

## A journey from Dreamtime to Machine Time: Australian history through the eyes of Australian Indigenous artists

DI YERBURY\*

### Resumo

Di Yerbury colecciona arte Australiana há cerca de 30 anos, tendo iniciado a sua colecção de arte indígena em meados de década de 80 quando era presidente do Conselho Australiano, do qual a Direcção de Artes Aborígenes faz parte. Desde então, Yerbury reuniu uma das mais reputadas colecções privadas australianas de arte indígena. Em 1992, por ocasião do Jubileu de Prata da Universidade de Macquarie (Nova Gales do Sul), da qual é Reitora desde 1987, Yerbury doou 25 obras aborígenes à Universidade. Esta doação deu início à colecção de arte aborígene da Universidade de Macquarie. As obras da colecção Yerbury/Macquarie estão permanentemente expostas na Galeria de Arte da Universidade, bem como em outros locais do campus, tendo constituído a base de uma exposição itinerante por ocasião dos jogos olímpicos de Sydney em 2000. A conferência anual do Comité Internacional do ICOM para os museus e colecções universitárias (UMAC) iniciou-se com uma visita à colecção, guiada por Di Yerbury, na qual este artigo se baseou. A expressão 'From Dreamtime to Machine Time' [em tradução literal 'Do Tempo do Sonho ao Tempo da Máquina'] é de Trevor Nichols, um dos artistas que representou a Austrália na Bienal de Veneza de 1990. Este artigo traça os principais aspectos da história australiana desde a época da 'criação', através dos olhos de alguns dos artistas representados na colecção Yerbury/Macquarie.

### Abstract

Di Yerbury, a collector of Australian art for 30 years, started collecting Indigenous art in the mid-1980s as CEO of the Australia Council of which the Aboriginal Arts Board was part. She has since built one of Australia's best-known private collections of Indigenous art. In 1992 she donated 25 Aboriginal artworks to Macquarie University, whose Vice-Chancellor and President she has been since 1987, to celebrate its Silver Jubilee, starting Macquarie's own Indigenous collection. Works from the combined Yerbury/Macquarie collections, displayed annually in the Macquarie University Art Gallery and elsewhere on campus, were the basis of a travelling exhibition to mark the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and the planned (later deferred) Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2001. In October 2002, the second international conference of ICOM's UMAC opened at Macquarie with an exhibition from the collections and a floor-talk by Yerbury on which this paper is based. The term 'From Dreamtime to Machine Time', is borrowed from Trevor Nicholls whose series of paintings with that theme represented Australia in the 1990 Venice Biennale. The paper relates aspects of Australian history from the time of Creation, viewed through the eyes of some of the very diverse Indigenous artists represented in the collections.

Thousands of years ago, long before Europeans set foot in Australia, Aborigines painted in caves, and on bark, in natural ochres and clays. In the Judaic-Christian culture, the Old Testament of the Bible tells how God created the world in six days. The Indigenous peoples of Australia – and there were more than 500 nations (or language groups or clans) prior to colonisation – did not have written languages. They conveyed their 'Creation stories' or 'Dreamings'<sup>1</sup> through oral story-telling, passed

down from one generation to another, in re-enactments and sacred ceremonies and in their cave paintings. For example, the Gunwinggu people of the Oenpelli area, a small community in Western Arnhem Land, painted stories of the Ancestor Beings who, having travelled over what was previously flat, featureless earth, created the land, its rivers, mountains, gorges and waterholes; the food and drink sources it provides; and the people who inhabit it. The land is imbued with their spirit. They also

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<sup>1</sup> While 'the Dreamtime' refers to a particular time, 'the Dreaming' comprises a continuing cultural and spiritual process. 'Dreamings' or 'stories/Creation stories' are told and painted of the history, passed-down knowledge and spiritual beliefs of the language groups or clans in Australia prior to colonisation, each using distinct dialects, body designs and rituals.

provided the laws, the customs, the culture and the ceremonies. It is this period of creation which is called the Dreamtime.

At the end of the Dreamtime, these Ancestral Beings abandoned their human forms and became Totemic Spirits such as Rainbow Serpents, the Spirit Beings that appear as snakes, residing in the waterholes, in the gorges and between the rock-faces. The Gunwinggu painted their Totemic Spirits, recounting events important in their culture, or relating the roles the Spirit Beings played in the community, or calling on them to continue to provide rain and the foods it brings to the land, or to ensure that there were animals for hunting. They accompanied their religious ceremonies with sacred music and rituals, and painted their faces and bodies with traditional designs.

The Yerbury/Macquarie collections<sup>2</sup> include a large-scale (1992) painting from Ramingining, a township in Arnhem Land, by Johnny Lewangu, about Garrtjambal the kangaroo who travelled from the Roper River area. Every time the kangaroo stopped, wild dogs - dingos - chased him on until, after following the creek, he jumped to Ramingining where he left his tail before travelling further west; and his tail metamorphosed into rocks. Parts of Garrtjambal represent different features of the landscape – for example, his head represents a hill to the north-east – as do the spiny anteater and the goanna. There is a male figure in the painting, who aims his spear at the throat of Garrtjambal: he represents the creation of the first human (Yerbury 2000).

One of the traditional art styles was (and still is, in places such as Oenpelli and Ramingining) what people often term 'x-ray art', where the internal organs and backbone of the creatures are highlighted, especially the edible parts in the case of animals hunted for food. Mimi Spirits, the long elongated spirits (whose thinness enables them to live in the cracks of rocks), seen on television screens across the world as

portrayed by Aboriginal dance companies in the Australian celebrations welcoming the year 2000, are depicted on the rock walls of Western Arnhem Land. Kakadu bark paintings also incorporate their images in narrative art.

In one of the two important barks in the collection by Yirawala (1903-1978) from Western Arnhem Land, *Kangaroo Increase Ritual* (c. 1970), male dancers perform the Dreaming story about the death of Kundaagi, the red plains kangaroo who was killed and eaten by the Mimi people. The old kangaroo mother made the first Lorrngon ceremony for her son, and sanctions the ceremony today when a man dies, to release the new ghost to travel back to its home country where it will dwell with other spirits. Yirawala's bark, *Maraitan Ceremony* (c. 1970), depicts the Ancestral Beings with the new ghost after the ceremony<sup>3</sup>.

England Bengala (born c. 1925) paints the Wangarra Spirits in a series of barks (1985) from Eastern Arnhem Land. These dangerous spirits inhabit his father's country at Bopalinmarra. As the artist narrates:

"This spirit one Wangarra, he lives in the jungle or in the water in Dreaming House [...] He can easily kill you [...] only clever men like me can talk to him. I can give him trick. I'll tell you one story from this cheeky Wangarra. He was stealing one boy from my camp, his name was Namandarra. That Wangarra took him to the jungle, he was there for two days. They tried to teach him clever tricks but I know that Wangarra and I went to the jungle and called for that boy. He came back with turtle, freshwater one, and I knew that Wangarra put those tricks inside that turtle. I killed the turtle and the boy was so sick, but he's alright now"<sup>4</sup>.

The collections include a carving of *Baru*, the ancestral crocodile spirit by Watjinpu Marawili (c.

<sup>2</sup> Selected items from the collections are reproduced and discussed by ISAACS (2000) and MUNDINE (2000).

<sup>3</sup> © stories by Sandra Holmes, reproduced with permission in YERBURY (2000: 20-21).

<sup>4</sup> Story supplied to the author with the painting.

1937–2000) from Yirrkala in Eastern Arnhem Land. It displays the crosshatching design which depicts fire, related to the Dreaming story of how, through the actions of some fishermen and the sacred crocodile, fire entered the sea and was brought to the land and the people during the Dreamtime (ISAACS 2000: 7).

The origins of human mortality are central to Tiwi culture. A double-sided ironwood carving with resin, feathers and natural earth pigments by Enraeld Djulabinyanna Munkara (1885-1968), collected by Dorothy Bennett from Melville Island (north of Darwin, Northern Territory) in 1957, represents the creator-ancestor Purukapali on one side and his wife Bima, later known as Wai'ai, on the other. They are the god figures in the Pukamani religious stories of the Tiwi people who, until the tragedy which beset the ancestor and his family, were all immortal. Purukapali's brother Tapara is also represented in the collections by a carving (c. 1955) by the same artist. He seduced Bima, whose son Jinaini died in the hot sun while she was committing adultery. The bird Tokampini, weeping, brought the news of his son's death to Purakapali. Bima ran away, followed by the angry pelicans who hissed and pecked at her. Purakapali fought with his brother, inflicting serious wounds: he escaped by climbing to the sky and becoming the Moon-Man, with help from his mother, the Moon. She promised Purakapali that, if he would give her the dead baby, she would make him alive – but only when the moon was full. Mad with rage and grief, the father refused, declaring that henceforth everyone, like his son, would die. He made the first Pukamani (funeral) ceremony for Jinaini then, weeping for his son, waded out to sea to follow him by drowning himself. Bima (Wai-ai) turned into a curlew, in which form she still roams at night, wailing with grief and remorse.

The Pukamani funeral rites include the erection of carved and painted graveposts, of which there are fine examples on display at the University, along with a massive carving of the pelican.

The Kimberley region in the north-west of Australia is home to the rock paintings of the Wandjina

ancestral spirits and the very different 'Bradshaw' figures, so-termed after the European who first recorded them – or 'Gjorn-Gjorns', as the Mowanjum artists term them. The Wandjinas came out of the sky and the sea, bringing the rains, lightning and other elements. They created the animals and the baby spirits that reside in sacred *ungud* places throughout the Kimberleys and they continue to control all that happens on land and in the sky and sea.

There are different versions of the origins of Gjorn-Gjorns, some Europeans hypothesising that they are not Aboriginal figures at all but from some different, even earlier culture. They are slender, dancing creatures, and Donny Woolagoodja (born 1947), explains about his work *Lulim* (2002), that 'they were the first people who came along before the Wandjina' and that they created corroborees for the people. Lulim was the wife of Namarali, the Wandjina depicted in the artist's huge montage at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. His father, the late Sam Woolagoodja, an eminent Worora leader and law man, explained the Wandjina image, with its round white face and huge body: "their power is so great that they don't need to speak, so they have no mouth. Their eyes are powerful and black, like the eye of a cyclone. The lines around a Wandjina's head can mean lots of things – clouds, rain, lightning. The Wandjinas painted their own images on the cave walls before they returned to the spirit world" (quoted in the catalogue *Spirit of the Wandjina; Mowanjum artists of the Kimberley* [2002]).

He also recounted the story of Namarali's death and his burial on a rock platform. He was pursuing the elusive rock cod when his group told him that some other Wandjinas had taken his wife. Namarali chased them and knocked them down, but was fatally speared. "His group carried him away, made the tree platform where his grave is and painted him on the rocks. The people must use the burial platform because the Wandjina used it: that fellow made the law for the dead bodies" (cited in CRAWFORD 1968: 56).

The Warmun community in the eastern Kimberleys at Turkey Creek have also been the focal point of a

major art movement. It was Christmas Day 1974 when a tropical cyclone named Tracy devastated Darwin. Rover Thomas (c. 1926-1998), a Kukatja/Wangkajunga man at Turkey Creek, had a dream visitation from the spirit of a female relative who had died in an aircraft taking her to a Perth hospital after a car crash. As she died, the aeroplane flew over a whirlpool in the Indian Ocean, which is home to a Rainbow Serpent called *Juntarkal*. The stories of the travels of the dead woman's spirit from the whirlpool to Turkey Creek where she was born, accompanied by the spirit of another long-dead woman, came to Thomas in a *palga*, or narrative dance/song cycle, called the *Kuril Kuril*. The performance of the *palga* involved painted boards with images of Darwin and the cyclone (CARUANA 1993: 166-7).

The collections include Thomas' large 1995 painting of Cyclone Tracy. He began painting *Kuril Kuril* emblems from 1981, including the cyclone which he painted as a massive black form advancing on Darwin, outlined with white dots, and surrounded by lesser winds extending out from the menacing black mass in natural ochres. In 1990, along with Trevor Nicholls, Thomas represented Australia at the Venice Biennale.

The collections are strong in dot paintings by several internationally acclaimed artists from Papunya, a small township in the Western Desert created by the Honey Ant Ancestor. A young European art teacher, Geoff Bardon, took a job in the Papunya School in 1971 and was influential in stimulating the local artists to transfer their traditional designs, images and Dreamings on to wood (and, later, canvas).

Yardsmen such as Long Jack Philipus Tjakamarra (1932-1993) and Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri (born 1925), represented in the collections respectively by *Rain Mythology* (1981) and *Rainbow Serpent* (1988), and other artists were given permission by the elder and custodian of the Honey Ant Dreaming, Old Tom Onion Tjapangati, to paint a mural with Bardon on the school walls. Initially the artists used crushed ochres, clay and charcoal mixed with glue to make

the colours stick to hardboard sheets supplied by Bardon. Later they used synthetic paints although limiting the range of colours. They formed the Papunya Tula Artists Co-operative, still focusing on the land, what is on it, and stories about it, and continuing to use the visual vocabulary such as the dotted concentric circles from their traditional designs.

Another Papunya artist, Turkey Tolson (1942-2001), painted *Two Women Dreaming* (1981) about the rockhole site of Putja where women played the leaf game *Munni Munni*, with sand designs, leaf arrangements and songs, and decorated their bodies for the Yawulya ceremonies, believed to attract eligible men<sup>5</sup>.

*Fish Dreaming* (1986) by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1943-2002), is about a site north of Napperby station. Sinuous lines of dots show floodwaters flowing across the land; the central areas are the higher ground in the river bed; the white shapes are the darting fish. Clifford Possum told the story: "We call'm fish. He sleeping on water and wet sand. This kind and another one with a big tail. At Napperby. From the creek. Sometimes, at big storm time, they come out. How come? Really big ones. Just appear from nowhere after storm. We cook on the fire" (JOHNSON 1994: 16). He explained how there used always to be fish in the water hole until one day a magpie from Mt Allen flew over to it and ordered the fish out: "[...] he tell'm all the fish, 'Get outta here! Get out of that you mob!' All the fish get out; go to running water, at Hermannsburg. But when it rains they come back" (JOHNSON 1994: 16).

Dot paintings, albeit with different styles, designs and symbols, are also characteristic of the Anmatyerre and Alyawarre artists in Utopia in the eastern part of central Australia. The Queensland Art Gallery initiated the first national touring retrospective for an Aboriginal artist in 1998, paying tribute to the senior Utopian artist, Emily Kame Kngwarreye (1910-1996), in *Alkalkere: Paintings from Utopia*. By the time she became a painter, she was already in her seventies, an

<sup>5</sup> © Papunya Tula Artists, reproduced with permission in YERBURY (2000).

elder and leader of women's ceremonies. The progress of her contact with white culture from 'wild black' in her youth and member of a displaced minority; a domestic worker; a custodian of stories; a land rights spokeswoman; then, finally, a leading artist, itself represents a wide sweep of Australian history. The collections are enhanced by her large, characteristic and very beautiful *Anooralya: My Story* (1991).

The 1970s brought radical changes to the lives of Aboriginal people with Land Rights legislation. Utopia Station was acquired by the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission in 1976 for the Utopia community and in 1977 the dispossessed people began to move back. The artist, along with other Utopian women, played a key role in the 1979 Land Claim Hearing, significant as the first successful land rights claim.

Oodgeroo (1920-1993) of the Clan Noonuccal of Stradbroke Island, better known to many as the poet and activist Kath Walker before she changed her name to a traditional Aboriginal name for the paperbark eucalyptus, was a poet, painter, tribal elder, activist, role model and actor (winning praise for her role in *The Fringe Dwellers*). Several of her works on paper, the subject of a book in 1985, are now in the Yerbury/Macquarie collections.

Oodgeroo explained one of the drawings thus: "[...] Snakes lay eggs and I have often wondered: if I cut this egg just before the birth, what would it look like inside? Of course I would never do that to a snake's egg. But this is my interpretation of what I would see, if I dared to interfere with Nature in that way. I won't do it, but I'll draw it! So there is the baby snake with the different kinds of skin around and the yolk" (BEIER 1985: 54)<sup>6</sup>.

In her address at the conferral of an honorary doctorate by Macquarie in 1988, Oodgeroo ended with a stirring exhortation:

"[...] a multi-cultural society can only successfully occur in this country when

seventh-generation Australians recognise the Aboriginal culture. No change will or can occur until the theft of Aboriginal land and the enslaving and slaughter are redressed and compensated. This Aboriginal land will never accept and will always be alien to any race who dares try enslave her. Aborigines will always be the custodians of their traditional lands, regardless of any other enforced law system, for the land is our mother. Aborigines cannot own her, for she owns us".

There is still much to be reconciled in Australia between Indigenous people and later arrivals; and the year 2000 was proclaimed nation-wide as Reconciliation Year. The Queensland Art Gallery's national touring retrospective, *Urban Dingo: the Art of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, was conceived as its own contribution to Reconciliation. It was a fitting tribute to Lin Onus, a leading artist of wit and humour as well as wry social observation<sup>7</sup>.

Of Yorta Yorta and Scottish descent, he commenced painting in 1974 and was largely self-taught. His early work included photorealist landscapes inspired by the valleys, ferns and creeks of Sherbrooke Forest in Victoria, where he lived for three decades until his untimely death. In 1986, as Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board, he made a visit to Maningrida in Arnhem Land. There he experienced the local Aborigines' depth of knowledge, the value systems about their land and the importance of traditional symbols, pattern and design. He also saw daily the degradation of much contemporary Aboriginal life – petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse, and other forms of dysfunction. It affected him deeply and he began to change direction in his art, meanwhile returning over and over again to Arnhem Land.

Onus' fusion of styles is very apparent in his *Garmadi Dreaming* (1986). A cat, along with a transistor radio and a rifle, these three non-traditional features being painted in European style, are juxtaposed against a

<sup>6</sup> The story cited is reproduced with permission in YERBURY (2000).

<sup>7</sup> *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, Catalogue for the National Touring Exhibition, published by Queensland Art Gallery, 2000: Curator Margo Neale.

landscape, painted in similar visual language – fine diagonal crosshatching – to that used by Maningrida artists to depict landscape on bark.

Onus tackled tough subjects, but in a way that attracts support from, rather than alienating the non-Indigenous viewer. He built in imagery from both white Australian and Aboriginal culture to bridge the gap between the two: neither culture gets lost in this approach.

The collections also include his famous portrait (1988) of Djon Mundine, one of Australia's leading curators of Aboriginal art. Mundine was asked to curate an Aboriginal art installation to mark the Bicentenary of European settlement in 1988. He brought together an extraordinary collection (now installed in the National Gallery of Australia) of 200 hollow log coffins of the type used for reburial ceremonies in Arnhem Land, in front of which he is seated in the portrait (at the University too, the portrait is displayed with log coffins). The artists participating in the installation were commemorating the Indigenous people who had died during the years of white settlement without traditional funeral rituals.

The story of the arrival of Captain Cook, the colonisation and the associated massacres and other injustices are the focus of a number of artists represented in the collections. Harry Wedge's *Breakaway* (1998) also focuses on those who died without proper rituals being observed:

"[...] They tried to wipe them all out. After they killed these people, they got convicts to dig trenches, ditches where they threw the bodies and buried them. Soldiers doing their job, chucking the bodies in – women, children. ... These things have got to be brought out in the open. They should not be locked away. Cause I know that people keep diaries or whatever they were told to do at the time. These [my people] are trapped. Their spirits can't rest. That's why I feel this country is haunted. These spirits

break away from the world where they are trapped, showing themselves maybe to try to show people where they are buried so their spirit can be free. They don't want to be trapped anymore"<sup>8</sup>.

The late Robert Campbell Jr (1944-1993) was born in Kempsey and left school at fourteen. In the 1950s he used to help his father, a well-known boomerang-maker, by drawing designs of kangaroos, other animals and birds for the boomerangs. All this time he painted, in gloss paint on hardboard, having first got interested at primary school. He would sell his early works (as he later said) for a carton of grog. At times he worked as a manual labourer in various jobs in Sydney, later saying: "It was all work that was not good enough for white people". He went back to Kempsey where his work in the late 1980s was sometimes humorous, often tough, political, usually commenting on the impact of the dominant white culture on his own culture. He was searching, as he said in his forties, for the Aboriginal identity he felt he had lost.

Writing about the urban art in Yerbury's collection, Jennifer Isaacs highlighted his painting, *Charlie, We're Very Sorry* (1990), as "a work as important to internal Aboriginal history and politics as it is to the wider art world. Campbell pioneered the move to express unpalatable truths in a flat storyboard art form revealing the daily events and historical occurrences of seaside and rural life in Kempsey. This painting was executed with feeling and great respect for the Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins at a time when he was facing public criticism" (ISAACS 2000: 10).

The Governments of the 1930s and 1940s had attempted assimilation – trying to force Aborigines into the dominant culture at the expense of their own culture and society – including forcibly taking Aboriginal children away from their parents and 're-educating' them (and in some cases exposing them to exploitation) in white society. Whole families were dispersed and it is a source of continuing anguish, including to Aboriginal artists such as Sally Morgan

<sup>8</sup> Story supplied to the author with the painting.

who has both written and painted about the 'Stolen Generation'. Born in 1950, and now a university professor in Perth, she is a very successful writer as well as visual artist and her book of her own upbringing, called *My Place*, tells how she was 15 when she found out about her Aboriginal heritage, having been told by her mother and grandmother that she was Indian. She has said of her grandmother, "She'd had a lot of hurt and rejection, her life had been controlled by welfare and government authorities and she had a great fear that we'd be taken away and she wouldn't have us in her life" (THOMPSON 1990: 39).

One of the two major works by Morgan in the collection is autobiographical. She uses small figurative pictures to build up the stories, with a distinctive colour palette in vivid pinks, greens and blues, often with black outlines around the characters. Another, called *Hold on to the Dreaming* (1989), depicts the spirits of the dead and tiny yearning figures stretching out imploring hands to the luxuriantly-portrayed lands of the Dreamtime.

A social activist artist, much of her work is historically based and concerned with social injustices, especially dispossession. It also reflects the intensely strong bonds between Aboriginal people and their environment – so often now not the lands their Ancestral Beings created, but the fringes of mechanised urban society.

There are several paintings in the collections by Morgan's close friend, Sydney-based artist Bronwyn Bancroft, as well as illustrations from her children's books. Bancroft was a founding member of the urban artists' co-operative, Boomalli. As Mundine explains, *boomalli* is a Wiradjuri name meaning 'to strike'; the artists "spelt co-operative with a k, to complete the anagram of BAARK (Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Residents Ko-operative), as in the bark sheets traditionally used to paint on [...]" (MUNDINE 2000: 16).

Bancroft's photomontage/painting, *Who Made Me?* (1999), features photographs of the fair-skinned artist as a child and her much darker-skinned father and

uncle as little boys, surrounded by heavily decorated oval motifs. Written across the bottom are the words, "For years we have been punished for being black, now it seems we are to be punished for not being black enough".

Jody Broun, a Perth artist who won the 1998 Telstra Award, contributes an innocent-seeming but dryly satirical painting of endlessly patient women of the North-West Pilbarra region squatting outside the Government hut in *Waiting for Government Promises* (2000). A concentric circle provides the characteristic basic structure, within which the simple shapes of the faceless women sit motionless on the rich red, bare earth under an intensely blue, cloudless sky. A dog sprawls asleep, as if dead, in the pitiless heat. These marginalised people have been waiting for years... and will go on waiting...

Broun can change such lives, not just as an artist and social commentator, but as a public servant. She trained as an art teacher and worked as such for eight years, before completing a masters degree in philosophy, focusing on Aboriginal culture. She was appointed Director of Aboriginal Housing at Homewest in 1994.

Another powerful recent acquisition, *The Seven Sisters* (2002), by Julie Dowling, born in Western Australia in 1969, presents six Aboriginal women in long white dresses on a wooden veranda, with a seventh nearby. The background story<sup>9</sup> is about the Pleiades group of stars, representing seven sisters who decided to visit the area near Kalgoorlie, but found it full of Yararr men who refused to leave, and tried to capture them. One man followed one of the sisters back to the sky and became Orion. Dowling has explained that the women in the painting were at the Kalgoorlie Hospital, gathered to look at the 'seven sisters' constellation. Because Indigenous women were often denied access in the past to doctors and white midwives, many, including some in the artist's family, gave birth on the hospital verandas or in the surrounding scrub.

<sup>9</sup> Story supplied to the author with the painting.

Trevor Nicholls was born in Port Adelaide in 1949, the son of a non-Aboriginal tradesman and an Aboriginal mother who played down his Aboriginal heritage. Most of his life has been spent in Australia's big cities; but he describes himself as a stranger in urban society, just as he felt alien in the art schools with non-Indigenous teachers. He explores through painting his Aboriginal identity and gives expression to the painful transition for Aborigines from 'Dreamtime to machine-time'. In his angry 1992 painting, *Machine Time Madness*, the central Aboriginal figure rages against the background of four tall spiky constructions representing the Church, commerce, the media and government – the latter illustrated by a black figure falling from a prison window in a reference to the infamous 'deaths in custody'.

Nicholls was influenced by Papunya painter, Dinny Nolan - (born 1922), who is also represented in the collection, and has pointed out how his own works incorporate 'dot painting' techniques - here in forms of the Aborigine and the dog.

Nicholls' relationship with modern-day Australia is very different from that of Ian Abdulla who was brought up in a less urbanised setting, although also in South Australia, where he spent a great deal of time fishing and hunting with other young Aborigines. From the age of 14 he worked on a mission station. As an adult he mainly worked in the bush, picking fruit. He started painting when he was 40. Mundine describes him as addressing 'the dispossessed Aboriginal people whom Australian society continues to ignore. His paintings depict the menial itinerant work by which many of these people eke out an existence, with many of these events being portrayed in a nostalgic light' (MUNDINE 2000: 17). He paints from his personal memory with childlike figures, often with a storyboard as in a comic, writing on each painting a brief description, as on *Picking Grapes in the Rain* (1996) – an inscription which he recited to Yerbury with affectionate humour for his white co-worker:

"One day while I was working on a fruit block just out of Barmera where I lived for

the past Eleven Year. Me and my mate was picking grapes and while I was picking grapes it started raining. My white mate ran and got under the trailer but me I just went under the vines and kept on picking grape's so my white mate was wondering how I happened to get more bucket's the he hade silly white boy".

Here we see an Aboriginal artist who feels more integrated in the society he lives in, and with his own life-style, than (say) Trevor Nicholls. Abdulla does not feel alienated by it from his friends and family, and he continues to live closely with the land and the seasons and the foods they produce – the recurring themes of traditional Aboriginal art.

## Conclusion

The indivisible and enduring relationship of Indigenous people with their lands – to which they often refer in terms of the land owning them, rather than the other way round – go back some sixty thousand years. The Dreamtime is more than just an explanation of how those lands and all that exists upon them were created by the Ancestral Beings. It was the start of the Dreamings, the continuing spiritual and cultural processes whereby Indigenous people understand and express their origins and identities, and their connections with the Spiritual Beings, in art and rituals in which millennia disappear and the past is now.

These Dreamings, the Dreamtime in which they originated, and what they reveal to us about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins, traditions and identities, comprise the dominant theme of the Yerbury/Macquarie collections which 'represent work of almost all genres, styles and approaches ... Deep religious content is evident in many of the paintings on bark and in the Tiwi sculptures for the Pukamani ceremony' (ISAACS 2000:6)

However, the artists discussed here – and there are many other important individual artists and indeed whole communities and their art, well represented in the collections, which could not be mentioned in an

article of this length – are not living in the ‘pre-contact’ era enjoyed by Indigenous peoples prior to European settlement. Indeed, many are not living on their own lands, clans having often been relocated and sometimes brought together with other clans, so that languages and dialects were extinguished, and traditions were altered and in many cases disappeared. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that significant, albeit partial, attempts were made nationally and regionally to recognise and begin to remedy some of the past injustices to Indigenous peoples.

The collections have been strongly developed in terms of key urban and rural exponents of socio-political and ‘protest’ art from movements which emerged and coalesced in the ‘eighties and ‘nineties (ISAACS 2000: 6, MUNDINE 2000). The work of these

artists, like that of those whose art practice continues in more traditional styles (albeit sometimes turning to European media such as canvas and synthetic paints), still reflects the relationship with land and tradition; however, it is overlaid with concerns about *loss* of land, *loss* of tradition and *undermining* of values and identity. Their inclusion in the collections make the combined bodies of work specially powerful, not merely aesthetically and curatorially, but also in terms of the University’s primary goals for UMAC – namely, to serve as vehicles for research; teaching and learning, particularly in Australian History, Aboriginal Studies, Creative Arts and Museum Studies; and engagement with the community, especially the educational outreach programs organised for secondary schools.

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