



Sydney-based performer Bjorn Stewart plays Bungaree at the opening of the exhibition *Bungaree, The First Australian*, curated by Djon Mundine for Mosman Art Gallery, and showing there from 1 September to 25 November 2012, before setting of on a two-year national tour. Image courtesy Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney

# Burning Issues:

## Value and Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art

JANE RAFFAN

The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) 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 by local collectors Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan. In May 2012, Levi and Kaplan presided over the opening of *Ancestral Modern*<sup>1</sup>, a major exhibition showcasing over 120 Aboriginal works of art from their collection, all promised gifts to SAM. In conjunction with the exhibition, SAM organised a symposium to explore issues across three paradigms of influence on the acceptance and appreciation of Aboriginal contemporary art.<sup>2</sup>

Pam McClusky, Curator of African and Oceanic Art, hopes that *Ancestral Modern* will 'inaugurate an American awareness'<sup>3</sup>, that is, move entrenched expectations beyond Dreaming narratives and notions of traditional iconography centred on 'dot' painting. In support, SAM's permanent Aboriginal gallery was hung with eight works from the contemporary collection mixed with eight works by Aboriginal artists in an installation that foregrounded common concerns shared across distant cultures.<sup>4</sup> This staging is further examined in the book accompanying the exhibition, where American contemporary art academic Lisa Graziose Corrin develops intercultural 'conversations' between the works.<sup>5</sup>

The symposium's most critical and productive panels were those focused on the implications of globalism and Aboriginal art's value/market/canon. Commenting on the challenge of writing about Aboriginal art for the accompanying book, Graziose Corrin was at pains to

make clear her discomfort in writing about Aboriginal art as a cultural outsider. This distance, however, generated an illuminating rumination on the nature of contemporary art and the promotion and display of Aboriginal art within national and international cultural frameworks.

### ... THE FALLACY OF A LINGUA FRANCA / THE DANGER OF NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

The language of art historical criticism automatically prejudices the perception of non-Western art in any consideration of what is, or isn't, or might be called contemporary art. Graziose Corrin believes that the problems confronting the reception of Aboriginal contemporary art are embedded in museums themselves, where nomenclatures and taxonomic systems 'are deeply Eurocentric'. She presented as fallacious the notion of a contemporary art lingua franca, that 'art all over the world speaks a common language', decrying the concept as 'a convenient construct by the art world in order for us to float seamlessly from one cultural context to another ... talking about a lingua franca makes it easy not to speak other languages – literally and metaphorically'.

Graziose Corrin also 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*.<sup>6</sup> The Australian government has sponsored very few major touring shows to and/or across the USA, the NGA’s *Culture Warriors* being the most recent exception in 2009.<sup>7</sup> Instead, in what seems to be a strategy tied to the promotion of tourism and trade via the selling of culture, the government commonly supports the tour of Aboriginal art to Australian embassies and High Commissions<sup>8</sup>, where most recent tours have focused on soft-targets throughout the Southern Hemisphere<sup>9</sup> rather than Europe and the USA who have dominant and resistant contemporary art canons. And let’s face it, building interest among audiences on the diplomatic circuit is a token effort compared to generating a sustained academic and commercial market profile from within significant public art institutions, let alone ones with a contemporary focus.

### ... GLOBALISM V PLANETARY – UNIVERSALISM V MULTIPLICITY / THE VALUE IN DIFFERENCE

The views of expat academic Chris Mcauliffe concur with Graziose Corrin’s warnings about a nationalist discourse. He noted a curious coincidence between the development of Australian cultural policy in the 1970s and concurrent emergent desert art movements, remarking that the policy rubric of ‘a distinctively Australian culture’ remains one of the primary measures of federal cultural agencies in Australia. He quoted Juan Davila’s statement in objection, ‘we should find a dialogue constituting ourselves as a difference, not a peripheral “another”, but as a sustained contradiction’. Mcauliffe suggested these issues still confront us: ‘it has to be a dialogue, it’s not about getting out there and having our moment in the spotlight. It’s about constituting our nation as a difference, not one more voice in the corporate lounge of the contemporary art scene’. For Mcauliffe, Aboriginal art’s value within the contemporary art paradigm lies precisely in its engagement with sustained contradictions.

Earlier, in the panel on cross-cultural aesthetics, Brenda L. Croft advocated her curatorial approach – as seen in the recent exhibition, *Stop the Gap: International Indigenous Art in Motion* – as ‘exiting the paradigm of discussing work in terms of ideas of borders, states, countries ...’, not wanting to be complicit as ‘... another colonising curator’. Of course, within the Eurocentric paradigm of art historical discourse, the term ‘Indigenous’ is itself problematic, being a globalised or universalising term that automatically posits artists as non-Western, and therefore outside dominant contemporary canons. This is borne out in the stated position of *Documenta (15)* curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who is on record refusing to use the term.<sup>10</sup>



Simon Hogan, *Tjinigka*, 1998, acrylic on linen, 199.6 x 138cm; Collection: Spinifex Arts Community Collection; see related article by Alan R. Dodge, p. 14

Stephen Gilchrist made an eloquent case for ‘mobilising difference’ in Aboriginal contemporary art because ‘the alternative looks a lot like assimilation’. He suggested that the globalisation of contemporary art – within which certain Aboriginal artists have ‘made it’ at the cost of renouncing indigeneity – ensures a ‘systemic cultural asymmetry’. When asked about the politics of race and how this was taken up by artists, Gilchrist suggested that it was ‘okay to be Aboriginal, not okay to be a politicised Aboriginal in the contemporary art world’. This author begged to differ, and in response Croft argued that urban Aboriginal artists face having ‘the authority’ of their work dismissed in contrast to art produced from remote centres.

### ... REMARKING ON THE MARKET / VIEWPOINTS THROUGH PRISMS

This comment and the broader debate reveal less about the problematic reception of non-urban art as contemporary than it does the critical divide between two distinct art worlds: the academic/museum world and the art market. Earlier, Michael Brand had intimated that context (seen elsewhere as ethnographic framing) was not problematic in the urban paradigm. This is undoubtedly so, as urban artists who engage in criticising their own cultural contexts are rewarded in contemporary art arenas. Artists such as Croft, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett (represented in *Documenta 15*), Richard Bell, Destiny Deacon and many others have received international acclaim as contemporary artists. Playing politics in this paradigm continues to pay dividends in according artists



1/ Caroline Oakley, *The bonnet that Queen Cora Gooseberry wore*, 2012, handmade mulberry paper, with printed leaf matter and machine-stitched, 30 x 32 x 13cm

2/ Fiona Foley, *All men choose the path they walk*, 2012 (detail), mixed media, variable dimensions  
Both images courtesy the artists and Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney; both works showing in *Bungaree, The First Australian*

contemporary art doyen status. And while Moffatt and Bennett have long resisted being labelled as Aboriginal artists, no-one can say Richard Bell has ever had to renounce his indigeneity, or tone down his rhetoric.

Instead, the problem lies with market-derived authority for urban Aboriginal art, which, until recently and with few exceptions, has largely been dismissed in favour of works from remote centres.<sup>11</sup> And yet work from remote centres, and exhibitions like *Ancestral Modern*, face much tougher reception in academic and curatorial circles as contemporary art. Gerald McMaster summed up this position when he stated that 'Aboriginal art ... is seen to be extemporal or atemporal'. Earlier, in the panel on cross-cultural aesthetics, African art specialist and scholar Susan Vogel suggested ethnographic discourse is to blame, and that any such contextualising or framing by museums, including SAM for *Ancestral Modern*, would perpetuate a view of Aboriginal art as ethnography, regardless of how contemporary the installation or individual works look.

The data points for discerning ethnographic prisms are, however, as diverse as the spectrum of opinion against, and Vogel's opinion of SAM's staging engendered audience grumbling. Charlotte Townsend-Gault had argued a case for 'doublecross cultural aesthetics', which put any kind of singular approach to valuing aesthetics in question. And if one dismisses a purely formalist approach to valuing aesthetics, an engagement with hermeneutics is inevitable. Revisiting the issue of context and framing in a later panel, Gilchrist noted that 'Aboriginal art and culture is both hard and software and cannot function in isolation', and that it is impossible for Aboriginal art to exist in the contemporary art world at the cost of 'culturally resonant installations where meaning and context is everything'.

Pointedly, Roger Benjamin painted a picture of critical paucity from within the contemporary art world itself. In teasing out difficulties facing reviewers of work from remote centres, he suggested the field was fraught with moral and ethical problems. For example, if issues of quality turn on the question of handling, how can reviewers critique the handling of paint and avoid impugning the *Tjukurrpa*? Systemic controls are at issue: art centre coordinators are not taste arbiters, although they do set pricing, but the gamut of their responsibilities extend into the realm of cultural continuum. And normal market filters through which value has traditionally been ascribed have changed. Before collectors could source works online, art funnelled through high-profile dealers who applied critical eyes and commercial experience to narrow selection. Galleries with diverse missions (and

means) have grown in tandem with the explosion in art centre numbers. And consider the influence on the market of the prominence of ethical buying debates centred on provenance and ensuing government regulatory reform, which has reshaped opinions of quality, as it relates to a work's collectability, away from aesthetics and an artist's profile being chief determinants of value.<sup>12</sup>

Christopher Hodges indicated that solo shows were vital for the reception of artists in a contemporary context. He also made the salient point that linguistic interference with the spelling of an artist's career name potentially damages their standing

long-term. And while all English versions of Aboriginal names are linguistic constructs, I would argue that the adoption of revisionist spellings based on current linguistic protocol reinforces an ethnographic paradigm for the ongoing reception of the art.

### ... CONTEMPORARY V MODERN / ANCESTRAL V MODERN

An audience member questioned the titular use of 'Modern', suggesting that to frame Aboriginal art in terms of modernity guaranteed 'a dialogue of resistance or submission to a dominant paradigm'. In teasing out nuance, McMaster insisted that being modern meant being able to challenge one's positioning in history and adopting a politics of self-determination. Of course language is itself a colonising force<sup>13</sup> and changes to the way language is used alters slowly in the wake of those who forge ahead against the currents of dominant cultures. One only has to look at the fairly recent demise in the proclivity of 'Dreaming' in favour of '*Tjukurrpa*' or 'Law' in the titles of Aboriginal art books and exhibitions. Gilchrist provoked discussion on how we might change the way we talk about contemporary art, including adopting Indigenous terminology.

The artist who individuates from type or abstracts traditional iconography – the genius factor, is a given, with Michael Brand commenting that 'recognising human visual invention' was key to appreciating Aboriginal contemporary art.<sup>14</sup> This could have been elucidated more strongly via the exhibition – which literally sets the stage for the works' reception as contemporary – rather than through an *all-parts=whole* approach with conceptual support from the satellite installation and book.<sup>15</sup>

*Ancestral Modern* purposely offers contradictions about the nature of Aboriginal contemporary art, both in the language of its title and diverse viewpoints expressed in the book. The question arises: will these contradictions be supported and sustained across international

contemporary art fora?<sup>16</sup>

The fire has been lit, the issues are still burning, let's keep fanning the flames.

1. *Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington, USA, 31 May to 2 September 2012; accompanying book published by the Seattle Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London: 2012. Contributors: Pamela McClusky, Wally Caruana, Lisa Graziose Corrin and Stephen Gilchrist.
2. Panel 1: Artists' Voice. Moderator: Pam McClusky, Curator, Art of Africa and Oceania, SAM and Co-Curator, *Ancestral Modern*. Discussants: Djambawa Marrawilli (Australia) and Preston Singletary (Canada). Panel 2: Cross-Cultural Aesthetics. Moderator: Howard Morphy, Director of Research, School of Humanities and the Arts, ANU. Discussants: Susan Vogel, Professor of Art History, Columbia and independent African art scholar; Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Professor of Art History, University of British Columbia; Brenda L. Croft: Snr Research Fellow, National Institute for Experimental Arts, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW; Wally Caruana, Former Snr Curator of Aboriginal Art, NGA and Co-Curator, *Ancestral Modern*. Panel 3: Value/Market/Canon. Moderator: Roger Benjamin, Professor of Art History, University of Sydney. Discussants: Christopher Hodges, Director, Utopia Art Sydney; Will Stubbs, Art Coordinator, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala; Dr Michael Brand, Director (designate) Art Gallery of NSW; Roger Benjamin and Robert Kaplan. Panel 4: Global Art: Moderator: Gerald McMaster, Frederick S. Eaton Curator of Canadian Art, Art Gallery of Ontario/Artistic Director, Biennale of Sydney; Stephen Gilchrist, Curator of Australian Art, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire; Lisa Graziose Corrin, Director, Block Art Museum, Northwestern University, Chicago and former Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, SAM; Chris Mcauliffe, Gough Whitlam & Malcolm Fraser Visiting Professor of Australian Studies, Harvard University and Director, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
3. In conversation during the *Ancestral Modern* press preview, 29 May 2012; hence no 'dreaming' in the exhibition's title, an otherwise obvious museum drawback. This challenge is particularly difficult in the face of institutional needs, where audiences are critical for the ongoing support of curatorial vision.
4. For the duration of *Ancestral Modern* the permanent gallery operated as a satellite space. The installation, titled *The distant relative who calls at midnight*, references the 18th Sydney Biennale's 'all our relations' theme.
5. Lisa Graziose Corrin, 'Staging Australian Aboriginal Art', *Ancestral Modern*, op. cit., pp. 43-52.
6. McClusky indicated that SAM sent touring prospectuses to institutions across the US and did not receive 'a single bite', citing reasons given in response by various curators: 'no Australians in our city that we know of'; 'no collectors speaking up for this field'; 'no collections to refer to'; 'no funding possibilities'; and 'an unknown audience draw'. Conversation with the author, exhibition press preview 29 May 2012. The exhibition was opened by the Australian Ambassador to the US, The Hon. Kim Beazley, AC.
7. The *National Indigenous Art Triennial '07: Culture Warriors* travelled to a single east-coast venue: The Katzen Arts Centre at the American University, Washington DC. More to the point, it was also the first to not be near-exclusively focused on art from remote centres.

8. Through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in partnership with Artbank, the national organisation devoted to acquiring contemporary art and making it publicly available for rental.

9. Artbank's *Balgo: Contemporary Australian Art from the Balgo Hills* toured to Honolulu, but no mainland US cities. The current touring exhibition, *Message Stick: Indigenous Identity in Urban Australia*, will travel to the Pacific, Africa and Latin America over the next two to three years. Like the NGA's *Culture Warriors*, it is also the first Artbank touring exhibition not exclusively focused on art from remote centres.

10. Quoted in Fiona Gruber, 'Only connect, not compete as artists converge on Kassel for Documenta', *The Australian*, 9 June 2012, paragraph 15. The intro to *Documenta's* Keynote Lecture, 'Sovereign Imagination: Art of First Nations Peoples in the Contemporary Field' refers to 'the contemporary art of first nations' peoples', <http://d13.documenta.de/#/research/research/view/the-keynote-lectures-sovereign-imagination-art-of-first-nations-peoples-in-the-contemporary-field> (accessed 27 June 2012.)

11. This is changing post GFC, where speculators have all but disappeared from the market and where works by a host of urban Aboriginal artists, many of whom work in multimedia, are finding favour with collectors and winning national Indigenous art awards; Danie Mellor being a recent case in point (2009 winner of the Telstra NATSIAA).

12. For a broad overview of this recent history, see Jane Raffan, 'Moral Lip Service: Government's Hard Hit at the Art Market is a Soft form of Redress', *Sydney University Alumni Magazine*, Autumn 2010, p. 27.

13. As in the suppression of Indigenous language and culture by colonial authorities and contemporary effects, such as general disempowerment from the literacy tools needed to engage and succeed in contemporary Western societies.

14. Also stated as fundamental by *Documenta 15* curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Gruber, 2012: paragraph 14.

15. Aside from the essay by Graziose Corrin there are two: Wally Caruana offers an historical overview of the development of Aboriginal contemporary art in, 'The Bridge: A Brief History of Modern Aboriginal Art', pp. 17-28; and Pam McClusky gives American readers a series of reality checks with 'Stop and Smell the Air in Blue Mud Bay', pp. 29-42, which offers a series of experiential re-contextualisation of the art.

16. The SAM symposium had approx. 50 attendees, the majority from Australia, then Canada, then the US and Europe. It was commented upon that SAM's contemporary staff, and presumably other invitees from across the States, were at *Documenta 13*. By way of contrast to the issues in question, Hetti Perkins's keynote presentation at *Documenta* was a largely revisionist lecture about the early Papunya Tula movement and how contemporary artists were addressing issues of sovereignty, using examples from amongst urban practitioners rather than artist from remote centres (see note 15). Warwick Thornton (guest) raised the point that for remote artists, paintings of country and song were documents of title. For an essay on this phenomena see, Jane Raffan 'Power + Colour: Law and Country', in Jane Raffan, *Power + Colour: New Painting from the Corrigan Collection of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Aboriginal Art*, Palgrave Macmillan, Melbourne, 368 pp. (forthcoming).

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Judy Lorraine, detail, *Family and Future* sculpture, Wedderburn c.2005

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