CRITICAL RESPONSE

Aboriginal Contemporary Art in America: Crossing Cultures and Bridging Divides with an Ancestral Modern Aesthetic

Q&A by Jane Raffan
with Four Prominent American Collectors on Major Public Exhibitions of their Collections in Seattle (Washington), Hanover (New Hampshire) and Toledo (Ohio), 2012–2013

Crossing Cultures, Toledo Museum of Art

The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art has been donated to the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, and showcased over the past two years in the exhibition 'Crossing Cultures', firstly at the Hood, and then at the Toledo Museum of Art (TMA), Ohio.

It must have been an enormous and emotional decision to donate your collection to the Hood. Did you have any particular hopes or expectations for the exhibition's reception in these institutions/cities and how were they met and/or exceeded?

Our donation to the Hood Museum was made without any expectation they would quickly mount an exhibition. The decision was driven by a concern for stewardship. Our collection is uncommon among American collections of Aboriginal art in that we have consciously tried to collect broadly: works range from the early 1950s through the present, in diverse media, and representing desert, tropics, and cities. We hoped that the collection could remain intact and be used for study and research in the future.

Dartmouth College's commitment to making its collections accessible in classrooms and its obvious enthusiasm for Aboriginal art, and more broadly, indigenous art from several cultures, were the deciding factors in making our gift. Brian Kennedy's presence as Director of the Hood Museum gave impetus to the gift, but subsequently both Kathy Hart and the current director, Michael Taylor, invested enthusiastically in the exhibition, the catalog, and the collection.

If we had hopes for the exhibition in either location, it was that exposure to the art would generate the same excitement that we have experienced since we saw *Dreamings: the Art of Aboriginal Australia* at the Asia Society Galleries, New York in 1988. At Dartmouth, the faculty and the Hood Museum were enthusiastic supporters of the work and its place in an educational institution, so in a sense that hope had been realized from the start.

The Seattle Art Museum is the only contemporary public institution in the US to have a permanent gallery dedicated to the display of Aboriginal art, inaugurated in 2007 and built around early donations from the collection of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan. Just over one year ago, they presided over the opening of *Ancestral Modern*, a major exhibition at SAM showcasing over 120 Aboriginal works of art from their personal collection, all of which have been promised to the gallery.

Ancestral Modern was many years in the planning. A year has now passed since the exhibition closed. What lasting impressions do you have from the experience?

The beautiful **book** that SAM produced with Yale University Press offers the most lasting impression. It allows us to revisit the exhibit

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Australian and Oceanic Art Gallery, Seattle Art Museum

and—every time we do—to learn something new from the essays of the authors. It also helps us relive the pride we felt in the exhibition itself and the joy we took in seeing our beloved collection displayed so well.

On marketing the Dreaming

*Western society has absorbed the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity and the transubstantiation of Christ and yet it is interesting that the Aboriginal concept of 'the Dreaming' remains largely impenetrable and arguably one of the biggest impediments to the art's reception as contemporary. I agree with Will Stubb's view (**Buku-Larrnggay Mulka art centre, Yirrkala**) that the English term is the problem, not the Aboriginal concept. Did the audiences 'get it' in the end, and should the industry stop using the English term without qualification?*

RK & ML: The industry should stop using the term, whether audiences get it or not. It is extremely difficult to convey the Aboriginal worldview, given its complexity and variations across the continent. Some of the Seattle audience "got it," but others most definitely did not. What they did understand is that the art is about something that is of fundamental importance to those who produce it. Just as Flemish and Italian renaissance paintings are beautiful to regard but enhanced (at least for some of us) by a reading of their iconography, so, too, is the best of Australian Aboriginal art.

WO & HW: It's probably too late to obliterate the influence of the term "the Dreaming" (and at least it is better than "Dreamtime"). Audiences did get it, at least those who attended talks at the two museums where the concept was discussed. Multiple glosses help, for instance, explaining that there is a concept that goes by many different names in different languages (*tjukurrpa*, *wangarr*, etc.) So did pointing out that Aboriginal people themselves often translate their native languages' words as "business" or "law." Introducing **Stanner**'s concept of "everywhen" was probably the most effective in making people realize that they really had to think differently about the idea. I found that making explicit comparisons or parallels between Aboriginal concepts and Christian beliefs could shake up people's preconceptions as well.

The important thing is to present the notion that Aboriginal Australians have a coherent system of moral, ethical and spiritual beliefs and practices that can be encoded in words like "the Dreaming." Understanding that this system finds expression in their art is essential. And finally, it has to be recognized that Aboriginal art has profound political dimensions as well: that much of the art is inherently didactic, aimed at teaching non-Aboriginal people about their culture. It is easy to see that artists like Richard Bell and Gordon Hookey imbue their works with political messages; but Yolngu art, for example, is no less political in nature.

*In late 2010, MOMA exhibited a work by Emily from the **Klugh-Ruhe** Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia in a **group show about drawing**. Former National Gallery of Australia Director, Brian Kennedy (also former Hood Director and now Director at TMA) has stated that there is enough good work in the USA to seed exhibitions, with the caveat challenge for proponents "to provide the intellectual frameworks and curatorial support to institutions that lack the background and experience to interpret the art to their audiences." If marketing 'the Dreaming' brings them in—as it did in the Asia Society show in 1988, and Washington's National Museum of Women in the Arts in 2006—but also subverts Aboriginal art's acceptance as contemporary art, how do you see a way forward on this issue?*

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WO & HW: I'm not sure that either show was marketing "the Dreaming" per se, although certainly the appeal of the exotic and the unknown, the institutional thirst for novelty, was important. At **the Hood's installation in 2006**, the NMWA show, ***Dreaming Their Way***, was most decidedly presented as contemporary art—no didactics on the wall, not even exotic artists' names. It was intended to be a visual feast that impressed viewers with its aesthetics and its beauty. The audience at Dartmouth drew from both the campus and the surrounding community. In a university setting you are likely to draw a more sophisticated crowd who may have some prior knowledge or openness to the heretofore unseen.

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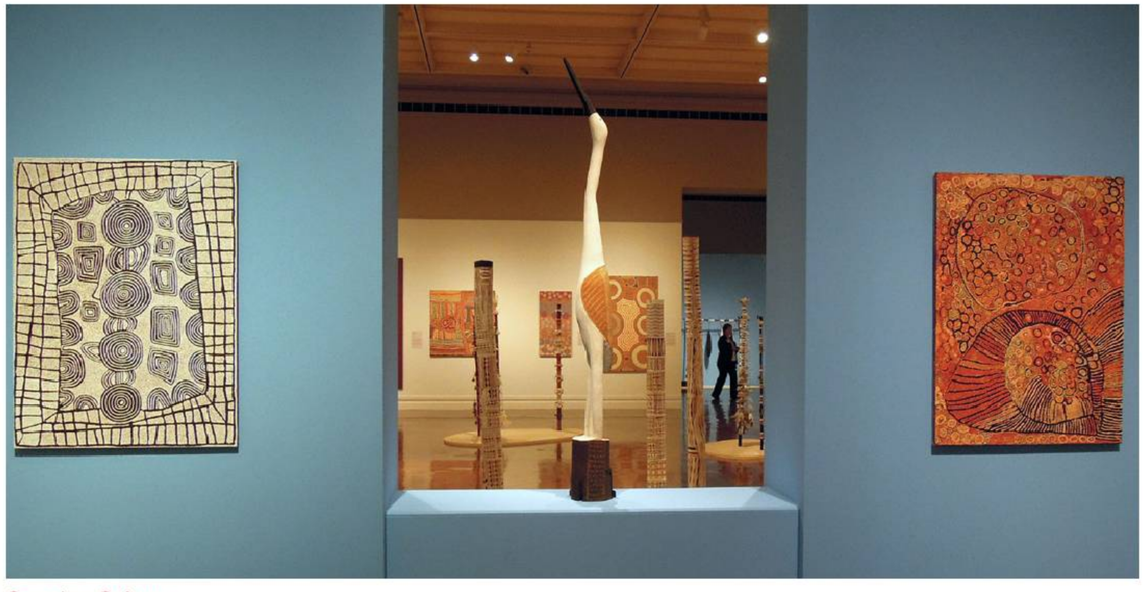
In 2012, *Crossing Cultures* explicitly stated that it was a show of *contemporary* Aboriginal Australian art: perhaps that plays both sides of the aisle. And for the audience at Dartmouth, it was the third time that they saw an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Hood in a decade, so there was a desire to see an art form that many were already familiar with. The audience was familiar with the work and enthusiastic about it. Many people we spoke to had visited Australia—some inspired to do so by seeing *Dreaming Their Way* —and could connect the art with the land. Some had purchased artworks while in Australia as tourists or on business, and came to see the show to learn more.

At the **Toledo Museum of Art**, most members of the audience were seeing the art for the first time and, like Harvey and me at the Asia Society in 1988, were just astounded by its visual impact, curious about its provenance, and eager to learn more. They responded profoundly to the power and the energy of the work. They were surprised that something this beautiful, complex, and meaningful has not already received wider exposure worldwide. But again, there was a clear signal in the first room—which comprised mostly photography (along with drawing and figurative watercolors) that this was contemporary, politically engaged art. By the time the galleries opened up into work from the deserts and Arnhem Land, I think people were prepared for and intrigued by a visually stunning experience of art. The didactics at Toledo emphasized the currency of the artistic production; indeed, this was a point that curator Stephen Gilchrist drew attention to by selecting mostly 21st century work for the show. Yes, people were curious about the Dreaming, but I think it was the visual experience that drew them in.

Ancestral Modern's working title included 'Dreaming'. How do you see a way forward on this issue, particularly in light of Ancestral Modern's success?

RK& ML: Keep searching for titles that convey the multi-layered nature of what the art represents.



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Emily's inclusion in the MOMA drawing show, and of course ***the major retrospective in Japan****, have been seen as important steps forward in the contextualization of Aboriginal art outside the anthropological/ ethnographic paradigm. I know that you feel that this dichotomy is a false one, in that all art is culturally coded and therefore inherently ethnographic, but there is still a strong divide in this perception that influences the art's reception as contemporary. How was this tension resolved in the exhibitions at the Hood or TMA?*

WO & HW: The issue was addressed at both locations by stressing the intercultural qualities of the art. Especially in the programming that surrounded the exhibition, the point was made repeatedly that the art is political and didactic and is meant to bridge two very different cultures occupying the same physical space. And I think that the visual sophistication of the work made it easier for people to maintain the focus on aesthetics, while opening their curiosity about the "ethnographic" (or rather specifically cultural) content of the art.

On aesthetics and politics

I've argued that Aboriginal contemporary art from remote communities, with its focus on law and connection to country, is inherently political. In her publication 'Sacred Exchanges', Australian academic Robin Ferrell proposes a philosophical paradigm for considering Aboriginal art's political power, something she terms 'aesthetics preceding ethics', wherein the aesthetic power of Aboriginal art can force real-world recognition of rights. Henry Skerritt addressed the power of aesthetics ***in your panel discussion at Toledo.*** *Do you think there is scope for this curatorial framework to be further deployed in American institutions, other than select artists' inclusion in group shows such as international Biennales, where, in reference to Crossing Cultures curator Stephen Gilchrist's assessment, the art is often included in a globalism/"cultural reactivation" paradigm? Is a framework around globalism the only way to bridge this divide?*

WO & HW: No, I don't think the art needs to be assigned to just another intellectual

framework, however expansive. Let me argue by analogy here. During one of my visits to the Hood Museum prior to the opening of *Crossing Cultures*, I saw an exhibition of contemporary art from Tibet. The work was quite varied in concept and execution. There were mandalas built by collage. There were photographic works that explored identity as a political concept, but from the perspective of gender rather than ethnicity as you might expect in a Tibetan context. This was a small show that presented a coherent a set of concerns germane to a particular culture. In order to appreciate the work, you had to grasp the context. You had to question how the artistic choices carried meaning. You inevitably asked, how does this art compare to contemporary art from Beijing? How does it stand in relation to Buddhist traditions? What does it say to me, as a member of a different contemporary culture? I think such a strategy can be successful in presenting Aboriginal Australian art to American audiences. The key, as you've quoted from Brian Kennedy above, is providing American curators with the intellectual frameworks that will allow them to interpret the art for their audiences.

The Hood Museum invested in this endeavour both by hiring Stephen Gilchrist to curate the collection and the exhibition and by bringing Howard Morphy to campus for an entire semester to teach an undergraduate seminar using the exhibition and collection. Stephen also taught a course in which students wrote some of the didactics for the show, and offered shorter sessions featuring Australian musicians or bringing an Aboriginal perspective to dancers. The Hood Museum, the Hopkins Performing Arts Center, and the Departments of Native American Studies and Anthropology helped sponsor a concert by the Black Arm Band during the exhibition's run.

In Toledo, Brian Kennedy brought in Wally Caruana to lecture on the history and varieties of Aboriginal art, worked with the Toledo Zoo to obtain permission from Yolngu elders to name their newly acquired saltwater crocodile "Baru," (and publicised that exercise in cultural protocols) and sponsored panel discussions with the likes of Stephen Gilchrist, Margo Smith, and Henry Skerritt. The intellectual capital exists in the United States to make this art accessible and comprehensible.

RK & ML: Much of the work in *Ancestral Modern* is political, as well as beautiful and narrative. It is very much tied up with claims to native title, on the one hand, and with establishing the place of remote communities in modern Australia, on the other hand. We had a wonderful **forum** at the University of Washington Law School in which Djambawa Marawili, Frances Morphy, and Will Stubbs discussed the role the "Saltwater Barks" played in the successful court case concerning traditional rights in Blue Mud Bay.

We cannot describe the Spinifex men's collaborative (which appears on the third edition of Caruana's Thames and Hudson **book**) without discussing atomic testing by the British in Maralinga. Ricky Maynard's photographs document aboriginal presence in Tasmania, in spite of genocide, and they powerfully convey the emotions and lives of those who live on the islands off the Island. These are universal themes and *cris de cœur.* Many of the most prominent of contemporary artists—think Ai Weiwei or Basquiat—make political statements, while drawing on their particular locations and cultures.

Audience Reactions

It's on record that you have fulfilled a long-held dream of formulating a museum-quality collection, which you have said "was born of chutzpah" as you had "no reason to believe a US institution would be interested". Do you know of other prospective collectors who have been influenced to pursue Aboriginal art by the success of Ancestral Modern and SAM's interest and support? Or indeed other institutions?

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RK & ML: We do not know of other collectors, but we do know there have been many purchases of particular artists by those who viewed the show. We continue to receive queries from other institutions about potential loans or other exhibitions.

Have any prospective collectors of Aboriginal art contacted you as a result of Crossing Cultures, and if so, what has been the most

common statement, question, query or concern?

WO & HW: We've had several people speak or write to us and usually they are interested in finding out where and how they can see more work, often with intent to acquire something. We've explained the ethical issues surrounding the marketing of Aboriginal art and directed them to appropriate sources for making an acquisition. We've also told them how we've built much of our collection from the USA via the internet, which always surprises people.

SAM curator of African and Oceanic Art, Pamela McClusky, has stated her astonishment that Americans "could ignore something as significant as the longest art producing culture on the planet". Will Owen's experience with audiences in Toledo, Ohio, suggest this is a widespread phenomenon.

Both Ancestral Modern and Crossing Cultures endeavoured to bring new scholarship and a new artistic vocabulary to the reception and display of Aboriginal art in the US. With hindsight, how would you measure the success of this enterprise in Seattle?

RK & ML: That is a difficult question. The public and press in the Northwest were enthusiastic, and the aboriginal art aficionados who made the trip seemed very pleased with the quality of the work and its presentation. However, the show did not draw and was not reviewed in the national press; that was a bit of a disappointment.

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Which audience responses have had the biggest impact on you/linger the most from amongst the American public, academics and art critics?

RK & ML: We went to visit the exhibition many times, sometimes taking groups and sometimes just sneaking in. Every time we went, there were people there we'd seen there before—one man was there almost every time. Those folks, the guards, the docents, and the bloggers who expressed such enthusiasm and pleasure confirmed our belief that this work would touch a wide set of viewers.

The other highpoint was the **symposium**. The debate generated by Columbia University art historian and filmmaker Susan Vogel's questions about what makes this "international contemporary art," a theme taken up by **Block Museum** Director Lisa Graziose Corrin, was exactly the conversation we wanted. Only with such critical assessment will Australian Aboriginal art achieve global recognition as the major art movement that we believe it is.

WO & HW: I wrote in July 2013 on ***Aboriginal Art & Culture: an American eye*** about a twelve-year old boy in Toledo who was zipping around the exhibition galleries taking pictures of the art with his cell phone. His excitement and enthusiasm were obvious and undeniable, and I imagine him at home with a new hobby, scouring the web for more information, drawing up lists of his favorite artists, and maybe trying to create his own versions of the designs for a school project. Maybe none of that has happened, but seeing his imagination captured and transported at the Museum was one of the most thrilling moments of many, many unexpected and delightful events. At Dartmouth, a first-year student presented me

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with a copy of a term paper she'd written for her art history class on one of the paintings from the Hood's collection. She *really* wanted me to know how taken she was by her encounter with that work. So in general, the response of young people and the hope it nurtures in me for the future made the biggest impact.

Bob, you were on the panel at Crossing Cultures in Toledo, is there a key difference, or set of differences, that you can categorise between the audience questions and/or responses to Aboriginal art in Seattle and Toledo?

RK & ML: I can't think of any difference in audience reaction itself. There was a difference in emphasis. In Seattle we were examining the place of Aboriginal art in contemporary art. The Toledo panel was an examination of the art movement and its relationship to the artists.

On mainstream endorsement and government support

Another prominent collector, John Wilkerson, has stated that for Aboriginal art to be properly endorsed in America, the Metropolitan Museum would have to embrace the field and periodically exhibit great works. Do you agree? And if not, what would be your preferred institutional context for promoting Aboriginal art as contemporary art going forward?

WO & HW: With all due respect to John (and to Eric Kjellgren, the Met's Curator of Oceanic Art), I couldn't disagree more, especially if you are talking about recognizing Aboriginal art as contemporary art and not consigning it to the globalist paradigm. Obviously, our choice of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College demonstrates our belief that there needs to be serious scholarship surrounding the art in order for it to gain broader acceptance. Placing collections and exhibitions in university art galleries is one key. And the right university galleries—**UCLA** perhaps?—could build the art's reputation and visibility in other ways. I think that a place like the Toledo Museum of Art, which has a reputation for astonishing collections and impeccable curatorial sensibility, was a great location for *Crossing Cultures.* Museums that have a strong commitment to contemporary art—**the Art Institute of Chicago**, the **Philadelphia Museum of Art**, or the **Walker Art Center**—could generate significant interest and advance understanding.

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Curatorial display notwithstanding, having experienced your work's reception in Seattle, do you agree about the Met being critical for American endorsement?

RK & ML: It would be a major achievement to have recognition of and representation of contemporary Australian Aboriginal art in prestigious international encyclopaedic museums such as the Met.

*Prominent French collector Bertrand Estrangin laments the demise of Australian government support of foreign collectors, particularly the **Austrade** incentive that brought collectors to Australia to tour Indigenous Art Centres. You and Harvey were part of the 2007 enterprise, where a select group of Americans visited 24 centres. Do you feel this type of government program still has a place in the promotion of Aboriginal art abroad and, in particular, in the USA? And if not, what would you like to see happen in its stead?*

WO & HW: First let me say that Bertrand himself is one of the finest evangelists for Aboriginal art outside of Australia and his **writings** on the subject are passionate and much to be admired. Second I want to say again—I've said it many times on my blog—that the **Austrade tour** was another truly life-changing event for me; the memories of that trip and the places we visited are among the most cherished of my lifetime. I will always be grateful for the opportunity to take that journey and for the friendships it fostered.

I do wonder, though, whether it wasn't a case of preaching to the choir, as most of us on the tour were already seriously committed to the art form. Its chief benefit for me, I think, was widening my awareness: it was instrumental in opening my eyes to Tjala Arts, to Warakurna Artists, and to Injalak Arts and Crafts, among others. I was able to meet many great supporters of Aboriginal art from John Oster to Michelle Culpitt, Quentin Sprague to Nicolas Rothwell, David and Anita Angel to Andrew Blake. Not to mention Clare Martin, who was then Chief Minister of the Territory.

I hope the return on Austrade's investment was significant; certainly we boosted sales at all the art centres we visited, and my interest in newly discovered artists and art centres has continued unabated. But perhaps bringing Aboriginal art to America (and Europe) rather than collectors to Australia would ultimately be more productive. I'm not suggesting that Austrade should take sole responsibility for this, but it would be interesting to see if there could be more collaboration. Having Stephen Gilchrist at Dartmouth for a couple of years created an incredible opportunity to promote Aboriginal art's presence in America. Margo Smith at the Kluge-Ruhe is doing amazing work, bringing major contemporary artists like Vernon Ah Kee, Judy Watson, Yhonnie Scarce, and Reko Rennie to the US for extended visits on which they work with students and local artists, create new work out of their experience there, and enrich the Kluge-Ruhe itself. Could there be support for similar ventures, for visiting

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curatorships to help organize exhibitions, or to leverage the work that dealers like Julie Harvey and Nana Booker are already doing here in the States?

In conjunction with Ancestral Modern, SAM organised a symposium to explore issues across three paradigms of influence on the acceptance and appreciation of Aboriginal contemporary art. American contemporary art academic Lisa Graziose Corrin, who wrote one the catalogue essays, raised concerns about Australia's rhetoric of nationalism, describing this discourse as "creating an imprisonment for the works that keeps them from having a productive dialogue with other contemporaneous art".

Throwing down a gauntlet, she challenged Australia—and here I'm expanding her framing beyond the federal government to museums, lobbyists and agent provocateurs—to critique and rethink systems of support and advocacy for Aboriginal art "to more easily facilitate the kinds of construction and abiding collaborations that would remove the art from within a rhetoric of nationalism into a bigger discussion of contemporary art happening around the world".

In panel discussions Howard Morphy noted "the contradiction between the Australian government's emphasis on Indigenous art and national identity and their inability to organise sponsorship for exhibitions". This was certainly the case with Ancestral Modern. French dealer Stephane Jacob has complained that the Australian government does not support foreign collectors of Aboriginal art enough, and this has been echoed by French collector Bertrand Estrangin. What is your view?

RK & ML: We kept learning that the Australian government was far more interested in funding commercial enterprises, e.g. dealers who would bring work to the U.S. and the

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artists they were showing, than in supporting major exhibitions of the work or artists and educators. The government agencies seemed determinedly unable to understand the need to create a market first, which is done by creating appreciation, which is achieved by seeing great work in a setting where it is vetted and presented by respected curators.

Last words

Has the experience of the exhibitions changed your collecting focus in any way? What is your most recent acquisition?

WO & HW: Knowing that our collection is going to the Hood Museum (and a great deal of it has already been given to their permanent care) has changed the way that we think about acquiring new work. We always asked ourselves, "Is this a work we want to look at every day for months or years to come?" Now we also ask, "Is this something that the Hood Museum's collection needs?" We have always collected broadly, from all parts of the country, from remote art centres and from urban artists represented by galleries who don't specialize in Aboriginal art. Now we are looking at what isn't in the collection as well as looking for our own pleasure. We want to provide a collection of record, insofar as that is possible. In line with this philosophy, we have recently purchased our first artist's video work, r e a's *PolesApart* (2009) and we also acquired Archie Moore's *Snowdome* from the NATSIAA this year.

RK & ML: I think what an exhibition from one's collection does is make one reconsider quality. I think it has reinforced our desire to find and acquire only the best works available for the collection. Our most recent acquisition is a bark painting by Gunybi Ganambarr, one of our favourite artists.

Ancestral Modern images: courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum, Robert Kaplan and Margaret Levi
Crossing Cultures images: courtesy of Will Owen and Harvey Wagner

RELATED LINKS

Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan & Levi Collection

Symposium Review, Art Monthly Australia, No 254 October 2012
Jane Raffan, 'Burning Issues: Value and Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art'

Launch speech by Ambassador Kim Beazley

Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art

Slideshow of Toledo installation

Toledo Museum of Art videos

Note: Crossing Cultures images are of the Toledo Museum of Art installation

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