginal art and
artists generally remained outside ‘the global canon of fine art’ (Langton
2000:11). As the curator Brenda Croft acknowledged, this meant that ‘only
certain types of designs were acceptable as Indigenous art’ (Croft 2000: 85).

112 Statistics concerning the sale of Indigenous art in the 1990s, both locally and
internationally remain scant (Altman 2000a). Acquiring precise figures of the market
However, in contrast to *Dreamings*, the exhibition *Aratjara* (‘the messenger’$^{113}$) in 1993 responded to calls for self-determination and Aboriginal control over their own arts practices. *Aratjara* was staged in Europe from April 1993 to May 1994, as a result of the Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board Gary Foley’s campaign, mainly in reaction to the Bicentennial celebrations and exhibitions, to have Aboriginal art presented in ways determined by Aboriginal people, rather than as constructions of a post-colonial aesthetic. Foley, Chika Dixon and Lin Onus, along with Bernard Luthi (a Swiss artist and academic), other Aboriginal artists and art curators, organised a travelling exhibition in Germany, England and Denmark (Luthi 2000; Luthi and Lee 1993; Wright and Mundine 1998). *Aratjara* was realised five years after the Bicentenary, indicating the difficulties and frustrations the organisers encountered in securing support, venues and funding (Peebus 1994).

The *Aratjara* exhibition enabled Europeans to see first-hand the diversity of Aboriginal art. The event reflected an Aboriginal perspective; the art was critiqued, curated and made accessible through public lectures by Aboriginal art experts, such as Djon Mundine (Luthi and Lee 1993; McDonald 1994; Onus 1993a). The collaborative approach between fine art experts and the Aboriginal community challenged previous assumptions about the staging of ‘high art’ exhibitions, especially at an international level.

The exhibition’s catalogue was detailed and diverse, edited by Luthi and the Larrakia artist and scholar Gary Lee. Over half the essay contributors in the catalogue were Aboriginal. The exhibition and the accompanying publication countered the practice of non-Aboriginal anthropologists and art historians as expert commentators on the ‘art’ of the Other. As Onus noted:

today also remains limited. This is most probably a result of the disparity in the market concerning the types of art sold in Australia and exported (that is for the tourist or fine art market), as well as the different networks and size of the sector involved in the sale of Aboriginal art and craft (see Parliament of Australia: Senate Committee 2007: 5-14).

$^{113}$ Felicity Wright (1998) provides this translation. There is no direct acknowledgement of which Aboriginal language group it is from.
The exhibition ARATJARA is a testimony to resoluteness and [the] dogged determination [of Gary Foley and Bernard Luthi] …

Central to the thinking of both men was the notion that the artist should communicate directly with the viewer, free of any arbitrary or imposed curatorial filters. Aboriginal art and its ethos has been examined, dissected and pronounced upon innumerable times by non-Aboriginal experts, yet rarely so by Aboriginal people themselves (Onus 1993a: 11-12).

Aratjara featured work by Aboriginal artists from around Australia. It was exhibited only in art museums, being one of the first exhibitions to challenge the preconception that Aboriginal art belonged in ethnographic museums or was merely tourist art. Luthi later noted that the exhibition:

... was the first major survey in Europe of the diversity of the contemporary art of Aboriginal Australia. Its content and conception were realised … in consensus with Aboriginal artists, curators and administrators and in collaboration with European art galleries (Luthi 2000: 52).

Lin Onus wrote an essay in the catalogue titled ‘Southwest, Southeast Australia and Tasmania’, which draws attention to the similarity of the artists’ experiences from these regions. This is reflected in their art, and to the significance of their work in articulating the social and emotional effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people. Onus also emphasised the significance of place in the development of southeast Aboriginal artists’ work. His accounts of the artists residing in Victoria, such as himself, Les Griggs and Karen Casey, as well as artists emerging in the early 1990s, such as Treahna Hamm, reflected their diverse styles, mediums and subject matter. None of the Victorian artists Onus mentioned, apart from McRae and Barak, used ‘traditional’ designs from the southeast. This suggests that the practice of reclaiming ‘traditional’ markings, as discussed by Ray Thomas in the previous chapter, was still in its infancy at this time.

The contemporary Aboriginal artists from Victoria, whose art was shown in Aratjara, articulated their identity in ways that drew on their lived experiences. Les Griggs’ work told the story of drug addiction, reflecting ‘the
raw reality of the inner urban environment’ (Onus 1993b: 291). Like many of Griggs’ paintings, the work chosen for the exhibition had dots in the background. This use of iconically representational Aboriginal imagery by urban-based artists in the early 1990s meant that their work was distinctly Aboriginal. However, as Griggs’ partner Megan Griggs (now Evans) noted, Les ‘developed his own unique style which is not borrowed from traditional Aboriginal art’; his paintings were ‘distinctly Aboriginal but also distinctly his own’. Griggs had been denied knowledge of his own culture and his ‘traditional’ designs. By adapting and ‘quoting’ readily identifiable iconography and images in his work, his art was instantly associated with his Aboriginality, thus contributing to ‘regenerating the culture of Victorian Aboriginals’ (Griggs 1990b: 88).

Plate 7.5 Les Griggs (Gourndidjmara). *White Line, Black Death*, 1988

![Image removed due to copyright.](Image removed due to copyright.)

From *Aratjara* exhibition. Reproduced in Luthi (1993: 128)

Karen Casey’s work in *Aratjara* included her Land Rights poster from the Aboriginal *Australian Views in Print and Poster* exhibition, and the eerie *God is on our Side* painting. This was painted in 1991, the same year as her widely acclaimed work *Got the Bastard*. Both works explored the effects of colonisation, feminism and Aboriginality on her identity (Onus 1993b: 292-
She explained her inspiration for *Got the Bastard* in an interview for this thesis:

The work has multiple levels of interpretation. On the surface it refers to the act of genocide committed on my Ancestors and to the annihilation of native species. It's a very emotionally charged painting … Looking back on that part of my life it was a time where I was going through a lot of inner turmoil about my own identity and sense of self … I'd never experienced discrimination as an Aboriginal person. In fact I wasn’t aware of my Aboriginal heritage until about the age of 13 and back then it was more like ‘Wow isn’t this interesting. It gave me a real sense of belonging to this land, but living in Tasmania we weren’t exposed much to racism of any kind … It did express my frustration at the inequality and repression one experienced as a woman at the time though, so it was very cathartic. But it wasn’t until much later that I realised that I was actually coming to terms with how I had actually been suppressing certain aspects of my intuitive feminine nature to survive and compete in what was then still very much a male dominated society.

Karen Casey, October 2004

**Plate 7.6**  
Karen Casey. *Got the Bastard*, 1991

![Image removed due to copyright.](image_url)

Reproduced in Caruana (2003: 214)
Although Aratjara prioritised Aboriginal perspectives, for Aboriginal art to be accepted internationally as ‘fine art’, Aborigines had to battle continuing misconceptions about their arts practices. In the 1990s Aboriginal art became increasingly subjected to neo-colonial representations of Aboriginal culture. In Europe the colonial tropes of the ‘primitive’ ensured that Aboriginal art remained an ‘ethnographic curiosity or … an expression of mystic qualities associated with ‘new-age’ thinking’ (Wally Caruana quoted in Smee 2002). Such attitudes continued to render Aborigines and their culture within an unchanging past, exacerbated by the tyranny of distance and a general lack of knowledge about Australia. Aboriginal art was also restricted by issues of the authenticity of contemporary Aboriginal art regardless of its provenance, inconsistent and restrictive labelling, the sometimes ‘mediocre’ quality of the work found in the commercial galleries of Europe and the United States, and ignorance of Aboriginal art and culture. These factors meant it was difficult to display Aboriginal art in fine art commercial galleries overseas. Aboriginal artists frequently relied on non-commercial art museums to provide exhibition space and educational material to explain the extent and breadth of their work such as Aratjara (Smee 2002).

The Cologne Art Fair Affair
Despite Aratjara being seen by over 250,000 people, in 1994 Aboriginal art, including work by artists from remote communities and urban-based artists such as Leah King-Smith (a Queensland Aboriginal woman living in Melbourne), was banned from the Cologne Art Fair on the basis that it was ‘folk art’ (Wright and Mundine 1998). A similar ban at the 1998 Cologne Art Fair indicated a lingering inability within the fine art world to distinguish a ‘living, identifiable artist’ from a colonialist representation of ‘anonymous tribal artisans’. There was no differentiation between ‘tourist trinkets’ and ‘contemporary traditional art’, which once again positioned Aboriginal art as ‘anthropological artefacts’ or second-rate folk art and craft (McDonald 1998).

114 Caruana was Senior Curator at the NGA from 1984-2001 and is now an independent consultant on Aboriginal art (Caruana 2003).
Thus, issues of authenticity and labelling continued for Aboriginal artists. Art from remote areas was not contemporary, if it had any association with the ‘traditional’ and was related in some way to the distant past. Artists from more urbanised regions struggled with issues of authenticity and acceptance as ‘Aboriginal artists’. Both groups contended with mainstream denial of their status as contemporary Australian artists (Mundine 1992; Onus 1990 [2003]; Wright and Mundine 1998).

As Langton notes, such restrictions continue today, especially when the uninformed become the so-called voices of authority. She explains:

Innovation in Aboriginal art … is regarded with suspicion; it is somehow not appropriately ‘primitive’, even though those who hold the suspicion might know nothing whatever about the history of art in Australia. They seem to be entirely unaware that Aboriginal art is an artefact of the colonial encounter. While all human societies have artistic traditions that provide a window on the ideas generated by culture, when artistic traditions become engaged across cultural borders, the results can be complex social phenomena, not easily perceived or understood, especially in the colonial and postcolonial worlds (Langton 2003b: 86).

Alternatively, by embracing the Aboriginal voice Aratjara challenged longstanding colonial assumptions about Aboriginal art, revealing new and alternative stories. As Brenda Croft explained the year before the Aratjara exhibition:

We desperately need our own curators, conservators, reviewers, writers, registrars … people able to work in all areas of the arts industry to ensure that marginalization ends and that longevity and quality are the key issues in the expansion of the Aboriginal arts industry (Croft 1992: 22).

‘WHERE IS ‘URBANIA’?’

Continuing restrictions of labels
The ‘urban artist’ label, coined in the 1980s to distinguish the work of those residing in the more populated areas of the country, had by the 1990s
become restrictive, denying artists in the southeast a place in the contemporary arts scene, as they and their work continued to be deemed ‘not really Aboriginal’ (Perkins 1993 [2003]: 100). As Brownyn Bancroft stated: ‘For years we were punished for being black, now we’re punished for not being black enough’. (Bronwyn Bancroft quoted in Perkins 1993 [2003]: 100). Later Djon Mundine wondered ‘where is Urbania?’ (Fink 1999).

Southeast Aboriginal artists’ work had limited access to ‘high art’ exhibitions. Few private galleries in the major cities held their work, and for most of the 1990s Lin Onus was the biggest drawcard in Victorian Aboriginal art. However, Boomalli Aboriginal Arts Co-operative continued as an inspiration for artists from Victoria in developing ways for showcasing and exhibiting their work.

Boomalli promoted autonomy and self-determination and was pivotal in facilitating Aboriginal curatorial practices. Its legacy continues today (Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative 1993; Croft 1990; Neale 2000b). In this context an astute group of artists and arts workers used their skills to draw attention to the diversity of arts practices in Victoria and to collaborate with different organisations.

**Can’t See for Lookin’ – Koori Women Artists Educating 1993**

The *Can’t See for Lookin’* exhibition in 1993, articulated the capacity of women artists living in Victoria to create art which was uniquely Aboriginal, yet also commented on the place of contemporary Aboriginal people in the southeast. The title was also salient as the Aboriginal women artists fought to have their work displayed in a female only exhibition. This ‘challenged stereotypes about Kooris’ being ‘blackfellas’ doing dot and bark painting, and emphasised the ongoing nature of Aboriginal women’s art from the southeast, despite its hidden history (Fraser 1993: 23). The exhibition included artists who had little cultural connection with their communities alongside those who grew up knowing about their heritage. Many of these artists struggled against racism and ostracism by exploring and voicing their history and experiences through their art.
This exhibition was also significant in providing an education resource kit, which was the result of a collaboration between the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and the Women’s Art Register. This project, initiated by the Aboriginal community, and designed by many of the artists involved in the exhibition, including Maree Clarke, her late brother Peter Clarke and sister-in-law Sonja Hodge, provided teachers with a kit for exploring issues of racism through women’s art, while challenging the stereotypes about Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people in the southeast (Harvey et al. 1992).

The education kit broke new ground for Aboriginal artists in the southeast. Participating artists told stories for classroom use, and provided knowledge of Aboriginal ‘cultural, historical and social issues’ from an Aboriginal woman’s perspective. The kit was divided into two parts: background information about the twelve artists and their work, and an educational toolkit for teachers that provided practical strategies for cross-cultural learning, including slides of the art. This material showcases the early achievements of many artists and has contributed to the expansion of the Aboriginal art network in the southeast (Harvey et al. 1992). The implementation of Koori perspectives in the education curriculum reflected the broader political agenda as set out in the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and moves towards reconciliation (Fraser 1993; Harvey et al. 1992).

The women’s stories emphasise the significance of arts practice in reinforcing identity. Kerri Kruse, whose ‘traditional’ connections to country were lost when her grandmother was stolen as a child, noted that: ‘Koori art was healing for me. It gave me the chance to re-examine my Aboriginality in a positive context, to begin the long process of building an identity of my own’ (Kerri Kruse in Harvey et al. 1992: 62).

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115 Kerri Kruse grew up near the Framlingham Mission. Her family were not ‘traditionally’ from that area and while her family were accepted by the local Aboriginal community, she experienced racism and denial of her Aboriginality, which she was able to come to terms with through her art and with the support of other artists, including Maree Clarke and Karen Casey (Kerri Kruse in Harvey et al. 1992).
The accompanying exhibition, held at the NGV in June 1993, also provided the general public with an opportunity to explore issues of Australian history and culture from Aboriginal women’s perspectives. While the exhibition catalogue contained only a brief summary of each artist’s background and work, it remains a significant account of the development of southeast Aboriginal artists in the early 1990s (see Clarke et al. 1993).

The women in the Can’t See for Lookin’ exhibition reflected the diversity of Aboriginal culture in Victoria, with over half claiming cultural connection to Country outside Victoria. Nevertheless all have contributed to Aboriginal arts practices in the State. Their art reflected their experiences as Aboriginal women, and the political and social situations of the Aboriginal community over decades. As with Aratjara, the catalogue presented discussions of the artwork by the artists, rather than ethnographic descriptions. The works ranged from reinterpretations of pre-invasion art forms, such as Connie Hart’s weavings and Maree Clarke’s echidna quill jewellery, to more contemporary styles, such as Donna Leslie’s paintings and Destiny Deacon’s and Ellen Jose’s photographs. Some, artists such as Treahna Hamm and Lisa Kennedy, explored ways of reconnecting to culture, while others, like Karen Casey and Gayle Maddigan, explored themes of discrimination, injustice, and survival (Harvey et al. 1992). While their work was contemporary, it highlighted the dualisms and multiplicities of Aboriginal art and history.

In her artist’s statement for the exhibition Karen Casey explained:

My Aboriginality is one of a spiritual nature rather than a cultural one. To me it represents a deep connection to the land, a sense of truly belonging to this country…

I draw inspiration from the land and my work is connected with Koori spirituality and social values, but essentially my themes are universal.

116 1993 was the United Nations International Year for the World’s Indigenous People. There were other exhibitions and initiatives promoting Aboriginal culture, apart from Can’t see for Lookin’, as well as ‘opportunities for bureaucratic organisations to respond to the aspirations and demands of Aboriginal people, and to make cultural capital out of these responses’ (Healy 1993: 6).
I don’t use traditional imagery because, first, I don’t have the right to do so, and second, it does not relate to my own cultural upbringing. This is why my work does not fit most people’s preconception of Aboriginal art (Harvey et al. 1992: 32).

Casey reiterated these points in an interview in 2004. Her practice disrupts preconceptions about Aboriginal art and highlights the tensions surrounding the individual’s perception of Aboriginality. While embracing the hybrid\textsuperscript{117} nature of her work, Casey questions the imposed discourse of Aboriginality:

My early prints and paintings were often confronting social commentaries on racial and gender inequality and environmental issues. Stylistically they were fairly expressionistic; I tended away from imagery that was identifiably Aboriginal. Later my work embodied more universal themes and I began to explore and combine different media.

Karen Casey, October 2004

Thus, Aborigines do not necessarily have to bear the ‘burden of representation’ (McLean 1998a). As the Wiradjuri artist Brooke Andrew states, there are any number of articulate Aborigines with their own ‘personal views’. However, there is a White imperative to fixate on a collective Aboriginal subjectivity rather than one which is individual (Andrew and Minter 2006: 141-146).

The fact that there have been more Aboriginal curators since the 1970s means there are more Aboriginal artists telling Aboriginal stories their way (Butler 2003; Langton 2003a; Russell 2001). The debate is moving towards a dialogue among the ‘Blak’ intelligentsia and non-Aboriginal academics about how Aboriginal artists wish to view themselves. Although this is reminiscent of the debates about language during the ‘Black Power’ movement in the 1970s, it has moved into the sophisticated domain of ‘high art’ criticism, the limitations of stereotypes and the need for open discussion concerning different ways of understanding and talking about Aboriginal art. In other

\textsuperscript{117} For commentary about reclaiming of the word hybrid, see (Paradies 2006: n 7)
words these issues are complex. Categories remain restrictive, yet there is a need to explore them in order to facilitate Aboriginal-control of art production. This can be achieved using an Aboriginal controlled discourse, which is Aboriginal yet also respects individuals' ways of speaking about themselves, their art, and the contexts which have influenced their work (Museum of Contemporary Art 2005).

**A Community Controlled Arts Centre**

In 1993 the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation (EGAAC) was established to represent six Aboriginal communities between Sale and the NSW border. It received external funding from 1997. Vicki Couzens, a participant in the current study, recalled at a conference in 2002, the beginnings of EGAAC:

> In 1990 or so, Uncle Albert Mullet ... rounded up a few of us younger people ... and he was talking up his vision of an Indigenous artist's organisational collective ... that included all visual and performing arts, and it was an idea that divided we fall but if we could get together, united we have much more strength. His vision was an Indigenous arts organisation that would empower and resource artists, give us a voice and help each other out ... (Couzens 2002).

EGAAC continues to operate as an artists' collective. Located in Bairnsdale it includes the Krowathukooloong Keeping Place and supports a diversity of arts-related programs, including the visual and performing arts, community arts, advocacy, information, support and resourcing, and community-based skills development. EGAAC’s activities, such as workshops and education initiatives, stimulated interest in reclaiming and regenerating local designs and arts practices, while supporting culture (Koorie Business Network et al. 2002).

Lee Darroch, a participant in this study and former manager of EGAAC, stated in a seminar held during the Regional Arts Conference in Horsham in October 2004, that the corporation continues to do a lot of things that haven’t made money, that assist wellbeing and self-esteem. These have included weaving workshops, mentoring artists, and supporting Koori cultural camps and cultural days (Field Notes 23rd October 2004).
EGAAC remains the only community-controlled Aboriginal arts organisation in the State (Koori Business Network 2006).

**SPACE, PLACE AND RECONCILIATION**

**Another View Walking Trail**

In 1995, the Melbourne City Council (MCC) commissioned Ray Thomas and the non-Aboriginal artist Megan Evans to collaborate on a series of public art installations,\(^{118}\) assisted by the Queensland Aboriginal writer Robert Mate Mate (Evans et al. 1995; Leslie 2000a). Galiambale Aboriginal Men’s Recovery Centre\(^{119}\) residents were also recruited to assist with a number of designs. They were actively involved in creating the mosaic near the Queen Victoria Gardens (Plate 7.7). Their involvement emphasised the significance of the collaborative nature of the project (Evans et al. 1995).

**Plate 7.7** Ray Thomas and Megan Evans. *Another View Walking Trail*, Site no.11, 1995. Photograph by Vicki Jones

Detail of pavement mosaic, Queen Victoria Gardens. ‘This pavement mosaic illustrates the Rainbow Serpent appearing from deep within the earth, rising to the surface and submerging again. The footprints lead the viewer towards the next site’. Reproduced from slide no.33 in Slide List in Evans (1995)

\(^{118}\) Both artists had worked together previously on public artwork, notably the mural now located at the Aboriginal Advancement League, see previous chapter.

Another View Walking Trail comprises seventeen sites, including thirteen art installations, in Melbourne's central business district. The artworks are located at significant sites of remembrance for the Aboriginal people of the Kulin nation. They include mosaics, carved poles and glass boxes, and paintings on everyday objects, such as electricity boxes and benches. The works are linked by the Rainbow Serpent, a universal symbol from Aboriginal creation stories, suggestive of 'life, death and rebirth' (City of Melbourne 1995; Evans et al. 1995). Some of the works represent the tribes of the Kulin nation.

Plate 7.8 Ray Thomas, Another View Walking Trail, Site no.9, 1995. Photograph by Vicki Jones

Detail of the concrete seat on the lower level of the Yarra Footbridge. ‘The painting portrays a scene of traditional daily Aboriginal life on the Birrarang (Yarra River) before white settlement. It appears as if the concrete is peeling back to reveal a harmonious scene from this location over two hundred years ago’. Reproduced from slide no.29 in Slide List in Evans (1995)

These ‘counter-memorials’ reinterpret historical sites from European occupation (Ware 2004). Other works reinterpret European histories of Aborigines at colonisation, including the journals and letters of the protectors George Augustus Robinson and William Thomas, as well as artwork by William Barak (Evans et al. 1995).
The artworks gave rise to several disputes which highlight contestation around cross-cultural consultation, the reconciliation process, and Aboriginal history. For instance, a community Elder complained that the Melbourne City Council (MCC) had not consulted with the appropriate Wurundjeri Elders about a mosaic adaptation of William Barak's *Ceremony* paintings (see Morris 2001). While the mosaic is still outside Parliament House, the complaint demonstrated the need for appropriate community consultation and negotiation and also the complicated and contested nature of reconciliation, since the mosaic risked being viewed as a White ‘tokenistic’ bureaucratic endeavour that extended White settler hegemony and emphasised the limits of Indigenous politics (Jacobs 1997: 203; Moran 2002; Morris 2001).

Although *Another View Walking Trail* was aimed at increasing public recognition of Aboriginal history and its association with place. Different understandings and relationships to place were revealed when the proposed installation outside the Victorian Supreme Court was also contested, following the publication of an article in the *Australian Financial Review* titled ‘Melbourne Plans a Guilt Trail of White Occupation’ (Callick 1995). The Chief Justice criticised the artwork for neglecting to consider “the “good work” that
the justice system was currently doing’ (Morris 2001: 187). The work, which referred to a massacre, was to be located under the statue of justice, but was deemed too controversial for general public consumption (Leslie 2003; Morris 2001).

These divergent understandings of ‘place’ demonstrate ‘multiple, intersecting social, political and economic relations, giving rise to a myriad of spatialities’ (Hubbard et al. 2005: 6). Differences in spatial understandings resonate with the Aboriginal artist and academic Donna Leslie’s argument, which ‘points to the difficulties some Australians encounter in contemplating histories presented from Aboriginal or collaborative perspectives’ (Leslie 2000a: 403). Ultimately they reveal the superficiality of the reconciliation process.

Perhaps in light of the controversies encountered during Another View, the MCC has promoted strategies which entail appropriate consultation with members of the Aboriginal community. From an Aboriginal perspective consultation is essential to the success of any project involving Aboriginal issues (Adams and Spratling 2001; Langton 1994; Langton and Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (Australia) 1994). In 1999, the MCC set up the Indigenous Arts Advisory Panel (IAAP), to advise on Indigenous arts programs and funding (City of Melbourne 1999). It has now overseen several public art installations, including the Art of Reconciliation projects (see Hawkes and Crofts 2002), including the ‘Toom-buk Toomnangi’ – Telling Their Stories Banners (2000), which comprise silk screened banners by prominent Victorian based Aboriginal artists, including Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm, Maree Clarke and Ray Thomas, with contemporary interpretations of ‘traditional’ designs. The banners are flown around the CBD during NAIDOC week each year (City of Melbourne 2007a; Hawkes and Crofts 2002).

‘Scar’: A Stolen Vision
Another installation, ‘Scar’: A Stolen Vision (2001), like Another View, remains a permanent fixture in the city, though it has moved from its original location. Initially located in the city square as part of the MCC’s celebration of the centenary of federation, the poles were shifted to Enterprise Park (City of
Melbourne 2007b), a relatively secluded area of the city, where their presence is generally unnoticed, creating little controversy or public reaction. It consists of thirty poles, constructed by Aboriginal artists residing in Victoria and curated by Kimba Thompson. These highlight the diversity of Aboriginal culture in the State and as Kimba explained, contribute to healing the ‘spiritual scars of Indigenous people and give a sense of pride as a nation’ (Kimba Thompson in Message Stick Online 2003a). They cover issues dealing with the stolen generations, land rights, citizenship rights and reconciliation (Hawkes and Crofts 2002).

However, the general obscurity of the poles tends to undermine the potent messages they were intended to convey. This mirrors the moves away from the notion of ‘symbolic reconciliation’, embraced by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments between the years 1991-1996, to those more recently endorsed by the conservative former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard of ‘practical reconciliation’. This process has endeavoured to dispense with so-called ‘black armband’ views of history and concentrate on ‘practical’ outcomes, and to move away from acknowledging the significance associated with visual representations of Aboriginality, especially those which embrace the unique social, political and historical experiences of Aborigines. The focus has shifted to those which consider individual rights, as opposed to the more ingrained problems associated with over two hundred years of dispossession and discrimination (see Altman and Hunter 2003).

While the sociologist Michael Morrissey argues that the Hawke-Keating years of the 1980s and early to mid 1990s were more ‘rhetoric’ than ‘outcome’, the situation following the 1996 election of the Howard government deteriorated, ‘not from good to bad but from bad to worse’ (Morrissey 2006: 348-349). The government removed many of the advances of the Keating years. In this context it is remarkable that Aboriginal initiatives in the arts continued to expand and develop.

In this section, I argue that over the last eleven years, despite relative federal government inertia in the field, arts practices in the southeast have slowly achieved recognition in a more globalised art market. There has been a visible resurgence of practices in contemporary contexts across many different fields, including, tourist art and ‘high art’.
We Iri, We Homeborn
The *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition in 1996 provided many of the Aboriginal artists interviewed for this thesis with an opportunity to have their work exhibited in large and professionally curated art spaces, including the National Gallery of Victoria. It was a significant turning point for many Aboriginal artists in Victoria. This exhibition was the brainchild of Maree Clarke and Kimba Thompson, who had been employed in 1994 by the City of Port Phillip’s new Koori Arts Unit (Ballyhoo Publicity 1996). These were the first positions identified specifically for Aboriginal people in Victorian local government.120

Maree Clarke had moved to Melbourne from Mildura in the early 1990s. In an interview concerning her involvement in the *Scar* exhibition, she recounted her introduction to public art projects.

> [Then], there was barely any Aboriginal art, public artworks out in the community. … I painted a tram for the Koorie Heritage Trust in ’88 and then, from there, just went on to much bigger public art projects (Maree Clarke in Message Stick Online 2003a).

In 1988 Maree was living in Mildura, where she managed the Aboriginal art shop Kiah Krafts. She had been commissioned by the local Aboriginal cooperative in 1987 to open an outlet for local and national Aboriginal art and craft. She then moved into her own jewellery-making venture and, later, photographic work (Greenwood 1990). Once in Melbourne she became better known for her public art installations. She has also curated and collaborated on a number of works around Melbourne from the early 1990s until today. Her expertise and skills as an artist and curator are essential in her current role as exhibition manager at the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) and for the success of most of their exhibitions.

Over six days in early 1996, Clarke and Thompson collected art-work from around Victoria in a ‘two-tonne truck’, for the *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition.

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120 The City of Port Phillip’s Indigenous Arts Unit continues to promote, produce and present high quality Aboriginal art and cultural events, including annual NAIDOC week events and the biannual Bless Your Big Blak Arts Festival (City of Port Phillip 2004; City of Port Phillip Koori Arts Unit 2000). Also see [http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/indigenous_community.html](http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/indigenous_community.html), accessed 12 May 2007.
exhibition, which included over 100 artists from across the State (Maree Clarke, pers. comm. November 2003; Kimba Thompson, interview September 2004). The exhibition ran over five sites in Melbourne throughout July 1996 in celebration of NAIDOC week. It was the 'largest ever concurrently running series of exhibitions of Aboriginal Art' (Ballyhoo Publicity 1996). Works were displayed at major art spaces such as the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), the Linden Gallery in St Kilda, the St Kilda Town Hall, the RMIT Koori Unit Building in Carlton, as well as the Grand Central building in Bourke Street, Melbourne (Ballyhoo Publicity 1996). It launched people’s careers; for the first time, work by artists such as Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch were exhibited in public. Vicki Couzens explains:

The other piece of work that was really significant ... was my first piece that went in the We Iri We Homeborn... ‘Big Shots’ exhibition held at the NGV. ... [I]t was a very personal piece. ... Jim Berg [former CEO of the KHT] was at the Koorie Heritage Trust and he offered to buy it and I was like, oh shock horror... I ended up not selling it because ... it was actually part of my own very personal spiritual journey and it was like an initiatory work and I’d gone through a level of learning and I called it ‘Wearyah’, which is a woman’s spirit and it was actually a vision I had. I think it’s sort of a self portrait [laughter]. But it’s ... a lizard kind of woman thing and there’s this big round womb area, the fire in the belly kind of stuff. I’ve still got that. On the bottom of it, it was actually on canvas, and I stitched it all, it had wooden bits I found, they were all found objects that I’d collected over the years. I sort of hung them and cut holes in it and stitched them on .... So it’s all about that, land and who we are and where you come from. So it was quite a significant piece.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

The exhibition attracted substantial media attention (Ballyhoo Publicity 1996; Bossence 1996; Cawthorne 1996; Freiberg 1996; Whiffin 1996). Maree Clarke was interviewed a number of times outlining the significance of the exhibition and the reasons behind its production. She called for Victorian Aboriginal art to be accepted on its own merits, rather than the stereotypes of dot or x-ray art (Bossence 1996; Cawthorne 1996). Her statements echoed
the experiences of those who had been exploring their own styles of painting for some time, such as Lin Onus, Ray Thomas, Lyn Thorpe and Karen Casey. The exhibition raised the profile of Aboriginal art in Victoria and once again delivered a message about the survival and adaptation of Aboriginal culture.

While the exhibition featured art predominantly from the southeast, Clarke and Thompson included artists from other regions who were living in Victoria, but whose connections to Country lay elsewhere. This was the same principle Clarke had adopted for the *Can’t See for Lookin’* exhibition in 1993: ‘It started off Victorian Koori women artists, but then of course a lot of your Koori women artists based in Victoria aren't necessarily from Victoria, so it ended up just being Koori women artists’ (Maree Clarke quoted in Fraser 1993:23). This inclusive sentiment, which recognises the various styles, influences and contributions of artists living and working in Victoria, is still paramount in Clarke’s philosophy (Koorie Heritage Trust and Clarke 2005).

**Possum skin cloaks 1999-2006**

By 1999, the conservative Howard Government had been in power for three years. Increasingly, issues concerning Aboriginal people and ‘difference’ were being removed from its agenda. The rise of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party\(^{121}\) from 1996 challenged ‘political correctness’ and the ‘black armband’ view of history. These were replaced by notions of the ‘(white) “Aussie battler” who had become the endangered species or the dispossessed’ (Anderson 2003b: 20). The Government reduced Aboriginal self-determination and control of Aboriginal communities and organisations, including amending the *Native Title Act* in 1998, dismantling ATSIC in 2004 (see Anderson 2007), and implementing Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) from 2005.\(^{122}\) The most recent example of Government intervention without community consultation is the National Emergency Response to child abuse in the Northern Territory (Altman and Hinkson 2007). This general

\(^{121}\) One Nation is a conservative nationalist party, which campaigns on issues of race and multiculturalism (Anderson 2000).


- 251 -
approach has impacted on continued funding of Aboriginal arts centres including the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne (Eades and Koorie Heritage Trust 2007; Parliament of Australia: Senate Committee 2007).

Despite these political difficulties, artists have continued to forge new strategies for reclaiming ‘traditional’ stories and practices, and telling them, along with recent stories in contemporary ways. For instance, stimulated to some extent by the *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition, a group of women, Vicki Couzens and her sister Debra (Kirrae Wurrung/Gourndidjmara), and Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta), joined together from 1999 to reinvigorate the practice of making possum skin cloaks. This skill had not been regularly practised for many years following the issue of blankets to people by various colonial governments in the nineteenth century (Reynolds et al. 2005).

Like other artwork from the southeast, the possum skin cloaks relied on contemporary reinterpretations of artforms from the precolonial and early colonial eras. The inspiration for making the new cloaks was an emotional experience for Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch, when they first saw one of only two remaining ‘traditional’ possum skin cloaks at Museum Victoria in Melbourne. They explained this in an interview conducted for this thesis in October, 2004:

**Vicki:** I reckon that idea was put into my head [by the ‘old ones’]… the thought of doing the cloaks was like ‘boom’, it was just there, that was given to us.

**Treahna:** The two girls Vicki and Lee got together first…

**Lee:** We were at the museum…

**Vicki:** No, we were at the Australian Print Workshop, which was a workshop run through the museum…

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123 Others involved in the reinvigoration of possum skin cloak making include Kelly Koumalatsis (Wergaia/Wemba Wemba) and Uncle Wally Cooper (Yorta Yorta) (see Reynolds et al. 2005) or got to the Culture Victoria website, [http://www.cv.vic.gov.au](http://www.cv.vic.gov.au), accessed 17 October 2007. Lyn Thorpe, and her son Alister Thorpe jnr and Ngarra Murray are also involved (see Lyn Thorpe, interview November 2004).
Lee: That’s right, the museum funded us to go and see their public collection and do drawings and etchings of it. So we were there and then Treahna dropped in to see us and have a cup of tea at the Australian Print Workshop up in Gertrude Street. Vicki had just said it, ‘we have to make the possum skin cloak’, and as soon as she said it I knew we had to do it. It was like we were given the responsibility to do it too. We agreed then and there we’d do it and we were all excited about it…

Vicki: But what happened was we went to the Museum to look at the collection, and we were out the back looking at it, it was all there, you could touch it and look at things and they got the Lake Condah cloak out, so it was uncovered and I just started crying…

Lee: We all did … 13 of us cried, it was quite an amazing experience.

Vicki: Then when we went back to the Print Workshop and Treahna turned up for a visit, it was like ‘bang’ from there…

Lee: It was like that room was full of sadness straight away and a few of us were thinking the same thing: that we wanted to grab things from our Country and run. I got thinking, could I make it past the guard, you know I really had this strong sense of our families having made it, it was ownership. There was a nice white curator standing there but I did feel like just smacking her and running for it [laughter] and I’m not a violent person. Yeah, so that was different to how other projects have come about. Sometimes it is as though you get a bit of a vision or a dream or something will come to you like that…

Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm, October 2004

From their first sighting of the nineteenth century Lake Condah cloak at the museum, the women reinvigorated practices which resonated for them personally, as the two extant cloaks were from the women’s own Countries: one from Lake Condah in Gourndidjmara country, and the other from Maiden’s Punt near Echuca in Yorta Yorta country (see Plates 3.2, 3.3 ).
The initial possum skin cloak project, acquired in 2003 by the National Museum of Australia, is known as the Tooloyn Koortakay Collection (squaring
skins for rugs\textsuperscript{124}). The cultural significance of the cloaks for the women and their communities, and the processes entailed in their making, are closely related to the women’s understandings of their obligations to their Ancestors. The making of the cloaks has also become a modern day ‘story’:

Vicki: We were given that honour and privilege to do that work and maybe there are varying degrees of knowledge that people are allowed to know, but I like to give back to the community and that’s empowerment for the community. So I’m doing a regional project, working with the communities making their own possum skin cloak because… I’d like to acknowledge those people who’ve already done them, made a cloak or whatever. In the last four years since we’ve been making them, there has been a real renaissance of cloaks being used back in the communities and being used at ceremonies and all sorts of things, you know. We’ve kind of been a big part of that.

Treachna: And also with people going to museums and connecting to their culture again that way…

Lee: See the museum said that not many people had done that before. I think Ray Thomas had done it, Maree Clarke …

Vicki: A few individuals …

Lee: Not many people have gone and studied what was in the museum and then did work based on what was there. Nobody had ever recreated anything. They told me in the National Museum that was unheard of and they thought that was amazing…

Vicki: And so, we’re able to give that knowledge back too, and it is also about strengthening [culture].

Treachna: We are lucky that our communities still exist because there’s only five [cloaks] in the world\textsuperscript{125}. They are rare and anything

\textsuperscript{124} See (Reynolds et al. 2005: n. 3).

\textsuperscript{125} The other cloaks are held internationally at The Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Pigorini Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography Italy, Museum of Ethnology Berlin, Germany. For further information see (Cooper 1989, Reynolds et al. 2005).
that I’ve seen in the collection in the Museum in Melbourne – it’s not a lot of stuff.

The skins were exhibited at the Koorie Heritage Trust in November 2005 in the *Gunya Winya* (Women’s Cloaks) exhibition, which included paintings, pastels and possum skins by Vicki, Lee and Trehna. This was held in conjunction with the launch of *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak*, the book which accompanied the *Tooloyn Koortakay* collection. A full-scale exhibition called *Biganga* was held at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria in February 2006 as part of the Commonwealth Games program (Museum Victoria 2006). The exhibition included cloaks, pictures, history, film and stories showing the past and contemporary production of possum skin cloaks (Museum Victoria 2006).


Exhibition Invitation, Melbourne Museum

Image removed due to copyright.

Invitation to *Biganga* Exhibition, Melbourne Museum. Reproduced from original invitation.
The possum skin project has played a significant role in reclaiming traditional art practices and reinterpreting them in contemporary contexts. The designs on some of the new cloaks (and related artwork) reinterpret those on the originals. In planning the reconstruction of the cloaks, cultural protocols had to be taken into consideration. The women understood the significance of the cloaks to their communities and sought permission from the appropriate Elders to recreate 'traditional' designs. In Vicki and Debra's case they consulted extensively with their father Uncle Ivan Couzens, an Elder of the Kirrae Wurrung/Gourndidjamara community (Reynolds et al. 2005: 22). While the precise original meanings behind the patterns are lost, the women have researched oral histories and the ethnographic record, including early photographs and the paintings of William Barak. They found that the designs on the original cloaks ‘symbolise country, geographical features and the wearer’s clan and tribal affiliations’ (see Plate 7.14) (Reynolds et al. 2005: 13). Lee explains:

Nobody knew the symbols until we started burning them into the design and then we knew in that process of doing it, because the older ones told us what they meant. That was a very different process and so I felt much more attached and quite emotional about that work... [The] Minister of Aboriginal Affairs wanted to buy it and we said, ‘No we wanted it to go to a public collection’, the two cloaks, and that was for the reason that our kids could come and see it … But I still feel something quite strong about that work and I suppose it is part [of it]. I dream about it even, that work, and it’s because it is of our country. Vicki did her family’s, their Country [Kirrae Wurrung/Gourndidjmara] and Treahna and I we did Yorta Yorta, our country so it was very strongly about Country.

Lee Darroch, October 2004
Reclamation of traditions is not always easy, as modern legislation often prohibits Aborigines from continuing past practices. The possum skin cloak project presented its own problems. Possums in Victoria are protected by law and cannot be killed without a permit. The women had to pursue other means of obtaining possum skins. They tried several sources for skins, finally importing them from New Zealand where possums, as an introduced species have become pests (Reynolds et al. 2005: 23). These bureaucratic restrictions are similar to those faced by a number of participants in this project. Lyn Thorpe raised the issue concerning the right to light a fire in her backyard as a gathering place. She stated:

Now to me a fire outside is a cultural thing, the same as with my art I feel the same way. We love to cook outside, sit around the fire, talk, have a good yarn. And yet we're told we can't do it because the law says it's illegal, so we can't practice it. I mean we're coming up against all these brick walls all the time. It's very hard and it's frustrating. It can be very depressing at times.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

The former curator of Aboriginal art at the NGV, Julie Gough, another participant, who, while working as an artist in Tasmania, had to seek
permission to take natural resources, such as plants, for making baskets and other artefacts. She asks the question: ‘Are we willing to continually negotiate with this bureaucracy to get permission from someone else to pick plants on our own land?’ (Julie Gough, interview October 2004). Julie, like the women cloak-makers, however, recognises that country and cultural knowledge are no longer as they were before occupation, and that cultural practices have to take account of changes to knowledge and Country (see Reynolds et al. 2005).

Like the strategies people adopted when they moved into missions in order to secure survival, recent creations of possum skins have been adapted to contend with contemporary life. The chemical treatment of the imported skins has meant that the women have forgone ‘traditional’ methods of incising the skins with bones and shells, and now burn designs on the skins with an electric wood burner, while some skins have been sewn with waxed cotton threads (Reynolds et al. 2005: 23).

The possum skin cloaks represent an artistic resurgence reflecting a contemporary southeast Australian Aboriginal voice. The cloaks are a significant contribution to reasserting a southeast Australian Aboriginal identity that challenges the West’s restrictive definitions of Aboriginality. With the possum skin project, a reversal of the Western gaze is articulated, as the women demonstrate their capacity to use and reinterpret Western academic discourse. By creating new initiatives in possum skin cloak production, they have contributed to enhancing and rebuilding a community identity determined through Aboriginal action.

While the cloaks and related artworks communicate cultural difference, the work is also accessible to the mainstream and has become a marketable commodity with a political emphasis. The women involved in the project recognise the political nature of their work in asserting culture. As Treahna notes:

… we’re always doing political work … no matter what.

Treahna Hamm, October 2004

Hence, the women claim that their art is about:
Vicki: Challenge and social change and to hit out at the system...But [our art does this] in a different way...

Lee: We’re more about continuing cultural practices so it’s not so overtly political although … that in itself is political.

Trehana: I mean that’s great if galleries want to show that [overtly political work], but a lot of times they don’t … want to be involved. Because … they want to put things on their walls that sell.

Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, Trehana Hamm, October 2004

Although contemporary Aboriginal artists in the southeast have struggled to have their work accepted as authentic, the possum skin cloak project represents the dichotomies associated with Aboriginal art. Like work from the desert or top end, it is an example of an arts practice based on ‘tradition’, yet the possum skin cloak project situates contemporary Aboriginal practices within the framework of an ‘urbanised’ landscape. Today the commodification and adaptation of southeast Australian Aboriginal art, inspired by reinterpretations of the past, has contributed to the transformation of contemporary material culture from kitsch to ‘high art’. The project has fostered several initiatives in communities around the State and has led to possum skin production as a source of inspiration in the reclamation of arts practices generally. One of the biggest and most successful of these ventures has been the State wide Possum Skin Cloak-Making project, which began in 2005 and was completed by thirty-five of the thirty-nine Victorian language groups. Workshops were conducted by Vicki Couzens, Maree Clarke, Trehna Hamm and Lee Darroch (in conjunction with the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation) in regional areas where they taught the skills of cloak making, as well as encouraged local artists to collect stories and research significant aspects of their history. The initiative was co-ordinated by Regional Arts Victoria and culminated in thirty-five Elders and community representatives wearing the cloaks at the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in March 2006, in front of a local and

126 See Ian Clark (2005) for a recent analysis of the number of language groups prior to colonisation.
international audience of over 1.5 billion people (Gerritsen and Regional Arts
Australia 2006; Sanders and Regional Arts Australia 2005). Other projects
which have been inspired by the cloak designs include numerous drawings
and prints by the artists discussed here and more recently glass panels made
in collaboration with Wathaurong Glass, Geelong, a successful Aboriginal
enterprise that makes glass artefacts featuring local Aboriginal designs
(Message Stick Online 2003b). The panel features in the new Oxfam
Australia building recently opened in Carlton, Melbourne (Darroch 2007).

Plate 7.15  Trehna Hamm. Wathauroung glass, Oxfam, Carlton,
2007. Photograph Fran Edmonds

![Image removed due to copyright.]

Description: Three panels, central panel symbolising
empowerment of people through human rights, two side panels
welcome visitors to Oxfam through the gumleaf designs.

REPATRIATION AND KEEPING PLACES

By the 1990s the repatriation of material culture and human remains from
museums to the Aboriginal community was receiving wider attention. Many of
the programs developed in the 1990s were in the spirit of reconciliation, which
as the archaeologist Hilary Du Cros claims, has been reflected in ‘museum
and cultural policies [and] indicate that at some levels Australian society is
sincere about rejecting scientific imperialism’ (Du Cros 2002).

Recently, two significant repatriation issues conducted between
Museum Victoria and the Aboriginal community have highlighted the
contentious nature of repatriation, yet have also influenced the cultural revitalisation of distinct arts practices. Both involved the Dja Dja Wurrung community.

The repatriation of Jaara Baby, the skeletal remains of a baby found in Charlton, Central Victoria in 1904, were repatriated to the Dja Dja Wurrung community in 2003, following negotiations which reflected the museum’s policy of returning human remains to Aboriginal communities (see Museum Victoria 2007). For Lyn Thorpe, this was significant, not only as it allowed the remains to be returned to Country, but as it provided her with an opportunity to become reconnected with the process of remaking a possum skin cloak for the child’s remains to be buried in. Lyn explains:

Myself and Ngarra Murray\(^{127}\) had the honour of working on a cloak for the Jaara Baby to return home to Country in. The baby’s skeletal remains were found early 1900’s by a wood cutter wrapped up in a possum skin cloak with over a hundred burial gifts both Aboriginal and some non-Aboriginal objects in the trunk of a tree he’d chopped down. The baby and objects ended up in the museum and stayed there in draws for almost 100 years. We drew on the original cloak the baby was wrapped in and the Aboriginal objects for inspiration to mark the new cloak for reburial. It’s important to pass on these skills to our young ones so that they can carry on and keep culture alive and strong. The original cloak had clear markings and designs incised into the skins. These markings were transferred onto the new burial cloak along with images of the new burial tree and some special objects and totems of the Dja Dja Wurrung were included as the baby was found in Dja Dja Wurrung country. The baby and all the burial gifts and original cloak were all bundled into the new burial cloak and handed over to the Dja Dja Wurrung people (at a special ceremony at the Melbourne Museum) to finally take home to be reburied on Country. This was a very special and meaningful experience and was my second opportunity to work on a possum skin cloak. It was made

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\(^{127}\) Ngarra Murray is a project officer at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria (see Fung and Wills 2006).
even more special to me because my Nan was a Dja Dja Wurrung
woman so that working on the cloak for me was on behalf of my Nan.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

The other repatriation issue, which was somewhat more contentious,
reflects the problems surrounding moves to reconcile past differences.
Repatriation of cultural material, other than human remains, continues to
reflect museum practices, which contrary to Du Cros’ belief, see museums
perpetuating on another level a paradigm of scientific imperialism.

In 2004-2005 the ‘Two Barks’ controversy placed issues of the
repatriation of material culture in the news headlines and divided the
Aboriginal community. This controversy concerned the two bark etchings and
a ceremonial wooden emu figure collected by John Kerr in the 1850s from the
Loddon region. These have previously been discussed in chapter four.
These items formed part of the Etched on Bark exhibition in 2004 at the
Melbourne Museum, along with the Lake Tyrell bark collected in the 1870s.
The bark etching depicting a corroboree scene was lent to the Museum by the
Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew in the United Kingdom. The other, depicting
the hunting scene, was lent together with the emu figure by the British
Museum. The Lake Tyrell bark came from the Museum’s own collection.
When the exhibition closed, the British institutions pressed the Museum to
return the two barks and the emu figure. This led to a dispute which
eventuated in the Dja Dja Wurrung seeking court orders that the artefacts not
be returned to Britain.128

The Victorian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, who had a well established
reputation for supporting Aboriginal rights decided, on the advice of Dawn
Casey previously the Director of the National Museum of Australia, to return
the artefacts, because all other artefacts and human remains held in
museums overseas ‘would most probably never be seen in Australia again’
(McShane 2005; O’Dwyer 2005).129 However, the return of the artefacts also

128 See (Carter v Minister for Aboriginal Affairs FCA 667 2005; Museums Board of Victoria v
Carter FCA 645 2005).

129 Some participants in this project echoed this concern.
highlighted the relatively neglected and fraught process surrounding the repatriation of Aboriginal objects from museums to Aboriginal communities (Fung and Wills 2006).

The ‘Two Barks’ controversy, illustrates the continuing disparities and unequal relationships between Aboriginal communities, government agencies and museums (in this case Museum Victoria, and the two British institutions) concerning repatriation of culturally significant objects (Fung and Wills 2006; Greenwood 2005). This is despite some institutions advocating better museum practices based on ‘democratising and decolonising’ approaches (Fung and Wills 2006: 11.10), where Indigenous involvement in the collecting and interpretation of Indigenous cultural material is espoused, as outlined in the Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities: Principles and Guidelines for Australian Museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Report (Museums Australia 2005).

Lyn Thorpe, as an Aboriginal woman with connections to those involved in the ‘Two Barks’ controversy, and having worked on successful repatriation processes in the past, commented on the continuing hegemonic status of museums in controlling items of significance to the Aboriginal community

In terms of objects, it seems that as long as the mainstream values them, then it seems that we are ignored if we have connection to them, or if we say ‘That’s ours you’re not taking it. Haven’t you taken enough? You’ve taken our language’… We’ve got to try and get that back ... What about all those things that are connected to us as a [people], whether as ... artist[s] [or not] ...all those objects and old paintings and remains and all those [things]. That is what validates who we are today. But we haven’t got the power to say who can see them and ... all of those hoops you’ve got to try and get through to get anything, to even view it. So it’s destructive for us. We’ve had enough destruction and exclusion. And that’s how I feel about it.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Despite the fraught circumstances surrounding the return of the objects, the ‘Two Barks’ exhibition saw a reinvigoration of bark etching
practices within the Dja Dja Wurrung community. Like the baby Jaara cloak and possum skin cloak project, this clearly articulates an assertion of ongoing Aboriginal agency in their endeavours to ‘take back what has been removed from them’ (Fung and Wills 2006: 11.9). The reclamation and reinvigoration of bark etching, as the historian Pamie Fung contests, is for the Dja Dja Wurrung people an indication of the:

… dynamic and creative responses to dominant constructions of Koori culture and identity. In their efforts to reclaim the barks, the Dja Dja Wurrung have mobilised their strategies to assert their agency in the way their culture and identity is understood (Fung and Wills 2006: 11.9).

The Koorie Heritage Trust, Museums and Art Galleries
For Aboriginal people the ability to control their material culture and to curate and hang their own artefacts has been one of the most significant ways of ‘Aboriginalising’ museum policies and practices.

As an Aboriginal-controlled organisation, the Koorie Heritage Trust presents a model in the southeast for Aboriginal curatorial and exhibition practices. While it was formed in the mid 1980s as a result of changing attitudes to Aboriginal organisations and culture, it wasn’t until 1999 that it was endorsed as ‘Melbourne’s first ever Koorie Cultural Centre’ (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000:5). The concept of the Trust as a Cultural Centre:

… emerged from a need for greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of Koorie culture throughout the community and the immediate need for Koorie cultural material to be controlled, managed and curated by Koorie people. (Koorie Heritage Trust 2000:5).

For Aboriginal artists in the southeast the formation of the Trust as a Cultural Centre provided more scope for showcasing their works. In 2003 the Koorie Heritage Trust shifted to a building which maintains the essence of Jim Berg’s original plan for the organisation to protect and foster the development of southeast Australian Aboriginal culture (Koorie Heritage Trust 2003). The Trust’s facilities have expanded to include a unique and supportive exhibition program. Although its initial purpose was to house items of cultural significance, the Trust now accommodates more than 10,000 artefacts,
50,000 photographs, an extensive book collection including rare books, a retail tourist outlet and an ongoing education and awareness program. It is a significant Keeping Place where all members of the community are welcome to visit and experience first-hand the material culture of southeast Aboriginal people (see Broben 2005)

Its policy of preserving the culture of Aboriginal people from the southeast remains a priority for the Trust. This aim has been enhanced by having frequent exhibitions highlighting older works from its collection and by being proactive in supporting emerging artists from the start of their careers. Older works include those by Barak and McRae, together with artefacts acknowledging the history of contact through displays of material culture. Artists who have been supported by the Trust from early in their careers include Lorraine Connelly-Northey and Turbo Brown. The Trust also encourages the improvement of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people by providing a wide range of services for the Koori community and the general public, including promoting Aboriginal culture through tourism (Indigenous Tourism Australia 2006).

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130 See Appendix 1.

131 The Koorie Heritage Trust was the recipient of the 2005 Victorian State Tourism Award for best Aboriginal tourism product and the inaugural Reconciliation Australia Governance Award. For details got to http://www.koorieheritagetrust.com/. For a comprehensive account of the history of the Koorie Heritage Trust see (Charles, B. 2006).
Breaking down barriers between museums and galleries

Along with Bunjilaka at Museum Victoria, the development of the Koorie Heritage Trust has been part of the process for breaking down the barriers between museums and galleries. As Caine Muir, a former manager of Aboriginal collections at Museum Victoria, says:

> It’s interesting for me, that thing about museums and art galleries; they seem to be separate things. But in Bunjilaka there’s a real cross over, designs become new art works, it’s real interesting … to see it first-hand happening right in front of you

Caine Muir, September 2004

However, tensions persist between the roles of art galleries and museums. While concerns continue to be articulated over the repatriation of items of cultural significance from Museum Victoria, the Aboriginal cultural centre at the museum, Bunjilaka, has since the opening of the museums new premises in 2001 included a ‘state of the art’ Keeping Place, where the community can gather and view their cultural heritage material. In this way it is encouraging community participation, interpretation and the retention of community ownership of Aboriginal cultural heritage located at the museum. Bunjilaka is working towards a process of cultural change in museum practice, by incorporating and working with Aboriginal cultures, providing space for Aboriginal people to interact with their cultural material through workshops.
and exhibitions, and ensuring that the collections are managed and curated by Aboriginal people. It includes a gallery for the exhibition and sale of contemporary Victorian Aboriginal art. It remains the only gallery in Melbourne that specifically promotes and supports the art of Aboriginal artists from Victoria (see Simpson 2006).

However, the ethnographic paradigm continues to exist in museums, where the display of Aboriginal culture is still ‘fundamentally problematic’ (Brady 2002: 31), as exemplified by the controversy over the ‘Two Barks’. Museums remain within a non-Aboriginal paradigm. In some circumstances they are still seen as cultural plunderers, while attempting to reverse the poor collection practices of the past, as Lorraine Coutts, an Aboriginal manager at Museum Victoria observed at a recent conference in Canberra:

We’re the ones who’ve stolen all the collections, we’re responsible for all the collections that have all been hoarded away. But in terms of what we’re actually doing we’re the ones providing the access. So it was really interesting to see, that even in the next century, we’re still being branded with that 19th century view of museums as collectors and hoarders, but we’ve changed, especially with the employment of a lot of Aboriginal people. I mean it will be a slow process, but hopefully we’ll be at the stage where most of the stuff will go back to the communities, which is what the Keeping Places are about. And we’ll work with those Communities to get the items back there.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Conversely, galleries are seen as places where people view art rather than participate in a process of cultural production and preservation. They are places where ‘high art’ is promoted and displayed. The National Gallery of Victoria focuses on the collection of ‘fine art’ rather than its production. Financial constraints at the NGV prevent it collecting as broadly as possible. It has therefore recently begun to work in partnership with organisations such as the Trust (Judith Ryan, interview January 2005). As Lorraine Coutts explains, again in relation to the Canberra conference where workers from art galleries and museums participated:
It was just amazing, we were like the big bad guys, the museums, we were made to stand up and actually defend what we had been doing, and I got really angry because no other art gallery’s doing what we’re doing. Like in a national gallery, the National Galleries of Victoria and Australia, they’re not doing the programs that we’re doing on the ground level. They’re not doing these workshops and going out into the community, yet we’re the big baddies, we’re the ones who’ve stolen the items, in terms of the museums.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Neglect of Victorian art still a problem
As discussed, the Koorie Heritage Trust and Bunjilaka have important roles in supporting Victorian Aboriginal art. However, they have not been acknowledged in the same way as Boomallli at a national level as major contributors in the Australian Aboriginal arts scene, by, for instance, the economist, Jon Altman, nor in the latest Senate Inquiry into Australia’s Indigenous Visual Arts and Craft Sector (see Altman 2005; Arts Victoria 2006a; Parliament of Australia: Senate Committee 2007). To an extent, this disregard reflects the numbers of Aboriginal artists in Victoria. Only 2.9% of Indigenous Australians whose main occupation is visual art or craft live in Victoria, as compared to 20.5% in New South Wales (ABS, 2001 Census of Population and Housing cited in Parliament of Australia: Senate Committee 2007: 28).

One effect of this is that Victorian artists miss out on federal funding. This is one of the reasons for partnerships between Arts Victoria, the NGV and the KHT (Arts Victoria 2006a).132

Authenticity of Southeast Aboriginal art
As a way of promoting southeast Australian Aboriginal art in these circumstances, several new and acclaimed exhibitions and arts awards have infiltrated the Aboriginal arts scene.

132 Also see Judith Ryan, interview January 2005
Exhibitions include *Urbaninity* as part of the Reconciliation Week celebrations held in May each year, an initiative since 2004 of Kimba Thompson and Maree Clarke; Linden Gallery in St Kilda also holds NAIDOC week exhibitions regularly in conjunction with the City of Port Phillip. During the Commonwealth Games in 2006, many exhibitions and displays, including the *Tribal Expressions* exhibitions, which focussed on Aboriginal tourist enterprises, as well as exhibitions of emerging and established southeast Aboriginal artists, were held around Melbourne throughout March of that year (Koori Business Network 2006).

**Plate 7.17  Urbaninity: Exhibition invitation, 2004**

![Image removed due to copyright.](Image removed due to copyright.)

Reproduced from original invitation

While exhibitions have been initiated to promote southeast Aboriginal art and stories, within the public arena, they also continue to be restricted by a colonial imperative to embrace a ‘soft’ Aboriginality (i.e. artwork positioned in a mythical or ‘primitivist’ paradigm), which does not overtly contest White histories or positions of power. Like *Scar* and *Another View*, the Reconciliation Week 2006 *Urbaninity* exhibition held at Parliament House in Melbourne, revealed the contested space which Aboriginal people and their history continue to occupy in Australia. Brian McKinnon an artist whose traditional country is Geraldton, Western Australia, had his painting removed from the exhibition as it referred pointedly to the Prime Minister, John
Howard’s refusal to apologise to Aboriginal people for the past, including the removal of children from their families during the years of assimilation (the ‘stolen generations’). The work, which included text that called Howard, ‘King Little Johnny’, was claimed to be ‘overtly political’. McKinnon, later stated that this was an attack on free speech, claiming that: ‘It’s another way of keeping Aboriginal people quiet … Any time we actually try to make a statement in any shape or form, it’s actually taken away, the right to free speech if you’re an Aboriginal is removed’ (ABC News Online 2006). Such events reveal the continuing restrictions encountered by Aboriginal people in a colonialist enterprise that attempts to silence the Aboriginal voice of dissent.

Despite ongoing challenges to artists whose work is viewed as contentious, the growing number and increasing popularity of exhibitions and displays of Aboriginal art in the southeast signifies opportunities for alternative messages, including the socio-political and historical, to be revealed. Perhaps in the future so-called overtly political art will also be embraced and understood as an expression of alternative histories and identities.

As will be discussed in chapter eight, Aboriginal people do not view arts practices as separate to other aspects of culture. Like art with political messages, all styles of art assist in articulating an Aboriginal story. Arising out of the conflation between art and culture is the reluctance by Aboriginal artists to differentiate between the categories of ‘art’ and ‘craft’; they occupy a similar space in Aboriginal communities, as do ‘tourist art’ and ‘fine art’ (Mellor 2000). Tensions, however, prevail as the commodification of art continues to determine which market Aboriginal artists aim towards (Altman 2000b; Craigie 2002), while changing mainstream attitudes towards the visual arts and crafts enterprises have also become blurred. Styles that were once viewed as strictly tourist or craftwork are now frequently positioned alongside those which reflect the traditional concept of ‘fine art’.

Consequently, these attitudes have impacted on the ‘high art’ world, where three-dimensional works, such as woven and carved objects, have recently been accepted and displayed in ‘fine art’ galleries, as well as ‘craftwork’ becoming more prominent as the recipient of art awards (Mellor 2000).
Art awards have assisted with promoting and developing artistic endeavours. Southeast Aboriginal artists have been successful in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. Gayle Maddigan (a Wergaia, Wemba Wemba woman from northwest Victoria) won the Telstra Work on Paper Award in 2005. The judges described her winning work, *Remembered Ritual* as a ‘powerful near-abstract drawing that uses charcoal and ash to mark, symbolize and celebrate her connection with country’ (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2005).

Since 2005, the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards have been instigated to ‘recognise and raise the profile of Victorian artists and showcase the range and quality of Indigenous art produced in Victoria’ (Arts Victoria 2007). The awards are professionally organised, widely acclaimed and well attended by the Aboriginal community. Award nights and exhibitions are a source of pride for communities, providing new ways of celebrating cultural practices and exchanging cultural knowledge within Aboriginal communities and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In this process, they become as Fred
Myers acknowledged in relation to Western Desert art, embedded in a process of ‘different types of exchange … encompassing spheres of systems of producing value’ (Myers 2002: 361). Southeast Aboriginal art can also be read as positioned within these ‘systems’, it is symbolic of and enmeshed with culture, but is also reconstructed as a marketable commodity, Myers continues:

Such systems not only recognize the existence of distinct regimes of value but combine and reorganize the activity from these various contexts into more complex mediations … as “hierarchies in the making” – in a word, culture making (Myers 2002: 361).

Hence, exhibitions and awards also evidence the cultural value arts practices have for Elders in the community, many of whom had little opportunity in the past to express themselves artistically to a wider audience. The Gippsland Elder, Uncle Herb Patten, in an interview for this thesis, commented on the opportunities that art has provided him as an older artist. Art as an economically viable practice was not available to him when he was younger. Today he pursues it as an activity, which provides him with opportunities to assert his cultural authority in ways which are culturally distinctive, yet innovative.

[When] we grew up … art wasn’t really … a useful thing for us to do at the time. We didn’t know there was money in it.

I think that … because some Aboriginal people find it a lot easier to paint and go to school than sit on the dole and be pestered by the schemes and the way Centrelink works. And that’s why I chose art to a certain degree, plus many people are trying something new.

Uncle Herb Patten, 2004 October 2004
Uncle Herb’s wife, Aunty Bunta Patten (Gourndidjmara) won the inaugural 2005 Victorian Indigenous Art Award. Another Elder, Aunty Rachel Mullett (Ngarigo, East Gippsland) won the award in 2006 (Arts Victoria 2005; Arts Victoria 2006b). Exhibitions by many Elders have grown out of their pursuit following study at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, leading to exhibitions of their work (see Appendix 1). Such relatively recent endeavours suggest that Elders are able to tell their stories in a more conducive environment than existed in the past. There is a vibrant, dynamic depth of work among the Elders in the community, which is associated directly with land, their experience and related stories.

Hence, within the context of the reclamation and adaptation of southeast Aboriginal arts practices, ‘authenticity’ remains a fluid concept; one which continues to reflect Aboriginal imperatives to tell their story. Aboriginal arts practices may be about reclaiming art from the past, or they may be conscious processes, which assert a postmodernist paradigm and embrace hybridity. Ultimately the artwork is about Aboriginal artists being considered
on their own terms as Australians who are Aboriginal. The new exhibitions and awards, as well as decisions by museums and galleries to incorporate Aboriginal people in decisions regarding the treatment of their material culture, along with endeavours by artists to reclaim practices from the past, emphasises the growth, diversity and authenticity of expressions of southeast Australian Aboriginal culture.
8. ARTISTS SPEAK

So, then once I started to incorporate the patterning and design work from my area, well that made me feel whole as a Gunai person, as a Gippsland person. And that’s what art will do to you. Well especially Aboriginal people anyway, because we’ve all got different styles of work and that’s what I tell people, if you can learn a little bit about Aboriginal art you’ll be able to tell where some people come from because of the different styles, you know. Sort of like reading a map.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

Participants’ stories are central to this thesis. They have informed my reading of history and my understanding of the contemporary context. The stories presented in previous chapters reinforce, and sometimes assist in the recovery of the historical significance of arts practices in southeast Australia. This chapter introduces those aspects of participants’ stories which relate to the major themes of this thesis concerning the connection between art, identity and wellbeing in the southeast Australian Aboriginal community.

For participants in this project, notions of identity and wellbeing are intertwined with the social structures and values specific to the southeast Australian Aboriginal community. In this instance ‘collective identity’ and ‘the extent of mutual support’ within the Aboriginal community impact on individual wellbeing (Manderson 2005a: 170). Wellbeing for participants in this project is maintained by their ability to articulate and display their Aboriginality through their knowledge and practice of art, free of outside prejudices, restrictions and labels that attempt to control, impair and define notions of them or their arts practices. Their ability to identify with their Aboriginality through their art and culture in strong and affirming ways contributes to individual wellbeing and assists in asserting a positive collective identity.

Thus wellbeing in this context is a broad set of understandings, rather than those restricted to the narrower definitions concerning the social determinants of health, for example those based on economic status, access to education, employment and housing (Eades 2000; Marmott 1999). Although these factors are of course significant in establishing equality for
individuals in Australian society, the sense of wellbeing in this thesis is less concerned with these ‘big policy’ outcomes and more concerned with wellbeing at an internal level, which is constructed from within an Aboriginal epistemology, concerning connections to land, social relationships, kinship obligations, reciprocities and accountabilities (Anderson 1995; Taylor 2006). These concepts are implicit in maintaining social, cultural and emotional wellbeing as identified by the participants, and as articulated within an Aboriginal worldview (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989; Vickery et al. 2005). Concepts such as these do not necessarily intersect with government policy, or for that matter mainstream Australia’s perceptions of wellbeing (Altman 2005; Altman and Hunter 2003; Taylor 2006).

Thus wellbeing, as discussed by participants in this project is not about how ‘healthy’ the individual is in a physical or embodied sense (see Mulligan et al. 2006), rather it relies on a conceptualisation of a broader more fluid definition. It fits more closely with a sense of wellbeing, which as the anthropologist Lenore Manderson explains:

… includes more than physical and mental health: it incorporates a sense of satisfaction, contentment, personal fulfilment and existential calm; much more so than health, it is a social construct. Accordingly, it can be redefined, refined and reinterpreted at any place and time (Manderson 2005b: 4).

Wellbeing then is ‘embedded in and derives from society itself, socially produced and sustained by social structures and systems’ (Manderson 2005b: 13). Within Aboriginal society in southeast Australia, wellbeing is frequently associated with people’s history. Opportunities to maintain and reclaim their heritage in practical and respectful ways contribute to an individual’s ability to feel secure in their identity as a southeast Australian Aborigine. Indeed, wellbeing in this thesis is conceptualised in relation to a person’s capacity to assert and identify positively with their Aboriginality within the Aboriginal community as a whole. Arts practices are intrinsic to this concept through their direct connections with culture and expressions of cultural identity as revealed through participants stories in this project.
Many participants’ experiences are similar, despite the stories being about different events and involving individual interpretations. Most stories resonate with statements about the significance of Ancestors, land and family to Aboriginal art, as well as the political struggles people have encountered in order to assert their survival and identity. Hence, the stories reflect the history chapters; they relate to past events, but they also show the contemporaneity of arts practice and its significance to identity.

This chapter is organised under the four main themes derived from the participants’ stories, which reflect their experiences and attitudes to their arts practices and southeast Australian Aboriginal art in general. The themes are:

- Continuity and Change;
- Adaptation and Authenticity;
- Reclamation and Revival; and
- ‘Art is Us’.

Each theme has several sub-themes that highlight the overall aim of the project, which is to explore the connection between arts practice, identity (or Aboriginality) and wellbeing. While extracts from individual interviews have been selected to illustrate the key themes and sub-themes, every effort has been made to maintain the essence and integrity of each participant’s story as a whole. Each narrative is like a testimonio (‘testimonial narrative’) which, as the American scholar and literary critic John Beverley argues, privileges the voice of the repressed, marginalised, exploited, or is simply about survival, which ‘is implicated in the act of narration itself’ (Beverley 2003: 320).

The stories reinforce the agency of the narrators, remaining centred within individual and community experiences. For the subaltern (or marginalised) to really speak, as the cultural theorist Gaytri Spivak argues, is to allow the Other to represent and articulate themselves in ways which are meaningful to them and are included in, yet contest the dominant discourse (see Spivak 1988). These stories are testaments of people’s understandings and beliefs concerning what it means to be an Aboriginal artist in southeast Australia. They are not peripheral ideas about Aboriginal art and
Aboriginality, but present a ‘radical restructuring of the traditional perspectives’ as accepted by the West (Young 2004: 215).

As outlined in the methodology chapter of this thesis, most participants are practising Aboriginal artists, while those who are not artists are directly involved in the Aboriginal arts field (see Appendix 3). As with most practising artists, few can support themselves economically from their art alone. Many of the participants work in full-time and often demanding occupations within the Aboriginal community; some applying their arts practice to their daily work, others practising and exhibiting their art in their spare time. The stories in this chapter assist in reinforcing arguments concerning the significance of arts practices to understandings of southeast Australian Aboriginal identity, wellbeing and culture. At the same time, each of the key themes incorporates tensions between the past and the present, disruption and survival, tradition and innovation.

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

The central theme of continuity and change was articulated by many artists. Uncle Sandy Atkinson explained it in this way:

> I mean we make big things out of our own art, out of photographs for example of our communities and all of those things, because of that feeling of continuity … of that community spiritual thing that stays there and all of the artwork, it’s all a part of that. It may very well not be treated as separate in the Aboriginal community … And so the art and the craft is all that, it’s a community treasury thing … it’s there for us to continually keep that connection with those days … and they’re pretty powerful

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004

Continuity in arts practices link the past and the present and potentially connect practices in the future. In this section I argue that although Aboriginal culture is dynamic and has adapted to colonisation, as discussed in previous chapters, many participants’ stories emphasise the relationship between their heritage and their arts practices. In this sense continuity and change are symbiotic.
All the participants in this thesis, the artists, arts curators, administrators and the non-Aboriginal participants, saw a strong association between the past, present and future. The tension between the central theme of continuity and the disruption to culture and loss of cultural knowledge as a result of colonisation is characteristic of Aboriginal cultural production in the southeast. White occupation, while dislocating many Aboriginal people from their families and Country and drastically changing the nature of Aboriginal society did not halt the production of art, did not extinguish all knowledge associated with material culture, nor remove the imperative to maintain arts practices. As Uncle Sandy acknowledges in the quote above, art and craft in the Aboriginal community is entwined in people’s lives.

**Connection to Country**

The connection between art and environment is a focal point for many of the participants when discussing continuity of arts practice. In Karen Casey’s works she reveals that:

> I do feel a deep connection to land and a strong desire to express that in my work. I guess it’s something that has been consistent throughout … being in tune with the environment and trying to represent those feelings of connectedness … If I were to put that into a cultural context I’d say it’s what draws the artist out and allows me to have a deeper connection to my Aboriginal heritage

Karen Casey, October 2004

Connections to Country are emphasised and can be related to the way people view the ongoing nature of arts practices within contemporary society. While participants spoke about arts practices as a practical encounter with material culture, as in the design of possum skin cloaks, or through weaving, many also emphasised an association between their Aboriginality and the environment. The significance of connection to land, especially Country with which they have ‘traditional’ connections, and the inspiration it provides them resonates through many of the participants’ stories. The relationship between land and arts practice assists participants to sustain practices that reflect their Aboriginal identity.
While many discuss the benefits they get from painting or creating from the land, they also acknowledge the legacy of colonisation and the resulting disruptions to cultural practices, both personally and through the experiences of others in the community.

Cathy Adams is a practising artist, who until recently worked with many displaced members of the Aboriginal Community as an art teacher in Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) programs in Melbourne. With Peter Clarke, Cathy was responsible for the introduction of the Koori art and design course at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 1995. This course was the forerunner to current programs at RMIT Bundooora, including certificate, diploma and degree level programs for members of the Aboriginal community.

Such programs offer an opportunity to experience the benefits of arts practices, while allowing Aboriginal people to identify with others from their Country and their heritage. As Cathy explains:

A lot of the kids who grow up in the flats of Collingwood … they have a big identity problem. They haven’t got that connection to home or anything … which I can relate to. But it’s the whole thing; you still see their culture coming out in their artwork, even though they’re doing graffiti style art work.

A lot of them do tap into the environment and the styles that might have been around in the old days and depending on whether they come from up near the Murray or the sea or whatever, you usually see the effects of it. Say if you’re Gourndidjimara … a lot of the time they’ll paint say sea eagles, or you know the waves or whales and dolphins and things like that. Whereas someone who’s from say Barmah, Cummeragunja … they paint the Murray cod and the river and the kangaroo and that sort of thing …

Cathy Adams, November 2004

133 This is discussed later in the section on education.

134 A number of this project’s participants, including Ray Thomas, Uncle Herb Patten, Treahna Hamm and Maree Clarke have completed or are enrolled in their PhD and Masters degrees in fine art.
Others discuss continuity in terms of past arts practices, where there is a direct connection between techniques associated with the manufacture of ‘traditional’ material culture, and those adapted as contemporary art forms (as seen in the ‘fish trap’ by Cathy Adams above).

Julie Gough is a Trawoolway woman from northern Tasmania, and a practising artist and academic. At the time of the interview for this project, she was the curator of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). From her own experiences, Julie reflects on the influences of the land in her art and its potential for sustaining connections to the environment. The sustainability of arts practices depends on the Elders’ knowledge to ensure a continuing supply of resources such as grasses for weaving or shells for necklaces.

While land provides the resources for material production, it also remains an inspiration for Aboriginal artists, both as a way of reclaiming culture, and for relocating culture in a contemporary context.
Julie talks about her personal processes for creating art with connections to Country, which allow her to explore the treatment of Aboriginal people since colonisation. Here she discusses the way she has collected material from the north of Tasmania (her Country) and its ability to reflect the past and the present:

I like the idea of people utilising and continuing tradition and yet modifying it with a contemporary story.

I made a work, a whole series of ten works with rocks and sticks and drift woods and plants and kelp and shells and they were all about the past and the present and continuing things…

Julie Gough, October 2004

Lee Darroch, who is involved in the Possum Skin Cloak project, attests to the way art is informed by Country. She has made several crayon drawings about her Country which are designs for possum skin cloak panels:

I’d like to live back in my traditional Country, my home Country again. And from that do some artwork based on being back in the Country.

Lee Darroch, October 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

Description: Detail showing three lines – rivers – merging into one. Reproduced in Reynolds (2005: 41)

Connection to Country inspires arts practices, which in turn have strengthened communities and specific families. Art can be associated with
people’s capacity for survival as it connects and, in some instances, reconnects people with each other and their past. As Lee states:

Art is a way of people finding out who they are.

… My grandmother and my great-grandmother, it goes right back, the women in my family, generations back did [weaving]. In fact my daughter when she was three had a dream that my great-grandmother came to her and she described what she was wearing and everything, and she said to her ‘Tell your mother to basket-weave because it’ll make her stronger’.

Lee Darroch, October 2004

Connection to Ancestors

Many participants acknowledged their connections to people from the past. Lorraine Coutts talks about the importance of collecting:

Each generation have their own style I suppose when they do create a piece of artwork. Like with Lin Onus’ work, there’s that connection with his family… We should be collecting from as many generations as possible. When I’m collecting, I see the stuff that’s being produced and I wonder what would be around and who would be around in the future to see it.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Caine Muir spoke about his connection to material culture through his role as an Assistant Collections Manager at the Museum Victoria. Caine is a young man, connected to the Yorta Yorta and Wadi Wadi nations through his mother Janice Muir. His family connections extend back to Agnes Edwards, the renowned feather flower producer from the Swan Hill area in the early twentieth century. The continuing production of material culture, including feather flowers and baskets, provides tangible evidence for Caine of his connections with arts practices, which he relates to his family’s survival:

I started at the Koorie Heritage Trust as a Trainee [in collections management], mainly because of my family’s association with the Trust, through things like my mother’s basket weaving. Her sisters also did basket weaving and made feather flowers, and my
grandmother, their mother, also taught them how to do the basket weaving, and my great-grandmother.

... I sort of fell into this role [at Museum Victoria] through family association. So I found myself looking after a lot of objects that are close to my heart because obviously through the family and the stories I’m connected to the pieces.

Caine Muir, September 2004

Symmetry between the past and the present is evident in Caine’s story. Many of his relatives have been involved in lobbying for improvements for their communities, significantly his great-grandfather Sir Doug Nicholls. Caine’s father, the late Bill Muir, was also a prominent community member, as well as a renowned emu egg carver. His skills as an artist were used to assist alcohol recovery programs at the Ngwala Willumbong Co-operative (see previous chapter). He is credited with supporting individuals in their recovery and in acquiring confidence in arts practices.135

The connection between resistance and survival is also highlighted in the continuous production of art by members of Caine’s family. Caine’s involvement in the management of southeast Australian Aboriginal collections realises the potential for artwork to highlight community achievements and restore community identity. Caine’s colleague at Museum Victoria, Lorraine Coutts, notes:

If you can say ‘Art that’s from our mob or my aunty did that or whoever’, you can identify. Like in the end you identify with which group it is. It is a community thing, because stories are from your communities, they’re from where you’re from, even if it’s from the ‘urban’ community, it’s still a community thing that’s owned.

... And there are different types of knowledge, for instance with Caine and his grandmother’s work and then seeing his mother’s and then maybe seeing work from his own generation.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

135 Also see Kerri Kruse in (Harvey et al. 1992).
Lorraine, as the roving curator at Museum Victoria, coordinates people's access to the collections of Aboriginal artwork, including photographic collections. She also organises printmaking and weaving workshops, and research programs for community members to access the Museum's collections held in the ‘Keeping Place’ at Bunjilaka. In this role she has experienced the profound impact that access to the collections can have on community members, for instance when a group of women from the Lake Condah area were shown the nineteenth century possum skin cloak: Lorraine explained that ‘this was long before people thought of the idea to do the cloaks in the new style’:

Often people come in and are moved by the collections, for example the possum-skin cloaks. The first time that the ladies saw it, when I’d organised a workshop, I really thought I’d done something wrong. I said to one of the women, ‘Did I do something to offend you?’ She said, ‘No I’m just crying because I’m seeing them for the first time.’ It was just the emotional reaction to seeing the work.

… It’s just knowing that the relatives may have produced this cloak … It’s that sense of connection.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

A similar powerful emotional response to the possum skin cloaks was reported by the artists Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm in chapter seven.

‘Art in the Blood’ and ‘Ancestral Memory’
Participants often refer to associations between the past and their current artwork in terms of ‘instinctual designs’, or an inherited ability to produce specific marks or designs, based on ‘Ancestral memory’, or that art is ‘in the blood’. Lyn Briggs and Treahna Hamm explain:

Oh look, art goes way back I think because on both sides of the family, on the Johnson side of the family and the Briggs’ there’s a lot of creative art … in the families … So it’s definitely in the blood.

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

I do think that we’ve actually got things that we carry around in us, like inside us, based on DNA or something.
I've shown my work to two older men. They can recognise certain symbols in it, whereas I don’t know what I’m doing, and to me I’m sort of speaking my own language through my work and I reckon it's ingrained in our psyche somewhere along.

Trehna Hamm, October 2004

Lee Darroch supports Trehna’s belief about DNA:

Ancestral memory must be held on your DNA.

Lee Darroch, October 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

Description: Possum skin cloak design in black ink. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

The connection between Ancestral memory and current arts practices are emphasised throughout the interviews. Both Robyne Latham and Karen Casey grew up disconnected from culture, but as Robyne observes:

Stuff gets left in your cellular memory.

… I don't know if it's cellular memory or that people just know how to do these things. I mean, I certainly know that I have made drawings and patterns as a kid, even before I was aware of my Aboriginality, that are definitely Aboriginal patterns, they're definitely Indigenous iconography, that no-one taught me.

Robyne Latham, November 2004.
Robyne Latham raises several issues about the denial of culture. In a colonised society, the restrictions imposed on cultural practice often resulted in older people deliberately excluding younger generations from learning about culture in order to protect them and to ensure survival. Despite these exclusions knowledge continued to be transmitted so that culture survived. This was evident in relation to Connie Hart’s story, as discussed in chapter five. For others the process of creating art is a means of reclaiming cultural practices previously denied by White authorities.

**Plate 8.4** Robyne Latham. *Spiral*, c.2004. Clay pot,

![Image removed due to copyright.](image)


Karen Casey has generally avoided the use of ‘imagery that is identifiably Aboriginal’,\(^{136}\) she uses the ‘power of art’, to (re)claim identity through an understanding of connections to Ancestors and land. These stories reflect not only the effects of disruptions to culture, but also an ongoing belief in the connection between the past and the present, a phenomenon articulated here as ‘Ancestral memory’.

I feel we maintain an attachment with the past despite having no conscious awareness of it. Regardless of whether or not there was

\(^{136}\) With the exception of some early works such as *Eternal Vigil*, 1988 and *Hot Fitzroy Night*, 1989, and the later Native Title monument 2001 in Reconciliation Place, Canberra, which do draw inspiration from traditional spirit figures (Karen Casey pers comm. 2007).
any prior knowledge of Aboriginality I think it’s carried on through
generations … encoded in our DNA as a sort of Ancestral memory I
suppose. But there’s also a certain level of connection to one’s
Ancestral lineage which comes out of intuition and connecting with the
land

Karen Casey, October 2004

While these stories echo the psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s theory of the
‘collective unconscious’, where people transmit knowledge and meaning
across generations via the ‘psyche’ (Jung 1991), they primarily reflect the way
people (as individuals and as part of the Aboriginal community) are reclaiming
their connections to a history and heritage that was denied in the past, which
has survived despite disruptions, and continues to articulate an Aboriginal
world view.137

Continuity through ‘Mark Making’
Research into the various marks, designs and symbols that are unique to
particular Aboriginal communities also continues connections with the past,
aligns people with kin and Country, and reflects contemporary Aboriginality
(see Godwin and Weiner 2006; Langton 2002). The adoption of ‘traditional’
Gunai designs by Ray Thomas, after his research at Museum Victoria into the
designs found on artefacts from his Country, was a turning point in his ability
to paint with more ‘integrity’. As reported in chapter three, Ray had

… found something which was you know, mine. Part of my culture,
my identity and who I am… from my area

Ray Thomas, October, 2004

Lyn Thorpe’s art has been influenced through similar research, which
has enabled her to confirm her connections to her heritage. Her identity has
also been reinforced through the development of her own marks, which she
attributes to her Aboriginality.

137 There are references to ‘collective’ memories in several interviews. For example, Robyne
Latham refers to the ‘collective unconscious shame’ which exists as a result of the denial
of a Black Australian history (Robyne Latham, interview November 2004).
There are certain marks that come up in my work consistently … I believe they’re instinctual … They come from somewhere in my past … from my people. Over the years I’ve developed these in my work. The fact that I’m developing the marks and whatever I do myself is not taken from anyone else, it’s me, Victorian, because I’m not imitating Western Desert art and … people wouldn’t look at it and think it’s from the desert.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Like Ray, Lyn’s work is informed by ‘traditional’ marks from Victoria: ‘Traditional’ Victorian art is very linear, lots of lines, crosshatching, diamonds, triangles, stick figures… A good example of this is on our possum skin cloaks, our shields and boomerangs and when we paint up for dance.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

Description: ‘This painting is about maintaining ones spirit and strength of Aboriginality against the odds of continual oppression…’. Courtesy Koorie Heritage

The connections between mark making and ‘Ancestral memory’ symbolise an Aboriginal imperative to reclaim cultural practices and reinterpret them in a contemporary context. Through mark making, people today are redefining connections to their heritage and rejecting the assumptions of earlier discriminatory policies, which classified and controlled Aboriginal people. To make your ‘mark’ is about standing your ground and
contesting the dominant culture’s essentialising and historicising of Aboriginal culture. For Aboriginal artists in the southeast, mark making is associated with reclaiming culture, within the social context of Aboriginality, and is a denial of racial categories (for example ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’ and so on). It is also very affirming as Robyne Latham remarks:

> I think a lot of people naturally are very successful at this sort of mark making technique and that’s always good for people, especially if they’ve not been successful much before.

Robyne Latham, November 2004

**Labelling and the Stereotype:**
The ongoing effect of racial categories imposed by discriminatory policies, such as assimilation, is reflected in the conversation between Lee Darroch, Vicki Couzens, and Treahna Hamm at the Regional Arts Festival in Horsham in 2004. Some of the conversation concerned their involvement in workshops at the Festival, they also discussed the continuation of the effects of racial stereotypes. Perceptions of ‘caste’ and skin colour continue to locate Aboriginal people as the Other. As Lee Darroch notes:

> Even in this conference, I’ve watched a lot of non-Aboriginal people, in different sessions … They were arguing about what terms they were going to call us in front of us.

> … Categories are a really negative thing. I mean this is an enlightened group of artists and art workers for god’s sake. What hope have we got out there with the rednecks?

Lee Darroch, October 2004

For Vicki, Treahna and Lee the categorising of themselves, their Ancestors and in turn their art, by the non-Aboriginal community, remains contentious. For the women, perceptions about their Aboriginality and skin colour within the mainstream also reflect perceptions about the authenticity of their culture. The confining of Aboriginal art to labels such as ‘urban’ and ‘traditional’ limits broader understandings of southeast Australian Aboriginal art. Such constructs are grounded in Western art history and continue to have a basis in social Darwinism (see Coombes 1992 [1998]). As the following conversation reveals, these constructs reflect stereotypes of
Aboriginal people, rather than an understanding of Aboriginality as a cultural concept (Johnston 1991; Russell 2001).

At the Horsham conference and festival the women were involved in a collaborative weaving project. They reflect on their arts practices and the labels imposed on them as Aboriginal artists:

Lee: They were terms that the government put on us. I just see ‘traditional’, and what are we, ‘urban’ or whatever, it’s just another way of ‘dividing and conquering’ us.

Vicki: But it is a process of education and awareness and changing those things. We’ve tried to stop the scientific racism with the ‘third, half-sixteenths’ and all that, ‘quarter-castes’ and everything.

Trehana: We want to define ourselves.

… You turn around and say … to some mainstream person … ‘Well, how much Irish blood have you got?’ … it’s a totally different thing because it’s all based on colour. It all comes back to colour. Not heritage. So it’s their way of defining themselves really.

Lee: But they also try and define us

Vicki: They turn around and call you Black all your life. They categorise you as Black, their statistics about you are Black, and then there are other times when they go, ‘But what makes you any different?’ and ‘How Black are you?’ and ‘You’re not traditional’.

Trehana: Black enough to be taken off your mother but you’re not…

Vicki: … Black enough to be a real…

Lee: What was I told? ‘You could pass for one of us.’ I actually had a woman say to me once in a shop, this is no kidding. It was in southern NSW. She said ‘Where are you from?’… It was summer and I’m a summer-time Black, so I was dark then and I said ‘I’m Aboriginal’ and she goes, ‘You couldn’t be, you’re too pretty’ (Laughter).

Trehana Hamm, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, October 2004

These comments reveal that outsider acceptance of Aboriginality is bound in colonial perceptions according to racial categories, which in turn impacts on debates about the authenticity of art by southeast Australian
Aboriginal artists. As the Queensland Aboriginal artist Richard Bell notes, Aboriginal art is a ‘white thing’, defined in white terms (Bell 2002). While for Aboriginal people art is a way of signifying pride in one’s culture (as evidenced in quotes from participants), labels such as ‘urban’, ‘traditional’ or ‘Aboriginal’ do not necessarily reflect the individuals’ ideas of themselves or their art, but rather the dominant society’s notions of Aboriginality (see Brady 2002).

While Aboriginality informs many artists’ work, there are tensions about the use of labels that do not adequately describe or acknowledge the work of artists as creative individuals:

I just call myself an artist, ‘cause that’s what I am, and I think if you’re stereotyped, if you put yourself in a little box you’re … not going to get out of that little box. … Everything I do is very contemporary, it’s [very] much my own [style]. I am Aboriginal but I’m an artist.

Cathy Adams, November 2004

My Aboriginality informs who I am as a person … But I don’t necessarily see myself as an ‘Aboriginal artist’

Karen Casey, October 2004

There’s sort of a debate… why is it termed Aboriginal art? Why isn’t it just Australian art? … Aboriginal people are pigeonholed again into this thing. Lin Onus once said he’s an Australian artist who just happens to be Aboriginal

Ray Thomas, October 2004

Lin Onus also observed an ‘emerging resistance to the tag “Aboriginal artists”.’ These statements support Marcia Langton’s advocacy of the eradication of ‘essentialist labels’, such as ‘traditional’, ‘contemporary’ and ‘Australian Aboriginal’. The removal of such labels ‘will imply that Aboriginal life is now accepted as legitimate in its own right’ (Langton 2003b: 91).

At various stages of colonisation in the southeast, governments have sought to control and restrict Aboriginal people within the confines of Western tropes. The use of labels to categorise people reinforced stereotypes about what was authentic and ‘real’. While Aboriginal people who practise art consider themselves artists without the restrictions of labels, their artwork
provides avenues for reclaiming connections to the past and for telling stories which are uniquely Aboriginal. Tensions within this paradigm are evident; an assertion of people’s own identity as Aboriginal remains paramount, while at the same time they are embedded in a colonising process which uses labels to construct the Other. You can’t be just an artist if you are Aboriginal; you must be an ‘Aboriginal artist’. For Aboriginal people, however, their Aboriginality and their art are not determined by labels, but are about community and individual experiences, connecting with the past, and being accepted in the present in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. As Lyn Thorpe explains:

Our own history is denied. I mean that’s the reality of it for me. …We have to continually prove that we are not only artists, but Aboriginal artists. That’s not why I do it. What it’s associated with is validating who you are and your right to it. It’s about your birthright; it’s about acknowledging and respecting your great-grandmother and other Ancestors who had their rights taken away from them. So that’s what we’re doing, we are claiming it back.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Similarly Lyn Briggs points out:

It’s the right of Aboriginal artists … to be seen as artists … So we’re also saying: ‘Hey, this person can go and do any art that they want to do … they can create in any style they want to create. So be accepting of them as an artist, not just an Aboriginal artist.’ That’s entirely up to the person as well, how they want to voice that.

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

**Connection as Healing**

The ability to create designs which are identifiably Aboriginal continues despite disruptions to the community. As Lyn Briggs, in her capacity as a manager at the Aboriginal Health Service, has witnessed:

When you see Aboriginal people doing art there’s something spiritual about it because the connection’s there. Even children who have been taken away or even kids who have grown up in a family that’s never practised the designs and law for that area where they grew up
... can still pick up a paint brush and paint something that gives off this cultural thing ... I really can’t explain it.

... I can easily go and sit down and have an idea in my mind what I want to paint and do, and you can see that it’s not a Western painting, that it’s Indigenous art and you know, I think that’s what you see with a lot of people who come in here and do the art projects. They’re not taught things but there’s something in them that still comes out as Aboriginal art

Lyn Briggs, February 2005


Description: This painting is about where I was born in Narrqndra which is on the Murimbidgee river but is also surrounded by other waterways. In my eyes this is how I will always see my homeland. Courtesy Koorie Heritage Trust

The use of Aboriginal designs in art, whether or not the mainstream views them as Aboriginal, reflects the various identities of Aboriginal artists as opposed to the labels outsiders impose. While contemporary designs may be related to arts practices and ‘markings’ from the past, Aboriginal artists today
are adapting, reinterpreting and creating art in a contemporary context. The work of those involved in the revival of practices through education and art workshops, and the reinvigoration of ‘traditional’ practices and iconography, speaks across generations, reinforcing Aboriginal identity and wellbeing. The reclaiming and exercising of cultural practices, which have continued across time and place, denies colonial stereotypes and emphasises Aboriginal concepts of their culture and history. Kimba Thompson explains:

I know when the possum skins were being redone by the girls [Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm], to have Elders come along, and to see the looks in their eyes, you go: ‘Hey there’s a bit of healing there and wellbeing for that community either as a whole or as a part’. Those … cloaks that represent … different communities … there’s a bit of healing there, a bit of reviving of something that maybe gets to tap back into culture. Like when you weren’t allowed to talk about something or practise ceremonies

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

On another level, arts practices have the capacity to ‘heal’ people who have been dislocated from their culture. For Colin McKinnon, as curator of the Mia Mia Aboriginal gallery at Westerfold Park, in Templestowe, Melbourne, his arts practice, was influential in assisting him as a recovering alcoholic, reconnecting him with his culture and enabling him to become engaged as an active participant in arts promotion and management. Colin also views ‘art’ as a viable economic industry for Aboriginal people.

In an interview for this project he commented on his time in Galiambe, as a recovering alcoholic, where he was inspired by Bill Muir. Bill provided him with emu eggs to carve. At the time, Colin didn’t think he could do the egg carvings. However, once he ‘got the hang of it’, the work allowed him to break out of his addiction cycle. After leaving Galiambe, with only a ‘dole cheque’, he was able to turn his art into a profitable industry. The egg carvings were based on totems from his community, Geraldton, in Western Australia. He later went on to have an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Through selling his art, Colin was then able to put his children through school (Colin McKinnon, interview October 2004).
Stories like Colin’s and other participants in this project acknowledge that arts practices provide visible signs of Aboriginality. Doing and seeing Aboriginal art potentially reconnects Aboriginal people with their culture in ways that are positive and affirming, while providing further opportunities to enhance identity and wellbeing for Aborigines in the southeast.

**ADAPTATION AND AUTHENTICITY**

Aboriginal culture isn’t distilled in time as a stagnant ‘primitive’ phenomenon; it has adapted, and is adapting to social and environmental change, as eloquently stated by Cathy Adams.

> Oh, culture changes. Culture’s not a stagnant thing, it’s always constantly changing … you can’t just put culture back in the past because it’s still a living thing today … it changes with your environment … it just adapts with what’s going on … It has to change, like we couldn’t live ‘traditional’, we’d all end up in jail for … indecent exposure.

Cathy Adams, November 2004

Despite disruption to culture, continuity in arts practice is evident from the stories in the previous section. Here the discussion turns to the practice of culture today and the way it impacts on issues of the authenticity of Aboriginal art, which have arisen as a result of the colonial process. There are tensions surrounding what is considered authentic or ‘real’ Aboriginal art, such as those arising from the quotation of designs (mainly dots and x-rays) by those who have not acquired the rights to paint these styles from ‘traditional’ custodians. The use of such designs has meaning in the context of colonial disruptions to Aboriginal culture in the southeast. Participant conversations challenge mainstream perceptions about the way southeast Australian Aboriginal people and their art are viewed, emphasising the dynamic and transformative nature of Aboriginal culture today.

**Art as ‘traditional’ and dynamic**

Aboriginal Elder Uncle John ‘Sandy’ Atkinson, highlights the changes in arts practices he has seen since he was a boy in the 1940s at the Cummeragunja Mission on the Murray River. His story emphasises the dynamism of
Aboriginal arts practices, while revealing connections to Aboriginal culture regardless of time and place:

On the mission, you can see an evolution that was taking place. For instance when handsaws came along, that was much better … people were able to go down the river and get the bends [tree branches] from the river bank and saw them, and then along came the power benches and then the planes. They could use a plane, which was much better than sitting under a tree with broken glass scraping … And so the revolution and evolution of this sort of work is always slow. I mean … if they were professionals they’d be down at the engineering works trying to work out like I have been, making plywood returning boomerangs. My equipment is very modern you know and I make four or five hundred boomerangs a day.

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

In his role as a mentor and teacher to young artists, Ray Thomas acknowledges the disruptions to Aboriginal culture and the ‘evolving’ nature of arts practices today:

A great deal of traditional culture and heritage has been denied from past injustices that our old people had no say over. We lost so much down in the southeast of the country.

Ray Thomas, October 2004
Yet these losses have not destroyed southeast Australian Aboriginal culture. Southeast Australian Aboriginal art today is located within a system of values and constructs that are specific to Aboriginal culture. Ray continues:

People are sort of a little bit lost in thinking they’ve got nothing to paint or got no story to tell but everybody has … people generally think that it’s got to be ‘traditional’. But that can’t be ’cause of the history. So what I do with the students, I’ll say: ‘Well, tell me a story about when you grew up or where you grew up’. This one student in particular, she’s sitting there, she couldn’t think of what to paint or draw for this design project … And I thought ‘Tell us something about when you were a kid’ … and she came up with this story about how they used to go fishing and they used to get the reeds or something to catch the fish and make these … little fishing rod types of thing and I thought, well there’s your story there, that’s your ‘traditional’ story there. It doesn’t have to be a ‘traditional’ Gunai story or something which is thousands of years old. I said: ‘That’s your story there, you paint that or you draw that up and design that and that’s your ‘traditional’ story. It’s a contemporary ‘traditional’ story.’ I said: ‘That’s what our culture is, ‘cause you know it’s evolving all the time’.

…Even with I guess the young people, they don’t realise that they live a ‘semi-traditional’ lifestyle in the sense of the family structure, the extended family, who they knock around with. It’s mainly all your cousins, the first cousins and that and you’ve got the extended family, and you meet at the grandmother’s house or the grandparents’ house. That’s the matriarchal or patriarchal meeting place and there’s a close kinship, family kinship thing and a lot of them don’t realise that they are still living a ‘traditional’ type of lifestyle.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

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138 Also see the anthropologist Peter Sutton’s discussion of native title claims, where he highlights the importance of continuing family obligations in ‘post-classical’ (that is since colonisation) urban and rural Aboriginal communities despite disruptions to culture as a result of colonisation (Sutton 1998:).
Lyn Thorpe’s story supports Ray’s:

The beautiful thing about Aboriginal art is I think, and if you haven’t got mainstream controlling and saying what Aboriginal art is, is the diversity … and different styles and techniques. You know Aboriginal art is not stagnant … We are ever evolving and changing however we are connected to our past, our Ancestors, our Country. Whether I decide to do a cloak … with ‘traditional’ Aboriginal iconography or scrape it the ‘traditional’ way or whatever, that is not important.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

**Challenging inauthenticity**

The effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people in the southeast prompted adaptations to arts practices, which challenge outsider perceptions of authenticity and the way Aboriginal people connect and identify with culture. As discussed in the earlier chapters, a stereotyped view of Aboriginal people manifested itself in the popular conscience, where the ‘traditional’ (that is ‘Black’ and ‘primitive’) was considered ‘real’, and any variations to this ideal
rendered the person and their art inauthentic. The construction of southeast Australian Aboriginal art as second-rate and inauthentic is also challenged by various participants.

Contentions about the legitimacy of Aboriginal art in the southeast continued throughout the twentieth century. Many of the artists interviewed understand that there is still an idealised notion of what Aboriginal art should be. However, the Senior Curator of Aboriginal art at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Judith Ryan, emphasises that the labelling of Aboriginal art is changing due to the number of galleries displaying a diversity of Aboriginal art:

When the public become more familiar and start looking beneath the surface they’ll see that it is impossible to generalise from one language group to another or one artist to another.

Judith Ryan, January 2005

Judith Ryan also says that the perception of ‘traditional’ art from remote areas has changed, since it reflects contemporary life. Like people in the southeast, artists in remote regions have responded to changes imposed by European intrusions into their lands and associated cultural disruption (Bardon 2000; Michaels 1994). The notion of the ‘traditional’, therefore, remains merely a construction of the West (Croft 1992).

Lorraine Coutts, a curator at Museum Victoria, who like Judith is exposed to a wide range of Aboriginal art, also acknowledges the diversity and adaptations of Aboriginal culture in the southeast, which reflect life in contemporary society:

Art is also informing the rest of the world that there are Indigenous people in Australia. A lot of the Victorian Aboriginal culture is unnoticed, mainly because people think of us as still being in the Centre. And most people, the general public, can’t get past that we’re living in today’s society, we use mobile phones, we use computers, we use cars to get around. They still want us to be in a ‘traditional’ lifestyle and they still think of us as not ‘traditional’. If you’re not out bush … standing on one leg, then you’re not Aboriginal. I just can’t believe that we’re the most adapted race around, we’ve adapted to
colonisation in the last 200 years … You still maintain your identity and I think that’s what a lot of the ‘urban’ artists are trying to do. To make people aware that they’re still here … that they’re still practising their culture, but they’re just using different mediums … and we’re adapting to those mediums.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

In the following stories, artists discuss the ways they have contended with lingering misconceptions about how Aboriginal art should look, and the way they have developed their work to reflect their own experiences. These stories also raise issues concerning the impact of the art market on the appreciation and acceptance of southeast Australian Aboriginal art.

Julie Gough considers issues of authenticity and adaptation within the broader context of change as a necessity for survival. She recognises that mainstream attitudes to change in Aboriginal culture are predictable; more contentious issues arise from resistance within Aboriginal communities to adaptation of arts practices. While culture is dynamic, this resistance might be explained as a reaction to assimilation and the attempted annihilation of Aboriginal culture:

I’ve heard people say ‘Oh! that’s not real Aboriginal art’. And that’s not very alarming when it comes from non-Aboriginal people … it’s almost expected there will always be someone who’s going to say ‘Oh! that kind of acrylic work or that kind of basket-making’s not “traditional”’ … and that comes through lack of knowledge or understanding … But sometimes it comes from Aboriginal people themselves about other Aboriginal artists.

… What I’m interested in is that people get the space from their own people to experiment and … to incorporate new things that are part of life now … So a modification of a ‘traditional’ technique can be seen as a great challenge and that’s pretty interesting.

…I mean just the blurring of whether there’s a fear that the original will be lost … If that artist wants to make something completely different … how well is that received? … Because I think that the old people before us modified and changed according to what plants were available and what they were catching, and if a certain species was
disappearing they’d have to change the whole style of basket to incorporate the new one … Like keep the past with us and precious, but realise that maybe it’s a pocket of time, it shouldn’t be frozen like some of the objects we love.

Julie Gough, October 2004


Work exhibited in the *Native Title Business* exhibition, KHT 2004.
Reproduced in Winter (2002: 44)

As Julie’s story demonstrates, culture and arts practices change, especially in response to disruption as well as to environmental changes, and change reflects the ability of Aboriginal people and culture to survive, rather than indicating a total eradication of ‘law and custom’.139

Similarly, health worker and artist, Susan Smyth (this participant chose to be known under a pseudonym) focuses on the influence of individuals’ experiences on their art styles. While style often reflects cultural disruption, it remains tied to Aboriginal subjectivities:

139 In the Yorta Yorta native title claim Justice Olney did not recognise that the adapted forms of culture, which the Yorta Yorta continue to observe, gave rise to native title rights. Olney declared that their native title had been ‘washed away by the tide of history’ (see *Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria FCA 1606 1998*). This refusal to accept the processes of cultural adaptation continues to be bound by restrictive Western definitions as they are applied to the continuity of Aboriginal culture; it must exist in a ‘classical’ state, so that its ‘laws and customs’ are in continuity with those that prevailed at the time of colonisation (see Sutton 1998: 60).
I think ... just being Aboriginal influences how you see the world ... different Aboriginal people have different sorts of backgrounds, and whatever that background is, [it] will influence what comes out ... I've seen people who aren't from Central Australia or people who do dot paintings, or people who do x-ray style painting that's not really from their area or wherever their family is from, but they're also very influenced by seeing other Aboriginal artwork and stuff. So I think it depends on your background. I've seen other people brought up very close to their cultural connections who have learnt drawing styles from that area ... One that I can think of is in the Grampians area, the people around that area ... because they have that artwork on rock and it's not going anywhere; they've maintained that connection to that area. So where people have had connections with artefacts or tools or whatever you want to call it, that's been handed down ... but then there's other people who have lost that connection.

... We don't have that history in our family so I can't really say the style of [my] artwork. So I guess the style that I've developed [is] based on my own experiences.

Susan Smyth, October 2004

Authenticity issues in arts practices mean that Aboriginal artists in the southeast are increasingly aware of the need to use styles that are relevant to them, rather than appropriated from outside. An individual’s art style is connected not only to the past, but also to their lived experiences today.

Categorising Aboriginal art as ‘authentic’ only when it accords with outside perceptions confines mainstream understandings of Aboriginal history and arts practices to an imaginary and unchanging past. Lyn Briggs explains that Aboriginal arts practices have always been about Aboriginal perceptions of society. Art reflects individual experiences, while style frequently challenges ideas of authenticity. Aboriginal art styles are also influenced by the external art market, which trades on mainstream perceptions about the ‘traditional’ Aboriginal art aesthetic:

There's even people today who you see are doing dot paintings but they come from here [Victoria]. ... [T]hey're not to know that that's not originally from here ... because they've never been taught that or had
that information passed on. Because if you have that breaking down from generation to generation, so many kids being put into institutions, so many families breaking up, of course you’re going to have that knowledge disrupted too, you know the passing on of knowledge. But it’s just amazing how all that can happen and has happened, but you look around and you see so many people involved in Aboriginal art, it’s amazing. And the stuff they’re producing, it’s incredible. That to me says it’s deep within you, there’s something there, I don’t know, it’s … spiritual sort of.

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

Other participants also discuss the influence of the dot and x-ray art market on people who have been dislocated from culture. While some people are concerned about the use of styles from other areas,\(^\text{140}\) dot and x-ray designs provide universally identifiable iconography that assists people who have been dislocated from family and culture to identify positively as Aboriginal (also see Croft 1992).

Robyne Latham echoes Lyn Briggs’ statement about using iconic Aboriginal designs to reinforce identity and reinforces concerns with labelling:

It’s already a dodgy concept, ‘Aboriginal art’. Putting aside the pros and cons of that as a statement, we all know what it means; people who are doing artworks using Indigenous iconography that they feel they have a right to use. … [But] I think it does give people a way of identifying who they are in time and place, [if they] are maybe incarcerated or in TAFEs, students anywhere. [They] can have a sense of who they are and be successful.

There might be all sorts of cultural issues around using that kind of iconography and its appropriateness to people from this area, but at the end of the day, if that’s helping those people manage being inside

\(^{140}\) See discussion of the experiences of Lin Onus and later Ray Thomas in previous chapters.
a prison [for example] and manage who they are and come to understand themselves better as a result of that process, then to me it’s worth doing.

Robyne Latham, November 2004

Julie Gough also articulates these sentiments, noting that to deny people the opportunity to reconnect with culture using art styles they can relate to is detrimental to their exploration of identity:

It’s not healthy to say ‘That’s wrong, go away you shouldn’t do that’, it’s better to actually provide people with the knowledge of where they can access their own cultural tool kit, even if they’re not sure where they are from.

Julie Gough, October 2004

Vicki Couzens says that people can move on from painting dots:

You see people who don’t know where they come from or who they are and they start painting dots because it’s that reaching out to their Aboriginal identity and trying to find out who they are, and when they start finding that out they move on to their own stuff.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

The effects of family separation and the breakdown of communities over the last two hundred years has resulted in people accessing the most readily available means of identifying with their culture. The proliferation of dot and x-ray style painting, made visible through the media and popularised in public and private galleries, has meant that for those in the southeast who have suffered some form of disconnection, the appropriation of these styles is one way of reconnecting with their Aboriginality.

The art market and ‘authenticity’
The Aboriginal art market is largely responsible for creating a perception of the way Aboriginal art should look and reinforcing the notion that Aboriginal culture in the southeast is peripheral, as Treahna Hamm observes:

People read Aboriginal painting or art as dots. That’s the big thing to break down.

Treahna Hamm, October 2004
It has been traditionally characterised by non-Aboriginal people buying works from remote areas. Many of these works are considered ‘high art’, as opposed to those from the southeast which generally continue to be associated with the tourist market and therefore considered second-rate or kitsch (Altman 2000b). As Judith Ryan comments, the ‘high art’ market promotes ‘authentic’ Aboriginal artists who are fashionable and their art economically viable and increasingly valuable (Judith Ryan interview, January 2005). Central Australian artists such as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Emily Kame Kngwarreye painted in styles, although contemporary, accorded with public perceptions of a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal aesthetic, which is generally abstract and linear (or curvilinear). As a result Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s painting *Warlugulong* (1977) fetched $2.4 million at a Sotheby’s auction in July 2007. In May 2007, Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s painting *Earth Creation* sold for $1.05 million (Genocchio 2007).

However, the perception that remote area work is ‘authentic Aboriginal art’ reflects the limitations of the general public’s knowledge of the diversity and dynamism of art styles throughout the country (see Altman et al. 2002; Langton 1994).

The public aren’t necessarily very well informed and if you are relying on the art market it’s only those artists who are well promoted, and that’s not really what’s going to give you a true picture of what’s going on.

Judith Ryan, January 2005

The difficulty in marketing art from the southeast is related to the continuing undermining of Aboriginal culture in the southeast (Altman 2005). Lyn Thorpe explains:

Sometimes people can get trapped into painting for the market … the galleries and curators have made themselves to be seen … as authorities on Aboriginal art by mainstream standards. In Victoria many of these places and people promote Aboriginal art from other states, particularly Top End and Western Desert art; very beautiful work. However, the shame of this is that it reinforces the myth that Victorian Aboriginal people have no culture, no stories, no authentic
Aboriginal art or craft. And that means, because art is often associated with stories, connection to country, family, all those things... that the Victorian story gets lost, and that reinforces that whole idea that there's no Aboriginal people here, there's no culture. ... Actually the Koorie Heritage Trust was one place that was very strong on that ... about trying to break down the barrier and ... to acknowledge, and have ... some respect for Victorian Aboriginal artists work ... as being legitimate Aboriginal art.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

The establishment of organisations such as the Koorie Heritage Trust, and programs such as Museum Victoria workshops and the Aboriginal art and design courses at TAFEs and Universities, have enhanced opportunities to learn about designs from the southeast. These programs assist artists to research the history and iconography of artefacts in the collections at the KHT or the Museum. They also provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges of skills and knowledge between communities throughout Australia and overseas and contribute to greater understandings about designs that are ‘authentic’ to specific regions.

More recently, there have been concerted efforts to develop and promote art from the southeast. In the government sector, Elisabeth Jones and Lowanna Norris, respectively a senior arts officer and an Indigenous arts trainee at Arts Victoria (a Victorian government arts funding and advisory body), have worked since 2002 to support southeast Australian Aboriginal artists and foster skills in promoting, exhibiting and selling their artwork.

Elisabeth and Lowanna discussed the strategies which Arts Victoria have implemented to support Koori and Victorian-based Aboriginal artists make their art more viable for the ‘art market’. While they are concerned about labelling artists and determining authenticity, they highlight the role of Arts Victoria, in partnership with the Koori Business Network, in supporting artists through the Deadly Arts Business programs:

Elisabeth: A really simple way to deal with authenticity issues is for artists to document, through an ‘artist’s statement’ and/or their biography, where they are from and which community knowledge and
culture they are influenced by. So, we've had cases where people have said, ‘I can't put that work in [an exhibition], I've used stitches from another area.’ Then we've found out that those stitches were taught in a cultural exchange workshop, so it was appropriate for the artist to use the stitches and refer to them as the artist's influences in an artist's statement, as supporting documentation for the work.

**Lowanna:** And we've also found that when an artist has an ‘artist's statement’, their work seems to sell more successfully, particularly if they have an accompanying story to it explaining the meaning of the picture and their biography to go with it as well. We found that a really good selling point.

**Elisabeth:** …I think that the buyers want to know the story; it's a critical selling point. And it's also the artists' ‘marketing edge’ over products that are not produced appropriately by Indigenous people because it provides credibility and evidence of authenticity if the supporting documentation is done properly. And it doesn't cost a lot of time or money to write an artist's statement. We believe it's a great way of addressing authenticity issues. But the other side is that not everyone wants to be identified as an Aboriginal artist; they maybe want to be identified as an artist first and foremost. And that's fine, and that's their choice. Other people say … ‘Look the works sells … “art for arts sake”, it speaks for itself, I don't need to provide documentation. Other artists can’t provide the documentation because they can’t write or because they don’t know what should even be in an artist's statement or because it's so obvious to them what the work means … it's difficult to put it in writing. So we believe one of the next phases of Deadly Arts Business is to actually provide support and ‘skilling up’ in those particular areas, for those artists that want to learn that process. It won’t suit everybody in terms of strategies to market their art, but it's also a great opportunity to raise awareness of cultural issues and it's another tool in raising the profile of Indigenous art from this area.

Lowanna Norris, Elisabeth Jones, December 2004

The ‘high art’ market is still not convinced about the authenticity of southeast Australian Aboriginal art. This is evident through the media's
continued promotion of artists and exhibitions from northern Australian Aboriginal art centres. Jason Eades, Chief Executive Officer of the KHT (and member of this project’s Reference Group), acknowledges the lack of media coverage of southeast Australian Aboriginal art, compared to art from Western Australia and the Northern Territory (Arts Victoria 2004). Further, at an early Reference Group meeting, Jason remarked that art from the north, especially Central Australian dots, was ‘adapted to suit an art market’ (Jason Eades, Reference Group meeting, 17 August 2004). Jason’s comments contest the general public’s frequent misconceptions of Aboriginal art from the north as fixed in time and therefore ‘authentic’. However, programs, such as those created by the Koorie Heritage Trust and the Koori Business Network, in conjunction with the established art market, are increasing the public profile and understanding of artists and arts practices in the southeast, across different art markets, including the tourist art trade (Altman 2000b).

Although art in the southeast struggles to receive equal status and publicity with art from more remote areas of the country, a growing awareness of and involvement in the art market can increase the potential for arts practices in the southeast to reinforce culture and identity. This has the capacity to impact positively on the Aboriginal population, and to challenge the public conscience. As Lowanna Norris explains:

Where I see the market heading is, it’s great for the Aboriginal community as a whole because it is actually assisting in reclaiming their culture ... There are economic, self-determination and empowerment opportunities.

Lowanna Norris, December 2004

While attending the Carve exhibition, at the Melbourne Museum in March 2006, I watched a canoe-making display by members of the Aboriginal community from the Barmah Forest area (near Cummeragunja mission). In this instance the carver was using power tools, much to the dismay of one of the tourists, who commented that ‘surely he should be using stone tools, if it was to be authentic’ (Field Notes, March 2006). For further details about this exhibition see (Robins 2006: 19).

For instance, the Koorie Heritage Trust has, since 2005, held stalls at the Melbourne Affordable Arts Fair at the Royal Exhibition Buildings, while the Koori Business Network supported the Tribal Expressions exhibitions and enterprises held during the Commonwealth Games in March 2006 (Koori Business Network 2006).
In reality, however, change is slow; the art market continues to prioritise artists from the more remote areas. In the southeast, where issues of authenticity and a revival in cultural awareness have only recently been supported by government programs, endeavours to address these perceptions by providing continuing education for Aboriginal artists and by highlighting their achievements in a context of cultural diversity remains a significant task (see Parliament of Australia: Senate Committee 2007).

While artists in the southeast struggle to be considered on an equal playing field with Aboriginal artists from around the country, their artworks, like those from elsewhere, are potentially open to exploitation and copyright issues operating within the sometimes unscrupulous art market. As Ray Thomas explained, there is an increasing demand for a systematic process that stops the ‘rip offs’ of Aboriginal artists’ work (Ray Thomas interview, October 2004). Colin McKinnon has also been significant in advocating for closer scrutiny of those involved in the Aboriginal arts industry. Since opening the Mia Mia gallery in 1995 in conjunction with Parks Victoria, and more recently with the support of The Aboriginal Artists Development Trust, the local Manningham community and Monash University, Colin aims to continue to promote, sell and exhibit Aboriginal art and culture from around the country, in ethical and sustaining ways (ANTAR 2007; Howard 2007). Colin has also become increasingly involved in his role as a spokesperson for The Aboriginal Artists Development Trust. This was established in 2004 in an endeavour to ‘provide some means of protecting and promoting Aboriginal art in a non-exploitative environment’ (Victorian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs 2004).

143 The most recent flagrant abuse of ‘ripping off’ Aboriginal art has been documented in the media concerning the Liberto’s, an elderly Toorak couple who forged the works of the respected Kimberley artist the late Rover Thomas. For commentary on this case see (Hagan 2007).

144 Since conducting this interview with Colin in late 2004, the Mia Mia gallery experienced financial difficulties, which resulted in closing the gallery due to a lack of funds for maintenance issues. However, with the support of the Manningham local council and The Aboriginal Artists Development Trust, Colin in conjunction with the Manningham community was able to successfully secure funding to reopen the gallery in October 2007 (Howard 2007).
Recently, in 2007, along with Jason Eades, CEO of the Koorie Heritage Trust and Judith Ryan, from the National Gallery of Victoria, along with other prominent arts advisors, Colin has become an ambassador for the City of Melbourne’s *Code of practice for galleries and retailers of Indigenous art*.

This code promotes the... ethical practice in the sale and display of Indigenous art products by commercial and public galleries and retail outlets. It is a guide that encourages the sale of authentic products and promotes fair and respectful relationships between Indigenous artists and galleries and retailers (Janke 2007: 4).

**RECLAIMING AND REVIVAL:**

As the stories told throughout this thesis have demonstrated, art is a way of reconnecting people to and reclaiming culture, particularly through workshops that have entailed researching designs from the past. This is poignantly revealed in the discussion in relation to the possum skin cloak project in the previous chapter. Current events and cultural practices can also inspire artists and affirm identity, as Vicki Couzens observes:

> [Our art] is about the regeneration and revitalisation of our culture and bringing those stories through and it is recording and documenting stuff. Whether it’s past events or current, things like reburials. I just did a painting on that and that is what really underpins everything that I’ve ever done, whether it’s working in the arts or being an artist.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

Where language and ceremonial practices are still relatively intact (such as the Centre and the Top End), evidence of arts practices are embedded in a ‘classical’ culture that is readily apparent (Morphy 1998). However, for artists in the southeast who have been exposed to the processes of colonisation for longer, the means of reconnecting with and reclaiming cultural practices has depended not only on cultural adaptation, but

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also on individuals’ participation in programs concerned with the retrieval and rejuvenation of culture (whether as a reflection of the past or as an interpretation of culture today). Judith Ryan explains:

It isn’t about artists discovering what was made earlier and replicating that exactly, it’s really about transforming it into something new. Treahna Hamm is doing a great body of work, she’s weaving lots of fabulous things, she’s made a possum skin cloak and now she’s doing things that derive from those designs but she’s not replicating them … So I think that it’s about doing the process, it’s like getting the material for an essay. You do your reading then you produce something that’s yours.

Judith Ryan, January 2005

Ray Thomas agrees:

‘Traditional’, historical painting … coming across the legends and myths from our area, so I can paint them now, which is good. So that’s reviving the ‘traditional’ culture from my area, I believe. But I’m painting in a contemporary style, of course.

Ray Thomas, October 2004


![Image removed due to copyright.](Reproduced in Arts Victoria (2004: 48))

Cultural rejuvenation and reclamation in part depend on the accessibility of programs such as art courses and workshops, which allow for
the rediscovery of culture, either through researching the history of designs on artefacts, or by knowledge exchange within and between communities.

The ‘Black Power’ movement of the 1970s (as previously discussed) provided people such as Ray Thomas, Lyn Briggs and Lyn Thorpe with opportunities to pursue research and education about their culture and to revive arts practices in ways which had not been available to previous generations. The self-determination campaigns of that era contributed to programs which have encouraged research into southeast Australian culture. These programs are available through educational institutions, and include workshops run by places like the KHT and Museum Victoria. Opportunities are also available (mainly at Bunjilaka and the KHT) for people to have their work professionally curated and displayed by Aboriginal experts in dedicated exhibition spaces.¹⁴⁶

**Education and research**

Uncle Herb Patten reflected on changes in education and the way Aboriginal people have been represented, or been able to represent themselves through teaching and learning;

> [In the 1940s] when we went to primary school, the first time I ever saw an Aboriginal person in a picture was a shadow figure of a man. He’s standing up on one leg, holding a spear, and just a shadow, no face features, just a little bit of body muscle features, but nothing specifically about who that person was … When I look back at that book it was written by a bloke called Strehlow … without the consent of the Aboriginal people … There was no Aboriginal person that I saw come through our school like I do at kindergartens today talking about boomerangs, spears, talking about culture … None of that.

Uncle Herb Patten, October 2004

¹⁴⁶ The Koorie Heritage Trust aims to provide ‘opportunities for artists of varying artistic stages to exhibit at the Trust, from community artists to highly acclaimed international artists. Art expression plays an instrumental role in the reconciliation process, the celebration of our community and awareness of Indigenous social issues’ (Koorie Heritage Trust and Clarke 2005: 9).

- 315 -
Before these programs were available, Aboriginal artwork in the southeast was largely associated with craft and ‘tourist art’. The common positioning of Aboriginal material culture as craft depended on Western art history’s concept of artefacts as functional or domestic items: ‘low art’. Decisions whether to display certain material culture in ethnographic museums and art galleries have a colonialisist history, which has undervalued craft or ‘three-dimensional’ works. Aboriginal people, however, see little differentiation between art and craft. These historical divisions are gradually being contested through the work of Aboriginal artists, curators and academics, as ‘three-dimensional’ artworks are now being accommodated in museums and galleries (see Brady 2002; Mellor 2000; Rowley 1992). The appropriate display and exhibition of southeast Aboriginal art, and increasing appreciation and understanding of arts practices from an Aboriginal viewpoint, encourages the self-determination of identity and culture.

Indigenous art and design courses at TAFEs and Universities around the State are today implicated in the process of reclaiming cultural practices and working towards repositioning southeast Aboriginal artwork within the framework of contemporary Australian art. These courses have contributed to the promotion of Aboriginal art throughout the State, prompting a rethinking of the categories and classifications of southeast Aboriginal art. Cathy Adams explains that, by challenging the accepted status of Aboriginal art as ‘craft’, she and other artists were able to initiate art and design courses with an equivalent status to mainstream courses, where Aboriginal artwork could be elevated beyond the historical idea of artefact or crafted object:

I used to work with Maree [Clarke’s] brother Peter Clarke, who passed away, and we wrote the curriculum for the Aboriginal arts course … I

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147 An example of the increasing acceptance of ‘three-dimensional’ objects as ‘high art’ is the 2005 22nd Telstra art award, won by women from Blackstone, Western Australia for their woven grass car (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2005). Another example is the Anangu (Northern Territory) women’s fibre figures displayed at the NGV’s Colour Power exhibition in 2004-2005 (Purich and Gough 2004: 126-130). Objects from the southeast include Lorraine Connelly-Norothy’s installations made from recycled tin and metal ‘woven’ to represent string bags and wooden weapons, and Treahna Hamm and Yvonne Koolmatrie’s woven fibre objects acquired by the NGV and exhibited at Landmarks in 2006 (see Gough 2006: 80, 86-87).
was the liaison officer at RMIT (TAFE) ... So we developed ... the arts course at RMIT that ran straight into the mainstream. So you got an equivalent qualification. It wasn’t... an Aboriginal arts design course, it was a design course ... It stood on its own ... and that was probably in about 1995 ... Our courses have run for a long time, but back in the ...’80s ... Aboriginal art was looked on as a craft not as art, so we sort of were trying ... to give it the status as equivalent to White artists ... That was a big argument, getting the word craft taken out of the curriculum to setting up the art course at Preston TAFE.

Cathy Adams, November 2004

From her experiences working with people who have been disconnected from their culture, or who have suffered abuse in one form or another, Cathy sees the potential for arts courses and accompanying exhibitions to assist people to recover and eventually to reconnect with their culture. As these are often community friendly events involving family they also assist in assertions of community identity and wellbeing:

The students are so proud when they see their artwork up and it sells and they get so excited by that. That brings their confidence up and it really raises their expectations in life... I’ve worked with a lot of students over the years ... they come in and they’re on heroin, they’re alcoholics and that and they’re a real mess.

... When I do an exhibition with everyone, it’s, a real big sense of community and a big sense of pride and the family's involved and everybody is there. And on opening nights it’s a real big deal sort of thing. You can rely on your family and your friends to come to your exhibition opening, whereas probably when I see non-Indigenous friends of mine when they have an exhibition ... it doesn’t have that feel of community and it’s a more 'big pressure' thing, like who’s going to turn up, what’s going to happen, all that sort of stuff. Whereas within the Aboriginal community you can always rely on your family and friends to turn up and be proud and show that ... sense of unity

Cathy Adams, November 2004 148

148 Similarly the Nemi Splash Art Studio in Preston, in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, provides Kooris with mental health issues with opportunities to
Robyne Latham also comments on the capacity for exhibitions in purpose-built gallery spaces (such as the KHT) to create a sense of renewed pride and community connectedness in emerging artists. For these artists the Koorie Heritage Trust provides:

A beautiful place to be exhibited, which is culturally appropriate. It’s not like they’re in the scout hall … It’s a proper gallery and it’s got the status it deserves.

Robyne Latham, November 2004

Kimba Thompson discusses the influence of public art exhibitions, particularly the recent *Urbaninity* exhibitions for Reconciliation Week, held since 2004 and organised by Kimba and Maree Clarke:

Koori art, from down this way, from my point of view, being involved in putting together exhibitions like *Urbaninity* etc… there’s plenty of feeling there, there are so many stories there, but at the same time also watching over the last few years (and especially when Maree and I were cruising around the first time in 1996),\(^{149}\) how the mob are actually not only identifying and doing the art but they’re actually bringing back symbols etc and researching their own designs through the Museum or the Trust or wherever and utilising those within their artwork.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

Changes are continuing to occur in arts practices. Opportunities to learn about designs and to explore southeast Australian Aboriginal heritage are challenging the more well-known dot and x-ray styles, reinforcing the significance of research and education in reclaiming the past:

With the cross hatching, the dot dot … there is still a lot of that within the artworks, especially with the newer ones coming through but this is changing. For example, I remember with Maree [Clarke] and Ray [Thomas] judging an art competition for Aboriginal Affairs Victoria

\(^{149}\) Kimba is referring to the *We Iri We Homeborn* exhibitions organised by Maree and herself in 1996, as discussed in the previous chapter.
(AAV) just recently... down Lonsdale Street, and Ray sitting there going, 'I've been watching him for a couple of years and he's finally using his own design. That's great!' Just to see that design within the artworks now, they're creatively using those symbols or whatever from their areas and that's great too. They're feeling comfortable with their artwork because they're allowed to use symbols from their areas.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

Circumstances have changed for people practising art today. People such as Maree Clarke, Ray Thomas and Kimba Thompson are encouraging people to research and access information specific to their own region. This also applies to the broader community:

Non-Aboriginal people … can go and see an art exhibition and learn something from that without being intimidated by history … it's a way for White people to learn about Aboriginal culture, in a non-confronting way.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

Ray Thomas also discusses using art as a tool for educating the non-Aboriginal population:

You've got to educate people about who we are and why we are the way we look because of the history, so they'll be able to benefit out of it I think, 'cause they're going to be educated in a whole new light of Aboriginal people, you know. About history in this state, or in this region … 'cause that perception is there; they think … the real Aborigines are up north still. So ... you've just got to pretty much educate people and you pretty much spend your life doing it really as an Aboriginal person.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

Ray's view is significant and can be related to the philosophies of the Koorie Heritage Trust. The Trust, through its education programs, provides an entry point for the general public to learn about southeast Australian Aboriginal culture. Its rotating exhibitions showcase local, established and emerging artists. Its collection includes works by William Barak and Tommy McRae, artefacts produced on the missions from the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries, and more recent individual and collaborative works by
Collaboration: Reviving culture through workshops and cross-cultural exchange

Preparations for exhibitions are significant in forming collaborations between artists for the exchange of ideas and information, as Kimba notes:

> I just remember doing SCAR\textsuperscript{150} when I had seven artists like Maree, Ray and all that working together … I saw this connection happening between them … For me just watching that happen was a great achievement within that project.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

These connections and collaborations also occur with workshops, which revitalize skills within and between groups, and have been significant in providing space for people to explore, research and reclaim art styles. The revival of skills was visible in a weaving workshop conducted immediately prior to the Horsham Regional Arts Australia conference in October 2004. Kimba Thompson recalls the training processes involved prior to the conference:

> I’ve got a basket on my desk that Treahna wove. I looked at the weave that she was doing and that she’d learnt to do after spending five days with Yvonne [Koolmatrie, a Ngarrindjerri Elder from South Australia]. Treahna was able to learn just sitting there watching and working alongside Yvonne.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

The weaving workshop was also for novice weavers from the Horsham area. Kimba continues:

> They also went out and collected the grasses. They were learning which grasses to collect and they were saying, ‘We’ve never looked at any of the grasses like this around here, and now we know where this

\textsuperscript{150} See the previous chapter for a discussion of the SCAR installation.
is and that is … We'll go and get that grass over there. We'll chop it all off for the eel trap'.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

The revival and resurgence of skills through workshops also encourages cross-cultural exchange. People can share with others from outside their immediate communities and learn techniques which might otherwise have been forgotten. While this is evident in the exchange of knowledge between different Aboriginal groups, it has also become possible with other Indigenous groups. For example, in the southeast, Aboriginal women artists are establishing ongoing connections with Maori women from Aotearoa/New Zealand:

We're also bringing the New Zealand women over; they're coming over, because we had weaving workshops here at the Koorie Heritage Trust last year (2003). Then we had them over in New Zealand in March (2004), when we went on a tour as a group of Aboriginal women from Victoria … so there's this cross-cultural weaving going on at the same time. At the conference the biggest project we're doing is the Koori eel trap, as well as the Maori fish-eel trap. There are so many similarities. It's about cross-cultural weaving and the women all feeling confident about being able to do that and share their experiences from it.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004


Image removed due to copyright.

Installation at Regional Arts Australia conference, Meeting Place, October 2004

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151 In this instance the women were from South Australia and Victoria.
This collaborative process assists in the reassertion of culture for Aboriginal women from the southeast, and for Indigenous people from overseas. The system of exchange (known as ‘Tanderrum’ in Woiwurrung), continues today through a cultural process emphasising the sharing of knowledge and resources within and between communities. All attendants (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) at the Horsham conference were invited to join in the weaving of the eel trap and other items.

At the conference, I attempted to learn the coiling technique from Gunai weaver, Elaine Terrick, from Gippsland, as well as the Maori style of weaving ‘raranga’. While the women made the task look easy, I struggled to remember the basics of either style and was constantly asking for assistance. Their patience with my clumsy attempts was encouraging, but also emphasised the degree of knowledge and dexterity such skills require. Although my hands remained blistered for a few days afterwards, the experience of participating in and witnessing the weaving in progress enabled me to appreciate and understand the benefits of cross-cultural exchange in sustaining and developing arts practices (Field Notes, 21–24 October 2004).

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152 In this instance the women were from South Australia and Victoria.
Although disruptions to Aboriginal culture have been profound, cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, which have continued since colonisation, are implicated in ongoing adaptations of Aboriginal culture. These cross-cultural exchanges highlight the social processes of art, which colonisation did not eliminate. Today, the processes of colonisation from the past have unwittingly contributed to the revival and reinterpretation of material culture.

The *Twined Together* exhibition, held at Melbourne Museum from May to December, 2005, illustrates the complexities of colonisation. Lorraine Coutts coordinated the *Twined Together* workshop, which involved the cultural exchange of weaving techniques between women from Gunbalanya in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, and women from the southeast, including Elaine Terrick and Aunty Letty Nicholls (Allen and Hamby 2005). Southeastern coiled weaving designs had been taught to Goulburn Islanders in Arnhem Land by the missionary Greta Matthews in the 1920s. She was the daughter of the missionary Daniel Matthews of Maloga mission (and later the adjoining Cummeragunja reserve in the 1880s), and learnt the techniques as a child from people along the Murray River, including the Yorta Yorta, Bangerang and Wiradjuri, and then as a missionary herself from the Ngarrindjeri in South Australia (Barwick 1963; Cato 1993).

The Goulburn Island women were discouraged by missionaries from doing their ‘traditional’ style of twined weaving, as it was associated with ceremonies, and were encouraged to adopt more suitable styles that could be sold to Europeans. At the same time this was thought to instil a Christian work ethic (Allen and Hamby 2005; Hamby and Mellor 2000).

The 2005 weaving workshop at Museum Victoria introduced women from both ends of the country to techniques which had originated in the southeast and were adapted over time in both the south and the north. The workshop resulted in a cross-cultural exchange of information about grasses and dyeing methods, but also reflected the social processes of art, in forming ongoing relationships between artists and communities. Lorraine explains:

> We did a workshop with Victorian ladies and Arnhem Land ladies. Just the cross-over that happens, that cross-cultural stuff, like Aunty Letty Nicholls (Caine Muir’s nan) was there and she put some of her
grasses in to dye … When she goes back home she’s going to look around for some dye the same, just to start doing some dyeing … The Arnhem Land ladies didn’t know that the coiling technique was taken up there from down here, so it was a learning experience for them … They [the women from Arnhem land] had pandanas and the other ladies from down here had cumbunji grass and they all swapped over … and they did the dyeing and it was just that cross-over again … And they made such good friendships, like they’re all talking about wanting to go up there now to Arnhem Land to stay.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

While this story illustrates the disruptive effects of colonisation, it also highlights the effectiveness of cross-cultural exchange and the commodification of material culture, so that colonial encounters, as we saw in chapter five often inadvertently enriched cultural practices and indirectly ensured their survival.

The revival of ‘traditional’ skills through workshops has assisted people to reconnect with community members, and fostered new friendships. These social processes are embedded in notions of restoring community wellbeing through making connections with arts practice and with each other. As Lorraine explains:

Some of the stuff we’ve had at the Museum, there’s been that interaction with people from different areas around Victoria. They get to be with each other, talk about what they’re working on, or even talk about family stuff … They’ve found that that’s the best part of it … There’s that interaction and that connection … Some of the people who come there say, ‘I haven’t done this before, I’m not an artist’, but … you look at it and you think this could be in any collection, anywhere. And I think that makes people feel really proud about themselves.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Treahna Hamm’s experience of workshops as a participant reflects Lorraine’s experience as an organiser in that they teach people in non-threatening ways about culture:
Well, I think for instance weaving workshops … a medium like that … it’s so versatile … It’s wonderful because you could take it like palliative care or with young ones, for older people … I mean right across the board … even schools. You can take it into so many arenas and it’s not toxic. You can still learn a lot about the culture even though you’re doing it and it’s a good way of seeing it, actually sitting around. While you’re creating something you’re also learning about your culture from other people talking.

Trehna Hamm, October 2004

The exchange of knowledge and the acquisition of new skills, through art and design courses and facilitated workshops, has contributed to a resurgence in the reclamation of southeast Australian Aboriginal art and culture. This knowledge is now being applied to reconstruct designs on artefacts and in artwork in styles specific to regions of the southeast. Despite the colonial encounter, opportunities to embrace skills and work with people from outside southeast Australian Aboriginal culture has continued the practice of ‘Tanderrum’ or cross-cultural exchange.

‘Art is Us’: Art as Cultural Survival

While the previous sections discuss themes of reconnection through cultural practice, and the processes of adaptation in response to colonisation, this section embraces the essence of Uncle Sandy’s phrase ‘art is us’ to develop the concept that art and culture are inseparable from an Aboriginal world view, where art itself is part of the social world (see Myers 2002).

Art is us, it doesn’t matter about how it looks or what it did, it doesn’t matter about me making plywood boomerangs.

Uncle Sancy Atkinson, November 2004

Lee Darroch explains:

As Aboriginal people art is just part of who you are and it’s nothing special, but for non-Aboriginal people it’s more like they see it as a big deal, ‘Oh I’m an artist’, and we’re like well you know, everyone is … a lot of people in the community do some artwork … It’s a different view … Art’s just part of life.
Lee Darroch, October 2004

Many project participants emphasise the interconnectedness of art and culture especially in the context of cultural survival and the assertion of identity through arts practices, which reconnects people with families, language groups and kinship networks. This approach is embedded in an Aboriginal worldview, which reflects the holistic nature of Aboriginal society, where connections to land, family and Ancestors are associated with identity (see Morphy 2000).

Vicki Couzens' work as an artist has been directly associated with her Aboriginality and the affirmation of her culture:

All my work throughout my life has been about our culture and our people and strengthening our people. I suppose, just through the arts I see it's really not even the arts, it's our culture. It just happens to be that we make skin cloaks or we paint or we use new media, but it's about the stories and the reclaiming and the regenerating.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

Outsider neglect to recognise the connection between art and culture can be read as another attempt at colonisation or assimilation. For instance, the imposition of some Western approaches to curating art in galleries removes it from its cultural context (see Mundine 1992; Museum of Contemporary Art 2005). Hence, the art becomes recognised by the outsider only as a commodity or decoration, rather than as part of a process connected to cultural survival. Lorraine Coutts explains:

I just think that art and culture are one. It seems that [the mainstream are] trying to remove Aboriginal art from outside the culture but everything’s intertwined, the stories come from who you are or where you’ve come from, who your family is and what you’ve been doing over the years and it’s handed down through the generations. Culture comes from people. All the art galleries try to do is put things on walls.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Art stories which affirm and assert culture and identity
Colonisers constructed definitions of Aboriginality, which stereotyped Aborigines. However, within the Aboriginal community, the revival of arts practices, based on ‘traditional’ styles, and influenced by contemporary experiences, challenge Western denial of contemporary southeast Australian Aboriginal culture and identity.

Trehana Hamm’s arts practice sustains her connections to community and reinforces who she is as an artist and Aboriginal person:

There are all different cultural reasons why things are done, and doing artwork is just another part of that chain and making your culture strong, not only for yourself as an artist but for your whole family and your community as well … I mean there’s no word for art in our culture.

Trehana Hamm, October 2004

Caine Muir explains the impact of art on Aboriginal assertions of identity within the prison system:

In a prison system, there’s a real chance you lose your own identity and … art just reinforces who [you] are. Art outwardly expresses to everyone else, I’m proud of my own background and this is shown through my artworks.

… That chance for [you] to have an actual identity can centre you a little bit more. I mean speaking from an urban perspective, we don’t have the ties to land and language and artworks from 200 years ago … Being able to express our art, and say ‘That’s my mob, that’s where I’m from’ and to say that’s how you identify yourself. I see a connection to health in a way; I mean it’s the expression. I can’t really put a finger on it, but being able to identify, and say ‘Yes I’m Aboriginal’, just makes you feel a little bit more at ease.

Caine Muir, September 2004

As the participants articulate, Aboriginal identities are informed by common themes and experiences concerning Aboriginal culture. Cultural disruption, caused by the colonisation of the southeast, has resulted in a diversity of Aboriginal subjectivities, which individually and collectively contest
the Western construct of the ‘real’ Aborigine through ongoing assertions of culture and cultural practice (Croft 2000:84).


Image removed due to copyright.

Description: Found materials. Invitation to *Cross Currents* exhibition, Linden – St Kilda Centre for Contemporary arts, NAIDOC Week July 2005. Reproduced from original invitation
9. Art, Identity and Wellbeing

Vicki: Why have ... people got ... problems in the first place?
Because of dislocation, displacement and dispossession, which
comes back to... identity and knowing who you are.

Lee: And so art is a way of people finding out who they are.

Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, October 2004

Art and Aboriginality

In this thesis, Aboriginal artists in the southeast and their arts practices have
told a story that is representative of and influenced by the effects of
colonisation. While Aboriginal artwork has frequently been subjected to
Western definitions of good and bad art, as well as Western constructs of
Aboriginality, which have resonated since first European contact, the distinct
and unique practice of Aboriginal art in the southeast continues to contest and
deny attempts at labelling and classifying Aboriginal culture. The historical
evidence and the stories collected from participants in this project support the
contention that arts practices are directly connected to the sustainability of
culture. This chapter will include stories from participants which reveal their
own perspective on the connections between art, identity and wellbeing.

As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues, people’s conceptions of
wellbeing are determined by what their ‘comprehensive conception’ of human
life is and their ‘overall conception of what has meaning and value in life’
(Nussbaum 2005: 28). For participants in this project, the reinvigoration of
knowledge and practices from the past, along with the freedom to express
their Aboriginality in ways determined by them, contribute significant ‘meaning
and value’ to their lives as contemporary Aboriginal Australians. Ever since
colonisation, arts practices have contributed to the sustainability of the
Aboriginal community. For instance, the artwork of Tommy McRae and
William Barak in the late nineteenth century reinforced Aboriginality in ways
that were connected to the past, while contesting European notions of
Aborigines as a ‘dying race’. Perhaps more significantly, however, the
artwork of Barak and McRae can be read as a powerful reminder by Aboriginal people of their unique culture and heritage.

In the past art production was a means of reinforcing Aboriginality, frequently in contested and discriminatory environments. Today, arts practices continue to provide people with ways of interpreting and reinterpreting their heritage from an Aboriginal epistemological perspective. Thus, Lee Darroch and Vicki Couzens are able to reflect on the importance of the freedom to identify as Aboriginal women, as opposed to the restrictions imposed on previous generations.

Lee: We’re the first generation … that can freely go out and express our Aboriginality, because our parents couldn’t, that generation, our grandparents certainly couldn’t and our great-grandparents were unable to, so it’s been a long time since people have been free to do that …

Vicki: I think that if people have a strong sense of identity, that’s a gut feeling you have when you know something. That knowingness … So if people have that strong core sense of self and … identity

Lee: Then they have wellness don’t they? They are well. Without that you’re not well if you don’t know who you are.

Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch interview, October 2004

Treahna also reflects on these changes:

We’re a generation on from our parents who a lot of times were made to feel ashamed of who they were. But now the pendulum’s swung the other way and more strongly. I believe what we do in our work is strong, as well as our purpose to actually get out there and pass it on and learn at the same time.

Treahna Hamm, October 2004

Lyn Briggs, in her capacity as a manager at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, comments on the way art remains a process which reinforces individual wellbeing and assists in reconnecting people with culture, while simultaneously facilitating community pride in culture:
I get the distinct feeling, and I’ve seen it and I’ve heard it, when the community starts talking about how well someone’s doing, when people know the sort of traumas that a person’s been through, or the losses that they’ve suffered, or the low self-esteem, no confidence, and then they hear a story about how this person who has got involved in an RMIT art course, or … just by coming in to the health service and doing community projects, art projects. What you hear is how happy they are for them. They feel excited for them. All of a sudden this person has done something, or found their niche, and you see them build on that and then achieve something at the end of that, that’s going to carry on. It’s not going to stop with that one painting or that one creation; they can actually do it again and again if they want. Just to see them … that transformation is unbelievable. And I know that community members do say a lot about certain people who have just turned their lives around. That’s the bonus to communities. You know we’re always talking about one strong healthy community and whatever way that people do that is up to them entirely. But let’s face it, it’s going to have an impact on the community in some way, it will be like a ripple effect.

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

The ‘ripple effect’, which Lyn is talking about, is apparent when people use art to reinforce their cultural identity and to reconnect with culture, ‘despite historic adversity’ (Langton and Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (Australia) 1994). Vicki Couzens agrees:

I think a lot of Aboriginal art has been … about that reclaiming of yourself and your identity so it’s a healing process. Whether you’ve been removed from your families or not. Some people were grown up or brought up being told they were island people or they weren’t Black. In my case we grew up as Aboriginal people, that’s all we ever knew … but it’s still about that reclaiming and rediscovering the things that haven’t been handed on for whatever reason.

Vicki Couzens, October 2004

Connections between past and present images and objects, also contribute to reinforcing Aboriginal identity and sustaining wellbeing today.
Lyn Thorpe explains:

I think there’s strong healing potential in art. Because when you’re focusing and you’re trying to work things out, ‘Ok, what is it that I’m trying to create here, and what does it mean for me’? Because that’s what art is about for the artists I feel … So if you’re drawing on those marks, or whether you go to a museum and see them … they’ve got objects in there and shields, artefacts and so on that come from different areas around Victoria. That’s why it’s important for people to be able to see these items because our Ancestors created these objects and their energy is strong in them, this energy potentially can make us stronger as people because the energy can make us feel who we are. If people see those marks on objects from their country, they’ll know for sure that those marks were made from someone, most probably related to them. Those sorts of things are very powerful, because otherwise if they’re detached … if you haven’t got access and it’s not encouraged, especially among our young people, then it’s like they don’t even exist. A huge gap in our knowledge in terms of who we are, where we come from and how we feel about ourselves can have devastating effects on our spiritual wellbeing. We need to be in touch with our past to be able to visualise our future. Art gives us the opportunity to express ourselves and to create form that mirrors our feelings, ideas and energies associated with our Aboriginality.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

Ironically, as previous generations were restricted from access to the knowledge associated with material and intangible cultural practices in the past, the aspects of culture which have been collected by amateur and professional ethnographers and anthropologists and now housed in museums and Keeping Places today provide opportunities to sustain connections between individuals and their communities. This also impacts on individuals’ identity and wellbeing:
Art’s about being recognised for your skills. It’s that sense of identity I suppose. I guess that’s one of the reasons why I like to do those workshops. At least give people an opportunity to connect with their collections, like connect with what we’ve got in the museum, but also to connect with themselves and with other people from their own communities.

Lorraine Coutts, September 2004

Art also contributes to community wellbeing. This is emphasised in Kimba Thompson’s comments about the possum skin cloak project, and further acknowledged through exhibitions of people’s work provided by places like the Koorie Heritage Trust and Bunjilaka. Access to these spaces encourages the Aboriginal voice to be heard, where an expression of Aboriginal history and stories becomes accessible to a wider audience, reinforcing pride in Aboriginal culture:

Those three cloaks that represent … different communities or whatever … just to see all of that and think, ‘Now that’s wellbeing for the community … there’s a bit of healing there, a bit of reviving of something that maybe gets to tap back into culture.’

To visually see [the art] and to have that sense of pride … as well, being able to get it out to the wider audience or public … it’s not only about [having] that little painting at home on the table and no one’s ever going to see it, but to see it out there and being looked at … there’s that sense of pride, too.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004

Thus art has the capacity to connect people with place: Aboriginal public artworks, with imagery recognisable by the community, can facilitate a sense of security in identity as it incorporates Aboriginality into the built landscape.

I think the mural up near the League is quite a powerful kind of statement. [Using art] on buildings, to identify buildings as Aboriginal and outside the health services… I guess it’s used really to symbolise it as an Aboriginal place, like there’s the walking trail in Melbourne and it does make you feel better when you go somewhere, where you’re
not expecting to see anything Aboriginal … So I think it’s just a lot to do with designating places.

Susan Smyth interview, October 2004

Elisabeth Jones, in her capacity as a non-Aboriginal arts administrator working with Aboriginal artists, views arts practices in terms of their opportunities to enhance wellbeing for the individual as well as the community:

Any arts project that I have worked on, there’s always a case of it being a positive life-changing experience for a participant. Whether they are being employed and it’s their first contact with the arts sector, or whether they have come in as a community member. Because from my observation, the Aboriginal community in general values art more than the non-Indigenous community of Australia.

Elisabeth Jones, December 2004

The interconnectedness of art and culture is also manifest in its connection to wellbeing, in contrast with Western dualism.

It’s funny, government work in a lot of silos (it’s straight up and down), whereas Kooris, well, everything’s sort of intertwined. I mean art, wellbeing and health they’re related not only because people are out being active and participating, getting outside to see stuff, but it’s about being able to interact with people. I find that important, you know, when some people come to an artwork and go – WOW – I know what they’re feeling.

It’s also that chance for the artist to put it onto a canvas or something like that. For example, I know Koori men can have trouble talking to other Koori men about how they’re feeling. So sometimes it comes out in their art works and sometimes it gives them that freedom to express what they’re feeling at that moment, that’s what I’ve noticed.

Caine Muir, September 2004

In relation to Caine’s comments, Lyn Briggs also describes how art assists those who have been removed from their culture, where it remains a way of reconnecting people with their identity and culture:

[Art] it’s very powerful in the Koori community … even with kids who have been taken out of their community and brought up in a Western
society ... [who have had] no contact with Aboriginal people, and then they come back in you can see it. Through art is one of their ways of connecting ...

Lyn Briggs, February 2005

For a community that has suffered the disruptions of colonisation, art for Aboriginal people remains one of the strongest means of sustaining, reclaiming and affirming one's sense of Aboriginality.

As Treahna says:

I know when I used to do my artwork, because of the fact that I was separated from my family, my art would build a side of me that answered a lot of questions that I couldn't necessarily get from people, I couldn't ask people, but I'd make different artworks to suit different circumstances at the time and build that identity that I didn't have as well.

Treahna Hamm, October 2004

Although 'hidden' for generations, the resurgence of arts practices which reconnect the past with the present (through both individual and collaborative processes) provide incentives for future generations to feel proud of their identity, reinforcing wellbeing in their Aboriginality.

A COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGY REVISITED

In his essay, Bell's Theorem: Aboriginal Art - It's a White Thing, Richard Bell discusses the way Aboriginal art is a construction of Western art experts (Bell 2002). While this thesis acknowledges Bell's assertions, I agree with Jon Altman's response to Bell, where he argues that there is a need to recognise the degree of 'intercultural' or 'hybrid' collaborations that occur within places such as community-controlled arts centres throughout the country. These have been focal points for successes in the Aboriginal arts industry (Altman 2005: 1). These collaborations allow Aboriginal artists to be Aboriginal, but to take what they need in an artistic and material sense from their White collaborators. The artists need not submit to White imposed paradigms and practices, but can assert their own authenticity and reclaim 'hybridity'.
While there are few community-controlled arts centres in Victoria, a collaborative approach to the success of many art and art related projects persists. The Koorie Heritage Trust is an example of an organisation which emphasises the significance of working with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The Trust has also been supportive of the application of a decolonising methodology in the current project. This recognises the necessity of working with and in the Aboriginal community, while also revealing the necessity of including Aboriginal people in the research process, so that the end result is relevant and reflective of the participant’s attitudes. In this project a decolonising methodology has contributed to a story of southeast Australian Aboriginal art, which challenges the ‘us’ and ‘them’ approaches of the past.

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Although acknowledgment of southeast Australian Aboriginal art has increased over the past five years, tensions surrounding its marketability continue to exclude southeast artists from wider recognition. Artists and arts administrators interviewed for this project were adamant that better processes were required for promoting and supporting Aboriginal art in Victoria, so that it becomes better known on a national and global level. Many of these processes were articulated in relation to the opportunity appropriate support could provide in sustaining knowledge of arts practices and cultural understandings. These included recommendations for more workshops for emerging artists, as well as opportunities for artists to share skills and to communicate with each other. As Kimba suggested:

Well I think it would be good if more Victorian Aboriginal artists had more contact with each other and maybe had some sort of collective body to communicate through. It would be good if there was a concerted effort to get art projects happening in communities as part of strengthening communities and bridging the gap that is widening between generations of our people.

Kimba Thompson, September 2004
Others were concerned about the lack of appropriate venues in communities to promote skills and create artwork, as well as the need for more exhibition spaces in the city to appropriately support, market and sell southeast Australian Aboriginal art:

You need more … studio space for local grassroots community. The ownership comes with having it in their own community setting. A lot of people don’t like going out of their environment. In your own environment you could build confidence better … established artists seem to be more supported than other [unknown] artists and if you’re out of the loop… well, nothing grows. I’m not out to put down those individual artists or anything, it’s the nature of the way the things have been for a while. Plus the [Aboriginal] grapevine isn’t what it used to be. That really stops real development happening. You know those old skills of making boomerangs and making [things] from scratch. We need to maintain those skills while there’re still people around to do it who can pass that knowledge on.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

The [Koorie Heritage] Trust isn’t big enough. We need more places like the Trust or those galleries in the city to change their attitude, [either] one of the two.

Caine Muir, September 2004

There’s a lot of work needs to be done … with promoting our art … we need to have our own gallery right in amongst all these other galleries in town. We should have our own gallery there with just…purely with Victorian artists in it.

Ray Thomas, October 2004

There’s a real lack of infrastructure in Victoria and that’s probably our other major, major issue. There is no dedicated exhibition space to see local work, except Bunjilaka, which even though it’s in a museum they have a strategy, to only show work from Victoria …

Elisabeth Jones, December 2004
‘IT’S NOT YOUR STORY, IT’S OURS’

Aboriginal art in southeast Australia has remained connected to the culture of Aboriginal people in the region, despite being marginalised, undermined and contested since the arrival of the first Europeans. For more than two hundred years, arts practices have continued to challenge the dominant construction of the history of Victoria. The effects of the policies of assimilation, produced under the guise of scientific rationalism have, since at least the end of the nineteenth century until the late twentieth century, been influential in determining that Aborigines from the southeast remained outside the public conscience.

This thesis has demonstrated that southeast Aboriginal art has endured across time and place. The production of material culture is both a reflection of Aboriginality within its historical context and the resilience of art as a cultural phenomenon, which transgresses outsiders’ perceptions of ‘authenticity’. Art for Aboriginal people provides commentaries on the variability of Aboriginal subjectivities, which have enabled Aboriginal people and their art to survive. As a result there is no one ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art practice, but rather a multitude of authentic Aboriginal arts practices, which are associated with corresponding knowledge, experiences and understandings of an individual’s Aboriginality.

The participants in this project, along with artwork produced by their Ancestors, attest to the significance of art within an Aboriginal worldview. Art is not a separate entity, but remains enmeshed in and connected to part of the everyday processes of Aboriginal society. Art can tell people about who they are and where they come from, and importantly today it can assist people with asserting their Aboriginality in ways which have been denied them in the past.

Aboriginal art of the southeast also reflects the losses of many cultural understandings as a result of colonisation. Within the process of loss and transformation, however, many arts practices have enabled ‘new’ approaches to art to reconnect people with their past and work towards resituating Aboriginality in the southeast as a positive phenomenon within society today. Lyn Thorpe explains:
A huge gap in our knowledge in terms of who we are, where we come from and how we feel about ourselves can have devastating effects on our spiritual wellbeing. We need to be in touch with our past to be able to visualise our future. Art gives us the opportunity to express ourselves and to create form that mirrors our feelings, ideas and energies associated with our Aboriginality.

Lyn Thorpe, November 2004

The process of reclaiming art has generated a renewal in positive assertions of identity and wellbeing. These ‘new’ representations of identity, which affirm the presence of a modern day southeast Australian Aboriginality, are infinitely entwined in connections to the past, which assist in maintaining the wellbeing of the Aboriginal community. Notions of wellbeing within the context of this study are not embedded in the biomedical or health and welfare model. Wellbeing is a lived phenomenon; it is fluid and difficult to define. However, in this project wellbeing has been articulated through the everyday experiences of artists and arts workers in the southeast Australian Aboriginal arts community, where their art today in contrast with the past, provides ways of freely expressing the diversity of Aboriginality. The place and space that art and arts practices assume within the Aboriginal community embody Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies that contrast with and provide alternative readings to colonialis t interpretations of history, a history which has largely denied the existence of southeast Aboriginal people and their art.

Southeast Aboriginal art also provides alternatives to essentialisms imposed by the West. Such essentialisms have labelled and restricted artwork to tropes consistent with notions of Aborigines as the Other.

However, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Aboriginality can also be constructed within ‘Black’ essentialist paradigms, such as connections to Country and kin. While these often allow space for political rhetoric, which is at times adopted ironically in order to harness outsiders attention, assertions of Aboriginality which are essentialist reveal the ambivalence of Aboriginal culture and arts practices as they exist within the ‘Australian context of failed colonial modernity’ (Haggis 2004). Art by and for Aboriginal
people is embodied in the multiple representations of themselves (either collectively or as individuals). These expressions of Aboriginality frequently fall outside the essentialised labelling by outsiders which seek to define who is or is not Aboriginal and what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginal art. Artwork, conversely, allows for expressions of Aboriginal culture and identity to be visually articulated in multiple, fluid and dynamic ways.

In this thesis I have discussed the various manifestations of art and arts practices in the southeast as a result of colonial intervention. The diversity of art practised in the southeast today reflects the cultural changes following colonisation. In bringing the story of southeast Australian Aboriginal art into the academy, I have also been aware that the many representations of Aboriginality and art styles, reflecting individuals and communities, have in the past been limited and confined to Eurocentric constructions of the Other. I have endeavoured throughout this thesis to ensure that the Aboriginal voice remains central, where authenticity is not a label imposed on art to define its acceptability or value in the market place, but reflects the significance of arts practices to Aboriginal artists and arts workers. As the prominent Aboriginal academic, lawyer and leader of Reconciliation Australia, Michael Dodson, has pointed out, there are many different Aboriginal people in this country, all with different ways of expressing themselves. Arts practices reflect these differences and are a way for Aborigines to ‘speak back’ to the dominant culture. Aboriginal voices, as Dodson notes, are imperative as:

They are assertions of our right to be different and to practise our difference. They refuse the reduction of Aboriginality to an object, they resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture. They are at times ancient, at times subversive, at times oppositional, at times secret, at times essentialist, at times shifting. It is for this very reason that I cannot … even as an Aboriginal person … say what Aboriginality is. To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another fixed category. And more than enough ‘fixing’ has already occurred (Dodson 1992 [2003]: 39).
CONTINUITY, COLLABORATION, CHANGE AND RESURGENCE

When I started this project in 2002, the prominence of southeast Australian Aboriginal art was in its infancy. In the five years since, the growth in the extent of work that has achieved public recognition is noteworthy. After relative obscurity, especially in comparison with the Central Australian and Arnhem Land art movements, Aboriginal art in the southeast is now frequently used to designate and ‘decorate’ public spaces in Victoria. While many of the artists remain relatively unknown and their art styles continue to contest the dominant attitude concerning Aboriginal art, the resurgence in arts practices from the past, which incorporate contemporary designs and techniques, reflects a growing awareness of Aboriginal presence in the State. Projects like the reclamation of possum skin cloaks, Wathaurong glass, and the increasing demand for exhibitions and sale of works on paper, acrylic paintings, woven objects and sculptures reveals the significance of time and place in providing opportunities for Aboriginal artists to participate in unravelling the broader history of cross-cultural relationships and the sustainability of Aboriginality in the southeast.

Today, art is enmeshed in the success of community events, where it visually represents the presence of Aboriginal people, marks occasions and can symbolise connections to Country and kin. It provides a source of pride in and connection with Aboriginality and remains significant within a community that has suffered from the overwhelming denial of their cultural existence within the dominant society. The varying social and political contexts which have impacted on southeast Australian Aboriginal people mean they are now increasingly urbanised. To many outsiders their modern lifestyles, skin colour and the limited knowledge of Aboriginal languages in the southeast have positioned them as ‘inauthentic’ and not ‘real’. Art is therefore an increasingly important signifier of Aboriginal space and place and an assertion of their cultural resilience to the broader community. The capacity for Aboriginal artwork to move beyond the gallery and museum, and to demonstrate Aboriginal history across a broad spectrum, remains a way of communicating ideas, history and feelings as expressed by Aboriginal people.
As a collaborative researcher working with members of the southeast Australian Aboriginal arts community, I have had the opportunity to work with individuals and organisations who embrace varying influences on their arts practices. They are prepared to include non-Aboriginal people in their endeavours to promote Aboriginal culture, and foster greater understanding and awareness of the issues that have affected Aboriginal people in the past and that impact on arts practices today. Indeed this project has challenged the ethnographic, anthropological and art historical constructions of southeast Australian Aboriginal art and culture as inauthentic. It has situated ‘hybridity’ in arts practices as an assertion of Aboriginal identity in the southeast, which is at times ambiguous, at times definite. It recognises the diversity of Aboriginality as expressed through art and situates it outside the colonial constructs of the biological definitions of ‘race’, reclaiming it as a historical, social and cultural phenomenon.

Southeast Aboriginal arts practices reveal an Aboriginal history which extends beyond a colonialist past to tell stories which resonate with contemporary Aboriginal culture. The essence of being a southeast Australian Aboriginal persists through the continuation of arts practices, which directly influence culture, identity and wellbeing. As Uncle Sandy Atkinson states:

The very important thing about [Aboriginal] artists, they weren't Picassos so to speak. They were the guardians of stories, and so no wonder that was a powerful position in that tribe. That these people, entrusted for generations of those people to be the guardians of their stories. And so you see … we have watched and seen that getting whittled away and dissolving, and getting, not so much lost, but what we've now seen is that that responsibility has now changed…

For instance, that artist is not necessarily the guardian of that community's story, but he's taken on that responsibility himself. And he hasn't had to go through any initiation to do it anymore … when the initiation stopped, so did the powerful stories that had been going on for thousands upon thousands of years. The initiation stops, so does the story, because it's got to be heard, it's got to be passed on to somebody who has gone through the law … the thing which is
important. But it didn’t die … because another young man or woman came along and got that. And he didn’t have the full knowledge but enough to take over, and he’ll take it on a bit further.

And it’s changed now. He can do it, and he can sell it and make a fortune and do what he likes with it. Way back, he may not have been able to do that because the community would say, ‘Wait on a minute; it’s not your story it’s ours’. So, when I talk about taking account of changes, surely we now have reached an era where we have really got to get serious on how we use those authorities and how we accept those changes and how we adapt to it. You know, I think we’ll be right. I don’t have any problems in thinking that we’re going to be right, you know…

Uncle Sandy Atkinson, November 2004


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- 368 -


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APPENDIX 1: MAPS

MAP 1: ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE MAP OF VICTORIA AND BORDER COUNTRY

Image removed due to copyright.

Reproduced with permission Victorian Aboriginal Languages Corporation

MAP 2: PORT PHILLIP PROTECTORATE DISTRICTS AND STATIONS, 1838-1850

Image removed due to copyright.

**Map 3: Victorian Missions and Reserves**

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Reproduced in Jackomos et al. (1991: 13)

**Map 4: Kulin Nations**

Image removed due to copyright.

Reproduced from Yarra Healing website:

http://www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au/kulin/about.html
APPENDIX 2: FIELD TRIPS AND EXHIBITIONS

Field Trips

Mungabareena Ngan Girra (bogong moth) Festival, Albury/Wodonga, 29th November 2003

Regional Arts Australia conference *Meeting Place*, Horsham, 22-24th October 2004

Cummeragunja Reserve, 2nd February 2005

South Australia Museum, Adelaide, April 2005

Brambuck Keeping Place, Halls Gap, Grampians, November 2006

Exhibitions

Exhibitions 2003


*Deadly Expressions*: Koori arts showcase, Federation Square, Melbourne, June 2003

CON-SENT-TRICK-SIR-KILLS: An Exhibition of Work by 6 Indigenous Artists. Shirley Angus, Gary Donnelly, Dennis Fisher, Gordon Hookey, Daniel King,
Jenny Murray-Jones. Linden, St. Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts, July 2003

*Remembering Barak*: Artwork by William Barak at the National Gallery of Victoria, August 2003


Big Black Arts Festival: A Koori arts festival funded by the Port Phillip City Council, St Kilda. Exhibits of Koori visual and performing artists including exhibition of paintings by Kevin Williams, photographs by Wayne Quilliam and textile artists from Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Co-op Warmambool, Victoria at Bright! gallery September 2003

*Eklektic Journey*: Graduates students from the Bachelor of Arts Visual Communication, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Geelong at Koorie Heritage Trust, October 2003


*What’s going on!* Contemporary Indigenous art from the Murray Darling region. Koorie Heritage Trust, October 2003
Gayle Maddigan, *Burial Ground* (charcoal drawings on paper). Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum, 13\textsuperscript{th} Nov 2003

Raka Awards Exhibition: National Indigenous arts awards. Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne, November 2003

*River Art*: Exhibition 1. Art work by Koori TAFE students from Echuca.


**Exhibitions 2004**

‘*If you Only Knew*…blak women respond to the City of Melbourne’s Art and Heritage Collection, at the City Gallery’. Destiny Deacon, Fiona Foley, Julie Gough, Dianne Jones. Melbourne Town Hall, 23\textsuperscript{rd} January 2004

*Yanyubak Yenbena-naruk* (Yorta Yorta language) – ‘To walk with the Ancestors’. Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm, Ray Thomas. Koorie Heritage Trust, 28\textsuperscript{th} April 2004


*Etched on Bark*. Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum 27\textsuperscript{th} May 2004

*Native Title Business*. Exhibition Koorie Heritage Trust 23\textsuperscript{rd} July 2004
Mission Life in the Limelight Exhibition & Mission voices Website. Launch at Koorie Heritage Trust 3rd August 2004

Richard Bell, Oh, Richie…! Exhibition Spacement Gallery, Watson Place, Melbourne, 9th September 2004

Turbo Brown and Lorraine Connelly-Northey Exhibition. Koorie Heritage Trust, October 2004

Trace Elements: Graduates students from the Bachelor of Arts Visual Communication, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Geelong. Koorie Heritage Trust, 3rd November 2004


Exhibitions 2005

Colour Power: Aboriginal art post 1984 in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria: Exhibition Ian Potter Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, January 2005

Eileen Harrison and Peter Waples-Crow. Exhibition at Koorie Heritage Trust, March 2005

Urbaninity 2: Images from Indigenous artists in South Eastern Australia.  
Reconciliation: Take the Next Step: Dantes Gallery, Gertrude St Fitzroy (produced by Sista Girl Productions), May 2005

Jim Berg (a Gunditjmara man), Silent witness – A window to the past. A photographic exhibition of scarred (canoe) trees of the Wotjobaluk people on the banks of the Wimmer River, near Antwerp. Koorie Heritage Trust, June 2005


Cummeragunja Drawings. Exhibition Koorie Heritage Trust, July 2005


Ray Thomas, Master of Arts Exhibition at Koorie Heritage Trust in conjunction with RMIT University, August 2005

Nudgeree (Friend): Listening to The Spaces Between. A multimedia and music presentation from the Koori Cohort Post-Graduate Researchers and Friends. Treahna Hamm, Mike Jordan, Steve Sedergreen, Ray Thomas, Uncle Herb Patten, Sharon West at RMIT School of Art Gallery, September 2005


*Picturing the Old People*. Video and sound installation by Genevieve Greeves. Presented by the Koorie Heritage Trust at the State Library of Victoria, November 2005


**Exhibitions 2006**


*Landmarks*. Exhibition in conjunction with the Commonwealth Games, National Gallery of Victoria, March 2006

*Carve,* Indigenous carving practices. Exhibition in conjunction with Commonwealth Games Melbourne Museum, March 2006

*Tribal Expression.* Series of concurrently running exhibitions showcasing Victoria’s Indigenous culture in conjunction with the Commonwealth Games, Melbourne, 2006. Exhibitions held at Federation Square, Arts Centre, Koorie Heritage Trust, Crafts Victoria, March 2006


Brian McKinnon, ‘*Who Am I*’. Indigenart, The Mossenson Gallery, Melbourne, October 2006

Victorian Indigenous Art Awards 2006. At Mahoneys Gallery, Melbourne, presented in conjunction by the Koorie Business Network and Arts Victoria, October 2006

Craig Allan Charles, *Mungo Stories*. Australian Dreaming Art, Gertrude St Fitzroy, October 2006

*JaMaPaCaHeMe*. Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Geelong Visual Arts Graduation Exhibition, Koorie Heritage Trust, November 2006.

**Exhibitions 2007**


*Old Messages/New Media*. Curated by Jarrod Atkinson and Sharon West. At Counihan Gallery, Brunswick, May 2007


*Looking Blak*: Showcasing retrospective of NAIDOC Posters; *Metal Blue Dreaming*: by Robyne Latham; *Pitcha This*: by Sista Girl productions at Koorie Heritage Trust, July 2007


*Strange Fruit*: Testimony and Memory Julie Dowling’s Portraits, Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne, August 2007.

Glass Panels at Oxfam, by Treahna Hamm, Lee Darroch and Maree Clarke at Oxfam, Carlton, August 2007

*Wrapped in Quilts* by Marlene Young Scerri and The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Birthright Quilt: A national campaign to address the
unacceptably high infant and maternal mortality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and babies. Koorie Heritage Trust, December 2007
# APPENDIX 3: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Interviews</th>
<th>Small Group Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julie Gough</td>
<td>Caine Muir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Oct. 2004</td>
<td>Lorraine Coutts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kimba Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin McKinnon</td>
<td>29 Sept. 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Oct. 2004</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Karen Casey</td>
<td>Trehna Hamm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Oct. 2004</td>
<td>Vicki Couzens</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lee Darroch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cathy Adams</td>
<td>23 Oct. 2004</td>
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<td>19 Oct. 2004</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Robyn Latham</td>
<td>Elisabeth Jones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Oct. 2004</td>
<td>Lowanna Norris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Smyth (pseud.)</td>
<td>22 Dec. 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 Oct. 2004</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Thomas</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14 Oct. 2004</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncle Herb Patten</td>
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<tr>
<td>19 Oct. 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyn Thorpe</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Nov. 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncle Sandy Atkinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 Nov. 2004</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Judith Ryan</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 Jan. 2005</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lyn Briggs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Feb. 2005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORMS

1. Plain Language Statement

2. Project outline

3. Participant consent to be interviewed

4. Consent to use artwork
Author/s:
Edmonds, Frances

Title:
‘Art is us’: Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia

Date:
2007

Citation:

Publication Status:
Unpublished

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35331

File Description:
‘Art is us’: Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia

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