

POTTER
MUSEUM
OF ART

65000 YEARS

A
Short
History
of
Australian
Art

TRUTH-TELLING THROUGH CURATING
GRADE 11 / 12 EDUCATION RESOURCE



Ngarrngga
to know, to hear, to understand

University
of Melbourne
Museums and
Collections



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

TRUTH-TELLING THROUGH CURATING
GRADE 11 / 12 EDUCATION RESOURCE

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.
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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 Some works in the exhibition contain derogatory images or titles with outdated terminology.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

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Ngarrngga Logo Design: Marcus Lee Design

Design: Emily Gittins [Gumbaynggirr /Barkindji]



POTTER
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Introduction

Welcome to the Grades 11 / 12 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 basis for making meaningful connections with 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 and non-Indigenous artists, selected by the curatorial team specifically for Grade 11 and 12 students and educators. By exploring how artists use digital media and paint 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 this 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 curricula subjects:

- Visual Art (Curatorial and creative practice)
- English (Literature, Language, and Communication)
- HASS (History, Geography, Civics, and Citizenship)

These connections draw from a balanced integration of intended outcomes, key concepts, and terminology from across Grade 11/12 syllabi and courses nationally.

Mapping for where the development of skills, knowledge, and understandings supported by this education resource align with content, capabilities, and priorities for these subjects 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.

Truth-telling through curating

Through six in-depth case studies, you will examine works of art by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Each case study highlights the significance of the featured work, and how the artists engage creative, cultural and curatorial practices to challenge dominant narratives, and assert their rights to advocate for cultural presence, preservation and truth-telling.

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

Sharing and discussing responses to these questions support connection making, identification and questioning of assumptions, and understanding of the interrelated aims and outcomes of art and curatorial practice. These conversations can be used as a basis to inspire further inquiry into related historical events and social movements foregrounded across the case studies.

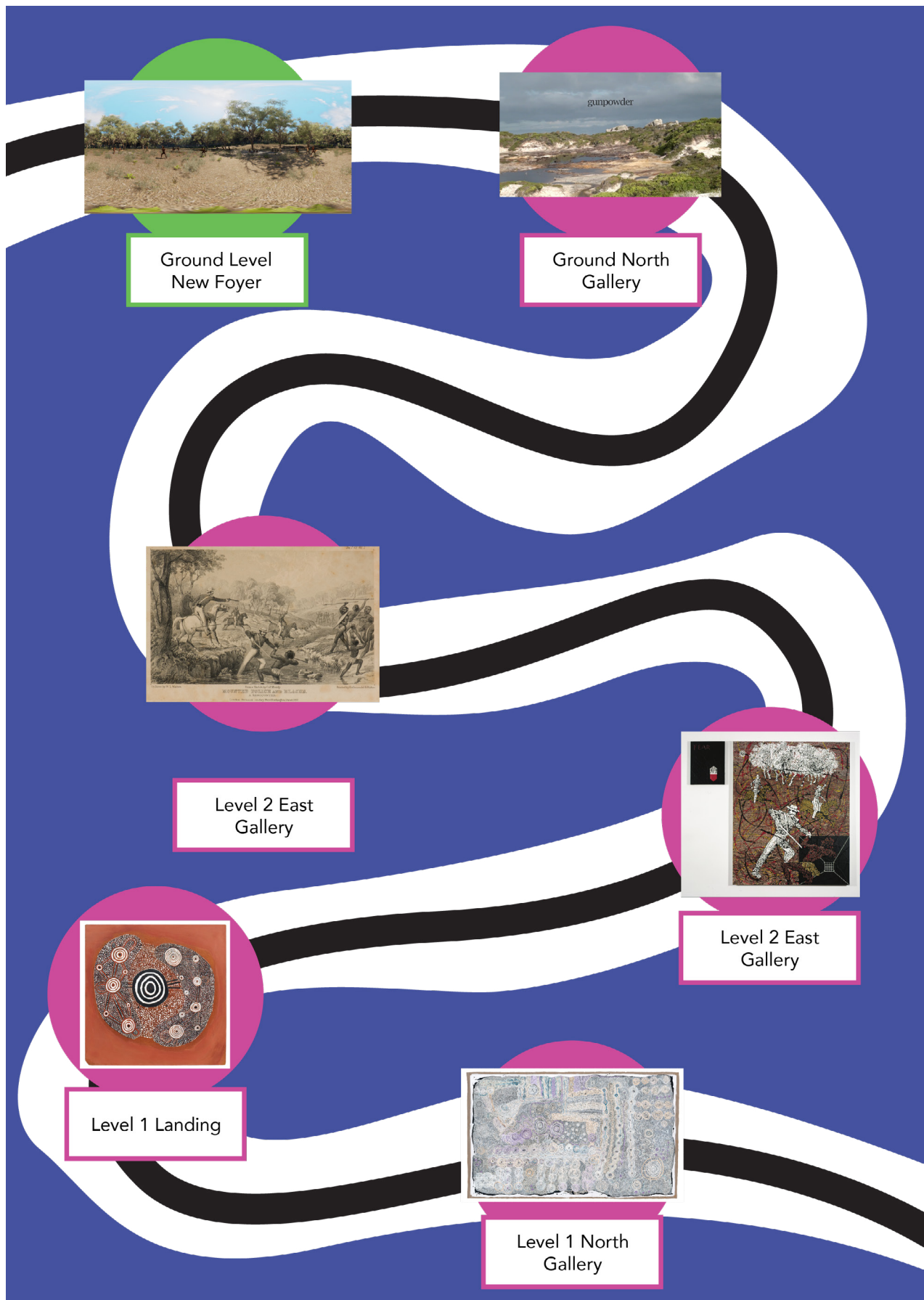
In coming to know, hear and understand with these case studies, we invite students and educators to:

- Explore Indigenous artists' experiences, values and views connected to their ancestral lands, culture and sense of belonging.
- Consider and question whose stories and perspectives are told in historical accounts, the reasons why some are left out, and the impacts and consequences of this.
- Engage with and discuss the visual language Indigenous artists use to affirm their presence and express knowledge and perspectives for truth-telling.
- Scrutinise dominant discourses and critically reflect on what, how and why knowledge is acquired, withheld and disseminated, individually and collectively.
- Build appreciation for the strength and ingenuity of Indigenous peoples' longstanding and ongoing efforts to uphold their deep connections to and with Country, community and culture.

The learning opportunities foregrounded across this resource seek to deepen understandings about the cause, circumstances and contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in art and cultural activism and build appreciation for the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives for truth-telling being made available by the artists.

In using these resources, educators are encouraged to be creative, confident and responsive in their tailoring of 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
<p>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p> <p>Sensory and space: employs digital visual technologies and emits sound.</p>	<p>Brett Leavy Kooma, born 1965</p> <p><i>Virtual Narrm 1834, 2025</i></p> <p>Geospatial virtual heritage digital media installation</p>	Reimagine	<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>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p> <p>Sensory and space: employs digital visual technologies and emits sound.</p>	<p>Julie Gough Trawlwoolway, born 1965</p> <p><i>Observance, 2012</i></p> <p>Video projection, colour, sound, 17:09 mins</p>	Reveal	<p>Ground South Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Ancestors and art of Victoria and Tasmania</i></p>
<p>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p>Godfrey Charles Mundy (draughtsman) English, 1804–1860, lived in Australia from 1846</p> <p>W. L. Walton (lithographer) English, active 1834–55</p> <p><i>Mounted police and blacks, a rencounter, 1852</i></p> <p>Lithograph on paper</p>	Rencounter	<p>Level 1 North Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>First Encounter and responses</i></p>

<p>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p>Gordon Bennett Australian, 1955–2014</p> <p><i>Death of the ahistorical subject (up rode the troopers a, b, c), 1993</i></p> <p>A: synthetic polymer paint on canvas; B: synthetic polymer paint and photocopy on canvas</p>	<p>Reinstate</p>	<p>Level 1 North Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>First Encounter and responses</i></p>
<p>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p>John Tjakamarra Pintupi, c. 1926–1998</p> <p><i>Untitled (Man's Dreaming), 1971</i></p> <p>Synthetic polymer paint on composition board</p>	<p>Revolutionise</p>	<p>Level 1 North Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Central and Western Deserts</i></p>
<p>Cultural safety: impacts of invasion, colonisation, displacement, and destruction/theft of Country and culture.</p>	<p>Betty Muffler Pitjantjatjara, born 1945 and Maringka Burton Pitjantjatjara, born 1950</p> <p><i>Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country), 2022</i></p> <p>Synthetic polymer paint on linen</p>	<p>Restore</p>	<p>Level 1 North Gallery</p> <p>Exhibition Theme/Section:</p> <p><i>Central and Western Deserts</i></p>

To know, hear and understand

Indigenous Knowledge

Organising ideas/elements: Country/Place (Land)

- Interconnection of people, culture and place; Spiritual and ancestral links

Organising ideas/elements: Culture (Kinship)

- Cultural landscape; Cultural norms and values

Organising ideas/elements: People (Communication, Rights and Freedoms)

- Resistance and activism; Custodial responsibility to safeguard cultural heritage

Organising ideas/elements: Identity (Indigenous Representation, Arts)

- Self-determination and advocacy; Art as protest

To know: This resource explores Indigenous knowledge that we are invited to come to know through six works of art exhibited in *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*. Through six interwoven case studies, we explore how, when and why these artists work with artistic and curatorial practices to assert Indigenous presence and perspectives for truth-telling. The storying of Indigenous knowledge in and across the case studies creates opportunities for us to engage with complex issues relating to truth-telling fulsomely, empathetically, and critically.

Indigenous Focus

- **Reimagine** with Brett Leavy
- **Reveal** with Julie Gough
- **Rencounter** with Godfrey Charles Mundy
- **Reinstate** with Gordon Bennett
- **Revolutionise** with John Tjakamarra
- **Restore** with Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

To hear: The case studies offer context around the artists' backgrounds, creative and cultural practices, and the ancestral stories and truths they uphold and share through their art. These bring together in conversation multi-modal (visual and textual) material, including key works of art, catalogue essay excerpts and commentary from Indigenous knowledge experts. This focus helps us to see, hear and consider the impacts of deficit representations, silenced voices, and dominant or biased narratives in ways that invite and encourage reflection.

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.

Truth-telling through curating: Case Studies

Reimagine – Brett Leavy

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

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 Woi-Wurrung people, the University of Melbourne specially commissioned Kooma artist Brett Leavy to create *Virtual Narm 1834*.

'I strive to bridge the past and the present, using modern computer graphics to honour 65,000 years of Indigenous knowledge. Virtual Narm 1834 is a celebration of Wurundjeri pre-contact past that has been developed in consultation with the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people.'

— Brett Leavy (artists' exhibition text, 2025)

This immersive virtual animation digitally re-imagines pre-contact Narm. 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). Through this work, Leavy invites us to see Wurundjeri people of grace and dignity, proudly wearing designs of identity and rank and bearing customary cultural objects in time prior to colonisation.



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

Leavy combines Indigenous knowledge and digital technology in *Virtual Narm 1834* to help us see what life was like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples before invasion and colonisation. Through *Virtual Narm 1834*, Leavy uses digital technologies to help us look, listen and consider how people care for Country and celebrate their culture.

Virtual Narm 1834 pays homage to the ancestors of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation and re-imagines their lands and waters, now covered by the city of Melbourne, its suburbs and outer areas.

"...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)

Inspired by present-day Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung elders, as well as research into colonial paintings, photographs and records, *Virtual Narm 1834* allows us to look back into Country, community and culture before the arrival of colonists. When we engage with this work, we are being invited to reconsider and reimagine what we know, hear and understand about this country, which was never ceded, always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

"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."

— Brett Leavy (artists' exhibition text, 2025)

Stories showcased in *Virtual Narm 1834* explore origins of landscape, animals, and people. These 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.

"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 (artists' exhibition text, 2025)

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

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 contemplate the consequences of colonisation for the traditional owners and Country upon which the Potter Museum and this exhibition stands.

"...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..."

— Brett Leavy (as cited in ACMI, 2020)

In enabling us to see and reimagine pre-contact Country, *Virtual Narm 1834* visualises rich scenes of connections, interactions and relationships 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.

The beliefs and values that underlie the knowledge revealed in *Virtual Narm 1834* stand strong today. When we engage with this work, we can see, think and share what we feel connection to Country means for First Peoples.

Reveal – Julie Gough

Julie Gough's single-channel video work *Observance*, 2012, invites us to consider the pertinence, power and possibilities that art and curatorial practice present for truth-telling. As an artist, writer and curator, Gough's creative and cultural expertise spans multiple artforms and contexts.

Curious question: Imagine stepping into the Country depicted in this video work. What sounds do you think you might hear? What smells might be in the air around you? How might the ground feel under your feet? What feelings do you associate with being in a place like this?



JULIE GOUGH (Trawlwoolway, born 1965)

Observance, 2012

video projection, HD H.264, 16:9, colour, sound, 17:09 mins

The University of Melbourne Art Collection

Donated by Gabriella Roy through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2021

Observance is one of several wry and powerful works of Gough's featured in *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*. This work features in the Ancestors and art of Victoria and Tasmania section of the exhibition. Gough describes the core meaning, motivations and purpose of this work as follows:

'Observance is about trespass... The film is my frustrated response in trying to get back to the essence of things, while being constantly interrupted by groups of intruding eco-tourists.'

Taking up the region for their continuous walks they remind and re-enact the original invasion of our Country. Witnessing their arrival, avoiding contact, I feel a multi-generational anxiety of knowing what happens next in the parallel world of that same place not so long ago.'

— Julie Gough (artist's exhibition text, 2025)

Curious question: What considerations are you mindful of when visiting places that are new to you? When exploring these places, what would help increase your awareness and understanding of events that have taken place there?

Working predominantly with film, installation and archives, Gough revisits the past by visiting places where certain events occurred, for example, in *Observance* she uncovers tensions and unresolved stories.

*"Gough's video *Observance*, 2012, takes viewers into an ancient Palawa ancestral landscape to encounter themselves as time-travelling eco/colonial tourists caught by the ever-seeing eye of Country (and the artist's camera)."*

— Greg Lehman (2024, p. 89)

Through reconfigured narratives of memory, time, location and representation, *Observance* entwines past and present happenings. Reverberating with Brett Leavy's practice to reimagine and revision, Gough's work involves similar acts of uncovering and re-presenting subsumed and often conflicting histories.

'Place holds truths about hidden histories – that are also in part evident in some oral stories, and concealed and edited in texts... These are consequences of colonisation that infect our 'everyday' and require immense energy to cope with, think around, and strategise our survival amidst.'

— Julie Gough (2020, p. 851)

Through these investigations, Gough permeates layers of concealment and containment that have been imposed by two centuries of settler colonialism in Australia (Lehman, 2024).

Observance conflates past and present in ways that allow us to see, hear and consider the respective and collective consequences parallel storylines have upon each other. In describing the motivations and intentions of her work, Gough asserts her beliefs as follows:

'I believe that the only way to work with imagery, text, inferences that are 'out there' already performing their intended roles in society, is to claim these representations, and reuse them subversively outside their original context.'

— Julie Gough (2020, p. 1)

An important function of Gough's practice – across her diverse creative, cultural, curatorial and academic pursuits – is that of interruption. In and through these combined pursuits, she observes, interrogates, interrupts and reveals the incompleteness of narratives that have been otherwise presented as normative, unchallenged and whole.

'Gough understands that objects and records do not speak for themselves by virtue of their survival across time, or the mere fact of their collection and preservation.'

— Craig Judd (2019, p. 1)

Gough likens this work to that of a detective (Gough, 2020). She elaborates on the scope, nature, purpose and implications of this detective work as follows:

'Art tests me in its making and exhibition, and hopefully also the audience who encounters it. Art and artists can often appear non-threatening which can facilitate difficult dialogues, while also leaving the artist/creator open to diverse opportunities... and to diverse critique – both as an artist and for me, as an Aboriginal person'

— Julie Gough (2020, p. 852)

In his essay *A canvas of silence: picturing Aborigines in the settler colony*, Greg Lehman (2024) describes Gough as one of the first Aboriginal artists in Australia to recognise the power of colonial silence in our art and curatorial canon. This silence refers to the absence of the Aboriginal voice in the written form, or the erasure of Aboriginal presence in the visual archive (Lehman, 2024).

'The task of exposing the gaps and silences in Australian art history – so useful to the colonial project – now falls largely to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. This is done by subverting the archive and unravelling the tropes of representation and the narratives of settler history. Or like numerous cultural knowledge holders and practitioners, they do this by continuing creative traditions that stretch back 65,000 years'

— Greg Lehman (2024, p. 98)

Curious question: Are we familiar with the term 'trope'? In the visual language of art, a trope refers to a recognisable and repeated pattern, story or symbol that artists draw upon to connect ideas and communicate key messages.

Artists and curators employ intertwined investigative and interrogative practices to critically examine normative and dominant discourses. They identify and venture into the edges of these discourses (Van Stralen et al 2022), unearthing stories and happenings omitted from the record.

The outcomes of their discoveries reveal instances where gaps and silences in the historical record contain important revelatory details. All decisions made regarding the inclusion and exclusion of detail shape the contours of what information and perspectives are made available to know.

'Engaging with the work of First Nations artists across this immense period of time is not about filling the gaps in the Australian story. It is about realising that canvas was never empty.'

— Greg Lehman (2024, p. 98)

Rencounter – Godfrey Charles Mundy

The arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in January 1788 marked the beginning of Britain's invasion and colonisation of Australia. And, so too, began European artists' creation of representational tropes that can be seen on the Ground Level of the exhibition.

Curious question: Are we familiar with the term 'rencounter'? Historically, and in the context of this work of art, *rencounter* is used to describe an unanticipated meeting of people, where hostility, conflict and violence ensue.

'These works inform much of what contemporary Australians know about Aboriginal people before the beginning of white Australia.'

They are the foundation of a national archive locking particular tropes in a construction of reality.'

— Greg Lehman (2024, p. 93)

This powerful image is one of very few representations of the Australian Wars in which Aboriginal people, in fighting to save their lands from the colonisers, suffered huge losses. Lands and waterways were taken, burial grounds desecrated, languages silenced, cultural practices suppressed, and families torn apart, all in the name of empire.



GODFREY CHARLES MUNDY (draughtsman)
(English, 1804–1860, lived in Australia from 1846)

W. L. WALTON (lithographer)
(English, active 1834–55)

Mounted police and blacks, a rencounter, 1852

frontispiece from his *Our Antipodes: or Residence and Rambles in the Australasian Colonies. With a Glimpse of the Gold Fields*, Richard Bentley, London, 1852

lithograph on paper

The University of Melbourne Art Collection
The Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequests, 1973

W. L. Walton's lithograph is based on a drawing by Godfrey Charles Mundy, a soldier and author, which documents a shocking massacre that took place at Waterloo Creek (also known as Slaughterhouse Creek), southwest of Moree, New South Wales.

'...capturing the viciousness of the push westwards following Macquarie's martial law and attacks on the Wiradjuri in the Bathurst region, this lithograph depicts the massacre of Aboriginal people by the New South Wales Military Mounted Police.'

— Marcia Langton (2024, p. 9)

Researchers at the University of Newcastle have studied the records of massacres and found references to at least 10,000 Indigenous people killed in 416 massacres between 1788 and 1930, with more massacres recorded between 1860 and 1930 than earlier. These numbers are likely conservative accounts of scope and impacts, as most massacres were not recorded (Ryan, 2020).

Curious questions: If you donned your detective's hat, what and whose information would you first seek out to help you piece together a complete picture of an event or situation? What detailed threads might you look to weave together to help create a more comprehensive account of events? Why do you think this could be an important thing to do?

Mundy completed his drawing from his imagination and published W. L. Walton's lithograph as the cover image for the first of the three volumes of his memoirs, *Our Antipodes: or, Residence and Rambles in the Australasian Colonies, with a Glimpse of the Goldfields* (1852). Mundy's accounts also provide us with a glimpse into the kinds of complex and tenuous circumstances that give rise to encounters.

'The political relation of the white race and the Australian blacks, with reference to the possession of the country by the former is peculiar to itself. We hold it neither by inheritance, by purchase nor by conquest, but by a sort of gradual eviction. As our flocks and herds and population increase, and corresponding increase of space is required, the natural owners of the soil are thrust back without treat, bargain or apology.'

— Godfrey Charles Mundy (1852, p.105)

Documentation of encounters in the oral, visual and textual archive detail the nature of these events from a specific vantage and for specific purposes. They irrevocably altered the course of history for Aboriginal peoples and British colonisers alike.

By scrutinising what is considered normative in dominant discourses of the archive, we can evaluate the details and information within the record in relation to surrounding contexts, perspectives, and additional information. By bringing these materials into conversation together, we can start piecing together a more fulsome picture of the impacts of these encounters, as well as the circumstances that give rise to them.

'[in 1788] Arthur Phillip declared all Aboriginal people would be British subjects. This meant that under British law, no treaty would be required. Despite being British subjects, Aboriginal people were granted no property rights and couldn't negotiate or buy their land.'

— *The Australian Wars, Episode 1: Resistance (Culture is Life, 2024, p. 6)*

Attempts by the British Crown to seize traditional owners' supposedly 'unoccupied' lands and waterways were made in accordance with the spurious concept of *terra nullius*.

"Terra nullius, meaning land belonging to no-one, was the legal concept used by the British government to justify and establish a dominant narrative of settlement of Australia."

— *National Library of Australia (n.d)*

Indigenous people have long called for a reckoning with Australia's colonial legacies, and the founding rationale for possession and occupation via the doctrine of *terra nullius*. An important step towards this was the claim of *terra nullius* being famously challenged and overturned by the 1992 Australian High Court case, *Mabo v The State of Queensland*, when it recognised the existence of Native Title (Lehman, 2018).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists alike continue to redirect our attentions to the ways art offers contexts to see, hear and understand difficult truths and injustices that underpin our respective and shared existence post 1788. The call to reckon with colonial legacies continues to be heeded by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists alike through their ongoing research of the archive.

Artists and curators bring a multitude of complementary literacies and professional skills to their explorations of divisive and contentious issues. Their subsequent works of art and curatorial decisions create opportunities for us to engage with complex issues affectively, empathetically, and critically. Careful consideration is given to how further reckonings can be avoided, with constructive and transformative experiential encounters enabled in their stead.

Reinstate – Gordon Bennett

Alongside and in response to Walton's lithograph after Mundy's drawing, is Gordon Bennett's *Death of the ahistorical subject (up rode the troopers a, b, c)*, which is a permanent record of the Slaughterhouse Creek massacre.

The outcomes of his excursions into the archive quickly made him one of the most influential artists of his generation. This visually complex and layered work challenges received accounts of Australian colonial history. Much of his work addresses his stated ambition, to:

'...reinstate a sense of Aboriginal people within the culturally dominant system of representation as human beings, rather than as a visual sign that signifies the "primitive", the "noble savage", or some other European construct associated with black skin'

— Gordon Bennett (artists' exhibition text, 2025)

As the title of the painting suggests, Bennett's focus is not the massacre itself, but its representation and the deathly language of the colonial archive. In referencing the massacres of Kamilaroi people, Bennett questions the valorising of these events.



GORDON BENNETT (Australian, 1955–2014)

Death of the ahistorical subject (up rode the troopers abc), 1993

A : synthetic polymer paint on canvas

B: synthetic polymer paint and photocopy on canvas

The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, on loan to the Art Gallery of Ballarat

Death of the ahistorical subject (up rode the troopers a, b, c) was painted early in Bennett's MacGeorge Fellowship, which he undertook in 1993. It appropriates details from Walton's lithograph after Mundy and reinstates Indigenous presence and perspectives into the narrative.

Through his art, Bennett interrogates the idea and implications of a dominant narrative that privileges colonial perspectives of history. By reinstating Indigenous voice into the story, he allows us to see and consider how colonial narratives work to erase Indigenous voices.

Curious question: In looking closely at Bennett's art, what specific things do you see that bring Indigenous voice back into the story?

The Aboriginal man being put to the sword falls backwards into a black square triangulated by perspectival diagonals and a grid with the alphabetic coordinates a, b, c, which is the prison house of Western language.

In the opposite upper corner is a Western Desert roundel signifying a power site, and across the whole canvas are dispersed curvilinear lines that emulate the abstract expressionist artist Jackson Pollock's drip technique, painted in the red, black and yellow colours of the Aboriginal flag – Bennett's trope for the abiding presence of the excluded Other in colonial discourse.

Death of the ahistorical subject (up rode the troopers a, b, c) echoes other tropes Bennett used at the time, such as the mirror and Kazimir Malevich's iconic painting *Black square*, 1915. These tropes, appropriated from the language of art, were the active ingredients – the verbs (or 'reverbs', as Bennett liked to say) – of his allegorical history paintings (McLean, 2024, p. 151). The imperative of bringing critical questions to visual and textual language played an important role in how Bennett described his approach:

"If I were to choose a single word to describe my art practice it would be the word question. If I were to choose a single word to describe my underlying drive it would be freedom ... To be free we must be able to question the ways our own history defines us."

— Gordon Bennett (1996)

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

In his essay for *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Ian McLean explains how Bennett described his approach as "history painting", which is an ironic reference to the traditional academic genre of Western art but also to what historians do, which is to interrupt and reshuffle the archive (McLean, 2024).

Archives served as the hunting ground for Bennett's postcolonial history paintings, which sought to deconstruct the archive's ideological content through dissecting the anatomy of its visual language. The archive's ancestral power is a formidable tool, but it is vulnerable wherever "its authority, its titles, and its genealogy" are contested, and wherever any "heterogeneity would seem to menace" the unity of its knowledge system (McLean, 2024, p. 150).

McLean describes how Bennett would have been particularly attracted by the irony that W. L. Walton's lithograph was the frontispiece for Mundy's 1852 book *Our Antipodes: or, Residence and Rambles in the Australasian Colonies, with a Glimpse of the Goldfields*. Mundy begins his book with the epigraph:

"Australia is the greatest accession to substantial power ever made by England. It is the gift of a continent, unstained by war, usurpation, or the sufferings of a people."

— Godfrey Charles Mundy (1852, p.v)

By acknowledging the fact that the normative narrative of the archival record is neither comprehensive nor complete, we open ourselves to see, hear and understand further detail. Reinstating Indigenous voice and presence into the narrative invites a re-evaluation of the discourse that enables us to consider how our views on matters might reposition and evolve as a result.

Curious question: Imagine you're building a bridge to truth. Despite discovering design flaws, you possess the materials for the bridge's repair. The next step is to invite the creators of the materials to work with you to make and cross the bridge together. How do you respectfully engage all parties to navigate disagreements, and ensure all the materials you have gathered are valued and understood for the essential role they play in ensuring the integrity of the truth bridge?

"If there was ever a time for the Australian people to understand how their nation was born, the time is now . . . We need to understand the fundamental truth of what happened, and we need a way to talk about it that makes it our own."

— Rachel Perkins (*The Australian Wars*, 2024)

Reinstating voices omitted from the record into conversation with dominant discourse helps us to arrive at more balanced, nuanced and just ways to think and talk about our shared history, together. Through their respective and combined practices, artists and curators create spaces and parameters for difficult conversations to be had in respectful and informed ways.

Our active engagement with and participation in these conversations can profoundly reshape our understanding of the past and present. Taking up opportunities to participate earnestly in these conversations is where we can learn how to talk about difficult topics, respectfully in real time and present contexts.

Revolutionise – John Tjakamarra

“The artworld’s hesitant curiosity about Papunya Tula painting quickly became an embrace. It grew into the most significant development of late-twentieth-century Australian art.”

— Ian McLean (2011, p.13)

The Papunya Tula art movement began in 1971 and was triggered by two key events. First, with encouragement from Geoffrey Bardon, an art teacher at the Papunya school, a team of senior men painted a huge *Honey Ant Dreaming* mural on a blank cement rendered school wall.

Following this and a transition from working with acrylic pigments on small boards, they soon moved to paint on large canvases. Their use of modern materials of acrylic on board and canvas rather than earth pigments on stringybark marked a significant shift in practice, as did their rendering of the iconography of concentric circles and dots that, until this time, were largely confined to men’s ceremonies. While these pioneering artists embraced experimentation in their shift to working with Western painting media, they were steadfast in painting from their own designs, rather than styles associated with Western interpretations. This decision was both individually empowering and collectively powerful.

Secondly, an Anmatyerre, Warlpiri and Arrernte artist based at Papunya, Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, shared first prize in the Caltex Alice Springs art award, with his work *Men’s Ceremony for the Kangaroo, Gulgardi*, 1971. These events created tremendous interest in the Papunya community and soon many men started painting in the school art room.

Collectively, these events drove significant transformative shifts in the way Indigenous people and their art were viewed by settler Australians and the world.

“One of the fundamental ways in which First Peoples in Australia have engaged with each other, delineated and mediated relationships of similarity and difference among themselves, is through art.”

— Fred Myers (2024, p.19)



JOHN TJAKAMARRA (Pintupi, c. 1926–1998)
Untitled (Man's Dreaming), 1971
 synthetic polymer paint on composition board
 Private collection

John Tjakamarra (c. 1937–1992) was a founding member of the Papunya Tula Artists group, which is the name of the Indigenous cooperative that established itself at the then-government settlement of Papunya, 250 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs in Central Australia. Tjakamarra was a Pintupi man, born near Kulkurta west of Tjukurla, in Western Australia, where he grew up. He travelled widely through the Western Desert in his youth before encountering non-Aboriginal people.

In his work *Untitled (Man's Dreaming)*, Tjakarmarra depicts sacred signs or marks of ancestral beings, whose exploits are found in Country and commemorated through ceremony. His painting is a powerful example of how Papunya Tula artists condensed and transformed the complex phenomenon of ancestral presence into two dimensions.

“People exchanged and shared knowledge and art in the forms of ritual, dance, performance – a kind of sharing that is the foundation of social life.”

— Fred Myers (2024, p.19)

The absence of a horizon expresses Tjakamarra’s spatial affinity with the land, and closeness to the ground. There is no separation between land and sky or between the artists’ identity and their Country. Their conception coalesces stories and events of the past, present and future. The absence of a frame enables their horizon-less landscape to stretch beyond the frame.

Curious question: If this painting were a storybook about Country, what stories, characters, or events do you see unfolding within its symbols and marks? What specific visual cues guide your interpretation and the possible meaning you arrive at?

The aesthetic appeal of Papunya Tula paintings being made with modern materials resonated with modernist art movements and appealed to evolving contemporary tastes for painting in the West. With the Papunya Tula Painters’ revolutionary work igniting the Western Desert art movement, a broader cultural shift followed.

A post-Menzies generation of Australians came to see and appreciate how these works expressed a unique relationship with Country. Recognition of this unique visual language for communicating relationships with Country enabled significant shifts in colonial understandings of Indigenous art and people.

“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 Papunya Tula artists demonstrate the creative and intellectual capacities of a people that settler Australians had once regarded as inferior. By speaking back to settler Australia with cultural nuance and artistic creativity, these works speak to the ingenuity and power of Indigenous knowledge and voice.

These artists demonstrate a powerful capacity for political advocacy through their command of visual language, and assert the enduring legacy of Indigenous cultural identity, practice and presence.

The influential interaction between the Papunya Tula artists and Geoffrey Bardon illustrates the mutually transformative outcomes that can occur when Indigenous and non-Indigenous artistic practices and purposes are brought into conversation together, with respect and relationality.

Through their modification of traditional iconography for public view, the Papunya Tula artists transformed not only their artistic practice, but also their approach to sharing insights into Indigenous knowledge with a broader audience.

“In giving, receiving, revealing, controlling, restricting, these artists define and relate their identities with others.”

— Fred Myers (2024, p.19)

The Papunya Tula Painters depicted ceremonial ground designs, creating powerful conceptual maps that expressed the artists’ identity in the land. Not everyone in the community was comfortable with the revelation of Indigenous knowledge to the outside world, particularly in the early paintings. Over time, this saw the artists further transform their styles to ensure secret or sacred knowledge was safeguarded within their designs (National Museum Australia, 2024).

The designs and symbols in Tjakamarra’s painting hold deep knowledge and values, with some meanings being made available to us while others are not. For instance, *Untitled (Man’s Dreaming)* contains designs and stories that pertain to Pintupi men’s law and Tjakamarra’s connections with sites in his Country. Specific examples and meaning of visual language relating to men’s business are not made available to us. We are therefore only sharing and discussing knowledge which has been made available by the artists to share and discuss.

Curious question: What stands out to you visually in this painting? What specific details grab your attention? Try to explain why those details caught your eye, and what you feel is being said and not said.

While some meaning and knowledge is made available to share and discuss, artists can also withhold knowledge, as is their prerogative. We might not necessarily understand the reasons, and nor do we need to if we are to respect the answers we have been given.

Ethical engagement requires us to respect artists’ choices not to reveal all meanings and knowledge about their work, even when we seek to understand. Sometimes, *not being permitted to know something* is a very important and valuable thing for us to know and understand. We should instead respond to these occasions with a sense of appreciation, respect and wonder.

To this day, these cultural objects continue to exercise their effects on those who view them. They bring recognition to those who made them and, through them, recognition of the powers they have sought to mediate.

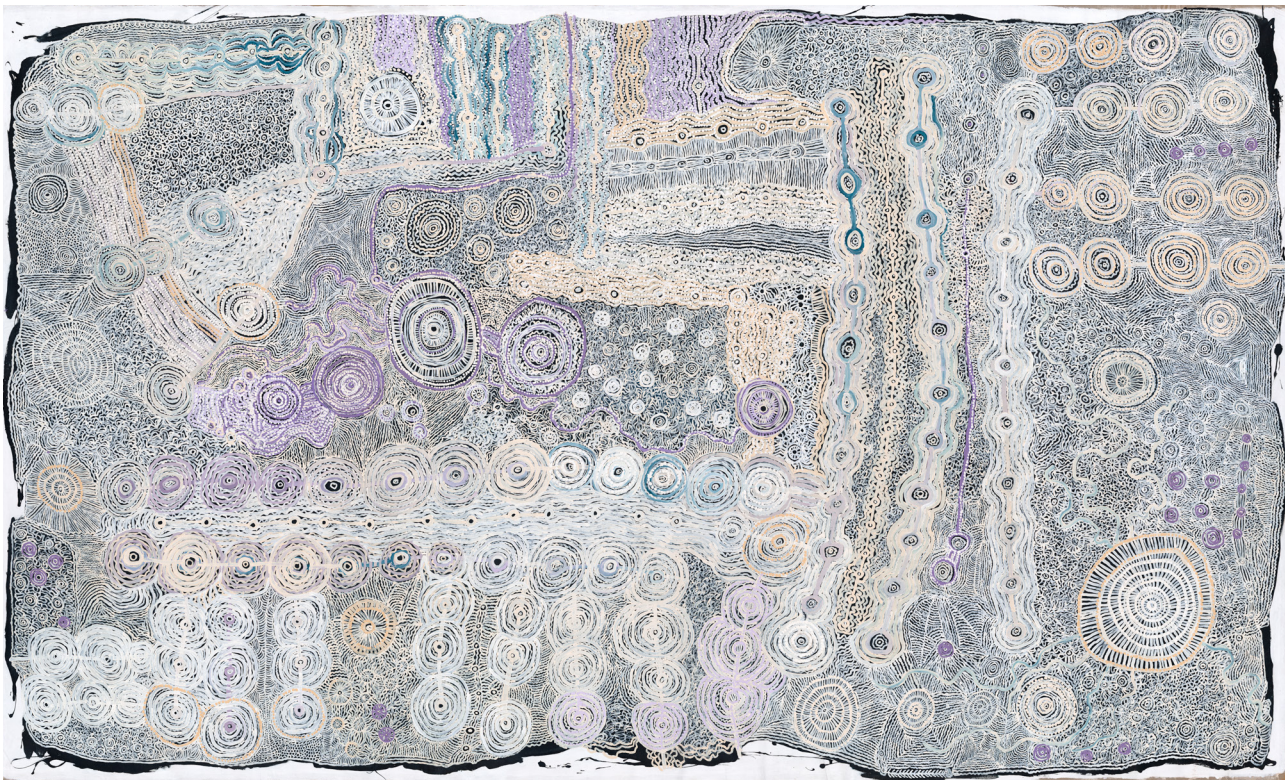
Restore – Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton

So far, we have explored how selected works of art can open dialogue between Indigenous knowledge and dominant narratives.

We have considered where Indigenous perspectives are omitted, and how art and curatorial practices work together to enable the scrutiny of normative truths. We have considered the ways artists redress the colonial archive in ways that reinstate Indigenous voice and challenge what is accepted as normative truth in colonial discourse.

It is fitting that we round out our adventure with a work that speaks to the restorative power and sense of reclamation that comes with care and healing.

This huge acrylic on linen masterwork has been created by two knowledgeable senior women, especially for *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*.



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

Curious question: What impact does the scale of this very large painting have on you, and what story does its placement within the exhibition tell? What curatorial choices do you think were made to emphasise its significance?

Betty and Maringka have painted the Country where they were born and belong. These places are an essential part of each of them. This painting is about healing Country and people. It proclaims the strength of women's art and law.

Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton are an aunty and niece duo of *ngangkari* (traditional Anangu healers), who come from the Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands and live in Indulkana community. Ngangkari skills are passed down through generations and each healer has a different specialisation. This work has been commissioned especially for this exhibition. The painting is expansive like the Country it represents.

Curious question: As you contemplate this painting, what feelings and thoughts surface? What realisations do these give rise to, and how might they transform the way you see, understand and relate to the people and places that are significant in your life?

Maringka Burton is a respected senior artist working at Iwantja Arts, which maintains a prolific practice across painting and *tjanpi* (native grass) weaving. She paints Anumara Piti, the caterpillar Dreaming site, where she was born. Maringka paints the big rockholes with the linking paths taken by the green Anumara caterpillars, creating Country.

Betty Muffler's practice spans painting, drawing, printmaking and *tjanpi* (native grass) weaving. Betty was born at an emu site, a place of emus named Yalungu. Her birthplace is only significant for this one *tjukurpa*. They're plain as day there, those emus; their tracks walking along: and Betty has painted those tracks.

A recurring theme in her works is highlighting the importance of upholding care for one another, land and Country, and the healing of Country and Anangu in the aftermath of the British atomic weapons testing at Maralinga and Emu Field between 1955–1963.

"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. Contemporary art practice is one aspect of maintaining culture and it underscores the need to care for and conserve Country and heritage."

— Eve Chaloupka (2024, p. 185)

Betty and Maringka have worked together and alone as *ngangkari* for decades, and in recent years have started to collaborate on epic paintings. A good portion of Betty and Maringka's healing work is done in the evening when they travel to the sick and give them treatment; on waking, their patients often feel the difference immediately. Their work is testament to the unbroken lineage of restorative powers possessed and practiced by these remarkable traditional healers.

"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 attests to the 65,000 years of ingenuity and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We hope you take time to learn more about all these important artists and the works of those artists around them.

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