

**The Intercultural Exchange of Aesthetics,  
Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous  
Artists in Australia: What are the broader  
implications of this and how do I apply them  
to my own arts practice?**

Bachelor of Arts Honours

University of SA  
Underdale

Literature and Artifact Review

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# The Intercultural Exchange of Aesthetics, Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Artists in Australia: What are the broader implications of this and how do I apply them to my own arts practice?

This is a dialectic investigation<sup>1</sup> into the polarities of otherness and unity<sup>2</sup> within the realm of Australian Visual Arts. It reflects the state of culture and consciousness, the opinions and artifacts created by indigenous and non-indigenous arts practitioners in relation to the issue of reconciliation. I aim to find a means by which reconciliation can be expressed<sup>3</sup> via designed objects. *excellent*

It is necessary to first acknowledge the impact of colonialism on the original people of this country<sup>4</sup>. With this imposition it must be recognized that an imperial, patriarchal system has recently violated and dislocated an other successful society. Subsequently this action has been largely denied, diminished and distorted. I acknowledge this and I wish my project to assist with the process of reconciliation.

These artists' first-generation experience of the impact<sup>5</sup> of colonization equipped them with the fortitude, skill and vision (and incredible generosity of spirit) required to create revelatory paintings that epitomizes the pervasive endurance of indigenous culture.

Appropriation is a key issue in this debate, but first I must articulate my position with regard to Modernity and Post-Modernity. The simplest definition I have found for Modernism is an obsession with originality<sup>6</sup>, whereas Post-Modernism could be

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Benjamin and David Bennett, *Modernity and Postmodernity*, Art Association of Australia (1990) pg 1

<sup>2</sup> Monterra Guibernau and John Rex, *The Ethnicity Reader- Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, Polity Press (1997) pg 299.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Dehnmolm, *Adam Rish- Misanthropology*, Art and Australia Vol 39, No 1 (2001) pg 92

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula Artists*

<sup>5</sup> Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink, *the Corporeality of Landscape*, Art and Austrasia Vol 38 (2000)

<sup>6</sup> Roger Benjamin and David Bennett, *Rhetorics of History: Modernity and Postmodernity*, Art Association of Australia. Vol 11 (1990)



conceived as an aesthetic development where originality is no longer important and the artist is free to include imagery from other sources outside the artwork in anarchic manner.

Post-Modernism Cannibalises its own culture  
Modernism wanted to rationally create Culture.

Modernism has been perceived as a tool for competition within a capitalist structure.

This perspective suggests that individuality inspires conflict, and denies the potential of strong individuals living in harmony which opposes my ideal of Eco Anarcha-Feminism.

Post-Modernism celebrates diversity within the one artifact whereas Modernism

celebrates diversity amongst the artifacts. Essentially there isn't much difference between the two concepts it just depends on the objectivity of the viewer.

PM is an extension of Modernism  
Hyper-Modernism is

Central desert indigenous painting has a uniqueness that easily expresses the ideals of

another theory  
of our culture  
we are  
all just  
self reflexive  
Modernists.

Modernism and there is a strong tradition of collaboration amongst aboriginal people<sup>7</sup>

that promotes diversity in the manner of Post-Modernism. This practice of collaboration

defies the notion of otherness. It may be possible that post-colonial doctrine has

impacted the perception of indigenous artists who have established the same duality that

has been imposed on them.

Although colonization was driven by economic forces,<sup>8</sup>... its implementation was underpinned by assumptions of cultural superiority. Colonial domination was justified by the 'civilizing' mission of the colonizer. For this reason the process of colonization is total, in that it involved cultural invasion and colonization of the minds of the invaded as well. In fulfilling an historic mission, the colonizer had few options in the treatment of the invade: extermination of the indigenous population, or subjection by force or assimilation.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Radok, *no man is an Island*, Artlink vol 21 No2 (1999) pg. 9-13

<sup>8</sup> Walker, RP, *Tears of the Dead*, Edinburgh University Press. Edinburgh/ Boabab Books, Harare (1990) pg.151



<sup>9</sup>Deborah Edwards refers to colonialist societies seeking to build a national identity through appropriation of indigenous art. She claims that Margaret Preston has been scrutinized for being linked to this mentality. She says that Preston's connection with aboriginal arts goes deeper than this due to her travels to remote communities throughout the desert. This could be said for fellow white Australian's like David Larwill and Adam Rish.

Edwards discusses the notion of<sup>10</sup> primitivism in relation to linear progression – savagery to civilization. She puts forward Preston's perspective that there is no progression in art, only change. This fits with indigenous Australians living without a numerical system.

... extended to early twentieth century models of disease the concept of the primitive came to include neurotics, schizophrenics, criminals and sexual deviants, whose "conditions" were commonly understood as degenerative – a sort of twisted return to primitive states.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 2, pg 23)

It may be suggested that to desire indigenous artifacts is a part of the process of<sup>11</sup> commodification, which underestimates the meaning and value of the sacred arts. It is my perspective that the real fruit of the work is in its manufacture and the artist is the real recipient of its most significant value. Much of the content of Australian indigenous art precedes the notion of ownership.

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Edwards, *Margaret Preston \_ Reviewing the Landscape*, Art and Australia Dec (2002) Vol No 156. pg 19

<sup>10</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, World of Art. Thames and Hudson (1994)

<sup>11</sup> Terri Janke, *Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights: A Visual Arts Perspective*. Art monthly Australia. July (2002 )pg. 26-28







Indigenous artists nationally are concerned about the appropriation of their art and want to stop the unwarranted and unauthorized copying of their cultural material.<sup>12</sup>

In the process of selling painted canvases indigenous artists have commodified their own heritage and appropriated western culture. I consider the process of commodification and appropriation being a two way relationship and western culture assimilating the shamanic teachings of Aboriginal Australia.

I was discussing these times with John Kean the other<sup>13</sup> day and he was saying how Tim Leura, like Kaapa Tjampitjimpa another extraordinary artist, had thought a lot about ideas relating to intercultural exchange and how, probably more than any of his contemporaries, he did reach out and aim his work at a European sensibility.

I refer to appropriation and the assumption that there is a victim and a perpetrator. This relates to the idea of the other and the need to escape dualistic thinking patterns. In the overt action of appropriation, the artist is using this technique to highlight the absurdity of the concept. Whether it is judged by the observer to be appropriation or collaboration the artist intrinsically knows that their position in life is that of a scape-goat and that christ is born of the action of creating from the heart.

Scottish born Australian artist-hero Ian<sup>14</sup> Fairweather – and to the place, Dinah Beach in the gallery's locale, where Fairweather squatted in a hulk before heading off on a miraculous 16 day voyage to Roti on a makeshift raft-changing voyage in 1952, just a few years before the missionaries of Sacred Heart moved into Malak country on the present community site.

<sup>12</sup> France Peters Little, *On the Impossibility of Pleasing Everyone: The legitimate role of white filmmakers making black films*. Art Monthly Australia May (2002).

<sup>13</sup> John Wolsley, *Rock Wallaby Dreaming: The Power, the Mood and the Scandal*. Art Monthly. Sept (1999)

<sup>14</sup> Maurice O'riodan, *Living Water Mary Kaangi at Raft*, art Monthly. Sept (2001) pg 25

explain the reference?

→ excellent



From the understanding of the scape-goat mentality I have developed a contradiction that explains a human dilemma that seems to be another obstacle to the healing process. This is something I have encountered through observation of people working in indigenous arts. In contrast to the scape-goat I have come to recognize a polar opposite, that of the hero. Politically it is essential for collaboration to be effective, that the participants remain on a equal footing, however, through economic and power driven circumstances it isn't unusual for someone to ride on the crest of what should be communal success.

What I am suggesting is that there is an imbalance in power that is unacknowledged and undealt with, but to transform this idea one can proclaim the truth of political guilt and shame. This would release the tension and create balance and acceptance that democracy is in order and collaboration is freely available to all parties. Appropriation is a symptom of the dualistic mind that denies collaboration and community.

I feel that it is a scandal that these desires, this reaching out, have been reciprocated in so few ways. One dramatic illustration of this lies in the paradoxical disjunction between the millions generated for the Australian economy by Aboriginal Art and the impoverished and shattered situation which exists in many of the communities from which this art comes. (<sup>13</sup>pg 378)

Visual Art is a great opportunity in the process of reconciliation it provides a forum for indigenous and non-indigenous voices to come together with ideas and concepts which needn't be a conclusive experience. If we overcome the conflicting concept of appropriation and commodification to create non-competitive nurturing environments for free expression for everyone' we might see more resolution rather than reinforcing recycling of aggressive and defensive attitudes.

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(D<sup>+</sup>)

Ruth,

\* Late  
otherwise would  
have been higher

\* Speak to  
your tutors about  
further study. I  
would strongly  
urge you to follow  
this research through.

This is an excellent piece of  
writing. Well articulated and  
thoughtfully presented. You  
definitely see this issue in  
a new light. I would recommend  
that this is a great subject for  
a Masters degree. The scape-goat  
idea is such a pervasive  
one in our culture of guilt.  
Flinders University has a strong  
Aboriginal Art (History & theory based)  
study program - A masters here would  
be good if the studio component  
was not important to you. Adelaide Uni  
offers Masters of Art History that  
includes an aboriginal Art component  
but I feel a Research degree  
would be better for you. Unisa offers  
Theory & Practical MFA's. You should  
go for a Scholarship. Well done.  
(\$300 per week)