

EDITORIAL



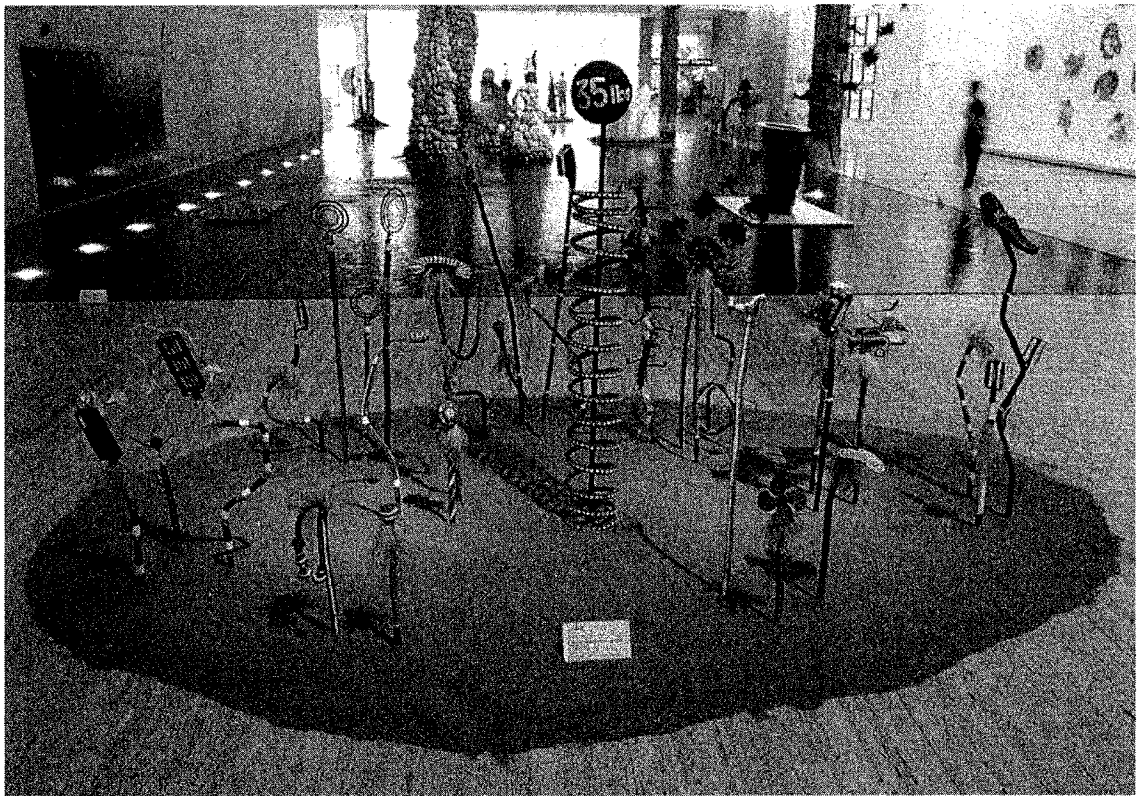
This edition of *Humanities Research* on Indigenous knowledge is guest edited by Associate Professor Paul Turnbull, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research. It features papers emerging from an important Conference in Cairns in 1996 convened by Paul Turnbull and Henrietta Fourmile and organized by the Humanities Research Centre on the subject of "Science and Other Indigenous Knowledge Traditions". In this issue of *Humanities Research* there are also reviews of two groundbreaking Indigenous art exhibitions developed to coincide with the Olympic Games in Sydney in September 2000—*Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* and *Urban Dingo: the Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*.¹

The concept of a special issue of *Humanities Research* devoted to Indigenous knowledge grew out of discussions regarding a greater focus for the journal on ideas of general interest across the Humanities and related to projects of both the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR). The year 2000 has been an important one for both Centres with a move to new premises in the historic Old Canberra House situated on Lake Burley Griffin, close to the new

National Museum of Australia, and the forging of partnerships in research between the Museum, other National Cultural Institutions and the Centres.

There have been new appointments this year to the staff of both Centres. While Professor Iain McCalman remains Director of the HRC and continues to play a key role in the developing programs of the CCR, Professor Howard Morphy has been appointed as the second Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, succeeding Professor Nicholas Thomas. My own appointment as Deputy Director of the HRC (succeeding Professor Graeme Clarke) has also included Editorship of this journal. Because of these changes and the appointment of a new Publications Officer to the HRC, Lindy Shultz, there will be only one issue of *Humanities Research* in 2000. A double issue will be produced as the first issue in 2001 and the theme for that issue, which will coincide with the opening of the new National Museum of Australia in March 2001, is "The Future of Museums".

The ideas presented in these pages open up questions of fundamental importance to Australian society today as we seek to reconcile ancient and contemporary cultural values, address past wrongs and



Lin Onus. A Stronger Spring for David, 1994. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Photo: Courtesy Margo Neale

present concerns of Indigenous people in Australia and come to a greater understanding of what Australian culture is at the beginning of a new century. The HRC and the CCR have foregrounded Indigenous issues in projects being developed at the Centres. The publication of the landmark *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* this year, a most significant compendium of articles edited by Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, is one of a number of projects related to Indigenous culture. The Centres have also commissioned (as part of the Australian National University's public art program) Fiona Foley, one of Australia's leading artists, to undertake a sculptural installation in the garden between the old and new buildings of the Centres on the Acton Peninsula. Foley, herself an Indigenous artist, has produced a memorialising work which conceptualises Indigenous knowledge of Canberra.

The two Indigenous exhibitions reviewed in this issue were conceived for international and local audiences as a way of introducing important developments in Aboriginal art and contributions to recent Australian art. Both were shown as part of the Olympic Arts Festivals in Sydney in September 2000. At the Olympic opening ceremony the theme generously proposed by Aboriginal representatives was "sharing the knowledge" and both exhibitions encapsulate that philosophy. *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* was presented at the Art Gallery of NSW in a collaboration with Papunya Tula Artists,

the Aboriginal company formed in 1972. It is the story of an artist-run company which has facilitated not only the flowering of an extraordinary creative outpouring by its artists but found a way to share that creativity, culture and knowledge with other Australians and international audiences. Without this vital movement, as Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, a senior Warlpiri Elder has noted, "they [meaning the outside world and particularly the rest of Australia] wouldn't know us". Creating works of authority, which at the same time tell powerful stories, and drawing on ancient knowledge, this movement has used new media—canvas and paints—to tell these stories. As Marcia Langton tells us in the catalogue to the exhibition (edited by Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink), these are "spiritual landscapes". In that sense they are maps of inner and outer worlds and reflect a cosmology and way of looking at geography that encapsulates the sacred as much as cartographic knowledge in a Western sense. Yet, Aboriginal painting has also been used as evidence in Land Rights cases. These artists, in their longing for their land, produced works of incredible beauty such as the 1972 work by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri illustrated on the cover, which are meant to be shared with outsiders and are also inspiring testimony to cultural survival. Vivien Johnson, currently a Fellow in the CCR notes in the catalogue: "... we learn that disintegration is not the inevitable consequence of cultural contact" (p.197).

Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney is an equally inspiring story of an artist and activist who addressed his own identity in two worlds (Yorta Yorta and Scottish heritage) and in an urban context to attempt to reconcile these different worlds within contemporary Australian society while also addressing the broader concerns of Aboriginal people in the changing social and political context of Australia in the last three decades.

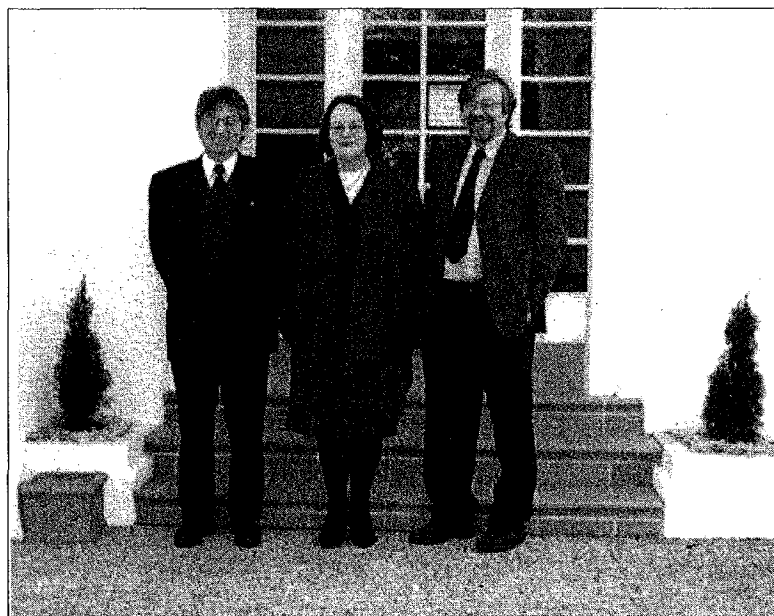
The exhibition was the first national retrospective of an urban-based Aboriginal artist and was curated by Margo Neale, who earlier in 1998 curated the first retrospective of any Aboriginal artist in this country, the acclaimed *Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere: Paintings from Utopia*.

Onus, described by Neale as "... a cultural terrorist of gentle irreverence", worked for social justice and in his art to find a new visual language to be a "bridge between cultures".

His work *A Stronger Spring for David... Toas for a Modern Age*, 1994, reminds us that Aboriginal and Indigenous culture and knowledge is not locked into Western perceptions. The items ceremonially presented in the installation are detritus of urban life presented by Onus and identified as Toas—the mysterious direction markers of Lake Eyre. The humour of this work, which encapsulates Onus' philosophy of engaging Black and White audiences through shared stories, belies its serious message. The work is also a tribute to Aboriginal writer and inventor David Unaipon (1872 – 1967) now honoured for his work as a scientific inventor in a

*L to R:
Iain McCalman,
Caroline Turner,
Howard Morphy*

*Photo:
Leena Messina*



Western sense by having his image appear on the Australian \$50 note.

Unaipon began as a servant at the Point McLeay mission and was a storeman, bootmaker and book-keeper. He was the first Indigenous writer to be published and an inventor of a handpiece for sheep shearing, a centrifugal motor and other devices related to perpetual motion but was unable to get financial backing. He dedicated his life to Indigenous culture and to attempting to achieve equal rights for Indigenous Australians through "sympathetic co-operation" between Blacks and Whites.

One of Unaipon's inventions was a spring with a steel ball which Onus refers to in the art work's title. The work was a central element in the 1994 exhibition "Perpetual

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Indigenous culture and knowledge, as these two exhibitions remind us, is not locked in the past. The challenge for non Indigenous cultures and for Australian society is to recognize and respect both ancient knowledge and present contributions of Indigenous peoples in ways that are positive for all.

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NOTES

1. Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink (eds), *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of NSW and Papunya Tula artists, 2000; Margo Neale, *Urban Dingo: the Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948 - 1996*, Craftsman House and Queensland Art Gallery, 2000.

