POTTER MUSEUM OF ART

65 000 YEARS

A Short History of *Australian* Art

RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS
GRADE 9-10 CASE STUDIES

Ngarrngga
to know, to hear, to understand

University of Melbourne Museums and Collections

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art

RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS
GRADE 9-10 CASE STUDIES

Acknowledgement of Country

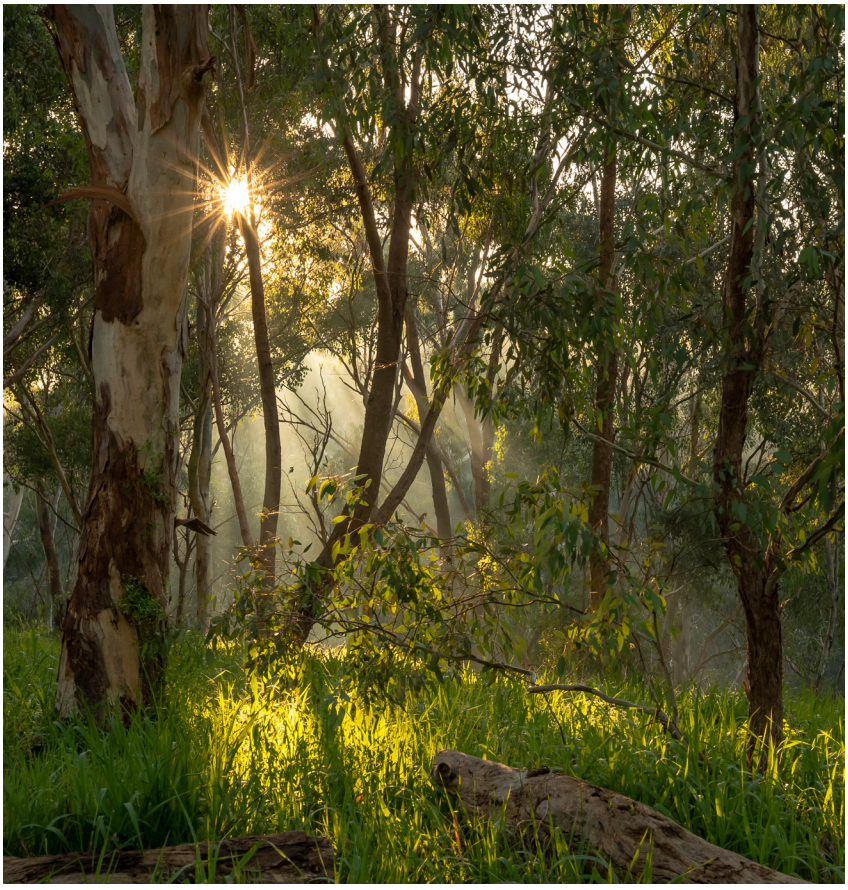
These education resources have been developed on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung peoples.

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 art.

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 Some works in the exhibition contain derogatory images or titles with outdated terminology.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 advise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that 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

ngarrngga.org/

Ngarrngga Logo Design: Marcus Lee Design

Design: Emily Gittins [Gumbaynggirr /Barkindji]

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

POTTER MUSEUM OF ART

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the Grades 9/10 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 9 and 10 students and educators. By exploring how artists use digital media, paint and sculpture to bring dominant narratives into conversation with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, this resource provides context for learning through analysis, 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)

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.

Rights and Freedoms

Through six in-depth case studies, you will examine powerful artworks by Indigenous artists that give voice to experiences of colonisation, segregation, the Stolen Generations, land rights movements, and ongoing activism for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. Each case study highlights the significance of the featured work, while also connecting it to the broader themes and case studies explored in the resource.

The case studies provide context around each artist's background, their creative and cultural practice, and the stories and truths shared through their works to assert rights, freedoms and self-determination for their communities.

Curious questions are woven across the case studies, inviting students to contemplate artists' motivations, symbolic meanings within the works, and their own responses to these. These can be used as a basis to make and discuss meaning, and to inspire further research into related historical events and social movements foregrounded in the case studies.

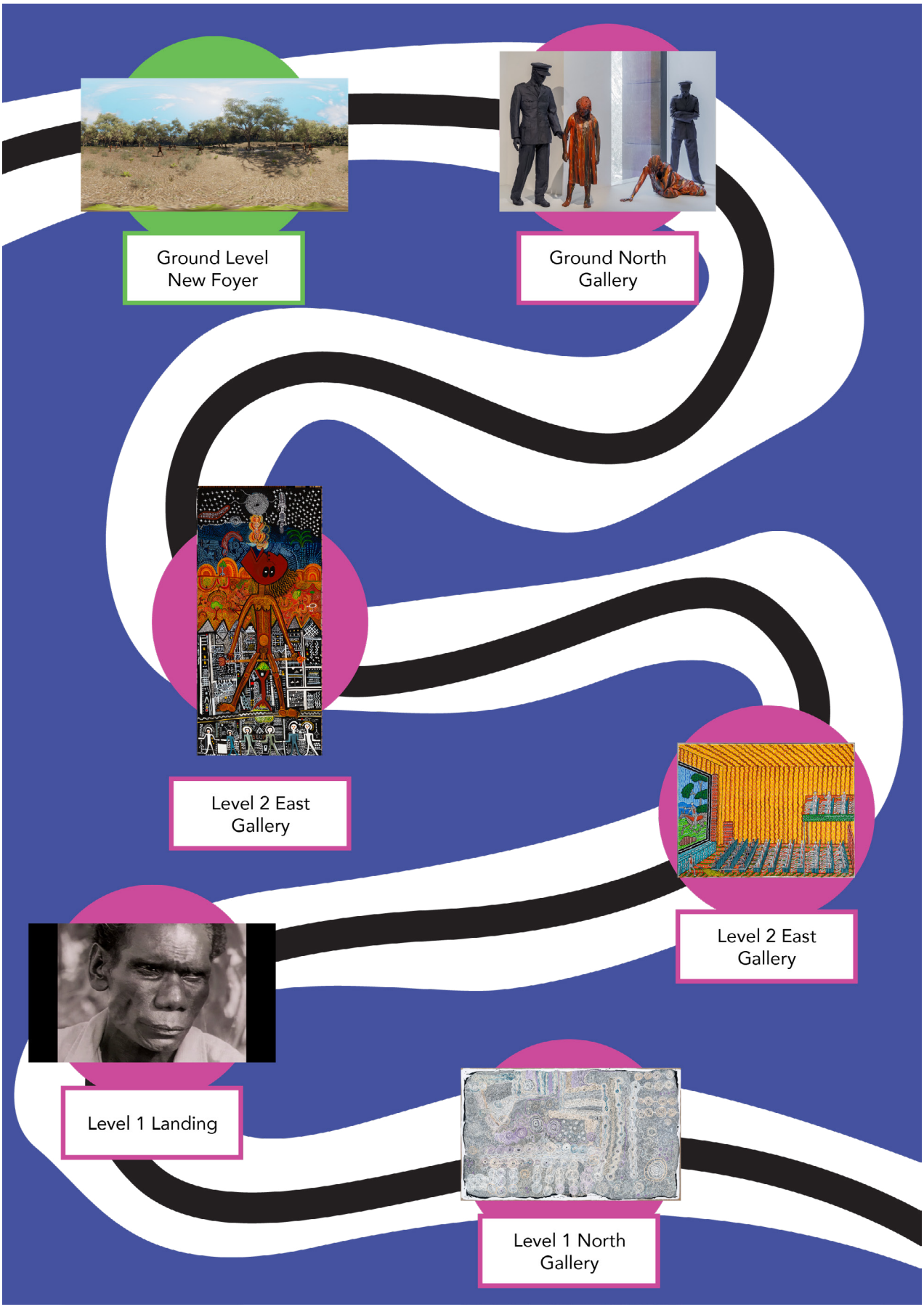
In coming to know, hear and understand with these case studies, we invite students and educators to:

- Develop and deepen awareness of Indigenous artists' experiences, values and worldviews.
- Recognise how art making can be an act of resistance and tool for social change.
- Critically examine whose voices and truths are represented in historical accounts, and the reasons, purpose and outcomes of this.
- Build appreciation for Indigenous resilience, ingenuity and ongoing struggles for self-determination.
- Practice skills in analysing visual language and metaphors within artworks to make and share meaning.

This resource creates space to scrutinise how truths are constructed from particular cultural viewpoints and for particular purposes and agendas. Through respectful engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems, perspectives and stories, this resource aims to cultivate balanced viewpoints, empathy, and awareness for Indigenous rights and freedoms.

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.

Exhibition tour map



Key information – Artists and featured works			
Content considerations	**Artwork Detail**	**Case study storylines**	**Location in gallery**
Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture. **Sensory and space:** employs digital visual technologies and emits sound.	**Brett Leavy** Kooma, born 1965 *Virtual Narrm 1834*, 2025 Geospatial virtual heritage digital media installation	Contemplating colonisation	Ground Level New Foyer Exhibition Theme/ Section: *Welcome to 65,000 Years: A short History of Australian Art*
Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.	**Lin Onus** Yorta Yorta, 1948–1996 *Taking the children away*, 1992 Fibreglass, pigment Dimensions variable	Stolen Generations	Ground North Gallery Exhibition Theme/ Section: *First Encounters and Responses*
Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.	**Trevor Nickolls** Ngarrindjeri, 1949–2012 *Tightrope walking*, 1979-80 Synthetic polymer paint on canvas	Political activism	Level 2 East Gallery Exhibition Theme/ Section: *Resistance and Invention*
Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.	**Robert Campbell JNR** Ngaku, 1944–1993 *Roped-off at the pictures II*, 1986 Synthetic polymer paint on canvas	Segregation at the cinema	Level 1 East Gallery Exhibition Theme/ Section: *Resistance and Invention*

Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture. **Sensory and space:** employs digital visual technologies and emits sound.	**Ishmael Marika** *Rirratjiŋu clan, Dhuwa moiety, born 1991* *Waŋa Wataŋumirri Dharuk*, 2013 Single-channel digital video	Land Rights and Self Determination	Level 1 Landing Exhibition Theme/ Section: *Resistance and Invention*
Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.	**Betty Muffler** Pitjantjatjara, born 1945 and **Maringka Burton** Pitjantjatjara, born 1950 *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)*, 2022 Synthetic polymer paint on linen	Reviving Country	Level 1 North Gallery Exhibition Theme/ Section: *Central and Western Deserts*

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: People (Communication, Rights and Freedoms)

- Resistance and activism; Custodial responsibility to safeguard cultural heritage

Organising ideas/elements: People (Rights and Freedoms); Identity (Arts)

- Self-determination and advocacy; Art as protest

To know: The case studies highlight Indigenous knowledge and perspectives on the impacts of colonisation, including displacement, segregation, the Stolen Generations, and destruction of Aboriginal lands. Indigenous knowledge shared and cultural expressions embedded within works of art attest to these artists' enduring connections to Country and unbroken cultural lineages. Through engaging with this knowledge, we gain insight into Aboriginal people's resilience, resistance, self-determination efforts, and activism to maintain, safeguard and revive culture in the face of oppression.

Indigenous Focus

- ***Contemplating colonisation*** with Brett Leavy
- ***Stolen Generations*** with Lin Onus
- ***Political activism*** with Trevor Nickolls
- ***Segregation at the cinema*** with Robert Campbell JNR
- ***Land rights and self-determination*** with Ishmael Maringka
- ***Reviving Country*** with Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

To hear: The case studies provide context around the artists' backgrounds, creative and cultural practices, and the ancestral stories and truths they uphold and share through their art. Their curatorial focus highlights how these artists use their work as a vehicle for advocacy, resistance, and to assert their rights and freedoms. Their works of art invite us to see, hear and consider how artists challenge dominant colonial narratives by giving voice to experiences of segregation, displacement, land rights movements, and intergenerational trauma.

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 open dialogue about and between works, highlighting the significant contributions these artists make to knowledge, society, culture and politics. Engaging in and with this dialogue presents powerful opportunities to reflect upon our assumptions and perceptions. It also allows us to challenge, reimagine, and deepen our understanding and appreciation of the enduring cultural practices, innovation, and custodianship of Indigenous knowledge demonstrated by these artists.

Rights and Freedoms: Case Studies

Contemplating colonisation – Brett Leavy

This exhibition brings together over 400 precious works of art and cultural objects from across the continent and its islands.

"65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art examines the rise to prominence of First Peoples' art across Australia in the face of a brutal history of colonisation and proclaims the importance of Indigenous knowledge and agency."

— Charlotte Day (2024, p. 3)

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

"…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."

— Brett Leavy (as cited in ACMI, 2020)

This immersive virtual animation digitally re-imagines Narrm prior to colonisation. Given that the Potter Museum of Art is located on the unceded lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, the University of Melbourne specially commissioned Kooma artist Brett Leavy to create *Virtual Narrm 1834*.

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

Colonisation significantly impacted on Aboriginal people. The establishment of British laws, governance, and social structures from 1788 disregarded and sought to suppress existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and knowledge systems.

"The British claim to the Australian continent, that disregarded First Nations peoples' sovereignty and their custodianship of country for thousands of years, set in train brutal conflicts that unfolded for more than 100 years."

— The Australian Wars (Culture is Life, 2022)

Diseases, violence, and policies introduced through colonisation severely impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, leading to significant population loss, cultural disruption, and ongoing intergenerational trauma.

Wurundjeri elder Aunty Diane Kerr describes the arrival of colonists as a time where the Wurundjeri were disempowered and effectively became refugees in their own Country (Kerr, 2023). Traditional ways of life, passed down for thousands of years, were significantly affected and in some cases destroyed.

"Largely, pre-colonisation is a distant memory, a place and space to which we can never return. The psychological and physical landscapes have changed so dramatically that humans and their nature have, in turn, changed too."

— Coby Edgar (2024, p. 66)

Through our engagement with and conversations about *Virtual Narrm 1834*, Leavy invites us to contemplate past, present, and future. In this work, Leavy brings Indigenous knowledge and digital technology together, allowing us to see and consider a time where Wurundjeri were free to live life unimpeded by colonisation.

Inspired by current Wurundjeri elders, as well as research into colonial paintings, photographs and records, *Virtual Narrm 1834* allows us to look back into Country, community and culture before the arrival of colonists. Through this work Leavy re-imagines and shares with us his vision of their lands and waters as they once were, and which are now covered by the city of Melbourne.

Curious question: What similarities and differences do we notice between Narrm 1834 and Narrm today?

> *"I strive to bridge the past and the present, using modern computer graphics to honour 65,000 years of Indigenous knowledge. Virtual Narrm 1834 is a celebration of Wurundjeri pre-contact past that has been developed in consultation with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people…"*
>
> *— Brett Leavy (excerpt from exhibition text, Virtual Narrm 1834 (2025)*

As we contemplate *Virtual Narrm 1834*, we are invited to reconsider and reimagine what we know, hear and understand about this Country, which was never ceded, and always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

> *"First Nations Australians demonstrate resilience in the maintenance, practice and revitalisation of culture despite the many historic and enduring impacts of colonisation, and continue to celebrate and share the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures"*
>
> *— Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] (2022, p. 4)*

Immersed in natural scenes and sounds, *Virtual Narrm 1834* highlights the beauty and spirit of the Wurundjeri people living on their traditional land. *Virtual Narrm 1834* invites us to think about how Wurundjeri people's ongoing care and values are part of their culture and their connection to Country.

"I aim to transport audiences into immersive and interactive virtual homelands of the Wurundjeri people as they were in 1834…The work calls us to reflect, recognise and respect their present and possible futures.

Through these digital realms, I aim to educate, inspire and foster a deeper appreciation for the environmental stewardship and cultural resilience that are hallmarks of Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung society"

— Brett Leavy (excerpt from exhibition text, Virtual Narrm 1834 (2025)

When we engage with this work, we can come to see, hear and appreciate these attributes of custodianship, and how they underpin Wurundjeri people's enduring connection with Country. Despite the impact of colonisation, the beliefs and values that underlie the knowledge shared in *Virtual Narrm 1834* stand strong and true today.

Stolen Generations – Lin Onus

In *Taking the Children Away*, Lin Onus confronts and presents us with his three-dimensional representation of a deeply painful chapter in Australia's history: the Stolen Generations.

Curious contemplation: Take a good moment to sit with this work. Part of our mature and considered engagement with this subject means we need to take time to pay careful attention to how we are feeling. We need to be mindful of how strong emotions can be difficult to regulate and can give rise to equally distressing reactions and responses.

It's natural for this sculptural installation to elicit powerful emotions within us, such as sadness, anger, disbelief, injustice, and more. It may be difficult to articulate how and what this work makes you feel, and why.

Curious contemplation: Once we've taken a moment to think about how we're feeling, let's take a further moment to consider what we might want to share, and how we feel that will help us, individually and collectively, come to know, hear and appreciate the meaning and understandings we can make with this work.

From 1850 through to the 1970s, a range of state-based laws were introduced that forced Aboriginal people to move from their Country to live on missions, reserves, or stations. Despite changes in how these laws were worded and presented over time, they were connected and driven by the same overarching colonial motive and perception; this being that Aboriginal people needed 'protection'.

"Many Aboriginal families have experienced intergenerational trauma, due to the trauma experienced by their parents or grandparents who lived through this period of history."

— Michael O'Laughlin (Australian Museum, 2020)

Collectively, these laws provided the legal framework and justification for the forcible removal of Aboriginal people from their homes and lands. Between 1910 and the 1970s, these laws saw many Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families, creating a tragic chapter in our history known as the Stolen Generations.

"During the peak enforcement of these laws, it is estimated that between 1 in 10 and 1 in 3 Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities."

— Australian Museum (2020); Australians Together (2025)

Despite a National Inquiry and a further Royal Commission (1991) into the immediate and related prevailing impacts of forcible removal, the effects of these laws, policies and practices continue to have a profound impact on Aboriginal people today.

"Many families were broken up and sadly there are significant numbers of people today who are aware of their Aboriginality but do not know where they were from as any records were either lost or simply not kept in the first place."

— Excerpt from exhibition text, Took the Children Away (2025)

Curious contemplation and question: Let's start sharing our thoughts about this work in a way that shows our respect and care for each other. What words and questions will help us do that? (Sharing their own initial responses and questions in response to the work allows educators to provide an example of thoughtful engagement and to demonstrate expectations for respectful communication).

Yorta Yorta artist and activist Lin Onus had a trailblazing artistic career that shone light on the mistreatment and injustices experienced by Aboriginal people. His father, Bill Onus, was a high-profile political activist and successful entrepreneur, who became the first Aboriginal president of the Aborigines Advancement League in Victoria in 1967.

Lin Onus was a self-taught artist and innovator who experimented freely with sculpture, painting and installation. Drawing inspiration from his family's activism and the momentum of wider Aboriginal activism through art happening in the central and western desert, Arnhem Land and cities of Australia, Onus developed a distinctive activist practice.

"Onus had a skill for combining European painting techniques with Indigenous designs, creating the unique fusion for which he is renowned."

— Hannah Presley (2024, p. 300)

Throughout his career, Onus created powerful works of art that allow us to see and contemplate the enduring impact of the laws that gave rise to the Stolen Generations. *Taking the children away*, is a very significant and highly acclaimed work, for which Onus won the Ruth Adeney Koori Award (RAKA) in 1993.

LIN ONUS (Yorta Yorta, 1948–1996)
Taking the children away 1992
fibreglass, pigment
dimensions variable
Onus Estate

Curious question: *Taking the children way* deals with a difficult and confronting part of Australia's history. What details in the installation stand out to you the most and why? What feelings do those details create for you?

Using fibreglass and coloured pigments, Onus has sculpted a series of figures that represent a moment where authorities came to take children from their mothers. *Taking the children away* allows us to see the pain and suffering that Aboriginal people experienced when their children were forcibly removed.

Curious question: Thinking about the way this work makes you feel, what do you think Onus is trying to express and communicate to us?

Taking the children away invites us to reflect upon how this experience was felt for Aboriginal mothers, in the moment where their children were escorted by a policeman in uniform, away from their family.

"It's important that we tell the whole history of this country and be truthful about it, because it's the only way we can move forward as a country, as a nation."

— Archie Roach, AM (ABC Education, 2021)

With this installation, Onus shows us how Aboriginal people experienced and felt the impact of those events. The brutal reality of the scene Onus presents in *Taking the children away* calls us to give thought to the harmful and unsympathetic mindsets that gave rise to them.

Curious question: How does this work help us to see and understand the connections between beliefs, actions, and consequences?

> *"It's only when you can share your grief and pain with others that you can start the healing process and find peace within yourself."*
>
> — *Jim Berg (Faulkhead & Berg, 2010, p.54)*

Curious question: Let's think about the title of this work. Is it familiar? What further examples of creative practice does it remind you of? Think about and beyond visual art.

This installation represents Onus' interpretation and expression of the famous Archie Roach song from 1990, *Took the children away*. Archie Roach (1956–2022) was a Gunditjmara (Kirrae Whurrong/Djab Wurrung), Bundjalung elder. His song came at a time of increasing public awareness and scrutiny of the impact of the Stolen Generations policy on Aboriginal peoples.

> *"This story's right, this story's true. I would not tell lies to you. Like the promises, they did not keep. And how they fenced us in like sheep. Said to us, "Come, take our hand". Set us up on mission land. Taught us to read, to write and pray. Then they took the children away."*
>
> — *Archie Roach AM, Took the children away (1990)*

In coming to know, hear and understand the consequences of *Taking the children away*, Onus appeals to our capacity to empathise and critically reflect. Our ability and preparedness to think, communicate and act with these capacities in balanced ways plays an important role in questioning what we know and shaping the understandings we arrive at.

> *"This is not just an issue of our past. It is happening today. While the intent of child removal today may be different to that experienced by the Stolen Generations, the effect is the same: a loss of identity and the exacerbation of intergenerational trauma."*
>
> — *AIATSIS (The Stolen Generations, 2023)*

Onus' *Taking the children away* is a powerful example of art and activism that visualises and speaks to the impacts of intergenerational trauma for the Stolen Generations. It is important to understand that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still suffering from the impact of the Stolen Generations.

Many Aboriginal families have experienced intergenerational trauma as a result of the traumas experienced by their parents or grandparents who lived through this period of history. Together, artists and activists play an important role in helping people to come together and come to terms with this history.

Taking the children away gives us cause to carefully consider the relationship between action, impact and consequence, to think about the beliefs that underlie and shape the approaches taken. In considering these factors, we can come to better understand the gravity of the situation and what helps and what doesn't.

For societies with shared histories of violence and injustice, the truth needs to be told, heard and understood by everyone. Understanding how and where our lives connect, directly and indirectly, helps us to locate ourselves within the bigger picture of society, what we hope to contribute to it and where we want to belong.

Curious question: Can we think of any other examples of art or music relating to the Stolen Generations; something more recent, perhaps?

Aboriginal people have made, expressed and shared knowledge through artistic and cultural practice for millennia. Onus' *Taking the children away* shows the powerful and innovative ways in which Aboriginal artists advocate for their rights and freedoms through all art forms and media.

"'…The children came back, back where their hearts grow strong, back where they all belong. The children came back…"

— Adam Briggs (The children came back, 2015)

Onus' *Taking the Children Away* and Briggs' *The Children Came Back* continue the powerful message of Archie Roach's *Took the Children Away*. Together, these artists weave a powerful pattern of intergenerational art and activism, furthering each other's work and efforts in ways that resonate with new audiences.

"The Children Came Back' advances the story...this new sequel of a song is released to champion black excellence and remind us of the amazing things achieved since."

— Adam Briggs (The children came back, 2015)

Individually, these artists maintain attention on prevailing injustice and forge new pathways to advocate for Aboriginal rights and freedoms. Collectively, they reveal a powerful lineage of Aboriginal art and activism, and excellence in advocating for rights and freedoms across time and generations.

Taking every opportunity to see, hear and learn about the issues we face, individually and collectively, helps us identify ways to move forward together and in ways that benefit everyone.

In their making and sharing of these works with us, these artists create brave, generative spaces for people to come together in conversations with a framework for understanding and healing, now and for the future.

Political activism – Trevor Nickolls

In the 1970s, a bold new Aboriginal art movement emerged at the Government settlement of Papunya, located 250 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs.

The political impetus of the Papunya Tula movement quickly spread to Aboriginal artists living in major cities and regional towns across Australia in the 1970s and 80s. This artistic awakening was part of a broader Aboriginal rights movement catalysed by Yorta Yorta trailblazers like Bill Onus from Victoria, who championed cultural renewal and rekindled Aboriginal pride.

"The Papunya Tula Artists cooperative was Australia's first Aboriginal arts company and foreshadowed the federal government shifting its Indigenous policies from assimilation to self-determination"

— National Museum of Australia (2024)

The pioneering Papunya Tula artists harnessed the power of art as a vessel for political activism, cultural preservation, and asserted their voice and presence. Aboriginal artists were engaging with a range of materials and styles, blending cultural knowledge with modern art techniques, to create powerful works exploring what life was like for Aboriginal people in city environments.

It is important to note that the label 'urban' has been applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists based in cities and it is not without contention. 'Urban' has been used to differentiate their work from art created with natural materials in far less settled parts of Australia, notably Arnhem Land, the Tiwi Islands and the Kimberley.

"Tensions between what is deemed 'contemporary' and 'traditional' are in many ways ongoing, reflecting pervasive racism and misconceptions around Aboriginal identity – beyond art itself – that exist within Australian society"

— Hannah Presley (2024, p. 293)

In the past, people viewed these works through a Western ethnographic lens that cast art from far northern, western and central desert communities as more 'authentic' and associated with terms such as 'traditional'.

However, this narrow way of seeing and defining these works of art failed to fully appreciate the diversity and complexity of Indigenous Australian art and culture. Today, the term 'city-based' is more widely understood, appreciated, and used by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists alike.

Curious contemplation: How might life in cities shape an artist's experiences and perspectives? How might this influence what they seek to communicate and commentate on through their art?

One of the founding figures of the city-based Aboriginal art movement was Ngarrindjeri artist Trevor Nickolls. His singular painting practice documented the turbulence of this era, exploring what it meant to straddle and navigate two worlds.

"Those Papunya paintings, those dot paintings – they're modern and yet they're ancient"

— Trevor Nickolls (as cited in Thompson,1999, p. 109-110).

Through his art, Nickolls voiced and visualised the challenge of living between two worlds, caught between Aboriginal and mainstream Australian culture and society. For Nickolls and others who had experienced the racism and displacement of assimilation policies designed to diminish and subjugate their culture, the Papunya art movement provided inspiration to proudly engage with and assert their Aboriginal heritage.

Curious question: Why is it important to learn about and understand the perspectives of lived experience for different cultural groups?

As Nickolls began interrogating his own Indigenous roots during the late 1970s, he drew upon both Aboriginal iconography and modern Western styles to articulate what he perceived as an uneasy fault-line underpinning a white Australian society that sought to disavow the depth and ingenuity of Aboriginal culture and presence.

"Lin Onus described Trevor Nickolls as "the great innovator of the 70s" for showing how Aboriginal artists raised in a European world could meaningfully engage with Aboriginal traditions."

— Ian McLean (2011, p. 57)

Alongside artists like Lin Onus and Robert Campbell JNR, Nickolls worked with striking figurative imagery and text to create a powerful artistic voice for Indigenous people displaced from their traditional lands.

They advocated for Aboriginal rights and self-determination, giving voice to the struggles imposed by a narrative that ignored or diminished Aboriginal history, culture, and injustices, promoting instead an Anglo-centric view that Aboriginal people should simply assimilate.

"Nickolls has been described as 'the father of urban Aboriginal art' and stands as a seminal figure whose career has spanned an unprecedented era of Aboriginal cultural expression since colonisation"

— Potter Museum of Art (2009)

Nickolls' collective achievements solidified his place as a pioneering and influential figure in Australian art and activism. In 1990, he and Kukatja/ Wangkajunga painter Rover Thomas, from the East Kimberley became the first Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.

In 2009, Nickolls was a finalist in the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria, and in that same year, his major survey exhibition *Other side Art* at the Potter Museum of Art celebrated his impactful career and toured nationally. Cementing his legacy, in 2013 Nickolls was posthumously awarded the Blake Prize for religious art, in recognition of the powerful spiritual dimensions underlying his work.

Inspired by rich Aboriginal storytelling traditions, Nickolls developed a distinctive art style that blended Aboriginal motifs and techniques with contemporary themes and mediums. His raw materials were the gritty realities of postcolonial city life. Experimenting with new forms like painting, text, and photography, many of these artists refused to be pigeonholed solely as makers of traditional cultural art objects.

TREVOR NICKOLLS (Ngarrindjeri, 1949–2012)
Tightrope walking 1980
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Gift of the artist to the Victorian College of the Arts, 1980
The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Nickolls' painting *Tightrope walking* speaks to and from the experience of being trapped between shifting cultures. The tightrope walker, strong yet precariously suspended above a harsh, machine-filled cityscape, is surrounded by vibrant colors and dream imagery inherent to Aboriginal cultural identity and design.

> *"In a career spanning four decades, Nickolls' humour and wit is always evident in his paintings, as was his recurring theme of 'dreamtime to machinetime' – the clash of modern-day life with ancestral traditions and a life more harmonious with nature"*
>
> *— Nici Cumpston, (Art Gallery of South Australia [AGSA] (2025)*

This revelation of both resilience and vulnerability invites us to consider the risks and challenges Indigenous Australians navigate daily as they strive to walk a line satisfying cultural and dominant societal expectations.

Curious question: Let's turn our attention to the face of the figure in *Tightrope walking*. Does this remind you of a face from another famous piece of Western Modern art from the 1930s?

As an example of Nickolls' engagement with and influence of Modernist painting, Ian McLean describes how the screaming, upside-down face in Picasso's famous painting *Guernica* (1937) resonated with Nickolls. The motif of the twisted, anguished face informed how Nickolls would come to express in his work the effect of his own lived experience in Australian society, as well as more broadly symbolising the pain and torment Aboriginal people felt living and walking the tightrope between worlds.

> *"Nickolls' artwork speaks about the juxtaposition of Indigenous cosmology (Dreaming) and Western machinery and technology, and the coexistence of both in the land now known as Australia"*
>
> *— Romaine Moreton, (National Film and Sound Archive of Australia,1987)*

By building a conceptual dialogue between Aboriginal and European artistic traditions, Nickolls pioneered a revolutionary approach for visualising what he defined as 'dreamtime - machinetime' through an extensive body of work which *Tightrope walking* sits within. Nickolls powerfully expresses the anguish Aboriginal people felt being wedged between the pull of Dreamtime cosmologies and the push into a modern, machine-driven world.

Curious contemplation: Think of a time when you felt pulled in different directions by competing pressures and expectations. Like walking a tightrope, having to carefully balance and navigate your way through opposing forces.

Imagine the push to stay true to yourself and being pulled into unfamiliar directions and places that feel unknown. What tolls could this balancing act take on you emotionally, mentally and even physically?

When considered as an example of appropriation, Nickolls' take on this within the modernist style did not simply apply Aboriginal design elements for European purposes. Rather, it questioned the modernist/colonialist separation between the two traditions and the discourse of essentialism and otherness they created.

This breaking down of boundaries highlights the interplay between Aboriginal and European subjectivities, the parallels that could be drawn between art and lived experience, and how these could each be conceptualised and explored through an intercultural lens.

Curious question: What role can art play in challenging oppressive narratives and giving voice to marginalised groups?

Through his art, Nickolls and his contemporaries didn't just depict the experience of being caught between traditions and pressure to assimilate – their powerful works were a way to articulate this through art as a vehicle for activism. These artists stood up for their rights, fought against pressure to abandon their heritage, and resisted oppressive demands to fully assimilate, asserting their authentic Aboriginal identities through artful activism.

Nickolls experienced the full effects of these agendas from a young age, fuelling his own activist spirit for giving voice to the displacement and anxiety of growing up off traditional lands.

Tightrope walking invites us to see, contemplate and appreciate the challenges experienced by city-based and other Aboriginal people navigating the entrenched racism and intergenerational trauma created by assimilationist policy agendas at the time.

Segregation at the cinema – Robert Campbell Jnr

For as long as racial segregation has existed, artists from all walks of life have created art as a powerful means to challenge it. Aboriginal artists have created interrelated bodies of work drawing together art and activism to expose the ugly truth about the rationale and impacts of racial segregation, and advocate for its redress.

Where the impacts of colonial politics had long served as a unifying experience of division for Aboriginal people, the creation of art imbued with activism became a powerful means for artists to articulate, challenge and shift politics of the time.

> *"From the early 1970s, Aboriginal artists looked to contemporary art to communicate a redefined Indigenous identity, creating work informed by their lived experience and documenting the collision of black and white culture in unique ways"*
>
> *— Hannah Presley (2024, p. 293)*

An important aspect of Indigenous art in the 1980s was the establishment of networks of cross-cultural influence among Indigenous artists across the country. Categorising artists solely on where they live and create art oversimplifies artistic vision, cultural influences, and personal identities, risking a narrow understanding of the nuances and complexities that shape their work.

During this time, prolific fusions of art and activism were born from cross-cultural exchange that resisted how artists were defined through reductive Eurocentric framings such as 'urban', 'regional', 'traditional' and 'contemporary'.

> *"We don't only make art about ceremony, about ritual: we are engaging with the now… We do things proppa way, the right way, with the right ethics. We are expressing our aboriginality now, which is often contrary to white western discourse or cultural colonialism – we are living in the city, making art about Aboriginal experience within the city."*
>
> *— Gordon Hookey (Occurrent Affair Education Kit, 2023, p.3)*

Curious question: Why do you think geographic labels like, for instance, 'urban', 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' are used to categorise groups of people and artists?

If we consider who creates these, what assumptions or connotations might these labels carry? Are there more appropriate or inclusive ways to describe people within different geographic spaces or systems of living?

Just as the segregation of people based on race or ethnicity is an unjust attempt to confine identities and experiences within narrow boundaries, the labelling of artists into categories can serve to segregate their art into restrictive boxes that fail to capture the full extent of their influence, contributions and ingenuity.

> *"The artists who led this movement are referred to as 'urban', as is their style of art, but as this idea has evolved it could more accurately be referred to simply as 'freedom of expression', or perhaps even 'the bridge'".*
>
> *— Hannah Presley (2024, p. 293)*

Ngaku artist Robert Campbell Junior (1944-1993) lived and worked in the town of Kempsey in northern New South Wales. A powerful storyteller, Campbell's vivid, uncompromising paintings shed light on the harsh realities of segregation experienced by Aboriginal people in 20th-century Australia. His pioneering work as an Aboriginal artist profoundly influenced both his contemporaries and later generations.

Primarily a self-taught artist, Campbell's distinctive cartoon-like figurative style allowed him to story and illustrate life as an Aboriginal person living in the latter half of 20th-century Australia that were otherwise confined to painful personal experiences. He grappled with the colonial impacts of oppression, dispossession and segregation.

Curious contemplation and question: Segregation separates people based on race, ethnicity, or other characteristics. Take a moment to reflect upon how such experiences could impact people, individually and collectively. How might experiences like this shape a person's sense of identity, self-worth, and belonging?

Creating activist works of art and commentary alongside the likes of Onus and Nickolls, Campbell powerfully contributed to the Aboriginal art mission to counter the erasure of Indigenous histories from dominant Western narratives. His unflinching depictions of colonial oppression and discrimination opened new avenues to assert Indigenous voices, identities, perspectives and experiences through art.

> *"Many of these artists confronted racism and violence throughout their lives, and consequently there is a strong thread of activism embedded in their art".*
>
> *— Hannah Presley (2024, p. 293)*

Campbell's vivid paintings made in the 1980s and early 90s powerfully asserted Indigenous perspectives on Australia's assimilationist policies and how these affected Aboriginal people living in cities and beyond. During the late 1980s Campbell's artistic journey took him to Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, where his interactions with artists' creative and cultural practices influenced his own work.

Incorporating aspects of Western Desert and Western Arnhem Land X-Ray aesthetics into his visual narrative, he storied his own lived experiences of racism, colonialism and apartheid in twentieth-century Australia.

ROBERT CAMPBELL JNR (Ngaku, 1944–1993)
Roped-off at the pictures II 1986
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Artbank Collection
Purchased 1987

One of Campbell's most powerful works is this 1986 painting *Roped-off at the pictures II*. It depicts a segregated audience at the Mayfair cinema in his hometown of Kempsey, where Aboriginal moviegoers were corralled into the front rows by a rope, separated from the white colonisers.

Painting upon canvas and board, Campbell developed a signature style and pictorial language, working with vivid colours, bold lines, and stylised figures reminiscent of marks and engravings from traditional Aboriginal cultural objects encountered in his youth. His paintings fused childhood memories with searing depictions of the discrimination, violence, and oppression he witnessed and experienced firsthand.

In Roped-off at the pictures II, Campbell portrays Aboriginal audience members staring straight ahead, meeting the viewer's gaze. So too do the actors on screen, including the Aboriginal lead Jedda, on horseback. The intricate, rhythmic patterns covering the surface evoke the designs of possum skin cloaks and engraved artifacts. Recurring red tie motifs represent the unbreakable connections to land, culture, and spirituality.

Curious contemplation and question: In *Roped-off at the pictures II*, Campbell uses irony in a powerful way to highlight injustice. The painting depicted shows Aboriginal people segregated from white audiences, even while watching a film that sought to showcase Aboriginal stories and cultures.

After giving some time to consider the implications, what deeper truths about the power dynamics and ingrained prejudices against Indigenous peoples do you feel Campbell is pointing to?

The projected film is Charles Chauvel's 1955 film *Jedda*; Australia's first full-length colour feature and the first to use Aboriginal actors in lead roles, though still created through a white colonial lens. *Jedda* was the first Australian film to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival. Its premiere in Darwin was still presented to a racially segregated audience.

While powerfully depicting the injustice of racial segregation inflicted on Aboriginal people, *Roped-off at the pictures II* also gives cause to consider wider activism initiatives that challenged segregation and catalysed change. The Freedom Ride of 1965 is one powerful example, protesting the discriminatory segregation practices in New South Wales swimming pools, cinemas, theatres and cafes.

> *"Recognised as one of Australia's most significant civil rights events, Charles Perkins AO organised a student bus tour around New South Wales. This was called the Freedom Ride, and it highlighted the state of race relations in Australia."*
>
> *— AIATSIS (1967 Freedom ride, 2022)*

Led by then University of Sydney student and prominent Arrernte/ Kalkadoon civil rights activist Charles Perkins AO, the Freedom Ride highlighted and challenged racial segregation occurring at the time in Australia and advocated for Indigenous health, education and housing matters.

Backlash from some white communities to the Freedom Riders' actions generated widespread media coverage, challenging the myth of a racially harmonious society and helping raise public awareness of the harsh realities of racism that Aboriginal Australians endured daily.

Inspired by similar rights and freedoms initiatives underway in the United States of America, the 1965 Freedom Ride in Australia played an important role in building momentum and public support for the successful 1967 Referendum on Aboriginal rights.

Roped-Off at the pictures II is an important window into understanding the realities of segregation practices in Australia's history. By depicting Aboriginal moviegoers being roped off from whites, it allows us to see, acknowledge and appreciate the dehumanising effects of racial discrimination.

Curious question: How does seeing this act of segregation depicted so vividly in Campbell's painting make you feel? In what ways does encountering segregation through this visual portrayal deepen and expand understanding compared to just reading about it in words or hearing it described?

Learning about the circumstances that create injustice also provide a means for us to understand how it is challenged and addressed, serving as a powerful ongoing reminder for society. It ensures we acknowledge the occurrence of injustice and remain vigilant in upholding a commitment to ensure human rights are in place and respected for all people.

Campbell played a vital role in providing an Indigenous perspective on Australia's dark colonial history. Incorporating visual and social commentary that balanced adversity and compassion with irrepressible wit and irony, Campbell conveyed an unflinching account of history.

"Very few practitioners in world art encompass joy and suffering so effortlessly as Robert Campbell Jnr."

— George Alexander (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2014)

Campbell's vibrant artistic legacy prevails through collection and representation in major galleries across Australia and abroad. His powerful paintings serve as an enduring reminder of the devastating impact that segregation, displacement, and oppression have had on Aboriginal communities. His unique visual language opened doors for later generations of artists to explore their own identities and share their lived experiences through art.

Through his distinctive wit and deft use of irony, Campbell's paintings demonstrate the ingenuity, resilience, and unbreakable spirit at the core of Aboriginal culture. His paintings attest to the enduring nature of Aboriginal identity, pride, knowledge and ingenuity, despite the efforts and effects of systemic racism that sought to diminish and deny Aboriginal presence, voice, rights and freedoms.

Land rights and self-determination – Ishmael Marika

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have maintained an unbroken connection to Country through complex systems of spirituality, law and culture. However, Britain's colonisation of Australia disrupted and denied these enduring relationships, stripping away land rights and imposing policies of dispossession and assimilation.

"The early 1970s was a volatile period of intense cultural activity, resistance and political resurgence for Indigenous people in Australia."

— Judith Ryan (2024, p. 48)

From this injustice arose powerful Aboriginal activists and storytellers who use their voices, art and cultural expressions to resist, assert their rights to self-determination, and fight for legal recognition of their ownership of ancestral lands. Ishmael Marika is one such truth-telling artist whose documentary filmmaking has powerfully contributed to Indigenous land rights and freedoms movements.

Marika is a Rirratjingu man from Yirrkala in Northeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In 2010, he took up the role of Inaugural Cultural Director of The Mulka Project, an Aboriginal-controlled cultural production centre. Here, Marika collaborates with other Yolngu artists and Elders on multimedia works that showcase and share ancient dhawu (stories), histories and laws with the world.

"The name 'Mulka' means a sacred but public ceremony, and, to hold or protect"

— About The Mulka Project (Buku - Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, 2017)

Curious contemplation and question: Aboriginal people have created works of art to assert their rights and connections to ancestral lands for millennia. What is it about these works of art and the mediums used to create them that make them so powerful and compelling?

Marika comes from a powerful lineage of Aboriginal leaders who have fought for land rights and self-determination for their people. His father Gary Waninya Marika was an esteemed Elder, honoured for services to Indigenous health. His mother Yalmakany Marawili is a Yirrkala Ranger and prolific painter of Baraltja saltwater estates upon bark and memorial poles. Marika's grandfather was the renowned Milirrpum Marika - the lead plaintiff in the historic Gove Land Rights case of 1971. This landmark legal battle saw the Yolngu people take on a mining company over land rights and ownership of their Traditional estates on the Gove Peninsula.

In 2013, Marika created the powerful documentary film *Waŋga Wataŋgumirri Dharuk*, which is Dharug for 'the land is ours'. This searing work reviewed the Yirrkala land rights movement that his grandfather Milirrpum Marika drove in the 1960s and 70s, capturing the devastating impacts of mining on his ancestral homelands.

ISHMAEL MARIKA (Rirratjiŋu clan, Dhuwa moiety, born 1991)
Waŋa Wataŋumirri Dharuk 2013
single-channel digital video, colour, sound, 15:42 mins
The Mulka Project, Buku Larrŋgay Mulka Centre

Curious question: Do you recognise the person portrayed in this still from the film *Waŋga Wataŋgumirri Dharuk*? Are you able to share something you know or have heard about his contributions to Yolngu art and activism?

The person depicted in this still is Roy Dadaynga Marika and he was a pivotal figure in the Yolngu land rights movement. As leader of the Rirratjingu clan from 1970, his involvement in the Nabalco case that eventually led to the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* laid the groundwork for his lifelong fight for Yolngu rights.

> *"[In the film] Yolŋu elders of yesterday and today speak of their ongoing struggle to seek control of their land in the face of mining operations, where we witness the mining company digging holes into sacred sites, devastating their land"*
>
> *— Excerpt from Waŋga Wataŋgumirri Dharuk exhibition text (2025)*

A powerful feature of this documentary is the splicing together of contemporary leaders' statements with historical footage from the 1960s and 70s focussing on the impact of the bauxite mine and Yolngu responses to the coming of the mine.

Curious question: How might the ability to splice together different video footage from across decades help strengthen the storytelling impact of Marika's film? What further messages does this splicing illustrate and highlight?

This editing technique allows Marika to share the intergenerational legacy of his people's ongoing struggle for land rights and self-determination, tracing back to the activism of the Yirrkala Bark Petitions.

In 1963, senior Yolngu leaders and artists created the pioneering Yirrkala Bark Petitions – these being works of art and cultural legacy that powerfully asserted their ownership and rights over ancestral lands being threatened by mining activity.

"… the people of this area fear their needs and interests will be completely ignored as they have been ignored in the past …"

— Yirrkala Bark Petitions (National Museum Australia,2025)

Signed by Elders, the petitions stated that sacred sites and hunting grounds at Melville Bay had been used since time immemorial, and that mining deals had been made in secret without their consent. The Yirrkala Bark Petitions were an ingenious act of resistance, using ancestral clan designs painted onto bark as powerful 'title deeds', asserting Aboriginal ownership over their lands in a way the colonial legal system could not ignore.

Although the Yolngu lost their historic case against the mining companies, their art activism challenged the myth that Aboriginal people had no real land ownership played a decisive role. Their courage paved the way for the 1976 recognition of Aboriginal land systems under Commonwealth law. This shepherded the return of the Arnhem Land Reserve to Traditional Owners - a hard-fought victory for self-determination.

"We want to bring knowledge of the past to the present, to preserve it for future generations and to understand what meaning it has in the present day and age"

— Ishmael Marika (as cited in Buku - Larrŋgay Mulka Centre, 2017)

With the tragedy of sacred sites being destroyed by mining, the retelling of these events and the activism efforts to challenge them play an important role in the long standing and ongoing fight for Indigenous land rights. *Waŋga Wataŋgumirri Dharuk* makes an essential contribution to a powerful legacy of art activism.

"Ishmael Marika's first documentary film, Waŋa Wataŋumirri Dharuk, 2013, is of special significance for this exhibition because of its interrogation of important political and social issues that contravene the human rights of Australia's First People"

— Excerpt from Waŋga Wataŋgumirri Dharuk exhibition text (2025)

Curious question: If we don't have the freedom to question what is presented as truth or as dominant narratives, how else might the urgent need to question truths be communicated, and what role do you think artists can play in this process?

Marika's documentary work is celebrated for its role in truth-telling, using restorative storytelling to acknowledge the profound impacts of colonisation and fight for Indigenous rights and freedoms.

By upholding and sharing his ancestors' legacy through the medium of documentary film-making, Ishmael Marika ensures Aboriginal people's voices, perspectives and efforts to advocate for their rights and freedoms are seen, heard and understood for generations to come.

Reviving Country – Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

In the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in South Australia, two powerful female voices echo across the generations. Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton draw upon an unbroken lineage of Traditional knowledge to mend the spiritual and physical wounds inflicted on their homelands.

Muffler and Burton are an aunty and niece duo of ngangkari (traditional Aṉangu healers), who come from the Aṉangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands and live in Indulkana community. *Ngangkari* skills are passed down through generations and each healer has a different specialisation.

Burton was born in 1950 near the site of the Anumara *Tjukurpa* (Caterpillar Dreaming), south of *Irrunytju* (Wingellina) in Western Australia. Betty Muffler was born in 1945 at Yalungu near Watarru in South Australia. Yalungu is a special site in Aṉangu *Tjukurpa* for emu ancestors who travelled and created that area.

> *"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."*
>
> — *Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 185)*

Their massive collaborative painting *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* is a profound statement on the restorative power of Indigenous knowledge and cultural continuity. Their paintings make aspects of this invisible world visible through knowledge and stories that attest to resilience and assert Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

> *"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."*
>
> — *Maringka Burton (as cited in Cobby Ekkerman, 2020)*

Commissioned especially for this exhibition, their painting includes story of *Tjukurpa* from their respective birth countries, with Muffler painting the emu tracks at Yalungu and Burton the rockholes and paths created by the Anumara caterpillars.

This painting is about healing and revival of Country and people. It proclaims the strength of women's art and law. Muffler and Burton paint the Country where they were born and belong.

Curious contemplation and questions: Take some time to explore the enormity and intricacy of detail in this painting. What are your feelings and impressions? What curatorial choices do you think were made to emphasise its significance?

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

A recurring theme in their collaborative works is highlighting the importance of upholding care, and the healing of Country and Aṉangu in the aftermath of the British atomic weapons testing at Maralinga and Emu Field between 1955–1963. Through their art, they reclaim narratives of Indigenous sovereignty to share how the Aṉangu people's custodianship of Country remains unbroken.

"Many Aṉangu were exiled from their contaminated lands during the 1950s and 60s due to the British nuclear testing program at Maralinga."

— Judith Ryan (2024, p.51)

The British nuclear testing program had devastating impacts on the Aṉangu people. None of the tests adequately considered the presence of the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara people. Their permission was not sought and their relationship with the land was not recognised.

Curious contemplation and question: What thoughts or feelings come to mind when you hear about nuclear weapons testing being conducted on Indigenous lands without consent?

With the agreement of the Australian Government, Britain conducted around 200 minor trials and 12 major trials of nuclear devices, with one being twice the size of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Despite the massive nuclear blasts and radioactive fallout, there was an appalling lack of concern for the health and safety of Aboriginal people living on these lands.

For over 30 years after, the Aṉangu were denied access to food, water and sacred sites on their homelands due to radioactive contamination. It was not until the 1980s for the true extent of plutonium dispersal was revealed.

"I survived…but many of my family didn't. it's a terrible sad story. We need to heal this country."

— Betty Muffler (as cited in Browning, 2021)

Curious question: How might engaging with works of art like *Ngangkari Ngura* help build greater understanding, appreciation and respect for Indigenous cultures and their enduring connections to Country?

In the wake of a 1985 Royal Commission condemning the injustice and lack of care for Indigenous people, Britain agreed to help fund a clean-up and pay compensation, conducting two ineffectual clean-ups of Maralinga in the 1960s. A more robust clean-up effort between 1995 and 2000 cost more than $100 million, of which Australia paid $75 million. The final section of Maralinga was returned to Traditional Owners in 2009.

Despite ongoing combined efforts to heal and revive the land, it will take a long time to fully repair. Many Aṉangu and nuclear test survivors still suffer significant illnesses as a consequence.

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

— Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 75)

While nuclear testing displaced them as children, Muffler and Burton's entwined ngangkari and painting practices attest to the unbroken lineage of restorative powers possessed and practiced by these remarkable traditional healers. Their work reminds us of the ongoing need to listen, learn and stand alongside Aboriginal peoples in the journey towards 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."

— Judith Ryan (2024, p. 30)

This exhibition is a testament to the incredible resilience and ingenuity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over the past 65,000 years. Their artworks tell powerful stories of pain and injustice, but also of strength, hope, and healing.

Take time to learn more about these important artists and their works. Each artist's story is shaped by their own reality and life. Through engaging with their work and stories, we can come to recognise and appreciate how these artists keep traditions strong and fight for the rights and freedoms of their people and lands.

The human spirit is truly powerful. It is true that we are capable of inflicting, feeling, and holding pain, as well as having the resilience, courage, and strength to overcome it. Hearing and holding truths are key for ensuring we build understandings informed by diverse perspectives and considerations. This helps us appreciate the bigger picture of our shared history.

There is so much more to be said and heard about the resilience and ingenuity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and activists. Rounding out our time with this work that so powerfully attests to Aboriginal peoples' powerful abilities to heal, revive, and care is fitting.

We hope you take inspiration to stay curious and open to deepen and further your appreciation and understanding of the resilient, clever, and caring spirit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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