

POTTER  
MUSEUM  
OF ART

# 65000 YEARS

A  
Short  
History  
of  
*Australian*  
Art

LAND, BELONGING AND TIME  
GRADE 7-8 CASE STUDIES



Ngarrngga  
to know, to hear, to understand

University  
of Melbourne  
Museums and  
Collections





*65,000 Years: A Short History of  
Australian Art*

LAND, BELONGING AND TIME  
GRADE 7-8 CASE STUDIES

# Acknowledgement of Country

These education resources have been developed on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples.

Ngarrngga honours the traditional custodians of Country/ Place throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection of First Peoples to lands, waters, cultures, and communities.

We pay deep respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories, and cultures, and to Elders past and present.

We recognise Indigenous peoples as the first educators and their continued leadership in teaching, learning and research.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous Knowledge to the work of Ngarrngga.



Sunrise Through Trees, Alphington, Wurundjeri Country.  
Photographer: Tiffany Garvie. Source: Ngarrngga. Used under licence.



# Advisory

Curated in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and custodians, *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* reveals the importance and brilliance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' foundational and ongoing contributions to art history.

The exhibition is also about truth-telling. For societies with shared histories of violence or injustice, truth-telling about the past is essential for overcoming division and achieving genuine democratic and prosperous outcomes for all citizens. Australian curricula frameworks recognise the importance of truth-telling, emphasising the critical role of education for building comprehensive understanding of the rich tapestry of truth that comprises Australia's history.

We advise all viewers that the exhibition contains references to dispossession, the Australian Wars, violence, massacres, child removal, missionisation, incarceration, and deaths in custody. Some works in the exhibition contain derogatory images or titles with outdated terminology. These do not reflect the University's viewpoint, but rather the social attitudes and circumstances of the period or place in which they were created.

We would also like to advise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers that that the exhibition and education resources include works by non-Indigenous artists that may cause distress. The exhibition and its education resources also feature the names, images and works of people who have died.

Ngarrngga's resources are developed within the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education by educators, in close consultation with academic and Indigenous Knowledge Experts. Guided by our principles and best practice Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) processes, as outlined in our ICIP Declaration, all resources are designed to empower educators to confidently showcase Indigenous Knowledge in their teaching and learning. As part of an ongoing research program, Ngarrngga follows iterative cycles of development, meaning our resources are never truly final. They are living documents, continually evolving in response to emerging needs, feedback, and systemic changes.



# Ngarrngga

to know, to hear, to understand

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**Ngarrngga Logo Design:** Marcus Lee Design

**Design:** Emily Gittins [Gumbaynggirr /Barkindji]



# POTTER MUSEUM OF ART

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# Introduction

Welcome to the Grades 7 / 8 education resource for the *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* exhibition. This booklet contains and explains the knowledge, perspectives, and understandings being made available to educators and students through this education resource.

Ngarrngga's education resources foreground Indigenous knowledge as the foundation for interpreting and enacting curriculum. This approach respects the holistic, interconnected nature of Indigenous knowledge in creating curriculum engaged and aligned resources for educators.

This resource features six works of art by Indigenous artists, selected by the curatorial team specifically for Grade 7 and 8 students and educators. By exploring the ways artists use digital media, possum skin, printmaking and paint to innovate and share Indigenous knowledge and perspectives connected to Country and culture, the resource creates a rich context for learning through reflection and dialogue.

The knowledge shared within each case study is storied in context of its respective work of art and in relation to the broader suite of case studies. The storylines for each case study work in complement, setting the scene to scaffold rich learning experiences that entwine Indigenous knowledge with elements of the following learning areas, subjects and/or strands:

- Technologies (Digital Technologies)
- The Arts (Visual Arts)
- English (Language, Literature/Texts, Literacy)
- HASS (History, Geography)
- Science (Understanding: Earth/Space, Biological)

These connections draw from and reflect a balanced integration of key content and concepts from New South Wales syllabus, Victorian and Australian Curriculum frameworks. Mapping for where the development of skills, knowledge, and understandings supported by this education resource align with curriculum content, capabilities, and priorities is provided in the Support Materials booklet.

While the connections made are comprehensive, they are not exhaustive. Educators are invited to exercise their agency to contextualise and create connections beyond those offered.

In using these resources, educators are encouraged to be creative, confident and responsive in shaping education experiences that acknowledge and embrace the unique needs and interests of their students.

## Land, belonging and time

Through six in-depth case studies, you will examine powerful artworks by Indigenous artists that give voice to connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their culture, and the land and Country they have inhabited for millennia.

Each case study highlights the significance of the featured work, and how the artists' work with creative and cultural practices to challenge dominant narratives, assert their rights, and advocate for cultural preservation and healing.

The case studies provide context about each artist's background and the stories they share through their art. Curious questions are woven across the case studies, inviting students to think about artists' motivations, symbolic meanings within the works, and their own responses to these.

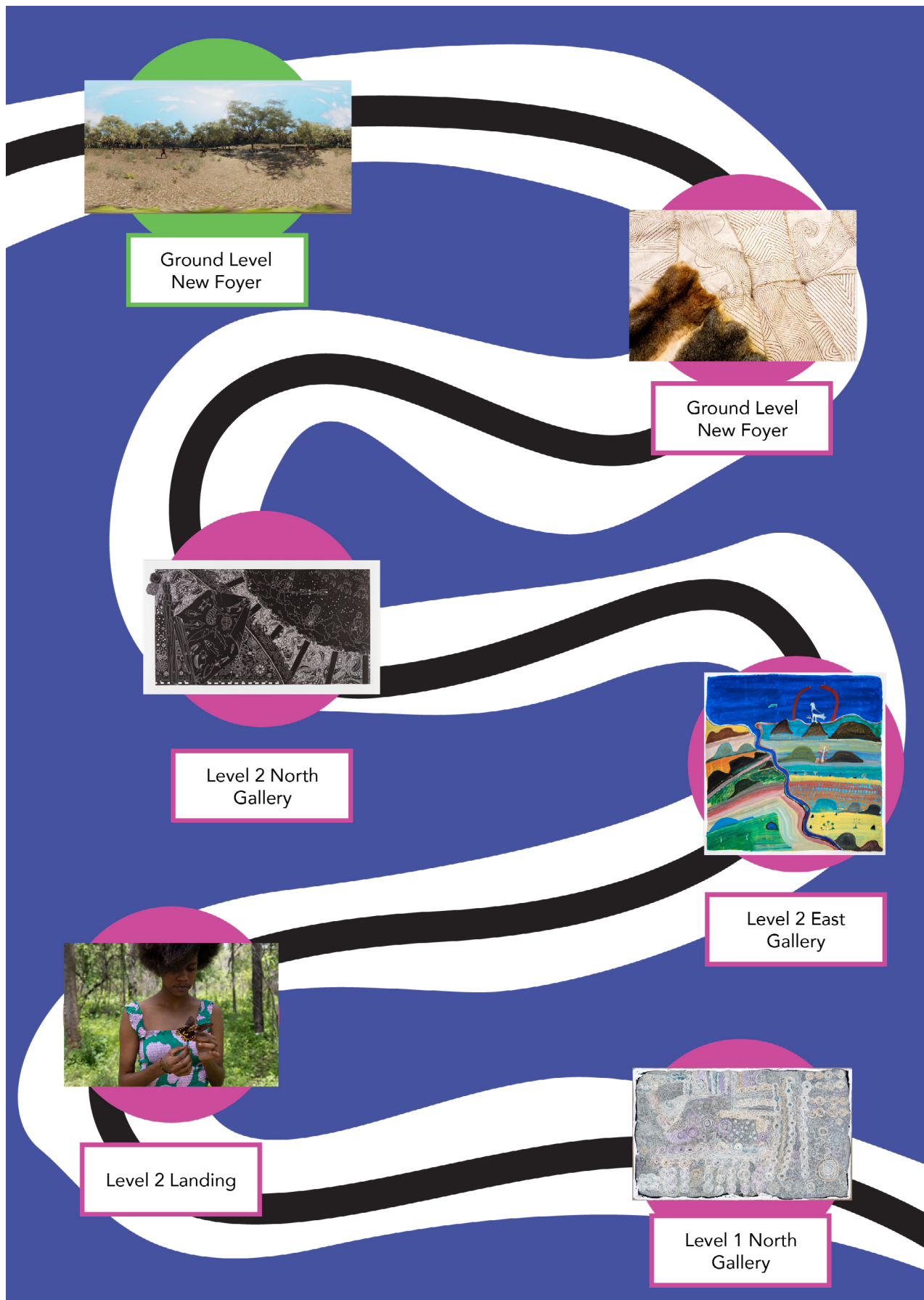
Sharing and discussing responses to these questions help students make connections, identify and question assumptions, and better understand the meaning and importance of land, belonging, and time for Indigenous peoples and cultures.

These conversations can be used as a basis to inspire further inquiry into related historical events and social movements relating to the case studies. In coming to know, hear and understand with these case studies, we invite students and educators to:

- Explore Indigenous artists' experiences, values and views connected to their ancestral lands, cultural belonging and age-old traditions.
- Engage with and discuss the visual language artists use to share stories about their enduring ties to land, belonging and long-held traditions.
- Consider and question whose stories and perspectives are told in historical accounts, and why some are left out.
- Build appreciation for the strength and ingenuity of Indigenous peoples upholding their deep connections to land, culture and knowledge over millennia.

This resource offers insights into the resilience, ingenuity, and activism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It foregrounds learning encounters designed to build recognition and appreciation for enduring cultural practices, innovation, and custodianship of Indigenous knowledge shared by the artists.

# Exhibition tour map



Key information – Artists and featured works			
Content considerations	Artwork Detail	Case study storylines	Location in gallery
<p><b>Cultural safety:</b> impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p> <p><b>Sensory and space:</b> employs digital visual technologies and emits sound.</p>	<p><b>Brett Leavy</b> Kooma, born 1965</p> <p><i>Virtual Narrm 1834, 2025</i></p> <p>Geospatial virtual heritage digital media installation</p>	Continuity of culture and Country	<p>Ground Level New Foyer</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Welcome to 65,000 Years: A short History of Australian Art</i></p>
<p><b>Cultural safety:</b> impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p><b>Mandy Nicholson</b> Wurundjeri-willam, born 1975</p> <p><i>Possum skin cloak, 2012</i></p> <p>Possum skin, thread, charcoal</p>	Possum skin stories	<p>Ground Level New Foyer</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Welcome to 65,000 Years: A short History of Australian Art</i></p>
<p><b>Cultural safety:</b> impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p><b>Brian Robinson</b> Wuthathi / Maluyligal / Dayak, born 1973</p> <p><i>Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe, 2016</i></p> <p>Linocut mounted on canvas</p>	Charting our place in the universe	<p>Level 2 North Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Cultural Astronomy</i></p>

<b>Cultural safety:</b> impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.	<b>Ginger Riley Munduwalawala</b> Marra, c. 1936– 2002  <i>The Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country</i> , 1993  Synthetic polymer paint on canvas	Brilliance and belonging	Level 2 East Gallery  Exhibition Theme/ Section:  <i>Resistance and Invention</i>
	<b>Naomi Hobson</b> Southern Kwangju / Umpila, born 1979  <i>Life on the River</i> , 2024  Digital Print	River rhythms	Level 2 Landing  Exhibition Theme/ Section:  <i>Resistance and Invention</i>
	<b>Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton</b> Pitjantjatjara, born 1945 and Pitjantjatjara, born 1950  <i>Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)</i> 2022  Synthetic polymer paint on linen	Country, care and kinship	Level 1 North Gallery  Exhibition Theme/ Section:  <i>Central and Western Deserts</i>



# To know, hear and understand

## Indigenous Knowledge

### Organising Ideas/Elements: Country/Place (Land)

- Interconnection of people, culture and place, Impacts of colonisation

### Organising Ideas/Elements: Culture (Kinship)

- Cultural landscape, cultural norms and values

### Organising Ideas/Elements: People (Communication, Deep Time)

- Custodial responsibility to safeguard cultural heritage

### Organising Ideas/Elements: People (Rights and Freedoms); Identity (Arts)

- Self-determination, resistance and advocacy, modes of and mediums for communication

**To know:** Artists create works using cultural and contemporary knowledge passed down over generations. Their art highlights long-standing community and cultural ways of knowing, understanding, and belonging. These artists invite us to think about time as an interconnected past, present, and future. Learning with this knowledge helps us understand how traditions are successfully transmitted across generations.

## Indigenous Focus

- **Continuity of culture and Country** with Brett Leavy
- **Possum skin stories** with Mandy Nicholson
- **Charting our place in the universe** with Brian Robinson
- **Land, life and belonging** with Ginger Riley Munduwalawala
- **River rhythms** with Naomi Hobson
- **Country, care and kinship** with Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

**To hear:** The case studies provide context on the artists' backgrounds, creative practices, cultural traditions, and the ancestral stories they share in and through their art. They highlight the enduring sense of belonging Indigenous peoples have with land and culture. The studies showcase why caring for ancestral homelands is important to these artists. By exploring these works, educators can help students appreciate the deep connections artists have with the Country and culture their people have sustained for thousands of years.

## Indigenous Topics

- **Legacy and longevity** of cultural practice (always was, always will be)
- **Innovation and ingenuity** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- **Creation and custodianship** of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems

**To understand:** The case studies and accompanying questions invite reflection, discussion, and appreciation for the artists' significant contributions to knowledge, culture and society. Participating in these conversations encourages examination of assumptions and perceptions. Through these, understandings of the enduring cultural practices, innovations, and custodianship of Indigenous knowledge exemplified by the artists can be developed.

## Continuity of culture and Country – Brett Leavy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have enduring connections to Country that are central to their identity and culture. Over 65,000 years, they have developed beliefs and values deeply intertwined with the land, sea and sky. We start learning about this connection through the work of Brett Leavy, an artist who introduces us to the Country where this exhibition stands.

**Curious question:** Which First Peoples are the Traditional Owners of the Country featured in this work, and why is it important for us to know this?

Given that the Potter Museum of Art is located on the unceded lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri people, the University of Melbourne specially commissioned Kooma artist Brett Leavy to create *Virtual Narm 1834* for the exhibition.

*"...below the bricks and mortar of the city is a connection for First Nations people... we want to say 'Hey this city is here, but don't forget First Nations were there before'."*

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— Brett Leavy (as cited in ACMI, 2020)

Leavy's digital animation *Virtual Narm 1834* pays tribute to the ancestors of the Wurundjeri people and re-imagines their lands and waters, now covered by the city of Melbourne and its suburbs. When we engage with this work, we are invited to consider – and perhaps reconsider – what we think we know about this Country.

**Curious question:** Which different names do you know for the city of Melbourne?

Inspired by Wurundjeri elders and research into colonial records, *Virtual Narm 1834* allows us to look back at Wurundjeri community and culture before British invasion and the arrival of colonists. To do this Leavy combines Indigenous knowledge and digital technology to help us see what life was like before colonisation.

Through stories showcased in *Virtual Narm 1834*, we can start to understand the enduring nature of connections between people, community, culture and Country and why these are so important for Aboriginal peoples.



**BRETT LEAVY** (Kooma, born 1965)  
*Virtual Narm 1834 2025*  
geospatial virtual heritage  
Commissioned by The University of Melbourne, 2023

**Curious question:** What changes and differences do we notice between Narm 1834 and today?

Stories showcased in *Virtual Narm 1834* explore relationships between Country, animals, community, culture and people. These stories are often linked to significant landmarks and the actions of ancestral beings. When we look at, listen to and talk about these stories, we can start to understand why connections between people, community, culture and Country are so important.

Immersed in its natural sounds, *Virtual Narm 1834* conjures and offers a glimpse into the beauty and spirit of Wurundjeri people on Country. As we consider *Virtual Narm 1834*, we are invited to see and think about the consequences of colonisation for the Traditional Owners and Country upon which the Potter Museum and this exhibition stands.

*“The work calls us to reflect, recognise and respect their present and possible futures. By harnessing the power of photorealistic animations, I aim to transport audiences into immersive and interactive virtual homelands of the Wurundjeri people as they were in 1834.”*

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— Brett Leavy (artists’ exhibition text, 2025)

By allowing us to see and reimagine pre-contact Country further for ourselves, *Virtual Narm 1834* depicts rich scenes of interaction and connection between people, culture, community and Country. We can come to see, hear and know what kinds of activities took place, as well as who and what was involved.

*“Through these digital realms, I aim to educate, inspire and foster a deeper appreciation for environmental stewardship and cultural resilience.”*

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— Brett Leavy (artists’ exhibition text, 2025)

The beliefs and values underlying what we see and hear in *Virtual Narm 1834* stand strong today. When we engage with this work, we can appreciate what connection to Country means for First Peoples and how Leavy visualises their rich relationship with the land.

*“...it’s about knowledge sharing. It’s about telling stories; digital storytelling is part of it. It’s about really immersing people in the culture. We want to gain better respect, understanding, knowledge about mob. And I just think this medium is the best...”*

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— Brett Leavy (as cited in ACMI, 2020)

## Possum skin stories - Mandy Nicholson

This exhibition brings together over 400 precious works of art and cultural objects from across the Australian continent and islands. While this is certainly a large and impressive number of works to bring together, you might be surprised to learn that very few examples of these survive from the early colonial period. This is due to efforts made at that time to suppress and deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to engage in their cultural traditions and practices.

*“These are precious works for the present-day traditional owners whose cultural heritage was largely destroyed.”*

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— Marcia Langton (2024, p. 10)

Despite efforts made to stop Aboriginal peoples from engaging in and practicing their culture, the stories, skills and knowledge for making cultural objects like possum skin cloaks continue today through the efforts of artists like Mandy Nicholson.

Wurundjeri-wilam artist Mandy Nicholson was born in Healesville and grew up in Melbourne/Narm on the lands of the Kulin Nation, she is an accomplished artist and academic who creates work to share knowledge about her culture, connection to Country, and the importance of storytelling.

Growing up, Nicholson learned traditional practices like possum skin cloaking from her Elders, who are the custodians of this cultural practice, and the knowledge and stories within in. Possum skin cloaks are highly valued cultural objects, traditionally worn in ceremonies and for warmth in southeast Australia

**Curious Question:** What do you think it means to be a custodian of knowledge?

Through her possum skin cloaks, Nicholson shares stories of Wurundjeri culture, her special connection to Country, and why storytelling remains so important for the care and continuity of culture and Country.

*“...culture is at the heart of what makes us human, and provides the foundation of our values, choices and relationships...and our ability to respect and care for each other.”*

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— UNESCO (Framework for Culture and Arts Education, 2024)

Nicholson’s cloak provides a powerful example of how Aboriginal artists honour their Elders’ and ancestors’ cultural traditions, carefully preserving and sharing stories and knowledge.

**Curious question:** Are there important senior people in your family that know and look after special knowledge and stories in your family? Are there special events or times across the year where they like to share these with you?

When Aboriginal artists make special works like this, they think very carefully about the process for developing designs for the cloaks. This is especially important for when artist’s designs contain cultural information, knowledge or stories. Their process would usually involve collaboration and conversations with senior people, such as Elders, in their community. This is because the Elders know the responsibilities that come with protecting and sharing cultural knowledge.

*“The First Peoples of south-eastern Australia have been making possum skin cloaks since time immemorial—today the practice is flourishing.”*

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— Joe Hinchliffe (2019)

Possum skin cloaks are very special cultural objects for Aboriginal people in southeast Australia. They were traditionally worn in ceremonies and to keep warm. In her possum skin cloaks, Nicholson explores ideas about identity, belonging, and why it is important to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next.





**MANDY NICHOLSON** (Wurundjeri-willam, born 1975)  
*Possum skin cloak*, 2012  
 possum skin, thread, charcoal  
 Commissioned by Melbourne Medical School in its 150th Anniversary Year  
 The University of Melbourne

**Curious question:** Looking closely at this possum skin cloak, how do you think the design is made and marked into the cloak?

*"Possum skin cloaks often have personal maps and stories illustrated on the inside. Traditionally, they are etched with mussel shells, possum jawbones or kangaroo incisor teeth. Today, cloak makers commonly scorch their designs into the pelts using burning tools."*

— National Gallery of Victoria (2025)

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Their process would usually involve collaboration and conversations with senior people, such as Elders, in their community. This is because the Elders know the responsibilities that come with protecting and sharing cultural knowledge.

**Curious question:** Are there important people or elders in your family that know and look after special knowledge and stories? Are there special events or times across the year where they like to share these with you?

The University of Melbourne is honoured to have received this possum skin cloak from Nicholson, which is worn to respect and celebrate First Nations peoples during major University events. Between official engagements and featuring in special displays like this exhibition, this cloak is held safely and with care, on permanent display within the University of Melbourne's Old Quad.

With this possum skin cloak, Nicholson highlights the importance of caring for connections between people, community, culture, and Country. Created especially for the University of Melbourne, Nicholson invites us to learn about the following stories and cultural knowledge:

*"The University of Melbourne asked me to create a cloak with traditional Wurundjeri designs, and which also reflected a student's life at University/ The use of traditional Wurundjeri symbology is respecting the fact that Parkville is on Wurundjeri Country and as a sign of respect to my ancestors."*

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— Mandy Nicholson (University of Melbourne, n.d)

Nicholson shares the story and meaning of the mark making within the design of this possum skin cloak. These meanings and stories are those that Nicholson has made available for the broad public to know, understand and share:

*"The swirl throughout the design depicts two things. Firstly, it represents the smoke of a welcoming fire (by way of a traditional Wurundjeri Welcoming Ceremony). This welcomes all students, from local areas and from all over the world."*

*"Secondly, the smoke swirls depict the learning and personal journeys of students and the connections that they make personally and professionally while at University. This can be on a small scale and on a larger scale where, once they have completed their courses, they share this knowledge with their own and the wider community."*

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— Mandy Nicholson (University of Melbourne, n.d)

Possum skin cloaks are both precious and important in the ways they represent the artist, their stories, and their culture. When learning with and about cloaks like Nicholson's, we have a special opportunity to demonstrate our respect for artists and their culture.

Sometimes, artists might have permission to include special cultural symbols or details in their designs, but they might not have permission to share everything about the meaning of these details in their creations, or the stories behind them.

This could be because some of the knowledge is meant only for certain people or groups, like knowledge that is just for men or just for women. It is important to understand and respect that there are some things that cannot be shared with everyone.

**Curious question:** What further reasons can you think of for why artists might need to keep some knowledge private? On occasions where artists are not able to answer our questions about their work, what could you say or do to show your understanding and respect for this?

When artists share their cultural knowledge with us, we have a responsibility to treat it with care and respect. If there are some things they cannot explain or share with us, we should understand that they are protecting their cultural traditions.

Instead of feeling disappointed, we can enjoy the artwork and wonder about the deeper meanings that we may not fully understand. It's like having a special secret that we get to appreciate, even if we don't know all the details.

*"In sharing, receiving, revealing and managing access [to cultural knowledge and stories], artists carefully define and relate knowledge and their identities."*

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— Fred Myers (2024, p. 19)

With this possum skin cloak, Nicholson shares with us the story and some meanings about the mark making and design. While she shares these stories and knowledge with us, there may be further details that we might be interested to know more about. However, we must appreciate and accept that artists may choose not to share and explain everything about their work with us.

By responding with care and understanding on these occasions, we are helping to honour and protect the artists' cultural knowledge. This is a great way of showing respect for their traditions and their decision to share what they can with us.

**Curious question:** When someone shares knowledge with us, what things can we do to take good care of what we now know?

Nicholson's beautiful possum skin cloak shows how Aboriginal artists care for and share stories of their cultural traditions today. They do so in ways that ensure important knowledge about making cloaks and other cultural practices are carefully looked after, and can continue to be practiced and shared into the future.

When we start recognising the connections that exist between Indigenous people, their culture and Country, we can start to think about ourselves as part of a bigger picture too. The sharing and hearing of stories plays an important role for building our understandings of how and where we are connected, and the importance of taking care and looking after ourselves and each other.



## Charting our place in the universe – Brian Robinson

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have looked to the stars, planets, and celestial bodies to guide their way of life and understand their place in the universe. Their detailed knowledge systems helped them navigate long distances, follow the patterns of changing seasons, and understand the connections between all things on land and sea.

Maluyligal / Wuthathi / Dayak man Brian Robinson is a contemporary Torres Strait Islander artist who creates detailed works of art mapping ancient celestial connections. His intricate linocut prints allow us to see Indigenous astronomical knowledge and learn about its enduring ties to land, belonging, and the concept of time.

*“...Torres Strait Islander culture is closely linked to the stars. They inform Islander laws, customs and practices that are recorded and handed down in stories, song, dance, ceremony and artefacts...”*

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— Brian Robinson (2016)

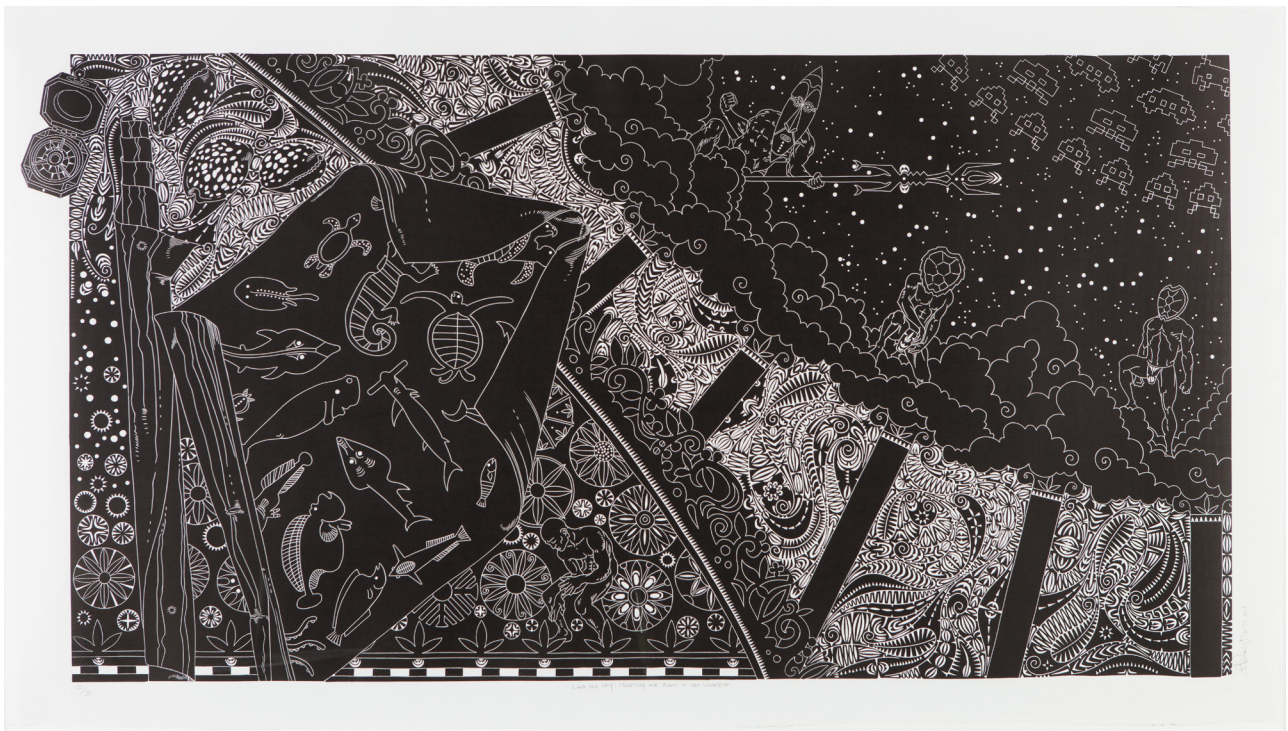
Robinson was born on Waiben (Thursday Island) in the Torres Strait, where he grew up immersed in the rich cultural traditions of his people. From a young age, he learned the important role the stars played in Torres Strait Islander culture, and how celestial observations inform laws, customs, and practices that are recorded and handed down through stories, songs, dances, ceremonies, and artefacts across generations (Hamacher, 2013).

*“...Islander astronomy contains practical information about the natural world, which is essential for survival and cultural continuity. Islander culture is linked to Tagai – the creation deity represented by stars spanning the southern sky...”*

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— Brian Robinson (2016)

Robinson’s *Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe*, fuses these ancient stargazing traditions with modern printmaking techniques. The linocut medium is especially popular and prevalent in the Torres Strait, where some artists have built upon the ancient tradition of woodcarving to develop innovative and skilful techniques in linoleum cutting and printmaking on paper.



**BRIAN ROBINSON** (Wuthathi / Maluyligal / Dayak, born 1973)  
*Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe*, 2016  
 linocut on paper  
 Courtesy of the artist and Mossenson Galleries

*"...Contemporary Indigenous artists have developed modern styles based on customary practices. The linocut medium...enables the artist to add unparalleled detail of any size ..."*

— Duane Hamacher (2024, p. 327)

Robinson's linocuts are rich with imagery from the natural world, celestial observations, and spiritual beliefs that highlight the sense of belonging and interconnectedness at the heart of Torres Strait Islander astronomical traditions.

**Curious question:** Take a moment to explore the imagery within this linocut. Can you identify any familiar animals, plants, or symbols depicted in Robinson's linocut print?

Creatures like turtles, dugongs, fish and birds, as well as depictions of plant life like trees and bushes, relate to how Torres Strait Islander peoples use star observations to understand behaviours, life cycles, and seasonal changes.

*"...I've been a stargazer for many years...I look up and I connect the dots. As a child, I learnt about what the stars meant in my community, to navigation, hunting, planting. These same constellations are described in contemporary astronomy and the antique zodiac; in black and white cultures from opposite ends of the earth. It's an amazing thing to contemplate."*

— Brian Robinson (cited in Hart, 2019)

*Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe* demonstrates how Robinson works with the linocut technique to visually map detail and stories of his people's interconnected land, sea, and sky knowledge system.

**Curious question:** What do you notice about Robinson's design – the placement of different images and how they interact with each other? What do you think they represent or symbolise in relation to each other, and about Torres Strait Islander astronomical knowledge and connections with land and sea?

*"...The art and practice of astronomy is an ancient one to the seafaring cultures of the Torres Strait in traditional times, the old men who 'watch the stars' trained their whole lives to hone their skills..."*

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— Duane Hamacher (2024)

Islander astronomy provides practical knowledge about the natural world, which is crucial for survival and preserving cultural traditions (Hamacher, 2013). Torres Strait Islander culture is broadly and deeply connected to the creation deity Tagai. In *Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe*, Robinson depicts the creation deity Tagai in the upper right-hand corner of his print.

*"Tagai can be seen in the southern skies, standing in a canoe in the Milky Way. He is standing on his canoe, formed by the stars of Scorpius. His left hand is the Southern Cross holding a spear. His right hand is a group of stars in the constellation Corvus, holding a fruit called Eugina..."*

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— Duane Hamacher (2013)

By combining customary Torres Strait Islander artistic practices with contemporary mediums, Robinson's innovative work highlights the enduring relevance of Indigenous astronomical knowledge in today's world.

**Curious question:** How might observations of the stars, moon, and other celestial bodies help inform and guide people's relationships and ways of engaging, living and learning with land and sea?

Robinson's work beautifully illustrates how Torres Strait Islander peoples have long used the movements of constellations like Tagai to navigate, mark seasons, and understand patterns of weather, and the behaviours and life cycles of animals and plants. Through his work, Robinson allows us to see and appreciate the long-standing relationship and connection his people share with land, sea, and skies.

*"Islander astronomical knowledge is deep, and we are currently trying to better understand it for the benefit of future Islander generations..."*

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— Duane Hamacher (2013)

**Curious question:** What role do you think artists like Robinson play in keeping Indigenous astronomical knowledge alive for future generations?

Indigenous astronomical knowledge, cultivated over many thousands of years, showcases the remarkable sophistication and depth of understanding about the cosmos held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By engaging with Robinson's work, we can gain a greater appreciation for this deep, enduring and complex knowledge system that has been developed and shared over millennia.

*Land Sea Sky: Charting our place in the universe* invites us to contemplate our own place in the universe and to see the profound connections between land, belonging, and time. As we continue to take up opportunities to learn with and about Indigenous astronomical knowledge and wisdom, we can build our understanding for why it is so important to ensure this knowledge is respected and protected for generations to come.

## Brilliance and belonging – Ginger Riley Munduwalawala

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, connections to land, belonging, and time are deeply intertwined with ancestral stories, spiritual beliefs, and lived experiences that stretch back 65,000 years and continue today.

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala's luminous paintings lead us on journeys into stories of his homeland in South East Arnhem Land. These works of art allow us to see his unique way of capturing the deep connections between his people, their culture, the land, and the ancient knowledge that echoes through it.

*"Growing up, Riley was educated in the immemorial ways of Aboriginal life, through ceremony and oral storytelling."*

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— Tristan Harwood (2024)

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala (c. 2002) was born around 1936 near Ngukurr in the coastal salt-water Country of the Marra people of south-eastern Arnhem Land. In the 1950s, Riley travelled across the Northern Territory, working as a labourer and stockman. This work brought him to Aranda country around Ntaria/Hermannsburg, where he encountered renowned Western Aranda watercolourist Albert Namatjira.

Namatjira inspired new generations of Aboriginal people both at Ntaria/Hermannsburg and far beyond to represent their identity in the land and to see themselves as artists. Seeing Country and culture portrayed so vividly and powerfully by Namatjira left a deep impression on a young Riley.

*"I saw Namatjira painting his colour country, admired the nice paint, and saw my colour country."*

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— Ginger Riley Munduwalawala (as cited in Ryan, 2001)



Although he led an adventurous and independent life, the paintings Riley created from the mid to late 1980s reveal the deep sense of connection and belonging he shared with his ancestral home, especially the lands and coastal saltwater Country featured in *Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country*.

It was during his time in Ngukurr (place of many stories) that Riley started creating new ways to paint his homelands, bringing the inspiration from Albert Namatjira to life through his own use of brilliant colours. Riley soon became renowned for his vibrant portrayals of the ancestral beings, special sites and stories of his mother Country.

*"...Always mother country – I see my country when I wake up, think what I'm going to do – sometimes one colour, sometimes three. Same country – coming to one place, Limmen Bight – blue down, green, red, building up colours, keep building up country..."*

— Ginger Riley Munduwalawala (as cited in exhibition text, 2025)



**GINGER RILEY MUNDUWALAWALA** (Marra, c. 1936– 2002)  
*The Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country*, 1993  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Private collection, Melbourne

**Curious question:** Take a moment to explore the big picture and detail within Riley's painting. Can you identify any familiar animals, plants, and symbols? What do some of the lines and shapes remind you of?

We often see very special images and symbols in Riley's paintings that are from his culture and Country. In *Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country*, Riley depicts Garimala, the powerful snake ancestor and creator of Riley's Country, including the Four Archers (Barrkuwirriji), located 50 kilometres inland from the mouth of Limmen Bight River. The Four Archers rock formations are a site of special significance in the creation stories for the Marra people, understood as the centre of the earth and where all things start and finish (Ryan, 2001).

*"Although referred to as if it were a single being, Garimala is understood to be two, and often takes this form in Riley's work."*

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— Excerpt from exhibition text, *The Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country* (2025)

**Curious question:** Can you see where Garimala features in Riley's painting? What do you think Garimala is doing?

Apart from picturing important sites like the Four Archers rock formation and the winding Limmen Bight River, another figure appears many times in Riley's paintings, this being Ngak Ngak, a powerful, white-breasted sea eagle guardian protecting Riley's ancestral homelands. In *Limmen Bight River – My Mother Country* Riley shows Garimala redoubled in an arch over Ngak Ngak.

The shapes and lines of the river, hills, and contours of the land echo Garimala's snake like form across the canvas, under Ngak Ngak's watchful eye. The wedge shapes and parallel lines also reference body painting traditions of Riley's people and culture, which were painted on people's skin using pigments from the earth itself.

*"Riley's extraordinary creativity allowed him to express his vision of physical geography, creation knowledge and ancestral sites."*

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— Wayne Tunncliffe - Art Gallery of New South Wales (2014)

Riley depicts Country from a unique perspective – from high above, as if viewing it from the clouds. By adopting a flattened aerial perspective that combines spiritual and geographic views, he paints in ways that allow us to see the inseparable and expansive nature of Indigenous knowledge and connections to Country.

With his vibrant, glowing paintings, Riley invites us to see and appreciate his deep sense of identity and belonging with his Country. He forged his own unique way of painting the bigger picture and fine detail of stories from his mother Country, over which he was granted Native Title and custodianship in the year 2000 through his role as *djungkayi* (caretaker).

*“Riley’s vibrant depictions of country challenged and changed Australia’s preconceived notion of Indigenous art, and the landscape painting tradition... Ginger is the boss of colour.”*

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— David Larwill (Castlemaine Art Museum, 2015)

Riley’s paintings highlight the resilience of Aboriginal cultures and the importance of maintaining connections to Country across generations. Through paintings that vibrantly speak of longstanding living connections, he reminds us that when people nurture and care for Country, Country stays strong and healthy. And when Country thrives, it can continue to nurture and sustain people, just as it has for generations.

## River rhythms – Naomi Hobson

For Southern Kaantju/Umpila artist Naomi Hobson, the rhythms of daily life intertwine with the ebb and flow of Wukaanta, the Coen River, which forms the western boundary of the town of Coen on the Cape York Peninsula. Born and raised on the riverbanks of Coen, Hobson’s photography offers an intimate glimpse into Aboriginal river cultures and ecologies of her community.

*“The river has fed us for thousands of years – we have lain on the sandbanks and looked at the same star constellations as our ancestors.”*

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— Naomi Hobson (2015)

For generations, the Coen River has been a life-sustaining force, providing food, transport, and spiritual sustenance. Hobson’s vibrant images capture the long-standing relationships that exist between Country, culture and identity, and assert a strong, joyful and thriving vision of her Southern Kaantju/Umpila community.

In sharing her deep affinity, care for and connection with the river, Hobson’s photographs depict everyday scenes that invite us to see the ever-present and nurturing role the river plays in her community. Through her lens, she captures gentle, connected, playful, and caring encounters that are the driving force of her culture.

*“These photographs represent a true picture of our way of life...intimate pictures of river life and my connection to Country.”*

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— Naomi Hobson (2024)

**Curious question:** Based on Hobson’s descriptions, what roles and meanings does the river seem to play in her community’s way of life?





**NAOMI HOBSON** (Southern Kwangju / Umpila, born 1979)  
*Butterfly from Life on the river series, 2024*  
digital print  
Collection of the artist, Coen

Taken during the wet season, these photographs portray a vibrant river culture and the relationships between the people and Wukaanta – the Coen River.

Naomi's daughter Shonae Hobson explains how Naomi's photographs for her *Life on the river* series work together to show the story cycle that Wukaanta provides, this being a story that is shared and absorbed across generations (Hobson, 2024).

In her work *Butterfly from Life on the river series, 2024*, Hobson has photographed a young woman with a brown spotted butterfly – *paal paal* – resting gently on her fingertips, where we see its delicate wings on full display.

**Curious question:** What words would you use to describe what's happening in this photograph? What verbs (words for actions/doing) and adjectives (words for describing qualities/attributes) come to mind? Which words could you use to help explain the connections you sense and see between the young woman and the butterfly?

*"Butterflies are everywhere at this time... it's their time of the year because the rain and heat mixed together breaks the environment down creating exude from the wet wood, fruits and flowers, a condition butterflies and so many other bugs and insects love."*

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— Naomi Hobson (2024)



**Curious question:** Have you ever had a butterfly or bird land on or near you? If so, what thoughts and feelings did you have as that little creature shared your space?

Visually delicate and beautiful in nature, Hobson's photographs say something powerful about the strength of this, and for how attuned her people are to the rhythm, presence and behaviour of all elements of Country, culture and community.

*"My aboriginality is what grounds me. Through art, I get to freely express all of this. I can share my creative freedoms in a contemporary way."*

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— Naomi Hobson (2025)

With affection and deep insight, Hobson shares the connections that Aboriginal communities like Coen share and enjoy with their ancestral rivers and lands. While gentle and playful, Hobson's *Butterfly* portrays Indigenous identity and belonging in a visually powerful way.

**Curious question:** How might Hobson's photographs depicting everyday scenes help counter incorrect and stereotypical portrayals of Aboriginal people?

Her photographs play an important role in ensuring positive, genuine and contemporary Indigenous voices, stories, identities and perspectives are seen, heard and celebrated. *Butterfly from the Life on the river series, 2024* is a powerful reminder of the enduring, sustaining forces that create the special moments Hobson portrays.

*"Living on the river is part of our daily existence and defines who we are as people from Coen, how we look and how we live."*

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— Naomi Hobson (2025)

These special moments and encounters are made possible by the seasonal cycles and life patterns of the river. Hobson's photographs show how these are known and nurtured through the connections and understandings that exist between life, culture, and community.

**Curious question:** Think about a special natural place near you - it could be big like a beach, river, or forest, or smaller like a park, a certain tree, plant, bird, or animal that visits. What kinds of changes do you notice happening there through the different seasons? What thoughts do you have about what events or cycles create those changes?

Through her *Life on the river series, 2024*, Hobson invites us to see and appreciate the strong connections that Aboriginal peoples share with their ancestral lands and rivers, and the deep wisdom and knowing that underpins these connections, developed over thousands of years.

**Curious question:** What messages might seasonal changes be telling us about how to best take care of and protect something that is special? How could paying close attention to the life cycles and patterns that we notice help us understand the best ways to respect and care for it? Where could you go or who might you ask to find out more?

Just as we would carefully read and respect the powerful force of a river's flow, rhythms, and rapids, we should bring the same care and attention to every opportunity that helps us learn how to be respectful in our actions and responsive in our thinking and understanding of the world around us.

## Country, care and kinship – Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

When we learn about culture and Country, it is important to understand that they are interconnected. They include relationships between people, culture, land, sky, water and more that stretch over long periods of time and that continue to evolve in ongoing cycles. Culture and Country connect in ways that are much bigger, broader, and deeper than any one of the parts we might think or learn about within them.

*"Art created by Australia's First People is embedded in Country across Australia...The energy in these artists' work comes from a deep connection to Country and culture."*

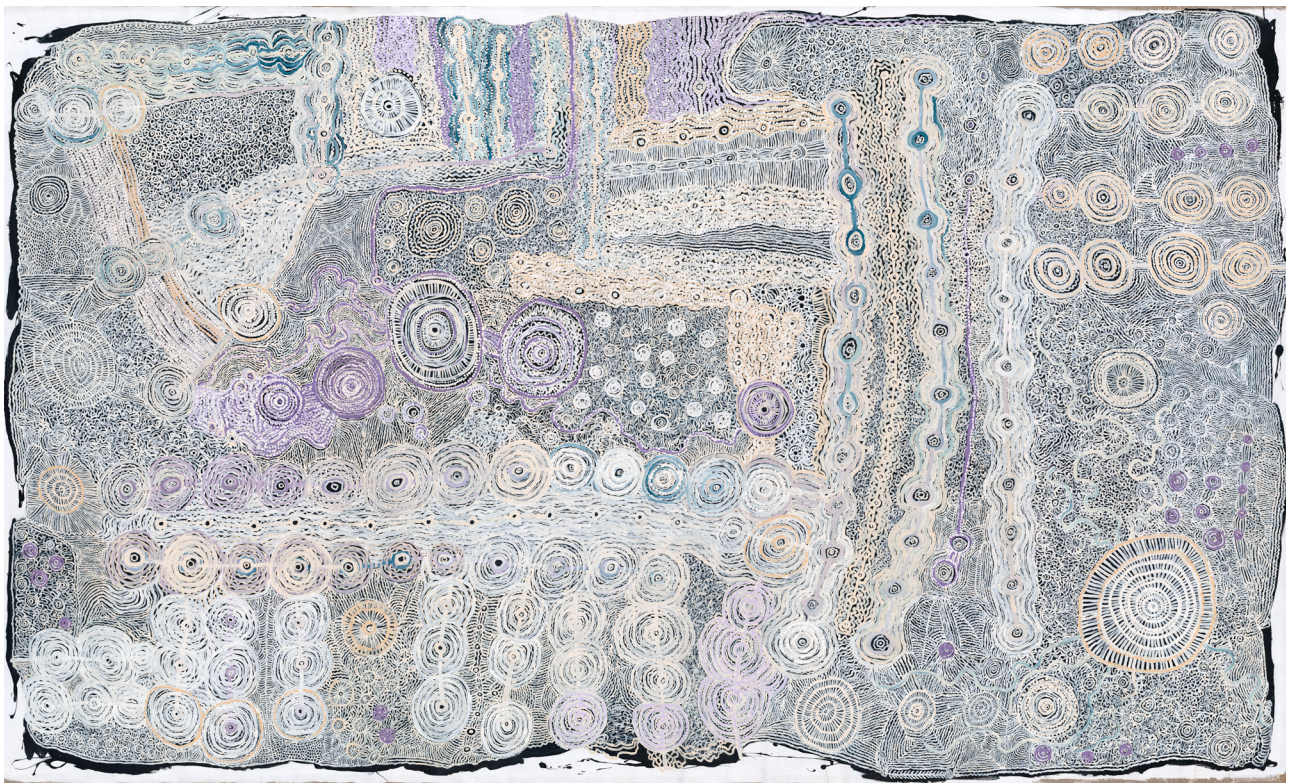
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— Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 185)

When learning with *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, remember that culture and Country are interconnected by the same bonds of care we have seen, heard and discussed within and across the works of art, stories and knowledge explored here.

We round out our learning about continuity of culture with this magnificent painting by Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton, an aunty and niece duo of *ngangkari* (traditional Anangu healers) from the Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands, and who live in Indulkana community.

**Curious question:** Take a close look at this vast painting. What special or interesting details stand out for you? What thoughts, feelings or impressions do you have?



**BETTY MUFFLER** (Pitjantjatjara, born 1945)  
**MARINGKA BURTON** (Pitjantjatjara, born 1950)

*Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)*, 2022  
 synthetic polymer paint on linen

The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Commissioned by The University of Melbourne, 2022

Purchased with funds donated by Peter and Ruth McMullin, 2023

Their collaborative painting *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* offers a window into their role as custodians of Indigenous knowledge and the powers they possess to heal people and Country. These powers, their Country and their culture are an essential part of who Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton are.

**Curious question:** What do you think it means to be a 'custodian of knowledge'? What roles and responsibilities might come with being a custodian?

Betty Muffler was born in 1945 at Yalungu near Watarru. In painting her birthplace, she includes references to her own *tjukurpa* creation stories of the emu. Maringka Burton was born in 1950 near the Anumara *tjukurpa* (Caterpillar Dreaming) site south of Irrunytju in Western Australia.

*"Tjukurpa (pronounced 'chook-orr-pa') is the foundation of Anangu Culture. In the same way that a house needs to stand on strong foundations, our way of life stands on Tjukurpa."*

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— *Tjukurpa katutja ngarantja (Tjukurpa above all else, Parks Australia, 2025)*



Together, Betty and Maringka paint the Country where they were born and belong, blending sacred *tjukurpa* (creation stories) from their respective birth countries. This painting was commissioned especially for this exhibition to celebrate the strength of Anangu women's art, law and cultural continuity.

**Curious question:** What does it mean when a work of art is commissioned? How might commissioning works made by Indigenous artists help support the sharing and continuity of culture?

Their enormous collaborative painting *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* makes a powerful statement about the strength of Indigenous knowledge and the importance of keeping Country strong and healthy and culture alive. Through their paintings, Betty and Maringka allow us to see into and learn a little about the mysterious world and practices of *ngangkari* healers.

*"We have done so much work together as healers. We both started off painting on our own, each of us painting the Country where we were born and belong. These places are an essential part of each of us."*

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— Maringka Burton (as cited in Cobby Ekkerman, 2020)

*Ngangkari* skills are passed down through generations, and each healer has a different specialisation. Each *ngangkari* has their own unique way of healing. Some can heal people's injuries or illnesses, while others use their powers to help heal and care for the land itself. Betty and Maringka have worked together and alone as *ngangkari* for decades, collaborating on epic paintings in recent years about this work.

*"Betty and Maringka's works are massive in scale. There is no way you could hand them on the walls of a domestic home. Yet, if you think about the amount of land they care for, works such as Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country) are tiny."*

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— Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 75)

An important story and message in Betty and Maringka's painting and *ngangkari* practice is how important it is to care for each other, the land, and their Country. Their paintings are important for advocating for ongoing care and healing after the British military tested nuclear weapons on the Anangu lands at Maralinga and Emu Field between 1955-1963.

The nuclear testing had terrible impacts – the Anangu people were never asked for permission and their presence on the lands was ignored. With continued efforts to heal and revive the land since, it will still take a very long time to fully repair all the damage.

By using their ancestral knowledge to keep people, culture and Country healthy and strong, *ngangkari* play a very important role in Anangu communities today, and as they have always done.

*"Some of my favourite artists are undercover truth-tellers"*

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— Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 75)

Through their healing work, practiced in paint and as *ngangkari*, Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton bring truth and power to heal people and care for culture and Country that has been passed down unbroken from one generation to the next.

**Curious Question:** How might engaging with Betty and Maringka's meaningful artwork help build greater understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures and their enduring connections to Country?

*Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* reminds us that we need to listen, learn from, and stand alongside Aboriginal peoples on their ongoing journey for greater rights, self-determination, and healing.

*"These artists are philosopher kings and queens who bravely and boldly call out injustice, racism and convention in clever, caring, creative and hopeful ways."*

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— Judith Ryan (2024, p. 30)

*65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* celebrates the incredible resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over many, many thousands of years. The works of art tell powerful stories about the challenges and injustices people, culture and Country have faced, as well as the enduring strength, hope, and healing power that allows culture to be passed down and continue, always.

We hope learning about Betty and Maringka's work inspires you to further your learning and appreciate the resilient, clever, and caring spirit of Aboriginal Peoples. There is so much more to discover about their powerful abilities to heal, revive, and care for their communities and ancestral lands.

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