

WRITING CRAFT / WRITING HISTORY



The point is often made that the entry of Aboriginal art into public galleries has involved a fundamental shift in perception from the anonymous, scientific categories of ethnography to the status accorded the aesthetic art object. But in celebrating the recognition for contemporary Aboriginal art we need to be mindful that discourses of Aboriginality are constituted in and through colonial power relationships. Post-colonialism may have cleared a space for wide-ranging critiques but it has not undone or overthrown the hierarchies which allow the dominant culture to secure its own identity whilst selectively excluding other cultural practices. Indeed it may well be that the much-celebrated shift between the two bounded categories of ethnographic artefact and fine art object may actually lend support for the narratives of progress, which incorporate Aborigines within wider formations of the national imaginary.

This paper aims to unsettle and problematize these narratives by focusing attention on a third, more elusive term and ambiguous term, craft. In so doing, I do not want to project craft as a term of exclusion: all too often in focusing on marginalized terms, one merely replicates in reverse the skewed perspectives produced by earlier interpretations. My

tactical use of the term craft, then, is not intended to create an alternative set of hierarchies through the privileged status accorded another set of discrete cultural practices. Rather my aim in reconfiguring craft is to explore the regional histories largely excluded from existing interpretations of Aboriginal art by what the Philippine writer Marian Pastor Roces calls, the 'amputating mechanisms at work in museological taxonomies.'¹

My paper draws upon a wider study aimed at recuperating the 'hidden history' of Aboriginal art in south eastern Australia. The idea that discourses of Aboriginality have imposed cultural hierarchies which have framed the selective response to Aboriginal art according to dichotomous oppositions has emerged in response to post structuralist thinking of the past few decades. If we consider, for a moment the usual binaries separating 'traditional' Aboriginal art from remote communities and contemporary art from the cities, we begin to see how restrictively these terms operate, encapsulating Aborigines within temporal and spatial boundaries that are inclusive and exclusive.

Translated into the regional history of the southeast, existing discourses of historical Aboriginality produce an apparent gap:

whilst knowledge about Aboriginal art in the nineteenth century continues to expand, and urban Aboriginal art gains increasing critical acclaim, little is known of the decades in between, from the death of the artists, William Barak and Tommy McRae at the turn of the century to the emergence of a contemporary Koori art movement in the 1970s led by artists such as Kevin Gilbert, Lin Onus and Trevor Nickolls—a gap which implies that traditional Aboriginal culture in the region died out, then re-emerged as if from a cultural vacuum, transformed into a post colonial culture of resistance.

The apparent historical absence I have identified mirrors, and in effect reflects the impact of government policies aimed at rendering Aborigines invisible. As W. E. H. Stanner has observed, for much of the twentieth century a 'cult of forgetfulness' erased an Aboriginal presence from the national psyche. Aborigines in the settled southeast bore the brunt of discriminatory policies: defined and categorized according to new, more scientific definitions of Aboriginality, excluded from missions and, in many instances, forcibly separated from their emotional attachments to kin and country. To rub salt into these colonial wounds, racial discourses have, until very recently, represented south eastern Aborigines as 'cultureless outcasts'. Whilst the art world venerated traditional Aboriginal art produced in remote communities, Aborigines living in the cities found themselves displaced 'between two

worlds', neither black nor white, their cultural heritage relegated to almost complete obscurity within settler colonial politics of cultural identity.

In seeking to retrieve recognition for a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the south east, I do not mean to diminish in any way the legacy of anger and deprivation which is the direct outcome of generations of racial discrimination and oppression. Documenting the regional history of Aboriginal Australia intervenes in the colonial fiction that the only 'real' Aborigines with an authentic and traditional culture worthy of recognition are those living in more remote regions to the centre and north of the continent. The various objects with which I am concerned—small, portable seemingly insignificant items such as boomerangs, rush baskets, feather flowers and carved emu eggs—have long been overlooked by collecting and cultural institutions. Yet this array of beautifully crafted objects provide a remarkable insight into the cultural heritage of those Aboriginal people whom we now know as 'the stolen generations'. Like the biographies of the individual artists, these objects intersect with the events of colonial history.

Within the limitations imposed on a paper of this nature, I have focused on the work of two little known individuals: Wemba Wemba woman, Agnes Edwards and Wiradjuri artist Sam Kirby both of whom were associated with the mid-Murray township of Swan Hill, 300 kilometres north west of Melbourne. I aim to show

how they creatively responded to the limitations and opportunities offered by their particular circumstances, in town camps and in the pastoral industry living in dynamic co-existence with a settler colonial society. Outside the constraints imposed by institutions, Aborigines in the southeast never ceased to be involved in the production of cultural objects. These objects served multiple roles: inside the community circulating as toys and heirlooms, outside the community exchanged as gifts and commodities with members of the majority culture; missionaries, pastoralists, tourists, artists and dealers. My paper raises many questions for the writing of regional histories, how did craft practices evolve through the transformations effected by historical change and how might they work in particular ways to objectify identity for Indigenous minorities? In turn these questions raise a wider set of issues: how have the frames imposed by cultural and collecting institutions excluded recognition for craft practices and how might future curatorial strategies intervene in these historical narratives?

HISTORIES OF COLLECTION

I begin by examining how long-standing artistic hierarchies that differentiate between artefact/art object, fine art/craft and high art/popular culture have influenced the critical response to Aboriginal art and lent support for the discourses of Aboriginality that construct narratives of national identity.

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in Aboriginal material culture: in place of earlier survey exhibitions concerned solely with fine art masterpieces we see an increasingly eclectic range of exhibitions. To name a few: Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Canberra School of Art, the University of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Museum of Contemporary Art have all staged major exhibitions of fibre from

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Arnhem Land; in 1996 *The Native Born* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney juxtaposed bark paintings and textiles to explore their economic and spiritual connections to country, participants in the 1997 Venice Biennale included the Aboriginal painters, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Judy Watson and the fibre of Yvonne Koolmatrie whilst the Campfire Group's *All Stock Must Go* at the Second Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery (1996) confronted the (often ambiguous) relationship between Aboriginal art and the tourist

industry.

But it was not always so. Originally, objects produced by indigenous cultures were appropriated, collected and displayed heterogeneously, jumbled together like the 'summary of the universe' provided by earlier 'cabinets of curiosities'.² Subsequently collections of material culture were ordered into taxonomic systems on the implicit assumption that they represented factual, objective data providing confirmation of evolutionary tenets. Yet, as Howard Morphy has observed in his analysis of the typologies implemented in the Pitt-Rivers collection at Oxford, the inherent reflexivity of these collections worked in the opposite direction, to undercut assumptions of primitivism and the unilinear progress of civilization with a cultural relativity which suggested both the unity and diversity of human culture.³

Despite the major collections of material culture amassed by private collectors and institutions, during the following decades, interest in material culture waned. Tom Griffiths persuasively argues that 'The growing dichotomy between high and popular culture coincided in the first decades of the twentieth century with the height of social Darwinist influence in Australia ... [to give] particular authority to the Great Australian Silence.'⁴ With the establishment of the first Chair in Anthropology at Sydney University, functionalist anthropology emerged as a text-based, university discipline focused on the fieldwork and writings of the participant

observer. As evolutionism could no longer sustain academic respectability, anthropology came to view with increasing scepticism the objectivity previously thought to be embodied in collections of material culture. Aboriginal material culture disappeared from view.

As the considerable literature on primitivism makes clear, it was the visual affinities which modernists located between their own aesthetic ideologies and the objects produced by non-Western and indigenous cultures which went some way toward undercutting evolutionism. Nor were these correspondences necessarily restricted to those who ascribed to modernist tenets. As a major patron of the arts and a trustee of the Felton Bequest, Baldwin Spencer, Director of the National Museum of Victoria, was amongst the first to recognize the creativity of Aboriginal artists, drawing parallels with Japanese, Chinese and British artists on the basis of technical ability and realism.⁵

Primitivism was however betrayed by a paradox: Aborigines could be admired and romanticized as an exotic other but only when they were distanced in time and space from the modern world. 'Expectations of wholeness, continuity and essence have long been built into the linked Western ideas of culture and art' and in the response of both ethnographers and artists, authenticity was of paramount concern.⁶ For people 'without history', change was viewed negatively as evidence of acculturation and their capitulation to

capitalist forces.⁷ Also influential on the critical response to Aboriginal art was the growing concern with purism manifest in the new, scientific and biological discourses of Aboriginality which came to the fore by the turn of the century. As Nikos Papastergiadis observes, hybridity is one of the key axes through which discourses of purity and danger sustain positive and negative constructions of Aboriginality.⁸ When Baldwin Spencer stated in 1898 that 'In Victoria, there is not a single native who really knows anything of tribal customs,' he defined Aboriginal culture in a way that neatly coincided with government policies of integration and assimilation aimed at cultural genocide.⁹ By 1929, when the National Museum of Victoria staged the groundbreaking exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* the paradigmatic response was already in place: curatorial and critical responses recognized a regional cultural heritage from the past and art from remote communities but denied recognition for a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the southeast.

During the decades to follow, the very considerable achievements of nineteenth century artists such as William Barak, Tommy McRae and Mickey of Ulladulla were relegated to obscurity. When a fine art market for Aboriginal art emerged in the post war period, it was the art of remote communities, initially bark paintings from Arnhem Land and subsequently the acrylic 'dot painting' style initiated by Papunya Tula in the

Central Desert—but not, of course, the innovative watercolours pioneered by Albert Namatjira—which were acclaimed by the art world, arriving in the southern capitals 'trailing clouds of authentic (traditional) culture.'¹⁰ Recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal presence in the cities, waited until the landmark exhibition 'Koori Art '84' at Artspace, Sydney where the first generation of urban Koori artists including Fiona Foley, Trevor Nickolls, Lin Onus, Raymond Meeks, Avrill Quail and Gordon Syron showed with artists from Central Australia and Arnhem Land.

RECUPERATING CRAFT

In his analysis of the art/culture systems governing the collection and display of indigenous objects, James Clifford makes clear the categories which hierarchically differentiate between the objects produced by indigenous cultures. In his semantic square it is the authentic '(scientific) cultural artifacts ... [which will be promoted to the status of authentic (aesthetic) works of art. Other collectibles—mass-produced commodities, 'tourist art,' curios, and so on have been less systematically valued'.¹¹ Clifford concludes, that, within modernity, the categories and values imposed on indigenous objects always reflect 'the limits of ideological consciousness ... initial binary oppositions can, by the operation of negations and the appropriate syntheses, generate a much larger field of terms which, however, all

necessarily remain locked in the closure of the system.¹²

Craft, as art historian Sue Rowley observes, is 'everywhere, but also nowhere' in Clifford's semantic square.¹³ 'Historically, [she argues] the boundaries between art and craft are constructed discursively' through a series of dichotomous oppositions: if art is tied to modernity, rationality and progress, craft is systematically positioned as non-intellectual, conservative, and anti-modern.¹⁴ Equally the objects produced by these practices might be said to operate within different categories: whilst the unique art object produced by the artist/intellectual supports the myth of the avant garde, craft objects are, all too often, linked to the past, skill-based world of the rural artisan or, alternatively with indigenous cultures. Art/craft debates impinge on and are inflected through the wider social formations produced by the radical changes of modernity. Rowley points out that craft is defined as pre-modern precisely at the moment in time when modernism positions itself in relation to an emerging urbanized working class and the general commodification of mass culture. Moreover, as many writers in this field have argued, historical constructions of craft are inextricably linked to another social group and another arena of practice: within the domestic sphere of women, the time consuming labour of needlecraft becomes the quintessential symbol of femininity.¹⁵ Craft is thus categorically defined through its association with a

series of subordinate others: artisans, working classes, women and non-Western cultures.

Of course, it is a mistake to see discourses as totalizing: they are always constituted through an historical matrix. Clifford is not concerned with minority histories that take place at the level of everyday life, but with charting an institutional response—the view from the top down. He could be accused of failing to take account of Indigenous perspectives, local knowledges and the meanings that accrue in the process of cross cultural exchange. Nevertheless we need to trace the impact of these long-standing boundary disputes on the critical response to Aboriginal art. Howard Morphy recounts the situation at Yirrkala in the first decades of this century when missionaries viewed Yolngu handicraft 'not for its own sake but as an instrument of moral development and as a means to integration' within the wider community.¹⁶ In this instance, craft might be said to be positioned constructively within missionising discourses but in the critical response to the Hermannsburg watercolourists, modernists used craft pejoratively to imply a slippage toward the feminine and the commodification implied in the exchange with tourism.

In the changing response to Aboriginal productive endeavour, then, it is the shift from the artefact, operating like a metonym for a past, hunter-gatherer existence to the modernity implied in the art object, with all its associations with the

avant garde and authorial creativity which is privileged as a mark of progress. Caught in the space between these bounded categories, we see that craft will come to be positioned in antithesis to modernity, inevitably tied through its functional role and skill-based practices to ideas of 'tradition'—with all the difficulties that this term engenders for contemporary manifestations of indigenous cultural identity. The result is craft practices in remote communities are viewed as inherently more authentic than in the southern states. Contemporary revivals and reinventions may be scornfully evaluated as 'an echo of an earlier supplanted existence ... [and an] 'atrophied version of the way things were—a kind of Aboriginal Morris Dancing'—a critical response which defines Aboriginal subjects through the values attributed to their objects within dominant colonial discourses.¹⁷

A need exists then for a politics of representation for Indigenous craft practice. In place of any simple distinction between the use value of objects or their relationship to commodity exchange, I am concerned with the 'symbolic capital' that accrues around these objects and their significance in the politics of cultural identity at work in colonial regimes. Contributing to these debates Marian Pastor Roces draws upon linguistics to contrast the superficiality of the category 'art' with the layers of meanings cohering around the term, 'craft'.¹⁸ Craft's heterogeneity she argues, represents the

very means of recuperating an Indigenous presence by undoing the mechanisms at work in a multiplicity of modernisms: subjective, ideological and institutional. Thus, the idea of craft emerges as a practice of inter-textuality, whose traces, echoes and repetitions, restructure and refer to a 'pre-existing world of objects'. Craft is located outside institutional parameters, as a domain or estate which is simultaneously practice, concept and place. Within the domestic sphere, she suggests, craft lends meaning to objects through the layers of memory associated with individual and community identities; exchanged as a commodity in the public realm, craft mediates the social landscape between colonizers and colonized to contest imaginary formations of national identity. Craft thus becomes a means to renegotiating relationships between the tribal and the metropole. In an Australian context recuperating a politics of representation for craft straddles the gulf between Aborigines' historically distinctive experiences in remote, rural and urban settings.

NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY IN THE SOUTHEAST

Agnes Edwards, the first of the two artists with whom I am concerned here, was born at Mellool Station south of Swan Hill and, as a young woman, she married Harry Edwards from the nearby Muti Muti group. In recent years, as Aboriginal people in a spirit of self determination have themselves undertaken historical

Agnes Edwards, Speewa Camp 1920s

research, the precise details of Agnes Edwards' life—once taken as factual truths—have come to be questioned.¹⁹ Notwithstanding these revisions, Agnes Edwards remains a pivotal figure in the history of Swan Hill for both Aborigines and the wider community. With her introduction to Governor Hopetoun in the 1890s, Agnes Edwards attracted attention as the last of the 'full-blood' Aborigines in the region. Following her death in 1928, her status was such that a memorial was erected to Agnes Edwards as the 'Last Queen of the Moolpa Tribe' by the Australian Natives Association. Whilst such honours are appreciated by many, they are fraught with colonial ambivalence: by relegating Aborigines to the prehistory of white settlement they deny the presence of contemporary leaders and lend support for policies of

assimilation.²⁰

However my primary concern here is not with a reconstruction of Agnes Edwards' life but to place her cultural practice within a particular lived historical reality. In the latter part of her life, following the death of her husband in 1912, Agnes Edwards lived in a town camp improvised in the tradition of vernacular architecture from materials to hand: canvas, scrap timber and flattened four gallon tin drums. Typically such fringe camps were situated on the banks of rivers. Throughout the southeast rivers continue to represent a sustaining spiritual resource and a locus of cultural associations for Aboriginal people. Agnes Edwards' camp was no exception, sited on the Speewa anabranch of the Murray River in an area known colloquially as 'Black Aggie's Swamp'.

Traditionally town camps are a litmus to a bitter colonial history—the unwelcome outcome of racial politics that sought to exclude Aborigines from permanent residence in country towns. A more constructive response might recognize that, when that Aborigines chose to live in such camps, free from the restrictions and regimented life of missions and stations, they maintained a greater degree of dignity and autonomy. Indeed Peter Read's history of the Wiradjuri people argues that the fringe camps, formed in the southeast, in deliberate defiance of restrictive government policies and local bureaucracies, parallel and predate by several decades, similar homeland movements in remote communities.²¹

From conditions of relative poverty, and within historical conditions of racial discrimination and oppression, Agnes Edwards held a position of considerable respect through the invaluable contribution she made as a midwife to women in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of the landscape, Edwards was able to augment her income with the sale of produce such as fish, ducks, eggs and rabbits. And in addition she produced an extraordinary range of crafts: feather lures and feather flowers, rush baskets, embroidery and small draw-string purses made from the skin of water rats and much admired by women from the wider community. Through her initiatives Edwards achieved a considerable degree of independence. Jan

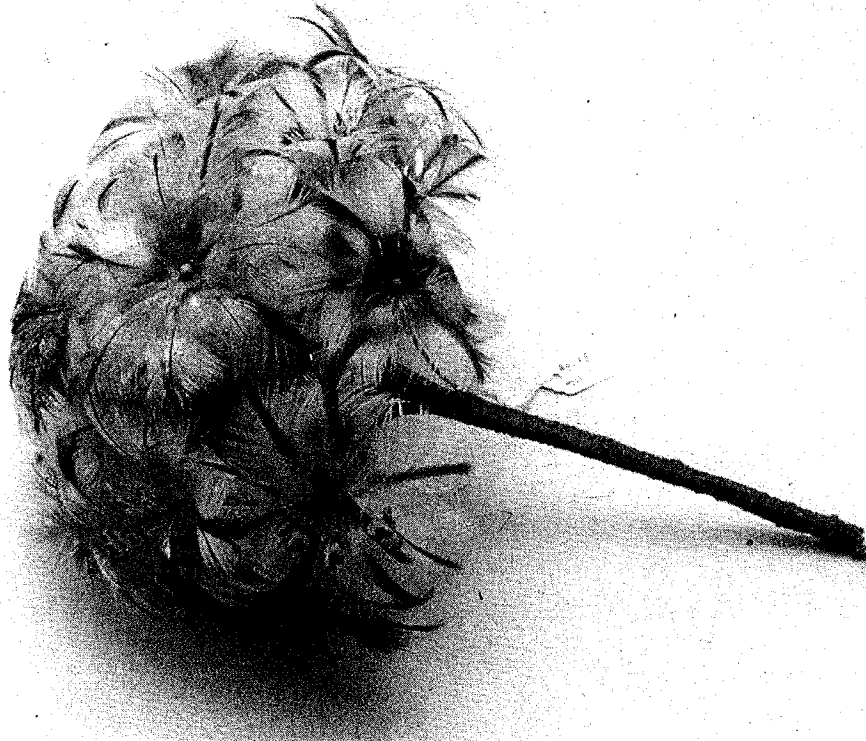
Penney records that she 'travelled in style in her buggy into Swan Hill every Saturday morning to sell her craft work and buy supplies'.²²

Through her extensive connections Agnes Edwards was able to maintain a circle of friends amongst women from the wider community. Operating from cultural values grounded in reciprocity, Edwards repaid their hospitality and kindness with gifts of fish, rabbits and feather flowers. In this way, by choosing to give food and objects which were highly esteemed and valued by their recipients, Aborigines incorporated members of the majority culture within their own exchange relations: gifts implicated individuals in future relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness. And when women displayed Aboriginal feather flowers as part of their domestic décor, they incorporated an Aboriginal aesthetic into their homes.

Until very recently cultural and collecting institutions have largely overlooked the fibre work of Aboriginal women—a bias attributable to the ephemeral nature of fibre objects and the androcentric nature of early anthropology. Recent studies have overturned these assumptions recognising that a fibre item, no less than a boomerang or bark painting, is incorporated within the systemic meanings of Aboriginal culture. Early ethnography records many instances of feathers used in a ritual context and as commodities for exchange. In the southeast, for example, Aborigines carried feather whisks and women wore *til-bur-nin* or feather aprons in dances.²³

Agnes Edwards, Feather Flowers, c.1920. 24.2 x 16 cm.

Mildura Arts Centre



Feathers also operated as signs for intertribal meetings: attached to spears, they signalled a challenge to other tribes; along the Murray River, white cockatoo feathers worn in the hair denoted peaceful intentions.

The feather flowers produced since the late nineteenth century emerge from these earlier contexts and occur throughout Australia modifying and transforming an existing set of practices in response to changed historical circumstances. Usually early collections of such objects are characterized by a lack of identifying provenance but in this instance, we are fortunate that the status accorded Agnes Edwards probably ensured that her feather flower posy, in the collection of the Mildura Arts Centre,

would be attributed. The posy typifies the feather flowers made by Aboriginal women in south eastern Australia with white and pink feathers from adult galahs and orange from young galahs bound together with the same looped buttonhole stitch used in coiled baskets and string bags from this region. Of course the difference is that, whereas feather flowers produced in remote communities continue to be used in ceremonial contexts, the feather flowers produced in the southeast for exchange as commodities fulfil a new role as decorative tableaux within the domestic sphere. Once denigrated as evidence of colonial dominance, such adaptations are better seen as a form of colonial mimicry: like the evident hybridity of Albert Namatjira's watercolours they are 'almost

the same but not quite'; selectively appropriating from a Western genre, but from an Aboriginal world view.²⁴

What roles did such crafts play in Aboriginal society? Talking with Wemba Wemba elder Nellie Moore, who grew up in the 1950s at Pinkeys, a fringe camp on the opposite side of the river in New South Wales opened up a rich store of memories. She fondly recalls her grandmother, Mary Moore, selling small and large posies of feather flowers for 7/6 and 10/- each in local stores— a not inconsiderable sum when compared with the £7 to £10 basic wage then earned by men working in the pastoral industry. Whilst Aborigines had long been incorporated within a colonial economy, the production of feather flowers, rush baskets, boomerangs and carved emu eggs enabled Aborigines to retain a greater degree of independence by allowing them to avoid a Protestant work ethic of disciplined, organized labour. The production of such items also served to reinforce the continuation of cultural traditions. As oral histories reveal, women played a significant role as the central focus of Aboriginal households: they maintained relations with kin, supported the family economically when men undertook itinerant employment and in these circumstances it was women who protected children from being taken away. As the story-tellers of the community, women relayed stories from an earlier hunter-gatherer lifestyle and their shared experience of colonial history, and in this way, reinforced the sense of belonging

which formed the basis of an Aboriginal sociality. Children's experiences were, of course, individual: whilst one may recall the feather flowers made as toys by an uncle, another will remember his mother's stern admonition to strip the feathers from birds he had hunted with a slingshot for later use in posies of feather flowers. Through such a wealth of experiences, embedded in memory, children acquired a strong sense of their cultural identity that enabled them to withstand the pressures imposed by a colonial society.

Feather flowers were not just a means of economic survival however, they were equally significant as a form of aesthetic expression. In our conversation Nellie Moore remarked,

They were for food, that was to buy the flour, tea, sugar and meat... to provide the food on the table. They use that as an art thing now and it's really not, it's an industry thing... It was something that they were good at doing and to say that they done that and they got a joy out of making that ... [Before] it was a decoration for corroborees [but in the fringe camps] we had nothing so we had to have something to look at ... If someone made a feather flower they might've gone out and got a crane [feather] 'Oh how beautiful.' you'd say because you never seen anything like that. Even if someone made a dress you know, they sewed it themselves. They did the embroidery stitching and the stitching was so fine my mum used to do, it looked like it was done by machine ... and all the jumpers used to be hand knitted ... because you never had those decorations you've got

now ... where you lived on the river bank
you had nothing, you just had the bare
essentials [so we'd] go and get gum leaves
[and put feather flowers in the hut].²⁵

Nellie Moore's narrative adds to our understanding of the roles which craft practices played in the lives of Aboriginal families: economic, aesthetic, and political. Situated within their regional domain, fringe camps offered Aborigines a degree of autonomy within a colonial realm where they were able to live with relative independence maintaining many elements of a small-scale society. In this setting, the landscape provided some compensation; mediating continuities with the past, feather flowers mitigated the present. Aboriginal people may choose to deny the hybridity of their cultural practices through statements such as 'We've always done things this way' but Nellie Moore elects to historicize the cultural production of feather flowers, differentiating between their use in a variety of contexts; as part of ceremonial life, as an industry and as an art form.

Philip Clarke's research amongst Ngarrindjeri at Raukkan (Point McLeay) supports this interpretation. Despite state intervention aimed at modifying Aboriginal culture by changing its perception of time and space, he found that Aboriginal extended families tend to use the rooms in their homes as public spaces, decorating the interior in a culturally distinctive way.

Many homes of Aboriginal people I have

visited feature large displays of family photographs on walls and in china cabinets. Often, objects such as clubs, boomerangs, sedge mats and baskets, feather flowers, painted stones, trophies and certificates, also decorate the rooms. The economics of decorating the home means that generally the objects must either be inexpensive or have been made by the owner or a relative. Most Aboriginal families take considerable pride in exhibiting a selection of objects that proclaim their Aboriginality. Household items associated with the pre-European material culture of the Lower Murray are considered to represent their links to the past Ngarrindjeri culture. For instance, Aboriginal visitors to houses of other community members may remark, when inspecting a sedge mat hanging on the wall or a bunch of feather flowers in a vase, that a particular ancestor of the maker was also a good basket-maker or feather-flower maker. Continuity with the past is stressed by Aboriginal people through knowledge of their kinship. Both objects and photographs are used to demonstrate that people 'know their culture'. In many Aboriginal homes, the decoration openly reflects how Aboriginal people perceive their Aboriginality, in both the local and national arenas.²⁶

Clarke's observations suggest the multiple roles fulfilled by Aboriginal craft practices within a domestic space where displays of heirlooms are emblematic of the past through the collective memory associated with individuals and their location within contact history. Like Marian Pastor Roces, Clarke suggests that these commodities

bridge the gap between private, localized experiences of ethnicity and the symbolic realm brought into play in the public arena in association with the more politicized affirmations of Aboriginality which emerged in association with the land rights movements of the 1970s. I turn now to this more contemporary era.

ABORIGINES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The work of the Wiradjuri artist, Sam Kirby, further suggests how craft practices in the rural southeast might serve to objectify identity as both a private and public affirmation of ethnicity. Born in 1901, Sam Kirby was taken into care at the infamous Kinchellah Home near Kempsey, New South Wales. When he subsequently returned to Wiradjuri territory in his youth, he was fortunate to be brought up by his adoptive uncle, Alf 'Knocker' Williams with whom he worked in the pastoral industry. Undoubtedly the experience of institutionalisation caused alienation and trauma to Aboriginal children denying them access to their families and wider bonds of sociality with the Aboriginal community but allowance also needs to be made for processes of compensation and adjustment. Parallels with the Kimberley artist, Rover Thomas, further demonstrate how involvement in the pastoral industry could assist in the maintenance and extension of cultural knowledge: as men followed the cattle from one waterhole to another, they maintained connection with the 'mura' or Dreaming Tracks.

Boomerangs feature as one of the primary objects Kirby produced. For Aborigines in the southeast, the returning boomerang is invested with symbolic power as part of their distinctive regional heritage—despite its appropriation as a national icon. The wooden artefacts for which the southeast gained renown in the nineteenth century were engraved in complex compositions of chevrons, lozenges and zigzags distinctive to different regions—designs which empowered warriors and gave them identity and status in their community. Equally the finely crafted pokerworked boomerangs produced by Kirby in the 1960s and 1970s, fulfil a not dissimilar role as a contemporary expression of identity and difference within a colonial regime. Although some evidence exist for Aboriginal burnt designs in artefacts, the pokerwork technique employed by Sam Kirby derives from several sources: encouraged by nineteenth century missions, intrinsic to the pastoral industry where it served as a means of branding animals and identifying personal equipment and a popular form of folk art amongst turn-of-the-century itinerant workers.

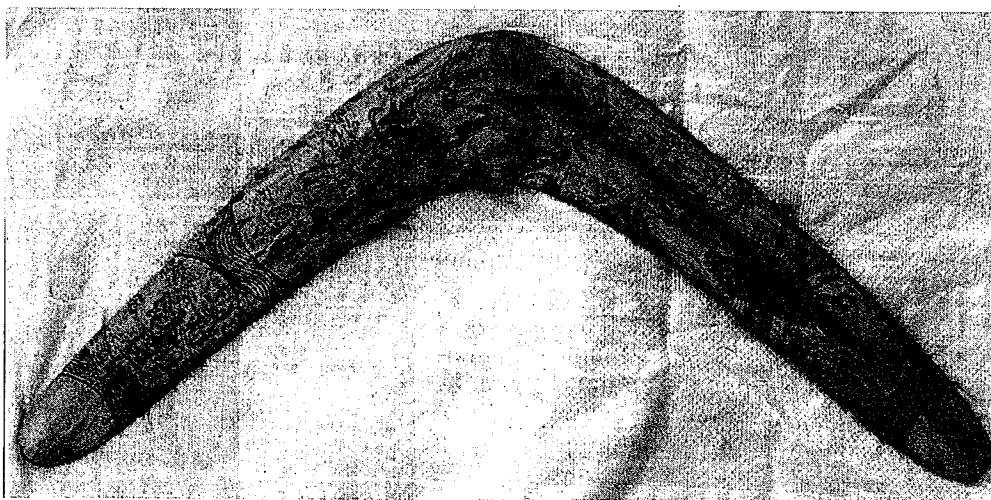
Typically Kirby divides his boomerangs symmetrically with four pairs of concave arcs engraved with geometric forms denoting his Wiradjuri domain. These paired elements, reminiscent of the carved trees unique to the region, are interwoven with the flora and fauna to represent a cultural landscape. In the most prominent

position, at the apex of the boomerang, Kirby depicts the Australian continent with his leitmotif of hands clasped in friendship superimposed. Across the map of Australia and inside the boomerang Kirby has engraved the text, 'Australia, Friendship, No colour bar'.

In one sense the boomerang can be seen to affirm Kirby's ongoing spiritual connections to landscape as an embodiment of identity. Operating both as an artefact and art object the boomerang reaffirms Indigenous connections to country established over millennia prior to colonisation. For Aborigines in the southeast, landscape is power: inscribed with the presence of ancestral stories, shared communal experiences and the relation of individuals to particular historical events and sites. The boomerang also reads as a sign of Aborigines' political struggles for civil rights and representation, reappropriating the symbols of the nation state in the fight for freedom, equality and justice. The particular

circumstances in which this boomerang was manufactured and presented as a gift to Greek born Alick Jackomos, a lifelong supporter of the Aboriginal cause, soon after his arrival in Swan Hill as Aboriginal Welfare Officer also bear scrutiny. That the boomerang was presented as a gift in 1967, the year of the successful Commonwealth Referendum granting citizenship to all Aborigines, highlights the significance of such objects in exchange relations and their symbolic role as an expression of individual and community identity at a time of changing Aboriginal consciousness.

Reprise, rather than originality, characterizes Aboriginal craft. Driven by an Aboriginal world view, key themes recur. As Janet Wolff points out, the emphasis placed upon individual creativity in the West tends to skew our understanding, but cultural production is more usefully thought of as an ongoing collaborative process where meanings accrue over time and space. Artists and their audiences are



Sam Kirby boomerang 1967, 8.3 x 52.0 cm. Private Collection.

involved in cyclic relationships.²⁷ Contrary to modernist conceptions of development and progress, Bennetta Jules-Rossette's study of tourist art in Africa found meanings flowing in a cyclic pattern: commodities embody particular values for the community concerned; in exchange they signal a further range of meanings and in turn, artists respond to, and mirror, the expectations of consumers.²⁸ In craft practice repetition of content and style, serves to relocate art in the public realm and enables audiences to engage as receivers and respondents.

It is not surprising that Kirby's carved emu eggs encode the same sign system. Echoing the symmetry found in his boomerangs, the emu eggs are divided bilaterally with his totem of the Morning Star at the top and particular plants either side. Frequently the darker side of the egg will depict a lone Aborigine fishing in the river surrounded by animals, birds and dense forest whilst the lighter side might represent a founding image from colonial history such as the arrival of Cook in Botany Bay superimposed across the continent of Australia with linked friendship hands and heraldic Aboriginal artefacts beneath—the entire illusion of reality carved through the layers of hard, brittle shell with consummate skill.

The idealized image of the Aborigine as 'noble savage' forms a recurring theme throughout Wiradjuri art appropriated from the colonial stereotypes available through school texts and the popular

illustrated press. In the past anthropologists have dismissed such nostalgia as an illusion: writes Marie Reay, 'without hope for a different future, [Aborigines] look backwards to a Golden Age which is believed to have existed in living memory.'²⁹ But the 'culture of poverty' position she and others have adopted denies the historical consciousness of Aborigines in the south east, and their many creative adaptations in the face of rapid cultural change. There is indeed an element of nostalgia in the work of Kirby however this does not necessarily invalidate Wiradjuri art as inauthentic. Nadia Seremetakis, writing on the part played by the senses in the construction of material culture as historiographic space, takes issue with the tragic and negative associations invoked by the Western idea of nostalgia as a sickness or *maladie du pays*.³⁰ Like Marian Pastor Roces she offers a constructive reading of nostalgia as a means of enframing the past. In this instance, the trope of the Aborigine as noble savage operates as an enabling device: a representation which empowered Wiradjuri by sustaining continuity with the past during a period of continuing discrimination and oppression.

Equally the image of Cook arriving in Botany Bay must be located within the growing corpus of Aboriginal stories which surround key figures from colonial history, Queen Victoria, Captain Cook and Ned Kelly. As Deborah Bird Rose makes clear through her analysis of these stories

'each individual's lived experience is both personal and shared; each person's past is both unique and collective.'³¹ She contends that the Captain Cook stories relayed by Hobbles Danayari of the Yarralin people, address the moral relationships produced by the act of dispossession, drawing attention to the gap which exists between the rhetoric of assimilation and the myths of egalitarianism which underpin an Australian ethos.³² In Lacanian terms sites such as Botany Bay are overdetermined,

burdened with 'a double meaning'... standing at the same time for 'a conflict long dead' and 'a present conflict' —that is, for that process of condensation and displacement' which occurs through the ideological contradictions incorporated within a colonial context.³³ Through his representation of the Endeavour's arrival in Sydney Harbour Kirby 'reclaim[s]...social and cultural identity through an appropriation of the moment in which lived experience is symbiotically linked with time and others.'³⁴ Set against

glorious images of clouds, billowing sails and rolling waves, time is mobile, both past and present. In some images Cook's arrival is located in the past with Aborigines watching from the foreshore; in others his arrival is pursued into the present as when the Endeavour passes before a lighthouse. Kirby's work plays upon a deliberate ambiguity. Through his appropriation of historical narratives and emblems of the nation state Kirby appears to reaffirm settler colonial narrative of identity. But in reality he subverts these narratives, retelling the story from below, drawing attention to the gap between the rhetoric and reality of the universal democratic ideals of equality and freedom and



Sam Kirby carving an emu egg c. 1975

the exclusion of Aborigines from representation in the modern nation state.

REFRAMING CRAFT

Despite the widespread acclaim and recognition for contemporary Aboriginal art it is evident that, in the paradigmatic shift from ethnographic artefact to art object, art world systems have revalued Aboriginal objects according to their own aesthetic criteria. In the binary division which prevails between traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art, there is a sense in which the critical, curatorial and scholarly responses have overlooked a colonial context for Aboriginal art. By arguing for a craft problematic, this paper intervenes in these long-standing boundary disputes. In place of the evolutionary assumptions that relegate craft practice to the unfashionable periphery of cultural production as an anachronistic and conservative residue of the past, the minority history I have examined calls for a social history of Aboriginal art arising from the colonial dialogue between black and white.

Identifying the hidden history of regional Australia establishes the cultural continuity of the southeast. Aborigines in the south east are not the hapless victims of colonial stereotypes. Like Aborigines elsewhere, experiencing radical change, Aborigines in the southeast drew upon the landscape as a spiritual and economic resource and a means of adjustment and adaptation that allowed for the

transformations effected by historical change. In the personal philosophies of practice articulated through these artefacts, Aboriginal culture is performed not just conceptualized. It is culturally constituted through the actions which actively link individuals to their community through a particular lived relationship to reality. The Aborigines with whom I am concerned are not in some way separated from the experience of modernity. Rather we see how craft practices represent a strategic intervention at the level of everyday life, that enabled Aborigines to incorporate an emerging Aboriginal nationalism. At a time when assimilation made any overt display of Aboriginality well nigh impossible, it seems craft practices had the effect of breaking down barriers, insouciantly slipping past the discrimination and oppression encountered in the wider community to enter the national consciousness.

The history of craft practice I have examined has both historical and contemporary significance. Contemporary Koori art from the cities did not emerge out of nowhere fully formed as a post colonial expression of resistance. Its origins lie in ancestral connections to country, in a cultural heritage forged against the grain of colonial history and in the land rights movements of the 1970s. Elaborating upon this background in greater detail, a great many urban Aboriginal artists including Fiona Foley, Robert Campbell Jnr, Lin Onus, and Ian W

Abdulla have remarked that it was their experiences as children observing and participating in the production, decoration and display of artefacts with family members that provided them with a strong sense of their Aboriginality. It is ironic that involvement with the production of tourist souvenirs—viewed with disdain by art world systems—contributed to the strong and abiding sense of cultural identity that enabled Aborigines to survive generations of oppression and discrimination. In the south east as in remote communities, what Peter Wollen terms 'para tourist art' provided Aborigines with the opportunity to expand the 'ambition, complexity and scope of their work' through new institutional structures of support that were 'ambiguously enabling and supporting'.³⁵ Craft practices provided the platform for a contemporary Aboriginal artistic expression.

Dismantling the hierarchies dividing art/craft, artefact /fine art and fine /popular culture allows for a more open ended dialogue about discourses of Aboriginality. Yet despite institutional initiatives dedicated to a more dynamic and inclusive representation of Aboriginal culture, the majority of public collections remain focused on canonical works of art. In the past, cultural commentators have called for the inclusion of acrylic 'dot paintings' in museum collections, equally we might call for the greater inclusion of Aboriginal crafts in the collections of art galleries. Such a curatorial strategy would not be

restricted to a few key works but take the form of a radical intervention at all levels of the collection. Such a program might offer the opportunity for a critical rethinking of the frames which implicitly govern collecting and exhibition policies of art institutions. If, as Dipesh Chakrabarty commented in an earlier issue of this journal, 'History is a subject primarily concerned with the crafting of narratives' then inserting minority histories of craft practice into the collection and exhibition program of public galleries intervenes in the narratives of progress that inform discourses of Aboriginality.³⁶ A more creative and imaginative history of Aboriginal art would give voice to the heterogeneity of Aborigines' distinctive historical experiences and their political struggles for recognition. In this more complicated and contested picture of Aboriginal creative endeavour, a bark painting, an acrylic dot painting, an urban installation and a pokerworked boomerang represent different, but equally significant expressions of cultural identity and difference. ∞

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