ReDreaming Dharawal: A transcultural and multi-disciplined approach to the Aboriginal art and landscapes of southern Sydney

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University of Wollongong
ReDreaming Dharawal:
A transcultural and multi-disciplined approach to the Aboriginal art and landscapes of southern Sydney

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

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by

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Abstract

This study addresses post-contact Aboriginal art practices of the southern Sydney region; traditional lands of the Dharawal-speaking peoples. Given that a conventional Western art history has found the pluralistic nature of such work problematic, this study seeks to understand how it might be valued and understood in a wider art-world context.

Through extensive field work which included the first survey and analysis of the large body of public art produced in association with Aboriginal people since the Bicentennial, this thesis finds that engagement with non-Aboriginal Australians is an important tactic of Aboriginal people in achieving agency in the modern world; and that, in contrast to assumptions still made about Aboriginal artists working in urban areas, re-establishing and reaffirming relationships with Country remains a core concern.

I argue that a multi-disciplined methodology that employs ideas from anthropology, archaeology and human geography offers the best means of comprehending the sensitive, transcultural nature of the art practices and art histories of Dharawal country.
Declaration

I, Vincent Bicego, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work except where otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Wollongong. Primary information was gathered with strict adherence to HREC guidelines. All Aboriginal voices appear here with their permission.

Vincent Bicego

March 2015
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For Nonno and Nonna
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ReDreaming Dharawal

Introduction and methodology
Origins of research

For indigenous people, [...] the garden landscape is us, we are the environment. (Djon Mundine 2002, n.p.)

On a broad level this research continues investigations begun for my Bachelor of Creative Arts (Honours) degree in 2008. My focus then was on the newly formed Aboriginal artist collective, Boolarng Nangamai¹, and their development of a bush tucker and medicine garden alongside their studio-gallery at Gerringong on the NSW south coast. The garden was a source of material for traditional fibre art practices as well as being a site of education for members and visitors alike. Influenced by ideas of the Australian continent as an Aboriginal garden or estate – a place shaped and managed by human agency (see Bill Gammage 2003, 2005, Judith Trimble 1995, and Marcia Langton 2000) – my thesis explored the idea of Boolarng Nangamai’s garden being a microcosm of such industry and symbolic of a continued connection to Country in the face of two hundred years of westernisation. So many other questions had come to me during this research that I knew I wanted to continue researching south coast Aboriginal culture in more detail.

Two different ‘angles’ to this doctoral research were explored but abandoned at early stages. Initially I was interested in recording the bourgeoning relationship between Boolarng Nangamai and the small Indonesian-based organisation Threads of Life. Threads of Life play an important role in sustaining traditional fibre arts practices in

¹ Meaning ‘Together Dreaming’ in the Biripi and Dharawal languages.
villages throughout Indonesia. Through the promotion of ‘dye gardens’ villagers have been able to grow plants used in their craft that, while normally gathered, are being increasingly lost to deforestation or substituted for store-bought material. The organisation also facilitates regular workshops for practitioners from across Indonesia as a means of sharing ideas and creating solidarity. I had become aware of their work through my mother’s own research and thought it quite serendipitous that Boolarng Nangamai director, Kelli Ryan, had been in discussion with her Threads of Life counterpart, Jean Howe. Their hope was to bring about cross-cultural workshops between the two organisations.

For the first half of 2009 I threw myself into a completely new world – I began reading literature about traditional Indonesian fibre arts and the shocking level of deforestation taking place in the region. Enthusiastic to conduct field research there in person, I even began an introductory Indonesian language course at WEA Illawarra. Email communication with Threads of Life director, Jean Howe, was established in early April, and was positive at first. Having relayed my ideas to the rest of her team, she informed me of their support, but advised me that due to the nature of their organisation they would have limited time and resources to contribute to my work directly. Unfortunately, by the following month, Howe was even less optimistic – with their busy schedule, limited resources, and my lack of Indonesian language skills, she felt there was little Threads of Life could offer me. This meant the topic of my research needed re-thinking.

In light of this, my supervisor, Diana Wood Conroy, suggested I spend some time in north-east Arnhem Land. Her friend, the much respected Yolngu artist and community spokesperson, Banduk Marika, had been asking for help in the Dudungurr Nursery – a business she had co-established in the early 1990s in her village of Yirrkala. Its main source of business is supplying native plants for local revegetation projects – much

\footnote{In hindsight, changing my topic at this early stage was the right decision because, while I understand Ryan and Howe are still in contact, no cross-cultural workshops have so far taken place between Boolarng Nangamai and Threads of Life.}
needed in the heavily mined areas between Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy. For a month, then, between June and July 2009 I was a guest of Marika at her home. During the day I helped locals and non-Indigenous volunteers like myself in the nursery, interspersed by trips to source seeds and saplings from the local environment. Another initiative was starting a community vegetable garden. Given the expense of fresh, store-bought food, it was hoped that such a garden would promote a healthier diet and an air of self-sufficiency amongst the villagers.

Discounting a rather unpleasant bout of swine flu that debilitated me for about a week, my stay in Yirrkala was a truly amazing experience – though at times confronting. A particular honour was to visit Yalanbara (Port Bradshaw), the place central to Marika’s clan mythologies, where the Djankawu (Creator ancestors) first arrived on the land, and from where they set forth, naming all the plants, animals and other phenomena they encountered. To actually be in this extraordinarily beautiful landscape, to have it explained / ‘read’ to you by traditional owners as the manifestation of these cosmic events, was perhaps the first time that the concept of a ‘cultural landscape’ really became clear to me – though the relevance of this concept to my research was as yet unclear. Little did I know, also, that the Wawilak Sisters dreaming – another dreaming important to Marika’s people – was to manifest itself again in my research in a most unexpected way (see Chapter 2). But as amazing an experience as this trip was, my mind was continually drawn back to the NSW south coast and the Aboriginal people there, and upon arriving back in Wollongong I found myself reconsidering my subject for a second time.

In its current form, this study began with two observations. The first was that ‘landscape’ – irrespective of its schematic rendering – is a prominent subject of south coast Aboriginal art. If one accepts that land remains intrinsic to Aboriginal peoples’ sense of identity, this observation seems unremarkable. But until I began my Honours thesis, the Aboriginal art I was most familiar with was the politically challenging work of artists
from the eastern seaboard such as Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt – artists who lampooned colonial modes of perception and representation, whose work embodied the ‘urban’ attack on so-called ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art. Theirs was the work I had researched for undergraduate essays and gone to see at exhibitions. From the beginning of my Honours research, however, I had found an altogether different resonance in work being produced in the Illawarra and further south coast, and was curious to know why.

During my Honours research I had become aware of just how much public art had been produced locally by or in association with Aboriginal artists. On top of subject matter dealing largely with local ecosystems, a number of works coincided with actual environmental projects. Alongside a revaluation of traditional Aboriginal land management I felt that these projects warranted closer examination. Returning from Yirrkala, I turned my focus to the NSW south coast in general – inclusive of, but not restricted to, Dharawal country. Prime case studies were to be the stabilisation of Coomaditchie Lagoon by the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC), various bush regeneration projects with which members of Boolarng Nangamai had become increasingly involved, and the larger examples of contemporary Aboriginal land management at Booderee National Park (Jervis Bay) and Biamunga on the far south coast – parameters essentially set by the Wollongong City Gallery’s Pallingjang exhibitions.

Two factors dramatically altered the parameters of this new approach. Firstly, as I live in Wollongong, it became obvious that it was logistically impossible to cover examples across such a large area to my satisfaction. Including Booderee National Park may have been possible, but including Biamunga National Park was not. I would not have been able to network and build friendships with people as I had been able to in the Illawarra – something I saw as essential to a holistic and ethical research experience. Secondly, I became aware of the huge concentration of rock art throughout greater Sydney. Suddenly, alongside the public art that had drawn my attention to contemporary Aboriginal
environmental agency, there was another substantial body of art positioned within the landscape to contemplate. Though dramatically separated by time, culture and, to a certain extent, geography, I felt they were perfectly paralleled and warranted investigation. That the scope of artistic material being considered had increased meant the study area necessarily had to be decreased. A decision was made to limit the study area to lands traditionally inhabited and managed by Dharawal-speaking peoples – a modern mapping of which essentially consists of the Sutherland Shire, the Illawarra, and the northern part of the Shoalhaven (Nowra).

Theoretical perspectives

A multi-disciplined approach

While this study is rooted in visual art theory, and is launched with a discussion of public and community art practices, it significantly draws on ideas from the fields of anthropology, archaeology and human geography. The idea of ‘cultural (or socialised) landscapes’, in particular, is key – how we as human beings conceptualise, transform, and artistically mediate our environments. This study specifically seeks to understand Aboriginal people’s continuing relationship with Dharawal country – how this relationship has been expressed through art in the past, how this changed with the violent advent of modernity (colonisation), how adaptations have engaged settler society in dialogue as a means of achieving agency, and how a cross-cultural, multi-disciplined approach to understanding and engaging with this art has the potential to transform wider public consciousness about the history of this region and future interaction with it.

The impetus for this aspect of my thesis stems from the writing of cultural geographer, Lesley Head. Her seminal work, *Second Nature: The History and Implications of Australia as Aboriginal Landscape* (2000), is concerned with developing a greater understanding of how the Australian continent was transformed by deliberate and residual
Aboriginal agency. While evidence for this agency is drawn principally from palaeoecological and archaeological investigations, Head’s discussion crosses a range of disciplines and argues for nothing less than the reconstituting of “founding myths that will facilitate socially and environmentally sustainable occupation of [the Australian] continent” (Head 2000, p.10).

A suggestion made in Second Nature in particular has set the trajectory of this research. In seeking to understand “the way land is brought conceptually into the human domain among Aboriginal people”, and how this in turn may transform non-Aboriginal attitudes, Head focuses on two themes: 1) awareness of Aboriginal land as “a set of densely humanised spaces”, and 2) the importance of Aboriginal voices in current dialogues relating to land ownership and management” (p.138). A third theme that Head suggests could illustrate this relationship further – and one “which deserves a full treatment” – “is the way that these issues are expressed in Aboriginal art, literature, and drama” (p.138). This study is an attempt to address at least the first of these three creative genres in the context of some of the earliest areas colonised in Australia.

Art history, Anthropology and Modernism

[O]nly in [the] wider frame of cultural intersections, rather than narrower art world terms, can an historical understanding of Aboriginal contemporary art be discerned. (McLean 2011, p.19)

Over the last quarter of a century, during which time the art world profile of Aboriginal art has transformed from a primitive art practice to a contemporary one, a number of theorists and practitioners have argued that there is a lack of critical engagement with Aboriginal art (see Gough 2009, Smee 2006, Perkins 1993, for some examples). Art historian Ian McLean has written that “because the notion of the modern is the central organising idea in histories of art from the previous two centuries, art historians [...] have
not so much ‘overlooked’ [Aboriginal art], as found it impossible to navigate” (2009, p.922).

With regard to ‘classical’ conventions associated largely with ‘remote’ communities, Elizabeth Burns Coleman (2005) argues that two contrasting responses dominate: praise for aesthetics (often viewed through the rubric of Western modernism) with little cultural awareness, and ethnographic praise with little appreciation of the individual merits of the author (p.259). The hybrid nature of Aboriginal art from ‘settled Australia’, even more so, remains problematic. Its trajectories do not adhere to what anthropologist, Howard Morphy, has called the “temporal sequences of European art history” (2008, p.14) and has thus long defied interpretation as either ethnographic or modern ‘fine’ art.

Commentators such as Morphy have thus argued that an anthropological approach to appreciating Aboriginal art is the most effective means of achieving this critical engagement. “An anthropologically informed art history,” he states, “is needed to provide the historical, art historical, social and cultural information, not only for those artistic traditions where background cannot be taken for granted but, it could be argued, for the Western art tradition as well” (2011, p.232). Far from being fixed, he argues, Western conceptions of art have constantly changed over the last 400 years (2008 p.147, 176) and must now be cross-culturally sensitive to “the common-sense knowledge and understandings of other cultures” (p.147).

In their discussion of Albert Namatjira’s cross-cultural practice, Ian Burn and Ann Stephen (1992) similarly argued that the Western viewer must reposition themselves in relation to the subject to achieve an effective interpretation; that Western art history must, in effect, become de-centralised. They write:

It is not [...] simply a matter of uncovering the hidden qualities or references in Namatjira’s art. Instead, Namatjira’s landscapes are different depending upon where – culturally, historically, theoretically – one stands in relation to
them. As white Australians, our writing about his art remains on our terms. Yet through those terms Namatjira’s art can still invoke a complex social and political landscape in-between cultures, where intersecting interpretations expose the deceits of conventional art history and anthropology. (pp.249-50)

Alongside the interviews conducted by myself, anthropological insight into the life experiences and art practices of Aboriginal people living and working in the study area is provided by Vivien Johnson, Tess Allas & Laura Fisher’s This Side of the Frontier: Storylines Full Report (2009). An on-going, interactive online research project, Storylines “is the first sustained attempt to explore Indigenous art making outside ‘remote’ Aboriginal Australia” (n.p.). One of the more important findings from the report is that “[d]espite the prevailing image of ‘urban’ Indigenous artists as art school trained sophisticates”, Aboriginal artists from regional and rural areas are more focused on “exploring and maintaining what might be described as ‘traditional’ Indigenous media” (n.p.). This was similarly argued by Sylvia Kleinert in her 1994 doctoral thesis. That Johnson, Allas & Fisher feel this needs reiteration suggests there are still a number of uncritical assumptions made about Aboriginal art from settled Australia.

Intrinsic then to a cross-culturally sensitive art-historical analysis of art from the study area is the notion of neo-traditionalism or ‘contemporaneous traditions’ (McLean 2013). Rather than markers of acculturation, post-colonial art practices – as well as interactions with country that respond, or are complimentary to, such practices – are argued as being authentic Aboriginal responses to modernity. Thus, in contrast to the ‘hegemony of Modernism’ (Morphy 2008, p.14) that has previously dictated the critical agenda, this study reiterates McLean’s argument: that “multiple modernities [have become] the master signifier of globalisation [...] Traditions are no longer negated or sublimated, as they were in the modernist myth of progress, but now shape the future” (2013, p.49).
Transcultur and Postcolonial theory

[Transculture] highlights those places where the carefully defined borders of identity become confused and overlapping, a task that requires new histories, new ideas and new means of representation. (Nicholas Mirzeoff 2002, p.477)

Coined by Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz in his book Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar (1947), ‘transculturation’ was posited as an alternative to the “inadequacies of the term ‘acculturation’ used in anthropology” (Taylor 2007, pp.122-123) when discussing the mixed cultures of South America. Rejecting the idea that indigenes, slaves and colonialists had all simply been assimilated into Western modes of society (Young 2001, p.202), Ortiz argued that “Latin American identity lies not on either side of a given binary [...] but instead in a constant process of negotiation” (Taylor 2007, p.123).

Ian Buchanan (2010) is correct in writing that “a large majority of what is deemed transcultural ... [is] the product of necessary compromises subjugated cultures make in order to survive” (p.474) – Ortiz himself argued that an often dramatic and violent loss of culture is an unavoidable component of transculturation (1995, p.102). Yet for all the inequalities that characterise the colonial and, indeed post- or neo-colonial experience, ‘transculturation’ recognises the two-way flow of ideas between the dominant and the subjugated – that although limited in agency, the relationship colonised subjects have with former or neo-colonial powers is “an active one” (Taylor 2007, p.124).

Largely interchangeable with ‘cross-cultural’ and ‘intercultural’, Ortiz’s term is used in this study for its historical and universal connotations. Its adoption by Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial theorists remains significant as evidence of transculturation itself – Western theory being influenced by ideas coming from former colonies and Indigenous peoples. “It is no coincidence that Ortiz theorised transculture [...] long before such ideas were discussed in the West,” Nicholas Mirzeoff (2002) states, as “the conditions now commonly known as postmodernism [...] have existed in Latin America
and the Caribbean since the mid-twentith century” (p.479). Similarly, Claire Taylor (2007) argues that the term “paved the way for a non-essentializing concept of identity” (p.123) and thus pre-empted some of the major concerns of contemporary postcolonial theory (p.122, 124, 127).

Spanning an array of disciplines, postcolonial theory is concerned with the ongoing affects of Western imperialism on ideas of identity, culture, race, and power. It is strongly associated with other theoretical movements such as Post-structuralism (Deconstructionism), Postmodernism and Feminism. One of the central tenets of this discourse is that non-Western cultures were conceptually constructed in binary opposition to Europe – that Europe’s image of itself as a superior civilisation necessarily rested upon the understanding of non-Westerners as inferior, barbaric, backward. It was through this that a relationship of dominance was justified and arguably sustained (Ashcroft et al. 2007, pp.18-21).

Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) remains the seminal postcolonial text exploring this idea of entrenched binarism. Said argued that the European construct of ‘the Orient’ – rarely based on real or qualitative experience – permeated the humanities and daily life. “[Orientalism],” he wrote, “is never far from what [has been] called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (1995, p.7). In parallel, African novelist, Chinua Achebe, argued that African cultures occupied an important oppositional role in the Western imagination. “The West,” he argued in 1975, “seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have the need [... to cast] a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity” (1988, p.261).

Unsurprisingly, the convergence of cultures resulting from imperialist expansion posed a problem to Europe’s notion of culture and the hierarchy by which it positioned itself in relation to others. Key then to postcolonial re-evaluations, including this study, is the
notion of hybridity across cultures – the transgression of previously stable (albeit conceptual) boundaries and hierarchies.

The idea of transculturation, however, suggests more than just hybridity. In his analysis of Ortiz’s term, Donald Cuccioletta (2001) argues that it is the “re-inventing of a new common culture [...] based on the meeting and the intermingling of [...] different people and cultures. In other words one’s identity is not strictly one dimensional (the self) but is now defined and more importantly recognised in rapport with the other” (p.8). Perhaps more explicitly he states that transculturation means “seeing oneself in the other” (p.1). Transculture thus has connotations of successful integration. Along with Cuccioletta, other North American cultural theorists (see Chalmers 2002, Slimbach 2005) have used it to denote a process by which both real and imagined barriers are broken down within multicultural society. They see it as an alternative to the failures of government policies relating to multiculturalism – policies, they argue, that have led to the insulation and essentialisation of cultures within nation states. “[T]here is an inevitable contradiction between the first two goals of multiculturalism policy,” Donald Cuccioletta (2001) argues, “namely preserving cultures and eliminating barriers to mobility” (p.5).

One of the central tenets of this study is that, in an Australian context, art practices of Aboriginal people in southern Sydney are not only historically transcultural – that is, authentic Aboriginal responses to modernity – but that they are strategically transcultural, particularly when produced in relation to, or in collaboration with, non-Aboriginal Australians. If at the beginning of the twenty-first century this form of transculturation still – as Ortiz posited – necessitates a loss, it is, in theory, the negation of foundational myths that continue to inform wider Australian society’s perception of Aboriginal people, their culture, and their continuing relationship with land.
Aboriginality, Aboriginalism and Identity

Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue.

(Marcia Langton 1993, p.31)

While transculturation is applicable to the Australian situation, it has distinct differences from that of South America. Ortiz’s writing arguably feeds into a more nationalistic discourse about Cuban identity being independent from that of its former European masters. He argues that it is the truly hybrid nature of Cuban society that constitutes its alterity. In a ‘settler colony’ such as Australia, however, where the Indigenous population is heavily outnumbered by the descendents of more recent settlers (Ashcroft et al. 2007, p.193), Aboriginal alterity is arguably maintained despite the hybrid reality of contemporary Aboriginal identity. As Julie Gough and Stephen Naylor (2009) state, “we do not have to live in our Traditional Country, speak our original languages or look black to be Aboriginal” (p.823). Similarly, Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson has stated, “[I]t is possible to choose to maintain an Aboriginal identity and be completely able to interact with modern society” (cited in McLean 2009, p.925).

Inspired by Ortiz’s writing, Brazilian writer Silviano Santiago (1971) argued that identity is negotiated ‘in-between’ cultures, emphasising “the hybrid nature of any colonial process” (Taylor 2007, p.124). This idea was explored further by a number of postcolonial theorists, most notably by Homi K. Bhabha in his concept of the ‘Third Space’ (Bhabha 1995), and more recently by art historians like Terry Smith (2011). But it is anthropologist Marcia Langton’s writing on Aboriginality3 (1993) that remains intrinsic to any discussion of Aboriginal identity as something negotiated ‘between’ cultures, and that indeed Aboriginal cultures – like all others – are ‘pluralistic’.

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3 This thesis refers primarily to Marcia Langton’s notion of Aboriginality in order to address notions of hybridity. These ideas can also be explored through the key texts on cultural hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha (1994 & 1995).
Langton argues that, as a discourse, Aboriginality takes place in three primary spaces: 1) between Aboriginal people themselves, with little reference to the ideas of settler society (though Langton herself attests this is increasingly difficult as even the most remote communities have some experience of Western society); 2) amongst non-Aboriginal Australians who have had little qualitative contact with Aboriginal people, thus resulting in largely stereotypical ideas of Aboriginal people; and 3) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (pp.34-35).

This study argues that public / community art creates a space, a new contact zone, in which not only Aboriginal but settler identity is negotiated. It is not a person’s Aboriginality that is in question, but rather what this Aboriginality is and / or means in ‘settled Australia’, how Aboriginal identity is positioned in relation to twenty-first century settler society, and how both cultures can benefit from a better understanding of, and rapport with, each other. Similarly, it is not a question of settler society becoming Aboriginal, attaining indigeneity, but rather that settler thoughts and attitudes become effectively ‘Aboriginalised’.

A number of Aboriginal community leaders, educators, and arts practitioners from the study area feel that Aboriginal culture and heritage must be embraced by settler Australia as an essential part of their own identity if it is to survive; that Aboriginal (re)conceptions of land necessarily inform future, more sustainable habitation of, and interaction with, land; and that Aboriginal counter-narratives must be incorporated into our readings of Australia’s colonial history for reconciliation to be possible (see interviews with Les Bursill, Vic Chapman, Tess Allas, Djon Mundine in Appendix 1). Irrespective of the subject matter of any of the art produced, many of the community art projects surveyed here offer non-Aboriginal people, often for the first time, an opportunity to meet and develop relationships with Aboriginal people. The arena in which this dialogue takes place is both physically and conceptually the landscape itself – both as a site of historical contestation and a life-sustaining source.
But the question remains: if non-Aboriginal people are invited to make Aboriginal art with Aboriginal artists, asked to accept Aboriginal conceptions of land and history, asked to partake in the reinvention and reapplication of these ideas, what then constitutes ‘Aboriginal’ art? Is Aboriginal art indeed, as artist Richard Bell (2002) argued (though for significantly different reasons), a ‘white thing’? Morphy has articulated the complexity of this scenario as thus:

[I]f Aboriginal art is nothing other than art produced by Aborigines, then some of the works in that category are most similar in format terms to works excluded from it. Thus Imants Tillers’ *Nine Shots*, which provided the inspiration, or perhaps the irritation, for Gordon Bennett’s *Nine Ricochets* is excluded from Aboriginal art. Yet it is part of the history of Bennett’s painting and therefore Aboriginal art history. (Morphy 2011, p.105)

Pertinent to this topic is McLean’s notion of ‘Aboriginalism’ (1998). In seeking indigeneity, one that constituted a unique national identity, McLean argues that white Australian artists from the inter-war years looked to Aboriginal art as a means of visually defining Australian culture. This attitude was made famous by modernist painter and designer, Margaret Preston, who encouraged artists to ‘Be Aboriginal’ (De Lorenzo 1988, p.6), though it was not until the 1950s that an Aboriginal aesthetic became a national one. McLean writes:

Aboriginalism can be defined as an attempt to understand what it means to be a white Australian through metaphors of Aboriginality rather than ones of empire. [It] proposes a hybrid Australian who is part Aboriginal and part European – though this overstates a model which arguably was assimilationist rather than genuinely hybrid. It incorporated rather than engaged in a meaningful dialogue with Aborigines. (1998b, n.p.)
Unarguably, rather than appropriating Aboriginal art, examples from the study area demonstrate that settler society has necessarily become engaged with, drawn into, Aboriginal art. An art history that seeks to comprehend visual transculturation in Australia, and certainly the study area, must reconcile / differentiate past Aboriginalisms with the transcultural strategies of contemporary Aboriginal artists. As Howard Morphy argues, “[t]he great challenges of a more cross-cultural definition of art is to allow what was and is different about Aboriginal art to remain despite its placement within a more inclusive category” (2008, p.3).

‘New Genre’ and ‘Indigenous-informed’ public art

The foundation of Australian culture must begin with including the aesthetic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. If their art and presence is nowhere to be seen in designated cultural spaces, then [... this] only adds another layer to the erasure of Australia’s Indigenous people ... (Fiona Foley 2012, p.64)

McLean (2011a) attests that “[t]he artworld’s embrace of Aboriginal art in the closing decades of the [twentieth] century is [...] the climax of a continuing advance and dissemination of ideas and practices that had been going on since first contact” (p.30). While ‘south coast’ Aboriginal art has yet to attain any great presence in state or national collections, the unprecedented production of public art by Aboriginal people in the study area over the last quarter of a century is clearly illustrative of that same “cultural front that had become increasingly strategic” (p.30) in its methods of engaging with settler society. Even more so than ‘studio’ works destined for private collections or gallery spaces, this public work created solely by, in collaboration with, or in reference to, Aboriginal people, and almost entirely since the Australian Bicentennial in 1988, attests to dialogue with settler society remaining a central tenet of contemporary Aboriginal arts.
practice. This premise rests not only on the art being more accessible and having more immediacy by virtue of its publicness, but through the often collaborative, cross-cultural nature of its production.

The concept of ‘new genre’ public art, as developed by American art historian Susan Lacy (1995), is used in this study to give global context to this collective and transcultural approach to art making in the public sphere. In contrast to the ‘cannon in the park’ model of public art that had hegemonic notions of nationalism at its core (Judith Baca 1995), as well as the conceptualism that transformed open spaces in the 1960s but which often alienated its audience, Lacy identifies ‘new genre’ as an increasingly grass-roots approach to community / public art-making that emerged throughout the world in the last quarter of the twentieth-century. Arguably stemming from earlier discursive movements – such as feminism – which valued collective art-making not only as a means of producing art ‘for the people, by the people’, but as a process that strengthened communities, Lacy argues that “[e]ngagement lies at the heart of new genre public art and is what differentiates it from previous forms” (1995, p.19).

‘New genre’ challenges the traditional boundary between the artist as sole designer / producer and the audience as passive observer. It is in this space that Aboriginal identity is negotiated. But significant to the study area, also, is the number of public works that, while facilitated by non-Aboriginal artists, are dedicated to, or inclusive of, Aboriginal subject matter. Thus the public art surveyed in this study is also positioned in the larger rubric of what art historian Catherine De Lorenzo (2000) has called ‘Indigenous-informed public arts practice’ (p.130) – public art projects that have increasingly sought to include Aboriginal perspectives and, just as importantly, have consulted with Aboriginal persons in doing so.

De Lorenzo’s commentaries (2000, 2005 and 2009) provide a national context in which to position the public art of the study area. She argues that the nation-wide poverty of
monuments and public art works dedicated to Aboriginal people, their cultures, or historical events involving them, is symptomatic of a national climate of ‘amnesia’; that Aboriginal people and their histories have been consistently erased from public memory. This is similar to what postcolonial writer and artist Paul Carter has called “the amnesia at the heart of imperial history obsessed with foundations” (1999a, p.76). Accordingly, De Lorenzo argues, the recent and increasingly fertile emergence of ‘Indigenous-informed public arts practice’ since the 1990s not only re-establishes an Aboriginal cultural presence in our daily surroundings but is indicative of a genuinely growing desire for reconciliation between black and white Australians. Of particular interest to De Lorenzo, and other art commentators such as Tess Allas (2010a and b), is the public work of Indigenous artist, Fiona Foley. One of the most prominent artists working in Australia today, Foley claims that “the premise behind [her] public art is to write Aboriginal people, Aboriginal nations and Aboriginal history back into the Australian narrative” (2012, p.64).

Important to this subject is also postcolonial writer Paul Carter’s notion of ‘writing public space’ (2006, p.14), of public art being a text, an inscription, one that follows traces of older, almost forgotten voices. This idea links with that of Aboriginal art being a visual language, one being developed afresh in the stead of what has been lost. In conjunction with Dharawal rock art specifically, explored are the potentialities of engaging with this earlier form of visual language and how it might provide new (ancient) typologies for Aboriginal artists to the land, its histories, and their relationship with them.

**Human Geography and Archaeology**

[A] strategy for colonising archaeological storytelling [...] is that of placing one’s physical body in the site, the place of archaeological storytelling. What
does it feel like, bodily, to be in this place? How can I understand this place in terms of my life experiences? (Beck & Somerville 1995, p.8)

Both Paul Carter (1996a) and Terry Smith (2002) have argued just how significant a role art played in the colonial project – that far from being just a physical process, colonisation was ‘conceivable’ because of the legitimacy it gained through the work of artists and cartographers. “It is in representing the grid,” Carter writes, “that multiplying field of tabulae rasae on which subjectivities [are] tortured, that the cruelty of founding histories appears” (1999a, p.70).

Invaluable to the postcolonial artist then is a greater understanding of the ways in which Indigenous peoples conceptualised and charted their lands prior to invasion. Both Marcia Langton (2000) and Deborah Bird Rose (2001) have written about the ‘sacred geography’ of Australia, how the “[t]he Australian continent is criss-crossed with the tracks […] where Dreamings travelled, where they stopped, and where they lived the events of their lives and deaths” (pp.103-104). A greater awareness and appreciation of these Dreaming tracks has a myriad of implications for conventional settler thinking about people’s relationship with the land, one that goes beyond concepts of ‘landedness’ and broaches concepts of time. Alan Rumsey (2001) calls it “a kind of temporal paradox” (p.23), that while dreaming tracks represent the movement of ancestral beings from one place to another, they remain present at them all. Thus, while “although the time of creation was before the present, it is also simultaneous with it.”

The two major implications then of the concept of Dreaming tracks are thus: 1) that it destablises previously entrenched Western modes of conceiving of and interacting with our environment, one in which time is linear, progressive, and strategically distances us from the past; and 2) that irrespective of the supposed disjunction between pre-contact and modern forms of lifestyle and cultural expression, contemporary Aboriginal expressions of identity in relation to land are meaningful, valid, necessary, and above all
else, authoritative, because they exist in a continuum with the past. This has strong links to the assertions of Richard Bell (2002) – that one of the many reasons why ‘urban’ Aboriginal expressions of identity are not only important but authentic is because they remain part of the complexity of dreaming tracks that spiritually bind this continent together. “[A] more or less reconstituted set of ideas about ancestral tracks and traces”, Rumsey argues, “will play a [significant] role in the emerging politics of Aboriginality in Australia” (2001, p.39).

Archaeologist Paul Taçon has argued that rock art is often indicative of Dreaming tracks. The Sydney Basin has a high concentration of specialised rock art that was produced over thousands of years prior to British invasion. Figurative rock engravings, specific to the habitats of the animals and seasonal events they depict, are testament to the Dharawal peoples’ detailed knowledge of their unique environments and their position within a complex cosmology. So how might an archaeological approach prove useful to this study?

In 1985 Sharon Sullivan argued that Australian archaeology had failed to capture the imagination of the greater population and had therefore failed to change perceptions about Aboriginal peoples’ complex relationship with the Australian environment. Reasons for this, Sullivan argued, ranged from entrenched Eurocentrism that saw Aboriginal material culture as impoverished; archaeological research that might have changed such opinions was poorly promoted outside the academic community (see also Michael Organ 1994); and that archaeologists, particularly when dealing with rock art in regions heavily colonised, had remained conservative in their interpretations, unwilling to draw on contemporary Aboriginal people’s understanding of this art.

Works by Ian Davidson (1995) demonstrate how significant a change there had been across Australian archaeological practice within a decade of Sullivan’s writing – largely through the appraisal and inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. Similarly, at the same
time, Isabel McBryde (1995) attested that the consultation with, and employment of, Aboriginal people in heritage roles, had increased exponentially (p.121). What my field work suggests, however, is that little had – or indeed, has – changed, in this regard, in the study area. Not one Aboriginal person I spoke with formally or informally during this research felt that Aboriginal people were consulted effectively in regard to the identification and protection of heritage sites or that substantial archaeological research in the area had lead to the general public having a better understanding and appreciation of the region’s Aboriginal culture and history.

A compendium of articles edited by Bruno David, Bryce Barker and Ian J. McNiven (2006), commemorating and extending on the work of archaeologist Harry Lourandos, was essential to my understanding of how changes in archaeology over the last thirty years suggest this discipline still has much to offer to this kind of study. A shift from processual to social archaeology has meant an acceptance / realisation that histories, understandings of the past, are created in the present – that Aboriginal perspectives, no matter how great the disjunction between pre-colonial and contemporary lifestyles appear to be, are valid and important interpretations. The phenomenological approach offered by Franca Tamisari and James Wallace is of particular interest. “It is in turning to the living, sensing and knowing body,” they argue,

that we propose that common archaeological notions such as locality, artefact, phase and system could be more productively rethought and developed in terms of the new heuristic concepts of situation, event, perception, sensual experience and idolocality (2006, p.222).

In the most recent series of art + soul, written and presented by Hetti Perkins, artist Jonathon Jones gazes down at sandstone engravings typical of the study area. “Like an abrasion,” he says, “there’s something really visceral [about these engravings]. But they’re also amazingly personal. You can see the people’s hands, you can put your finger
into the groove and feel what someone has actually started to create here.” Similarly, Langton argues that “ancient values about being in places are capable of sophisticated renegotiation in the challenging circumstances of post-colonial Australia” (Langton 2000b, p.263).

**Post-structuralism**

Significant to both the empirical and theoretical aspects of this study are concepts developed by cultural theorist and artist, Paul Carter, in *Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region* (2010). Focusing on the Mallee in north-western Victoria, Carter’s is a poetic search in the face of globalisation “for the creative principles that bring regions into being” (p.2). He argues that it is not dry scientific facts and statistics alone that constitute our conceptions of place, but “a fine capillary system of interconnected words, places, memories and sensations” (p.3). While this is a highly abstract approach in comparison to that of cultural geographer Lesley Head, they share a similar goal: such insights are “essential if we want to secure the future of places and sustain them” (Carter 2010, p.2).

Carter’s writing significantly crystalised my understanding of this project as a creative and personal reimagining of a region, one informed by Aboriginal art and voice. Born and raised in the Illawarra, this research has necessarily entailed my physical as well as conceptual re-exploration of Dharawal landscapes – some I was familiar with previously but learning to experience anew, others I had previously no knowledge or experience of. Like those who examine the ground in order to establish the truthfulness of aerial photographs, I have sought to ‘ground truth’ the study area through my field trips.

To engage in ground truthing is to undertake an enquiry [...] into the grounds of Being: how do we understand anything when we do not know the nature of the ground we stand on? It is to discover the ethical basis of the
relationships we forge: what is their reality? Are they compatible with the world we move through – or are they shallowly ideological and ultimately unsustainable? (Carter 2010, p.11)

Marcia Langton writes that “Aboriginal art expresses the possibility of human intimacy with landscapes. This is the key to its power: it makes available a rich tradition of human ethics and relationships with place and other species to a [wider] audience” (1999, p.306). The question of course is that for communities traumatised so significantly by colonisation, when traditional knowledge is fragmented and access to land minimal, how have or might such traditions be retained or re-envisioned? Carter writes:

How are we to see [these alternate histories,] some descendent of the panopticon school of history will protest. The answer is gradually, partially, by listening and reading between the lines. (1999a, p.73)

What writers like Carter, and arguably even Langton, Rose, and Morphy, bring to this research through their writing is a post-structuralist approach to knowledge. Aboriginal perspectives, and those inspired by them, provide a counter-narrative to the dominant Western view of history and people’s relationship with the natural world. The ways in which these imperialist narratives continue to shape our relationships with the land and the cosmos is in continual need of scrutiny. Art is one of the primary ways in which humans imagine and express their relationship with the world and is thus a means of such scrutiny. For Aboriginal people art has served as an important locus of identity in the face of colonialism. Particularly since the 1970s, when the work of the Pupunya Tula community began receiving international and national attention, art has become a prolific method of strengthening cultural identity for Aboriginal people and raising issues of concern to them. The survival and reinvention of traditions is a significant feature of postcolonial cultures. In regard to rock art, it is physically and conceptually a part of the
landscapes in question. These sites speak of a long, intimate and mutually sustaining relationship between human beings and their unique environments.

It is no surprise that post-structuralist approaches have been used to understand the significance of concepts such as Dreaming tracks / songlines, as these networks bear great resemblance – at least on a superficial level – to the non-hierarchical, rhizome-like model of thinking promoted by key post-structuralist thinkers, Deleuze and Guattari. But also, “[b]esides the currently fashionable rejection of structuralist forms of totalisation,” Alan Rumsey (2001) argues, “another reason for the recent revaluation of tracks and traces in the work of people with a postmodern or poststructuralist bent [...] is the rejection of reference-based or intellectualist theories of meaning [by philosophers such as Levi Strauss] in favour of notions of inscription, repetition, or mimesis” (p.37). In this way, Rose, Carter, Langton, and Taçon’s writing span the gap between understanding classical ontologies of artistic expression with the land and contemporary writings that place great value on alternate perspectives.

As such, this thesis also attempts to reconcile, in a manner of speaking, Carter’s approach with that of one of my other key theorists, art historian Ian McLean. In the post-script to White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art (1998), McLean argues that Carter’s concept of ‘spatial historiography’, as developed in his seminal work, The Road to Botany Bay (1987), and posited as the means by which a truly post-colonial identity might be shaped, is strong on phenomenology but weak on history (p.160). McLean argues that it is a ‘symptom’ of the colonial mind rather than a means of deconstructing it (p.164), and that the greatest foil to Carter’s argument is to imagine a relationship with the Australian landscape without first attempting to understand Aboriginal perspectives. “For Carter,” McLean states, “it is invariably the land, and not the Indigenous populations, that speaks back.” (p.161)
Subsequent writings by Carter (2010), and his participation in the creation of public works in key metropolitan areas (see Carter 2006, 1999), address both the Indigenous and colonial history of the land; they highlight the creative potential for individuals to arrive at an understanding of a place’s history, to develop a rapport with places outside of nationalistic meta-narratives, and that it is in the landscape itself that we find traces of our history and therefore future potentialities. McLean (1998) acknowledges that “[t]he value of Carter’s work is to show that this sheet [the Australian landscape] is never blank, that it is a palimpsest which speaks back” (p.161). I have found that this is very much the personal and working methodology of a number of Aboriginal people from the study area – where links to the past are fragmentary there is a creative search for future potentialities. The constant reconceptualisation of land in their art, the negotiation of their relationship with the land, posits the land itself as the site in which our identities as both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are traced, retraced and potentially reconciled.

**Existing literature**

Academic literature pertaining to contemporary Aboriginal art of south-east Australia is an incongruous entity. Few comprehensive studies of Koori art have been attempted. Significant works that encompass this subject matter include Fran Edmonds’ doctoral thesis, ‘Art is Us: Aboriginal art, identity and wellbeing in Southeast Australia’ (2007) – an impressive study of art from the Kulin nations (Victoria); and Sylvia Kleinert’s 1994 doctoral thesis, “‘Jacky Jacky was a smart young fella”: a study of art and Aboriginality in south east Australia 1900-1980’ – arguably the forerunner to Kleinert’s similarly excellent contribution to the extensive *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (2000). As mentioned above, a more recent study by Johnson, Allas & Fisher (2009) brings together a substantial amount of data relating to Aboriginal art-making practises
throughout ‘settled Australia’. As a source of ethnographic information into the regional characteristics of my study area, it has been invaluable.

With regard to the NSW south coast specifically, only two substantial studies about contemporary Aboriginal art practices exist. Daphne Nash’s doctoral thesis, ‘Transforming knowledge: Indigenous knowledge and culture workers on the south coast of New South Wales’ (2009), in particular, has great relevance to my own study, as it examines how traditional epistemologies have been maintained and rediscovered in relation to art practices on the NSW south coast. And though largely from a sociological perspective, a recent study conducted by students and their teachers (Dooley & Pollard, 2012) at Shellharbour TAFE, ‘Unique Practices of Coomaditchie Artists’, is the first substantial analysis of the Coomaditchie Artists’ unique and prolific approach to community art-making (see Images 0.01 and 0.02).

[Image 0.01] Shellharbour TAFE students launch their report on the art of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation. (Photo: V.Bicego, 03.12.12)
It would be difficult to over-state the significance of *Pallingjang* (‘saltwater’) – an ongoing project initiated by Wollongong City Gallery in the late 1990s that has so far culminated in four exhibitions (1997, 2000, 2002, 2009). While on one level it was a response to the already growing profile of local Aboriginal talent in the 1990s, *Pallingjang* has significantly contributed to this growth, providing artists with the opportunity to develop stronger networks between fellow artists, curatorial experiences, the development of new technical skills through workshops, and – in the case of the last two exhibitions – providing a wider audience for their work through touring exhibitions. Importantly, the accompanying catalogues for each exhibition remain some of the only literature particular to contemporary Aboriginal art of the study area.

To my knowledge, Paul Taçon *et al.*’s article, ‘Depicting cross-cultural interaction: figurative designs in wood, earth and stone from south-east Australia’ (2003), remains one of the only substantial attempts to provide a critical reading and understanding of ‘transitional’ artworks. Here, the output of the La Perouse community is discussed alongside other distinctive groupings from Victoria and South Australia produced
between the mid-nineteenth and later twentieth-centuries. Significant too, though more
general in approach, is Carol Cooper’s excellent contribution to Andrew Sayer’s
*Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (1994) – itself seminal in bringing a new
perspective to the transcultural nature of Aboriginal art in the colonial era.

Outside these specialised studies, relevant literature is largely a product of art journals
and conference proceedings, localised research projects, community workshops, and –
generally in the form of catalogues – as accompaniments to a growing number of gallery
exhibitions. Invaluable in illustrating the greater national and international art world
context of these publications has been Ian McLean’s compendium of critical writing,
*How Aborigines Invented the idea of contemporary art* (2010). Selected and edited by
McLean, it brings together for the first time an immense body of writing on Aboriginal
art published since the mid-twentieth century, charting the seismic shift in attitudes to
traditional and transitional practices – their relation to western notions of fine art, and
how they might be critically approached. Authors are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
arts writers and practitioners from a range of disciplines, and some have come to play a
key role in my research methodology: Marcia Langton, Djon Mundine, Terry Smith,
Sylvia Kleinert, Vivien Johnson, and Ian McLean himself.

Non-Australian literature that informed this research related almost entirely to public art
and concepts of transculturation. While prolific art journals such as *ArtLink Australia* and
*Art and Australia* have, over the last twenty years, published significant articles by
theorists and practitioners in the sphere of public art, and special issues devoted to the
subject, the most substantial and qualititative writing on public art has arguably been
produced in North America. In particular, compendiums edited by Susan Lacy (1995) and
Harriet F. Senie & Sally Webster (1992) chronicle a shift from hegemonic, nationalistic
forms of expression to what Lacy has coined ‘new genre’ public art – made for and by the
community. Understandably, this has been an important means for minorities to establish
a voice in their communities. While the examples related in these works are largely from
the United States, they reflect an international trend that provides an art-historical context in which to discuss public art made by Aboriginal artists in the study area.

No examination of ‘Indigenous-informed public art practice’ from the study area exists, highlighting the significance of the extensive survey conducted as part of this study.

Methodology

Field work: Interviews (Oral histories)

Fundamental to postcolonial enquiry is the inclusion of the voices of indigenous and/or colonised peoples. Howard Morphy (2008) writes:

> The ways in which Aboriginal people conceptualise art objects, the ways in which they talk about them and the kind of knowledge that they bring to bear on them has to be the basis of art history’s writing about Aboriginal art (p.144)

It was essential then that I met and spoke with local Aboriginal people about the issues examined here. In general, people were approached if they had an ancestral connection to the study area and were therefore considered traditional owners, stake holders, and/or community spokespersons. Well-known artists practising locally were also approached even if they did not identify as being of Dharawal descent. In regard to non-Aboriginal participants, people were approached if they had a significant working relationship with local Aboriginal people. A significant amount of time was spent contacting, meeting, and talking with participants, explaining both my aims for this research and understanding their thoughts on its subject matter, goals, and methodologies.

Potential participants were approached in as transparent and unobtrusive a manner as possible and in accordance with guidelines set by the Human Research Ethics Committee.
of the University of Wollongong. I was always upfront about my research. All potential participants were given documentation to read and sign before any officially-recorded interview took place. I made myself readily available to answer any questions they may have had about the research and how their contribution might be used. They were also given the opportunity to edit the transcript of their interview personally.

[Image 0.03]  
Uncle Vic Chapman at his home at Woonona  
(Photo: V.Bicego, 27.01.11)

[Image 0.04]  
Uncle Vic’s Baagi vase.  
(Photo: V.Bicego, 27.01.11)

It was obvious from the beginning that most of the Aboriginal people approached were rarely willing to speak to a researcher with a ‘fly in, fly out’ mentality. I was not interested in such an approach, but the logistics of distance and numbers meant that this process was long, arduous, and at times, emotionally turbulent. Not all communications or correspondences led to a formal participation. While most persons I approached were enthusiastic and supportive of the research, personal circumstances were not always conducive to their participation in the form of a recorded interview. Also obvious was the
need to be selective in my approach of participants. Despite how extensive this project became, it was impossible to incorporate every voice that might be deemed relevant. I learnt to appreciate the limitations of the research and accept that there will always be someone who felt they should have been consulted and that there will often be criticism directed at those that were.

Likewise, not every person I approached agreed to be involved. Reasons for this varied. When approached, a community elder that I had been referred to by a number of people, said he was sick and tired of Aboriginal knowledge being misinterpreted or misused by researchers and journalists. Another significant spokesperson for the Illawarra Aboriginal community said that my interviewing him would be unnecessary – he had spoken to the media so many times that the information I was seeking was already in the public domain. There were also those who, despite showing great enthusiasm at the prospect of being involved, proved too elusive to meet and talk with.
In total, twenty (20) persons formally participated in this research in the form of a recorded interview, fifteen (15) of whom are Aboriginal. Nine (9) are of Dharawal and/or closely related south coast ancestry: Les Bursill OAM (Dharawal elder, historian, and educator) (Image 2.26); Colin Isaacs (Dharawal elder and artist based at Inverell, northern NSW); Fiona Stewart (Jerrinja spokesperson and educator) (Image 0.06); Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas (Jerrinja-Yuin sisters, founders of Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation) (Image 0.02); Noel Lonesborough (Jerrinja artist, founding member of Boolarng Nangamai) (Image 0.07); Steven Russell (Dharawal artist and educator, founding member of Boolarng Nangamai); Jeff Timbery (Bidjigal artist and educator); and Clive ‘Bud’ Freeman (Jerrawangala-Katungul artist and educator). Other Aboriginal participants are: Vic Chapman (Yuwaalaraay elder, artist and educator) (Image 0.03); Tess Allas (Art historian, educator and curator, Wiradjuri nation); Djon Mundine OAM (Bundjalung artist, art historian and curator); Debbie Callaghan-Hempstead (Kamilaroi artist, founding member of Boolarng Nangamai) (Image 0.07); and Brad Welsh (Aboriginal Heritage Officer, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Kamilaroi nation).

The five (5) non-Aboriginal participants are: Howard Jones and Warren Holder (members of Gerroa Environmental Protection Society – who have worked closely alongside Fiona Stewart); Michael Keighery (artist and educator – who has worked with the members of the Illawarra Aboriginal community on several public art projects); Pat Hall (a former NPWS ranger – who has worked closely with the Shoalhaven Aboriginal community); and Dave Lambert (a rock art conservator – who has worked closely alongside Brad Welsh since the early 1980s).

Of the twenty formal participants, only six offered any amendments to their interview transcripts. Reasons for this varied: most participants were happy with the transcript I had made and felt that any substantial change was unnecessary; others simply had no time or inclination to scrutinise the material sent to them. Contact was maintained with all participants long after any formal interview(s) had taken place, and at no time was there
any indication that a participants’ failure to ‘amend’ their transcripts was due to a desire to withdraw their participation from the research. No participant wanted their identity masked, and all were happy for their interview to be reproduced in the thesis appendices in full.

Significant time was spent transcribing this audio, all of which are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix 1 of this thesis. The reasoning for this inclusion is two-fold. Firstly, as previously indicated, Aboriginal people often feel that their words are misconstrued. Including transcripts of all interviews allows the reader to analyse for themselves the manner in which I have included quotes in the body of my writing and generally interpreted people’s words. Secondly, these interviews constitute a significant body of oral history relating to the south Sydney / south coast region and are collected here for posterity.
Field work: Art in the landscape

Morphy (2009b) states that Aboriginal art was simply not collected in any substantial or qualitative manner by art galleries until the 1980s, the result being that such collections cannot represent satisfactorily a history of Aboriginal art. Thus, he writes, “[t]he writing of Aboriginal art histories is going to depend at least as much on those collections housed in the ethnographic collections of museums of natural history or social history ...” (p.61). Initial fieldwork thus consisted of visiting both the public and storeroom collections of various galleries and museums. These included the Macleay Museum (University of Sydney), The Australian Museum (Sydney), The National Museum of Australia (ACT), and smaller regional museums such as the Tongarra Museum (Albion Park) and the Lady Denman Heritage Complex (Huskisson).
A significant amount of fieldwork, however, consisted of haptic experiences of the landscapes in question, as it would never have been enough to explore them through literary records alone. These experiences have included guided walks with large parties of people into the Illawarra escarpment to see some of the few mature red cedar trees left in the northern Illawarra; native seed collecting at Foxground with members of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio to contribute to their bourgeoning native nursery; long solitary drives throughout the urban sprawls of the study area to locate and photograph public art works; and numerous bushwalks throughout the study area’s remaining bushlands to see Aboriginal rock art. These ventures not only yielded visual and anecdotal evidence for my arguments but were also a vital part of the re-exploration process that colours this study. Familiarising myself with these built and natural landscapes, their histories and stories, and noting my own feelings, and those of my companions, has been an immensely significant part of the journey.
Given its vast quantity, there was never any question of seeing anything more than a small percentage of the rock art throughout greater Sydney. Very few sites are publicised and few are easily accessible. My approach to visiting such sites was thus an organic one, making the acquaintance of people who had an interest in rock art and accompanying them to the sites they knew. Between early 2010 and mid 2014, and over the course of sixty (60) separate excursions, approximately 4 seventy-five (75) rock art sites were visited, some on several occasions. Extensive photography was taken at each site, not just of the art, but of the landscape itself. This included the geological nature of the site, its vantage points, the surrounding vegetation, and – when luck granted – native fauna encountered within its vicinity. Resulting photography was cross-referenced with previously published material (sketches, diagrams, photographs) and was often discussed.

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4 Given the complexity by which both natural and man-made elements are woven together throughout the landscape, it is impossible to say which elements constitute any one particular ‘site’.
at length with my fellow explorers. A diary of sorts was also kept in the form of detailed PDFs and shared with friends, supervisors, informants, and fellow explorers.

Maps 0.01, 0.02 and 0.03 illustrate the rock art and other heritage sites I visited in the northern and southern halves of the study area, respectively. Brief descriptions of each are given in Appendix 2 of the thesis.

[Image 0.10] Vincent Bicego photographing red ochre hand stencils in a low-lying sandstone on the outskirts of Campbelltown. (Photo: Martin Webb, 09.06.10)

Field work: ‘Indigenous-informed’ public art

While visiting rock art sites in person was essential to developing a holistic and haptic understanding of their role in the landscape, the fact remains that much detailed understanding was still drawn from specialist literature. It was from the published findings of archaeologists and historians that I could draw specific information and cross reference with my own experience and understanding of these sites (see McDonald 2008a, Bursill 1993, Officer 1991, Sefton 1988, Layton 1992).
[Map 0.01] Master map: Rock art and other heritage sites visited in the study area. Boundaries of the study area indicated by shading. (Google map appropriated by the author)
[Map 0.02] Rock art and other heritage sites visited in the northern half of the study area. (Google map appropriated by the author)

Corresponding to their number on the map, a description of each site is provided in Appendix 2.
[Map 0.03] Rock art and other heritage sites visited in the southern half of the study area. (Google map appropriated by the author)

Corresponding to their number on the map, a description of each site is provided in Appendix 2.
A similar approach to the contemporary body of public art examined here was simply not possible. The lack of comprehensive literature pertaining to contemporary Aboriginal art of the south coast of any kind – let alone public forms – meant I had to start from scratch in many respects. It became obvious that a detailed survey of public works was necessary in order to effectively analyse form, content, style, and other characteristics of the work. It would be only then that I could form a qualitative understanding of how this body of work fitted into the wider visual arts landscape, and then how this as a whole might be approached from a wider art world perspective. It is therefore this aspect of the study that constitutes a completely new and substantial contribution to the arena of knowledge.

Four lists provided the starting point of this survey: public works commissioned by Wollongong City Council, as seen on the council website; community projects facilitated by the Coomaditchie Artists (the list of which was kindly provided by CUAC secretary, Sue Leppan); community works facilitated by Kevin Butler (a list of which was,
similarly, kindly provided by the artist), and community works facilitated by Val Law, as seen on her blogspot. A number of other works were brought to my attention by ‘word of mouth’ or were ‘discovered’ simply in the course of navigating the study area to conduct fieldwork. I made a point of visiting and photographing for myself as many works as possible. This allowed me to not only see them in context but also assess what condition they were in.

Though time consuming, this process was relatively straightforward with regard to extant works located in civic spaces. Works located on school campuses (which dominated much of the later field work), understandably, necessitated communication with the school and the organisation of a supervised visiting time. Data collection continued until the end of 2013, therefore any public work produced and installed by the end of 2013 was included in the survey. With an extended working time, a further collection of work that had subsequently come to my attention was consolidated into the survey in mid-2014.

In total, three hundred and four (304) public works, or groupings of public work, were surveyed. The raw data is presented in Appendix 3 and includes: a visual survey (or catalogue) of the work according to author or author type, maps of their location, and tables in which form, style and content are analysed⁵. Column and pie charts are used throughout Chapter 4 to aid discussion of this data.

I am very aware of the inherent irony of the method in which I have drawn data from the public art survey: that for all of my argument for the need to approach quintessentially

⁵ Two characteristics traditionally important to the analysis of visual art were not formally considered in the survey: size and colour. With regard to the former, this was largely due to the logistics of gathering such data. While a significant percent of the works consisted of flat two-dimensional murals, the overall variability in shape and scale meant dimensions were not always easy to record accurately or synthesise in any meaningful manner, particularly with regard to works I was unable to see in person. Rather, the type of structure appropriated or created by the art seemed more important a factor. In hindsight, a general distinction between a more earthen colour palette (arguably inspired by art from Arnhem Land) and a broader one (as made available through modern acrylic paints) might have been pertinent, but as subject matter is heavily illustrative of coastal and riparian environments, the latter heavily outweighed the former.
transcultural material from a de-centred position, the way I have extracted and framed data is inherently conventional (western) in its approach. But Howard Morphy argues that “Aboriginal art history will only begin when the works are incorporated within a western frame” (2008, p.144). I would also draw attention to the words of art critic Sebastian Smee who, in his discussion of the ‘double bind’ of critiquing Aboriginal art either in aesthetic or ethnographic terms, has written:

... I would defend judging these works according to formal values such as colour and design simply by pointing out that they have been painted by artists who have adopted Western conventions (not uniquely Western conventions, mind you) and so ask to be judged, at least in part, by Western criteria ... (Smee 2011, p.216).

Of course Smee is talking here of art criticism rather than art analysis (in more of an archaeological sense), but I think the point is similar: that so long as the greater context in which these public and community works are produced is appreciated, and that it is accepted that percentages and timelines can only partially illustrate the subject matter, aspects of the art such as design, medium, and locality, can only help provide a better understanding of this body of work. The same can be said for the conventional use of cartography – mediated here by the now seemingly omnipotent and omni-present Google Maps – that for all its Eurocentric and colonial trappings, it nonetheless provides a basis from which to begin one’s journey – particularly if one accepts from the outset its limitations in illustrating ‘place’ over ‘space’.
[Map 0.04] Master map: ‘Indigenous informed’ public art identified in the study area.
(Google map appropriated by the author)
Numbered segments displayed in Appendix 3.
Boundaries / limitations

This study is not an art-history of Aboriginal arts practice in southern Sydney since contact. Rather, it is an exploration of how such practices might be approached in light of recent debates about the heterogeneous nature of modernity (see McLean 2013, and Morphy 2008), an argument that such a study be multi-disciplined and sensitive to transcultural processes. To be sure, there is a substantial amount of historical and artistic material examined here, but it should by no means be considered an attempt at a definitive history of this subject matter.

In regard to the study area itself, my research concerns Dharawal country as interpreted by David R. Horton for the Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia (1994) – subsequently popularised by the ‘Aboriginal Australia’ language map. In accordance with this interpretation focus is given to the coastal communities of the Sutherland Shire, the Illawarra, and the Shoalhaven. Throughout the following pages, these areas are referred to as ‘Dharawal country’, or, by virtue of their location in the Sydney Basin bioregion, ‘southern Sydney’. Other interpretations of Dharawal country exist, ones in which its western boundaries are significantly extended, and others where its southern boundaries are significantly reduced. Thus, further studies might include a more substantial incorporation of the Campbelltown and Southern Highlands areas, and might alternatively avoid the Nowra area altogether.

Large sectors of the study area with a high density of rock art are not accessible to the general public, particularly those managed by the Sydney Catchment Authority immediately west of the Illawarra escarpment. I was lucky to gain authorised entry to these areas on two occasions to see a few of the more well-known and well-documented arts sites. By and large, however, my exploration of Dharawal rock art – though still substantial – took place in landscapes accessible to the general public. These were areas predominately under the jurisdiction of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but also
included urban areas where some sites of pre-colonial activity have thankfully survived ‘development’ in some form.

While conducting this research there was a great deal of tension between my role as an arts researcher and the need I felt at times to engage in socio-political commentary. I imagine that anyone researching Aboriginal peoples and their cultures in our supposedly post-colonial era has experienced similar feelings. I am grateful to my supervisors for continually drawing my focus back to the artistic and theoretical aspects of my work – of reminding me that no matter how important and in need of further examination other factors were, the way I could best be of service was to explore these through the art itself.
Chapter 1

Dharawal country as cultural landscape
The study area: Dharawal country.
Boundaries based on Aboriginal language map created by David R Horton (1996) for the Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS. (Google map appropriated by the author)
Illawarra escarpment indicated by green line.
A note on the study area: the people, the land

The study area of this research is Dharawal country, the lands south of metropolitan Sydney traditionally owned and managed by Dharawal-speaking peoples. A modern mapping of this country includes the Sutherland Shire, the Illawarra, the Shoalhaven, and eastern aspects of the Macarthur and Southern Highlands regions. Extensive ‘undeveloped’ environments within this area include the Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park, Dharawal National Park, much of the Illawarra escarpment and Woronora Plateau areas (also known as the Southern Coalfields), and the north-easterly aspect of Morton National Park. It was Dharawal country onto which James Cook first stepped in 1770, and it was Dharawal people that he and his crew met with there (Turbet 2001, p.22).

In its current usage the word ‘Dharawal’ refers specifically to the language spoken by people from this region prior to European colonisation. While a comprehensive record of the language does not exist, enough has survived to demonstrate both its uniqueness and similarity to neighbouring languages (Turbet 2001, p.29). Etymological understanding of the name is limited. Dharawal elder and historian, Les Bursill OAM, has suggested that like the -gal suffix of similar language and dialect names (such as Gweagal and Targarigal), -wal is likely to indicate “belongs to or associated with” (pers. comm. 21 Nov 2011), but the meaning of the Dhara- prefix remains unclear.

Colonial records suggest the word denotes the Cabbage Tree Palm (*Livistona australis*) (Organ 1990, p.152; Wesson 2005b, p.50) endemic to the eastern seaboard of the continent and still prolific in the subtropical rainforests of the study area (Image 1.01). ‘Thirroul’, an historic township in the northern Illawarra, long known as ‘the Valley of Cabbage Tree Palms’, is understood to be a corruption of Tharawal, Turawal, or Thurwal.

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6 One cannot help but notice its similarity to ‘Dharug’ – a language of western Sydney. It is likely they are derived from the same word.
– different ways Dharawal has been spelt or pronounced in the past (Organ 1990, p.xxxix). Therefore, just as peoples living at Port Kembla were referred to as the Five Islands Tribe – in reference to a prolific, natural feature of that place – it is possible that Dharawal identity in general was strongly associated with this plant species and its environs. Certainly its fruit was an important food source and its large fanning fronds used in the production of utilitarian goods (Wesson 2005b, p.50) (Image 1.02).

[Image 1.01] Canopy of Cabbage Tree palms, Mt Kembla. Subtropical rainforest typical of the study area. (Photo: V.Bicego, 26.10.13)
A number of dialectical variations of the language were spoken within the study area. Gweagal, for example, was spoken by those living on the Kurnell peninsula; Wodi-Wodi was spoken by the Wollongong and Lake Illawarra peoples; the Jerrinja, traditionally occupying the Coolangatta area further south, had their own dialect also. Whether groups referred to each other by these dialectical names remains unclear. While drawn from traditional words, they are arguably recent classifications (Organ 1990, p.xli).

What is clear is that like all Aboriginal peoples in Australia, the Dharawal were hunter-gatherers – their movements and activities largely dictated by season and the availability of resources (Wesson 2005b, p.7). They took from their surroundings only what was immediately required and changed camp regularly to avoid an over-harvesting of stock. They lived in small family units and would come together in larger numbers for ceremony and trade (Organ 1990, p.xli). Division of labour was gender specific (Sefton 1983, p.33). In general, women were responsible for childrearing, harvesting of plant
foods, and the hunting of small animals; men were responsible for the hunting of larger animals (such as kangaroo, emu and goanna), managing their ‘estates’ using a variety of methods, and overseeing the spiritual life of their community – to which, it is argued in the following pages, a large portion of the region’s rock art relates.

Ecologically their world was diverse (see Wesson 2005b and Sahukar et al. 2003): the sandstone terrain around Botany Bay and Port Hacking, with its sandy, nutrient-poor soils, supports the dry eucalypt woodlands and coastal heaths so characteristic of the Sydney region, but which seemed so strange and alien to the those first Europeans. Moist subtropical rainforest, thick with fig, cabbage tree palm, and red cedar, occupies the smallest of sandstone gullies to the larger, more prolific south-east-facing mountainsides and their foothills. This environment type prevented for several decades settler

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Dharawal women were also revered for their fishing skills – only they harvested certain marine resources and by certain methods (Organ 1990, p.250).
exploration by land into the Illawarra – that great coastal plain which, with its lagoons, lakes and waterways (Image 1.04), had the rich alluvial soils so sought after by European farmers. Here, the relative abundance of resources meant Aboriginal life would have been semi-sedentary (Sefton 1983, p.33). Only in the winter months would the harsh Tasman winds necessitate a move to higher, more protected territory, in the plateau areas west of the escarpment (A1.I13, p.461). Throughout all these eco-geological zones, middens, rock art, and other signs of occupation, testify to the Dharawal peoples’ engagement with the land.

This changed dramatically in 1788 with the arrival of the First Fleet. A significant percent of the Indigenous population around Port Jackson died from introduced diseases within several years of the European invasion\(^8\). The disintegration of traditional life in Sydney rendered Aborigines dependant on the invading forces and they became a significant part of urban life. Around the time European settlement began in the Illawarra in the early

\(^8\) It is estimated that between eight hundred to a thousand people died within a sixteen kilometre radius of Sydney by 1789. (Bursill et al. 2007, p.42)
nineteenth century, the already strained “relations between Aboriginals and Governor Macquarie’s government broke down” completely (Bursill et al. 2007, p.45) and the first state-sanctioned massacres of Aboriginal people took place. Of the three thousand Dharawal people estimated to have been living at the time of invasion, nearly all “had now been killed or driven off their land” (Bursill et al. 2007 p.45).

It seems that much of the remaining Dharawal population dispersed in southerly and westerly directions (Organ 1990, p.xxxvii). While traditional kinship systems and trade practices had always meant extensive interaction with neighbouring groups, colonisation resulted in a chaotic mixing of peoples. Official large-scale removals also became common place with whole communities uprooted from their ancestral homes. Alexander Berry, one of the earliest settlers in the Shoalhaven area, forcibly removed Jerringa communities from their lands around Mt Coolangatta to Orient Point further south; in the late nineteenth century, a number of Illawarra Aborigines were obliged to move permanently to the reserve being established at La Perouse in Sydney (Organ 1990, p.xxxviii); and Bomaderry, a northern suburb of Nowra, became one of the first locations

![Image 1.05] Memorial plaque at Cataract Dam: an acknowledgement of the 1816 massacre of Dharawal people at Appin. Installed 2007. (Photo: V. Bicego, 03.11.12)
where Aboriginal children were officially removed to as part of assimilation policies in the early twentieth century – some stolen from far beyond the borders of New South Wales.

Despite the trauma of colonisation, Dharawal descendents continue to live in the study area in small numbers and are part of a strong network of Aboriginal families living along the south coast – from La Perouse in Sydney to Bega near the NSW/Victorian border. The language itself continues to exist in pidgin form, people using certain words and phrases that they picked up as children and which they have nurtured amongst themselves. Given the almost universal scenario of parents and grandparents refraining from using ‘language’ in front of their children due to the threat of child removal, the loss of a more complex linguistic structure is not surprising. Elders and historians such as Les Bursill have devoted years to researching and re-distributing traces of Dharawal language from oral records and colonial archives, and there is concerted efforts by some to incorporate words back into regular usage (A1.I01, p.318; A1.I07, p.403; A1.I09, p.423).

This situation is exemplary of so many aspects of Aboriginal culture from the study area and further far south coast. There is at once both a deep sense of loss for traditional practices and customs, and yet real pride and enthusiasm for those that have survived, those that have adapted, and even those that have evolved completely from the colonial encounter. Land, or ‘Country’, as it is referred to amongst Aboriginal Australians, remains a central tenet of their identity (Bursill et al. 2007, p.8). For those persons exploring their identity through art, both as subject and praxis, the land remains a constant source of inspiration.

This chapter focuses on the concept of cultural landscapes from the disciplines of archaeology and human geography; how it is applicable to Dharawal country through an interpretation of pre-contact land management, the cosmologies that dictated these practices, and how this is evidenced through the position and condition of extant rock art.
Discussed is how these practices and epistemologies explicitly challenge the foundational myths that, in the eyes of the invading forces, justified colonisation.

Intrinsic to this discussion is recognising the ways in which cartographic modes of mapping and seeing the world were privileged over more spatio-temporal and haptic understandings of people’s connection to land. Public art works, made by Aboriginal artists in the study area, it is argued, are a means of freshly articulating these ancient epistemologies to the wider non-Aboriginal community, whilst also exploring and reaffirming personal connections to Country.

Cultural landscapes

Chris Gosden and Lesley Head (1994) state that “landscape is a term which both invites and defies definition” (p.113). Similarly, archaeologist Paul Taçon (1999) writes “that landscape as a concept is infinitely variable” (p.34). Reasons for this ambiguity stem from the differing cultural perspectives through which people interact with and manipulate their surroundings, and how in turn they make sense of these processes (Taçon 1999, p.34). Ultimately landscape is about human perception of land and the role we envisage for ourselves in relation to it.

As such, cultural or socialised landscapes, specifically, are as much conceptual as they are physical (Gosden & Head 1994, p.113). They are created not only by human beings responding to and transforming our surroundings over time, but by the meanings with which we invest natural and man-made places – an evolution that is clearly circular. The sacredness of any given place, for example, may originally stem from its importance as a place of sustenance, such as the vegetation growing there at any one time. Even if its capacity to sustain should change, its role as a culturally important place, once established, may continue indefinitely. Conversely, the spiritual importance invested in an area – perhaps stemming from its unique geology or vegetation – might dictate abstaining
from exploiting its otherwise abundant resources

“Today,” Taçon (1999) states, “there are few areas of the world that have not been built upon, mapped, marked, or otherwise used for human use” (p.33). Even now, those areas which – in Western terms – are traditionally thought of as ‘wilderness’ are in fact culturally constructed spaces. “Sectioned off, marked, mapped, and mythologised into networks of national parks or reserves,” Taçon conjectures they become “another type of humanly defined landscape in the process” (p.33). An analysis of any cultural landscape thus necessary entails those intangible aspects of society as much as the material traces it leaves behind.

 Foundational myths deconstructed

Human geographer Lesley Head (2000) states that the foundational myths by which the British justified their colonisation of Australia continue to shape current attitudes towards the land and its original peoples more than we care to admit. She argues that a deconstruction of these myths is necessary to achieve an understanding of Australian land as ‘Aboriginal landscape’, and that only this, in turn, will facilitate a “socially and environmentally sustainable occupation of [the Australian] continent” (p.10).

The key foundational myth from which so many others gain legitimacy is that of *terra nullius* – land that belonged to no one. This myth was effectively perpetuated by the belief that Aborigines did not make use of the land in any meaningful way, that they did not shape their environments, that Australia was a ‘pristine wilderness’ prior to European settlement. The absence of architecture, land demarcations, discernible agriculture, the seemingly itinerant lifestyle of Aborigines, all contributed to this arguably wilful misconception⁹ by the colonisers. And yet, as anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2001)

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⁹ Recent research by Paul Memmott (2007) highlights multiple examples from the colonial record in which Europeans did perceive Aboriginal forms of architecture.
states, although such research is still in its infancy, “[i]t is becoming increasingly evident that both the distribution and diversity of Australian biota across the continent are artefacts of Aboriginal people’s intentional actions” (p.102). Although colonisation means that “much of the evidence we would want to examine has been obliterated” (Rose 2001, p.103), there are still fragile but valuable traces from which to draw evidence – traces in the colonial written records, oral traditions, and embedded in the land itself. As Gosden and Head (1994) state, “social landscapes [...] will be invisible, but inherent, in the archaeological record” (p.115)

a) Shaping the land

Historian Bill Gammage (2011) argues that there were three seminal ways by which Aborigines transformed and managed their environments: digging, the construction of dams and canals, and fire-farming (p.160). The quintessential example of how digging impacted the environment is the gathering of the yam. Having removed this tuberous root vegetable from the ground, women would replant its stem, thus ensuring continued growth and propagation. While on one level this seems unremarkable, this simple and well-established practice blurs the previously stable line between agriculture and subsistence. People did not only return to places known for their resources, but contributed to the maintenance of these resources. Deliberate and residual propagation such as this would have occurred with a number of other plant species across the continent. Over thousands of years its impact would have been significant.

Throughout Australia, the construction of fish traps and dams are further archaeological evidence of occupation and the deliberate shaping of environment. Men would arrange rocks in a fashion that, at high tide, would trap fish and other marine life in rock pools along the shoreline, providing them with an easy catch. Damming practices continued well into the colonial period in certain areas, and there is at least one instance of such a
trap being made near Gerringong in the early twentieth century. Jerrinja woman, Fiona Stewart, recalls:

[T]hey made a rock trap to catch the fish on the low tide. So when the high tide comes in, all the fish get caught in there. At low tide they’d go [and catch the fish with] whatever types of bags they had ... It was actually my grandfather who put that in with my father and a couple of my father’s white friends ... It’s still there today. (A1.I07, p.388)

A more ephemeral type of damming practice – one utilising plant materials – was also recorded in the study area by naval officer and early settler, Robert Marsh Westmacott, during the early colonial period (Image 1.06).
b) *Firing the land*

Fire, Gammage (2011) stresses, was by far the most significant means of land management, and at one time or another, in some shape or form, practiced across the entire continent. In the long term, ‘fire-stick farming’, as it has come to be called in northern parts of the continent, encouraged new growth in plants that require fire for germination, and shaped the grassy eucalypt woodlands for hunting optimums. While there appears to have been no occasion where a direct explanation of this practice was sought from the Aborigines themselves, European accounts from the earliest days of the New South Wales colony attest to the skilful use of fire by Aborigines in the modification of their environments. It was witnessed not only around Port Jackson but in the greater Sydney area, particularly to the west and north.

In the eyes of the colonisers, burning practices of the Sydney Aborigines seemed to serve several immediate purposes. Wildlife would be driven from their hiding places, making an easier hunt, and dense understoreys would be thinned, making not only travel but access to ground foods easier (Attenbrow 2010, pp.92-93). In the film documentary, *Memories of Jimmy Cook* (2000), Bidgigal man, Jeff Timbery, who has strong ancestral links to the study area, spoke about his understanding of traditional fire practices. Even more so than the example of the yam, there is an insistence here that to use fire was to ‘farm the land’. He said:

[There were] times when you would farm the land. Burning the bush [...] means] you can have easier access for you to travel on there. We have a lot of plants in Australia that actually need bushfire for them to regerminate. Burning of the bush – of course regenerating the bush – the young shoots and so on coming up from the plants attracts all the animals to that area. So when your family would come by that area again it would be thriving with tucker. So there was a farming technique that existed all over Australia.
When asked how about his ideas on traditional fire regimes, Dharawal elder and historian, Les Bursill, offered:

When I look at the photographs from about 1860 onwards it shows me that the [Royal] National Park, and this [Sutherland] area, was open forest with sandy soils … [Even] now … if I go to some of the places where there has been very little European impact, and where there has been the occasional fires, I see that they are open gum forests with sandy soils and grasses … So, there was firing [as a form of maintenance]. (A1.I13, p.460)

Personal memories also attest to the practice’s existence on the further south coast. Sisters Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas, founders of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation, recall eating bush tucker on their grandmother's 80 acre property at Falls Creek as well as the property being burned regularly to maintain its health and productivity. As far as they are concerned, these were practices that had continued since pre-contact times, albeit in various forms (A1.I20, p.525). Thus, while no historical
account exists of fire being used as a means of land management in the Illawarra at contact (pers. Comm. Michael Organ, 6 March 2012), rather than precluding its existence this should more appropriately be seen as one of many gaps in the historical record that needs considered re-navigation.

Tasmanian Aboriginal artist, Julie Gough, whose work interrogates the colonial record, states:

I work with gaps and am mindful of them. I stare at gaps amid layers in painted colonial landscapes. Gaps between the lines and the words in historical accounts. Gaps in who and what and where and when and especially why were recorded. (2001, p.156)

Investigating the ‘gaps’

The presence of fire was the most constant indicator to those aboard the Endeavour that the south coast of present-day NSW was indeed inhabited. James Cook and Joseph Banks reported numerous fires and ‘smokes’ of variable sizes over the course of a week in which, as part of a larger exploration of the east coast of Australia, they sailed between Ulladulla and Botany Bay in the later part of April 1770 (see Organ 1990, pp.2-4). It has been suggested that these accounts might be evidence of localised fire regimes (pers. conv. Jacqueline Gothe, 20 March 2012). Les Bursill, also, is insistent that fire regimes suited to south-east Australia’s temperate climate would have been minimal in comparison to the more intensive forms of fire-stick farming still practiced in the savannahs of northern Australia. He states:

Cleaning up country’ [is a better description of the local practice]. I’ve heard some old men use that term. I think that’s what fire-stick farming was down here – it was ‘cleaning up country’. (A1.I13, p.460)
Certainly, as the Holocene progressed, and the earth’s climate stabilised, there were areas of this region that would have benefited little from burning, suggesting that within the greater Sydney region itself, different environment types would have necessitated different fire regimes (Attenbrow 2010, p.42). The relative abundance of freshwater and marine resources in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, for example, means a reliance on grassland game would have been reduced, and the use of fire as a land management tool would have been focused on the immediate coastal plain and headlands, avoiding the larger subtropical rainforest areas still characteristic of the area.

From the small boat in which he and several other crew members of the Endeavour attempted to land near Bulli, Banks described the trees as standing separate “from each other without the least underwood” (Banks in Organ 1990, p.4). This description suggests the quintessential type of open woodland sustained through fire management.


Some of the earliest canvas depictions of the Illawarra were produced by Augustus Earle (c.1793–1838). Looking past its romantic sensibilities (emphasised by the dark palette),
his 1827 work, *Scene on the coast of New South Wales, Illawarra* (Image 1.08), illustrates the kind of scene described by Banks: an open forest by the shoreline. Despite the European figures in the middle ground, there is little indication that the scenery has been changed by the new arrivals and likely looks as it would under Aboriginal management.

Evidence of fire regimes can also be traced form current environmental conditions. By the mid-nineteenth century, by which time all fire regimes in Sydney had ceased, settlers were commenting on the noticeable difference of the bushland to only a few generations before. Understoreys where previously “a man might gallop without impedment, and see whole miles before him” were now “thick forest[s] of young trees”, and the animals drawn to these previously grassy woodlands, absent (Mitchell 1848 in Attenbrow 2002, p.42). While pockets of ‘pristine’ bushland remain along the coast, others have been invaded by both native and introduced weeds, creating large stockpiles of fuel during the bush fire season. The intensity of modern bushfires has arguably increased because ‘cleaning up Country’ ended with the displacement of Aborigines in south-east Australia. In *Memories of Jimmy Cook* (2000), Jeff Timbery relates:

> There’s a lot of things that we’ve been doing for that so long a period that the land actually wants it as well. Now we don’t do any burning of the bush and so on we’re finding a lot of introduced species of plants and also animals. So it’s changing, the environment’s changing.

In emphasising how densely compact Australian flora has become in the absence of Aboriginal burning practices, Gammage (2011) draws attention to an early depiction of the highlands immediately west of the Illawarra: *View on Wingecarribee River, NSW* (c.1821) by convict artist Joseph Lycett¹⁰ (Image 1.09). Unlike the previously mentioned work of Earle’s, there is also some indication that this landscape has been impacted upon by Europeans. The absence of lower branches on a tall tree in the foreground – most

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¹⁰ Although outside the scope of this thesis this discussion of cultural landscapes could be extended to include discussion of Lycett by Hoorn (1990), McPhee (2006), and Maynard (2014).
probably red cedar – suggests other large trees, once in close proximity, have been logged. Still, the work serves the purpose of comparison, because where Lycett's image shows details “such as sharp tree-grass edges” – details, Gammage argues, unlikely to have been invented by the artist – “most cliff country along the Wingecarribee [River] is now forest … and much too dense to photograph” (2011, pp.62-63). Gammage explicitly states that a landscape once maintained had become, and remains, a wilderness.


In recalling the distress of traditional owners over the extensive erosion caused by cattle-farming in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory, Rose (2001) also articulates this notion – that it is in fact the absence of traditional land management through which landscape becomes wilderness. There, people were describing the land as having gone ‘wild’. Aboriginal land management, developed over millennia, had maintained an order in the landscape, whilst introduced interactions were proving invasive and destructive. “Life was washing away,” Rose states, “and so was the possibility of life (p.117).”
Taçon asserts that the key to understanding the complexity of Aboriginal cultural landscapes is through an awareness of traditional Dreaming Tracks (1999, p.42), also known as Songlines, Song cycles, or Storylines (McBryde 2000, p.157). On a tangible level these are trade and access routes that formed a complex network across the entire continent, bringing different people and cultures into contact. According to Isabelle McBryde (2000) they “are among the world's most extensive systems of human communication recorded in hunter-gatherer societies” (p.158). But Dreaming tracks serve as prime examples of where the physical and conceptual are intrinsically linked, as to travel them means to walk in the steps of ancestral beings, Dreamings, responsible for the creation of the world with all its phenomena. The traveller, too, is responsible for sustaining these tracks through ritualised acts. Gammage (2011) writes:

A songline is also a map, compass and calendar. It follows paths ecologically suited to its creator ancestor, and teaches how to exploit resources en route.

If you can sing a song you can follow it, even into country you have never been before (p.135).

Individuals may have travelled only small portions of a particular tract in their lifetime, but where one group's familiarity with and responsibility for a tract ended the tract's association with another group began. The relatively small traffic and their largely seasonal usage means that, in their pre-contact form, these routes would not necessarily have been physically discernible in the way that roads are today. But ironically it is through modern roads and bush tracks that songlines remain manifest.

It is no coincidence that modern roads throughout the Royal National Park bifurcate significant rock art assemblages. Dharawal elder, Les Bursill, has lived his adult life in the Sutherland Shire and has made significant studies on the rock art of his ancestors in that area. In regard to the Sutherland Shire and Royal National Park areas, Bursill states:
Very soon after this area was colonised ... traditional Songlines and Dreaming tracks were usurped as roads. They would have first been walking tracks, and then later they would have been horse tracks, then cart tracks, then wagon tracks, and then they would have become roads. How can I verify that? … I look at a road, and once I've plotted the Aboriginal sites [nearby], guess what … Every couple of kilometres, on each side of the road, about fifty metres in[to the scrub], there's a site. And if we go down the [Sir] Bertram Stevens Drive [one of the arterial roads through the Royal National Park], there's sites all along there too. That is the main Songline [in this area] … [People would come] from the south coast, up along that ridge, with their Dreaming stories being told all the way along. (A1.I13, p.462)
Similarly, Jeff Timbery states:

When [the first settlers were] documenting discoveries of finding a pass over the Blue Mountains [for example] … Aboriginal people were involved in all of those [“discoveries”], because it was the same trails and tracks that our mob had always travelled on […] they've built bypasses and bridges [over them now] … but when you think back to the early days of the horse and cart, you'll find that they're the same Aboriginal trails that a mob have walked for thousands and thousands of years. (A1.I18, p.499)

The calculated positioning of art in the landscape is capable not only of revealing much about the strong conceptual mapping the Dharawal had of their country (songlines), but also their use of fire as a means of land management (maintaining access to significant sites). While a more detailed analysis of the rock art of the south Sydney region is undertaken in Chapter 2, several observations are worth discussing here.
Fire = Songline = Art

The production of rock art is one of the significant ways in which humans have socialised their landscapes over the last 40,000 years (Taçon 1994, p.117). Taçon adamantly contends that the production of art was an important means of 'humanising' Australian landscapes in the earliest times of human occupation:

When people first arrived on the continent … there was a need not only to colonise but also to humanise and socialise what they may have perceived as a hostile landscape. On a large scale, vegetation was transformed through burning practices, animal populations were changed through hunting practices, and geological places were socialised through rock art and ritual. (1999, p.50)

Anyone who has gone bush walking in the greater Sydney area will know just how difficult a task it can prove upon leaving any officially designated track. While significant pockets of 'pristine wilderness' remain, the massive and uncontrolled bush fires that have swept through places like the Royal National Park in recent decades have facilitated the proliferation of understorey species, making certain areas almost impossible to penetrate. Species such as Dagger Hakea (Hakea teretifolia) are now so extensive, so compact, that accessing many rock art sites can be arduous and painful. It is unthinkable that essentially naked people, no matter how hardened by their hunter-gather lifestyle, could traverse these environments as they are now; as Bursill emphasises, “You would die from loss of blood within about an hour” (A1.113 p.460). Thus, evidence can be drawn from current scenarios that navigating land also entailed its constant maintenance – undoubtedly by fire. As Jeff Timbery states:

[The use of fire was also] about accessing different areas … Traditionally there were trails or tracks that you would go on up and down [our country] … So when you talk about the bush being too thick to travel through now,
[like in the] National Parks, it's because nobody does travel on [some of]

those trails and tracks anymore. (A1.I18, p.499)

As such, while archaeologist Val Attenbrow correctly points out that there are no ‘historical’ records of Dreaming tracks in south-east Australia (2010, p.127), evidence drawn from the land itself is directly at odds with this. Besides the tracks themselves, the numerous engraved schemata of macropod, bird, and anthromorph tracks, testify to the centrality of the idea of travel, of journeying, in local cosmology. Increasingly important also, as evidenced in the above discussions with Jeff Timbery and Les Bursill, is that local Aboriginal people continue to talk about songlines today. It is a major component of people’s understandings of how country is composed, navigated, and interacted with (see Image 1.12), and links powerfully with more recent historical associations.

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 185 x 185 cm.
Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio.
Ways of seeing, ways of being

Part of [the Enlightenment] was to ‘discover’, list, investigate, and therefore possess, if only mentally, each new species of man, beasts, and society [...] It impressed the power and control of naming, to a large degree ignoring the idea that these societies may have already mapped the land themselves, and had their own taxonomy and methods of maintaining its memory. (Djon Mundine 2012, p.11)

Art historian Jerry Brotton argues that the desire to bring ‘order and structure’ to our world through various methods of mapping is “one of the most basic objectives of human understanding” (2013, p.2). But it is an endeavour, he adds, never made from “a neutral cultural standpoint” (p.6). Enlightenment Europe placed emphasis on rendering their vision of the world through mathematical science and geometry (Smith 2002, p.48), its ways of seeing intrinsically tied to capitalist economies. Primary concerns were what could be recorded, stored, kept, owned. It is unsurprising then that although “alert to the intrinsic differences” of the Australian landscape upon their arrival, colonists were “unable to see its internal order” (McLean 1995, p.101) as the Aborigines did. For the new colony to not only be, but also seen to be, subdued and made productive, a new visual order was required.

Art historian Terry Smith posits three major components by which visual regimes of western imperialism operated from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth centuries. “Practices of calibration, obliteration and symbolisation (specifically, aestheticisation),” he writes, “underlay the vagaries of style and circumstance” (2002, p.483). In regard to calibration, he writes,

Mappings of the oceans and landmasses, measurements of distances and of governmental and property boundaries, surveillance of people – all of these
practices [...] create the self-replicating conditions of a steady state, European-style ... (p.483)

Obliteration consisted of both the physical erasure of Aboriginal people from the landscape – diseases, massacres, the uprooting of communities – as well as the more subtle method of abstracting, or ‘othering’ the indigene out of the historical record (Smith 2002, p.483). So too does it encompass the destructive nature of settlers’ interaction with the environment. Of his visit to the Illawarra in 1834, Governor of New South Wales, Sir Richard Bourke, wrote:

[T]his [is a] secluded but fertile and beautiful tract [of land]. It has exceeded my expectation in point of beauty of vegetation. The Cabbage Palm and Fern Trees are exquisite – as are some of the tropical creepers and parasitical
plants. The maize and tobacco are more valuable indeed but I almost lament that the ground [has] been cleared of the former to make room for these homely productions. (Cited in Organ n.d., n.p.)

In such statements we recognise the pangs of guilt elicited by the destruction of the environment but also the steadfast, almost zealous belief, in betterment of the land through settlement, through the imposition of western-based economics and ways of seeing. Just as many people would later speak sympathetically of the ‘passing’ of the Aboriginal race, they saw this as a natural progression of civilisation – a process that, once begun, was unstoppable.

Bourke was certainly not alone in this sentiment. It appears to have been shared by many a visitor to the region. The Austrian painter, Eugene Von Guerard, responsible for some of the most romantic depictions of the region, stated:

Unfortunately the progress of settlement is necessitating the destruction of these magnificent forests, which in many instances clothe a rich chocolate soil of especial value to the farmer ... [S]tately giants were rapidly falling before the pitiless axe of the hardy pioneers of civilisation. (Cited in Mills & Jakeman 1995, p.28)

Integral to the processes of aestheticisation during the nineteenth century was the sensibilities of the Picturesque. Spinning “charming appearances as garlands over the instrumental actualities of establishing colonies”, Terry Smith has called it ‘the human face of imperialism’ (2002, p.484). Historian Michael Organ (1993) argues that beyond the beauty of Port Jackson, European artists found little in the rest of the immediate landscape to satisfy their picturesque sensibilities. As such, artists in the nineteenth century were drawn west to the Blue Mountains and south to the Illawarra in search of sublime scenery (n.p.). Works by Augustus Earle, Conrad Martens, and Eugene Von Guerard, the three artists responsible for some of the most iconic images of the Illawarra
in the nineteenth century, exemplify the way in which Europeans impressed upon the Australian landscape their own ways of seeing.


[Image 1.15] Remnants of an extensive subtropical rainforest: farm land at Jamberoo dotted with Cabbage Tree palms. (Photo: V.Bicego, 03.03.13)
Of the picturesque, McLean (1999) writes:

Here signs of culture and history, usually in the form of ruins, or old fences and farm buildings, or domesticated animals and labourers, were intermingled with an often wild nature, as if some sort of stasis or compromise had been reached between the two. (p.151)

Few illustrations of the Illawarra evoke this imaginary ‘stasis’ between nature and culture more successfully than the watercolours of Robert Marsh Westmacott (1801-1870), though in the annals of art history he is of little consequence. Like a number of military officers before him, his training in draughtsmanship and life drawing provided the outside world with views of the bourgeoning NSW colony before this job fell completely to professional and commercial artists and eventually photography (Organ n.d., n.p).


In his works, the grandeur of the Illawarra environs is contrasted to the small but prominent pockets of settlement (Image 1.16). Here culture is represented by sailing ships, farmsteads, roads; nature by the ocean and rivers, the mountains, the exotic flora
and fauna. To which category Westmacott saw the Aborigines belonging is not debateable. He is recorded as writing:

The Aboriginal population of New South Wales may be classed in the lowest scale of human beings at present known to the white man [...] Many attempts have been made to civilise them, and make them of some use, but instances of their leaving their wild habits are rare. (Cited in Organ 1990, pp.221-22)

Thus, in his picturesque style, Westmacott’s Aborigines represent two seemingly irreconcilable yet congruent ideas in the western imagination. First and foremost they are very much a part of the wild nature that has been – or at least in the process of being – brought under control. As Larrikia artist, Gary Lee, points out, until the legal overturning of *Terra Nullius* by the High Court of Australia, Aborigines were ostensibly in the same class as flora and fauna (1997, p.100). Second, they provided a visual mechanism very much in keeping with the ruins of castles seen in European landscape painting – a phase of human existence from which Western culture has long since advanced. Westmacott’s Aborigines are those ruins.

And yet, for all this, Wesmacott’s Aboriginal figures (Images 1.03, 1.06, and 2.20) are afforded more than a little dignity. No matter how much a visual tool, they represent some of the most substantial visual records of Dharawal peoples in the early to mid-nineteenth century. In contrast to well-known colonial paintings of Aboriginal people, such as John Glover’s fanciful corroboree paintings, Westmacott’s illustrations were drawn from observation and thus represent a valuable trace from which much information can be drawn.

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11 Although these statements might appear to be generalisations, this approach follows that of Lee (1997), McLean (1999), and Smith (2002). Further analyses of the political nature of landscape-painting during the colonial and neo-colonial eras can be found in the works of W.J.T. Mitchell (2001, 2002 & 2003) and Charles Harrison (2002).

12 Conrad, Earle and Von Guerrard all included incidental Aboriginal figures in their compositions, and produced the occasional detailed study / portrait, but their primary focus was the landscape.
Resonances

The degree to which landscapes continue to be mediated by colonial regimes of seeing is made evident by our language today. People still describe spaces as ‘picturesque’, or large vistas as ‘sublime’\textsuperscript{13}. Our perception of our surroundings and indeed our interaction with them continue to be mediated through the aesthetics of western imperialism. The detachment which a western understanding of landscape posits between the spectator and the view is as much evident in our actions: ‘a drive in the country’, ‘going for a bushwalk’; these presuppose a strict binarism between civilisation and the non-human world, totally at odds with classical Aboriginal cosmology.

\textbf{Image 1.17} Alexander Berry monument, Princes Highway, Berry. Illawarra escarpment visible in background. (Photo: V.Bicego, 24.08.12)

\textsuperscript{13} An example from the study area being the lookout, Sublime Point, at Bulli Tops.
Imperialism continues to resonate also through the privileged public positioning of structures directly related to western dominance – a tradition that Native American artist Judith Baca has called the ‘cannon in the park’ model of public art (1995, p.21). Nationalistic and hegemonic, it perpetuates foundational mythologies. Examples include war memorials, statues of famous monarchs, explorers and settlers, structures drawing aesthetically from classical Greek and Renaissance art, and the positioning of deactivated industrial technology (such as cannons and trains) in prominent locations.

The study area readily throws up examples of such work: the cannons atop Flagstaff Hill, Wollongong; the monument to settler Alexander Berry which, from almost every angle, one literally sees the surrounding landscape in his image (Image 1.17); the monument to Captain James Cook at his landing place at Kurnell (Image 1.18), its obelisk design echoing Europe’s long lineage of colonialism far beyond Australian shores. These all reiterate the notion of Western superiority: not just the West’s power in conquering other lands, but its ability to keep them. Baca has said that “[b]y their daily presence in our lives,
these [types] of artworks intend to persuade us of the justice of the acts they represent” (p.132). Similarly, Bundjalung artist, Fiona Foley, argues:

The taking of Aboriginal lands historically has made it easy for the continuation of civic spaces to privilege whiteness. To the detriment of Indigenous knowledge systems, constructs of power are used to position cultures in the visual landscape. (2012, p.64)

However, for all their calculated positioning in the landscape, alongside them are cultural presences that continue to be felt; echoes from the past which reverberate through our physical landscapes and enter our current lexicons. Beyond more recent public forms of art (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), the most consistent Aboriginal cultural presence in today’s built environments is in ‘geographical naming’. Alongside the names imported from Europe by the colonists and their descendents, Aboriginal place names echo the pre-contact and contact history of the land; the names of streets, suburbs, regions drawn from Aboriginal languages. It is a fragile tapestry of text, worn and threadbare through the colonial encounter, but a textured one that nonetheless colours our everyday lives.

De Lorenzo (2005) argues that from the early 1800s onwards the appropriation of Aboriginal words increasingly became a means of establishing an ‘essential Australianness’, one which distinguished the new settler identity from that of the motherland and, as such, are as much markers of dispossession as they are of cultural presence (De Lorenzo 2005, p.105). It is arguably one of the earliest forms of what McLean has called ‘Aboriginalism’ (1998), and exemplary of the unequal exchange Fernando Ortiz (1947) posited as central to transculturation.

And yet, no matter how unbalanced a cultural exchange, geographical naming means that a collective cultural memory of sorts remains emplaced in the landscape; a reminder that the palimpsest that is a cultural landscape is never fully erased, that traces can be
discovered, threads of the tapestry rewoven. Gough also writes specifically about the “traces of indigenous occupancy” that “old signs and mappings retain”, stating:

These namings ironically trace a portrait of presence across [the land] long after original Indigenous nomenclature was carefully removed from recollection. (Gough 2001, pp162).

The Shoalhaven city of Nowra takes its name from the word for black cockatoo, a bird whose significance resonates in mythology as well as historical accounts of the stolen generations; Mount Warrigal, a suburb on the southern shores of Lake Illawarra, takes its name from Warrigal greens (*Tetragononia tetragonioides*), an important vegetable in the pre-contact diet; Yaroma Avenue speaks of the Hairy Man, the Yaroma, a Dreaming specific to the region and associated with the fig tree from which the suburb of Figtree derives its name; Ooaree Creek outside Gerringong speaks of the Ooaree, a Dharawal clan with whom Dharawal elder, Les Bursill, had some association with as a child (A1.I13, p.461). The list is extensive, as are the words’ potential to articulate a fragile but real connection to the past.

The cultural presence embodied in these geographical namings has been emphasised by some local councils in the study area through specially designed signage – signs that draw explicit attention to their Aboriginal origins, often accompanied by the meaning of the word. This approach to public education is particularly noticeable in areas south of Lake Illawarra (Image 1.19).

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14 Amongst the Aboriginal communities of Nowra, the squawking of the black cockatoo was interpreted as a warning. It was said to signal the eminent arrival of government officials intent on removing children from their families. (A1.I15, p.479)
Ancient monuments, contemporary articulations

Similar to the sentiments expressed by Judith Baca and Fiona Foley, postcolonial writer Tony Birch has argued that “[w]here gaps exist within historical narratives, [state] monuments act as a filler, attempting to produce an unquestioned and singular view of the past” (Birch 1999, p.63). As well as the actual process of obliteration, then, these devices have significantly contributed to an entrenched ‘culture of forgetting’. Yet as art historian Gavin Malone (2007) rightly reminds us, while “not physically constructed[,] as is the custom in the colonising cultural tradition,” for Aboriginal peoples “‘monuments’ were in the land already” (p.163).

Taçon (1999) argues that there are four types of natural land features that have universally captured the human imagination (p.37). Briefly, these are areas of great transformation such as mountains, volcanoes, gorges; distinct junction points where differing vegetations or geologies converge; unusual natural features, such as a strangely shaped mountain
peak; and places that provide spectacular vistas.

Oral histories and colonial records attest to such natural features being central to the Dharawal cosmology. Dreaming histories pertain to many of the geological features and natural phenomena of the Illawarra (see Organ 1990, pp.il-cviii). Significantly, in recent years, such stories have increasingly become the subject of public art produced by Aboriginal artists in the study area.

Designed by Wadi Wadi woman, Alison Page, and a number of local Aboriginal women artists, the 2007 Merrigong Environmental Sculpture (Image 1.21), located at Mt Keira lookout, freshly articulates the ancient story of the creation of The Five Islands (Image 1.20) and Mt Keira itself. This Dreaming recalls how Oolaboolawoo, the West Wind, angry with five of his daughters, blows them out to sea where they become stranded and transform into the islands located off the Illawarra coastline. The sixth remaining daughter, unable to move through her grief, becomes Mt Keira. This is considered a special woman’s place by locals.

The story is rendered through six gunyah-shaped sculptures. Coated in bronze, which represents “Indigenous survival and everlasting connection to place” (Kombumerri 2006, p.73), the structures are constructed from sticks that the participating artists gathered on the mountain, and are arranged in a spiral formation that re-iterates the Indigenous non-linear approach to space (Kombumerri 2006, p.73). The positioning of six wind chimes in concealed locations, while intended to re-unite the daughters with their father, arguably also signifies the reaffirmation of Aboriginal people’s connection to this special place.
[Image 1.20] View from Hill 60 of three of ‘The Five Islands’ off the Illawarra coastline.  
(Photo: V.Bicego, 26.04.13)

[Image 1.21] 2007 Merrigong Environmental Sculpture at Mt Keira lookout.  
Designed by Alison Page and Tina Lee. (Photo: V.Bicego, 16.01.11)
The Dreaming of Gurangatch is similarly concerned with land formations and has also become the subject of public art (Image 1.22). Gurangatch, or Gurungaty, was a great fish or eel – that is, like most Dreamings he was essentially human in form but had attributes of these creatures. In an attempt to escape Mirrigan, the native dog, Gurangatch tunnels deep into a number of waterways, creating and connecting new ones.


[Image 1.23] Boolarng Nangamai and helpers begin bush revegetation on the slopes overlooking the Little Blowhole, Kiama. (Photo: V.Bicego, 11.05.12)
The links between the past and present through these stories are at times as fragile as they are rich and complex. Jerrinja woman, Fiona Stewart (Image 0.06) and her siblings were raised being told the stories of Gurungutch by their father and grandmother. They understood his Dreaming as a very real presence in the landscape and avoided certain areas so as not to disturb him (A1.I07, p.391). Others, such as Noel Lonesborough, who traces his lineage to the same language group as Fiona, but was raised by his white relatives, has only come to learn the tale as an adult (A1.I14, p.474). And yet Noel has played a central role in a contemporary reDreaming of the story. He has taken part in a revegetation project at a site through which Gurungutch is manifest – the Little Blowhole at Kiama (Image 1.23).

Works such as these operate on a number of levels. Firstly, considering Paul Carter’s idea of public art being a means to ‘write public space’ (1999), these works reinscribe a space which, for more than two centuries, has not only privileged western epistemologies but actively sought to discount Aboriginal ones. On a very tangible level they are a cultural presence purposefully impressed upon the land.

Deborah Bird Rose has worked with a number of Aboriginal communities across Australia, including native title claimants to Biamunga on the far south coast of NSW. She writes that a significant aspect of her research is understanding the way in which people impress upon their landscapes and how, in turn, these landscapes impress upon them. “An impress,” she writes, “is a set of traces of productive activity” (2001, p.100). She relates:

If we regard landscape in the more proactive and living sense of country – the webs of ephemeral life – then we see a continuously becoming, or a continuously coming into being, process. (2001, p.110)

Of the Gurangutch mural project and the associated bush regeneration, Yuin elder, Julie Freeman, stated at the time:
The [Gurangatch] project is too deadly. Aboriginal people reconnecting and caring for country. Stories are refreshed and retold, given new life through art and landscape. What a fantastic job. What a great team. What a beautiful place.15

Secondly, then, a significant factor of public works such as these is that they emphasise the very real way through which Aboriginal people continue to use art to reaffirm their relationship to country. Where colonisation has caused gaps to traditional knowledge or modes of interacting with country, these gaps can be made ‘broachable’ (Gough 2001, p.157) by their re-negotiation.

Thirdly, these works exemplify the way in which contemporary art practices are a vital means for Aboriginal people to engage the settler population in discourse. They make physical that which, through western modes of seeing, continues to be invisible; articulating ancient epistemologies in a manner more easily deciphered by “European ways of seeing, [and] modes of representing” (Smith 2001, p.640).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a broad overview of Dharawal country and the core concerns of this study. It has demonstrated that ideas drawn from the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, and human geography, are necessary for providing nuanced understandings of the ways in which Indigenous Australians traditionally socialised their environments, as well as interrogating the manner in which European ways of seeing denied these complex epistemologies. Importantly, these ideas provide a framework for addressing how Aboriginal traditions from the study area are capable of authentic rearticulation through contemporary art practices.

15 Message uploaded to the Boolarng Nangamai blogspot, 29.07.09
Chapter 2

Re-navigating the songlines:

the rock art of Dharawal country
Catherine De Lorenzo has described the greater Sydney area as “a bedrock of carved and painted sandstone that testifies to a thorough interweaving of the natural with the cultural” (2000, p.130) by the region’s original inhabitants. It is a cultural landscape that most Sydney-siders have failed to see, acknowledge or embrace. But it is through the extant rock art of the Dharawal people that we can glimpse how the study area, as well as people’s agency within it, was conceptualised, and how a fresh engagement with it offers many new understandings.

This chapter considers the general characteristics of the rock art of the study area, how it is physically manifest in the environment and how it was produced. In particular it attempts to articulate how songlines, so vital in comprehending the complexity of Aboriginal landscapes, can be re-traced and generate new understandings of Country for Aboriginal people today.

Aiding this investigation is what has been called a ‘social’ approach to archaeology. In contrast to previous approaches which felt that contemporary Aboriginal people’s interpretations carried little validity – the trauma to traditional knowledge, through colonisation, presumed too great – the oral histories of local Aboriginal people are considered as key to interpreting these images. It accepts that histories and understandings of the past have always been made in the present (Taçon 2002, p.132) and that a connection to rock art is capable of consolidating contemporary Aboriginal identity and culture.
Even where the gaps in oral traditions might seem ‘unbreachable’, the phenomenological approach offered by social archaeologists means there is much to be learned from an embodied experience of these sites; that it is by placing the living body in these places, experiencing it as the original inhabitants did, that a valuable connection to this heritage can be made.

**General characteristics of rock art in the Sydney Basin**

The Sydney Basin has the highest concentration of rock art in southeast Australia. The Cobar pediplain, the Grampians of western Victoria, and arguably the northeast corner of NSW, are the only other regions that have quantifiable signs of specialised rock art traditions (Officer 1992, p.6). While this does not presuppose a less conceptualised vision for those areas with fewer examples of rock art, it does emphasise the unprecedented degree to which human interaction with the greater Sydney environment was mediated through art.

Stylistically, rock art of the Sydney-Hawkesbury region has been classified as *simple figurative* (McDonald 2008, p.46; Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.9) and remains distinct from other southeast figurative styles characterised by small, silhouette-like schemata (Officer 1992, p.7). Sydney-Hawkesbury schemata, in contrast, are large, outlined forms (McDonald 2008, p46), and have been described as ‘casual’ (McCarthy 1977, p.407), ‘crude’ (Maynard, L in McDonald 2008, p.46) and ‘naturalistic’ (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.4); yet, most notably in the depiction of animals, these basic forms often convey enough graphic information to differentiate between species type (Bursill 1993, p.64; Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.9) and, for the informed viewer, to decipher culturally specific information (Figure 2.1).
Figures of small macropod and large freshwater fish engraved into creek bed near Audley, Royal National Park. (Photo: V.Bicego, 31.10.10)

Sex differentiation is arguably made explicit by the shape of the dorsal fins. The in-fill decoration of the male whale also is likely to represent the cicatrices of an initiated being.
Motifs are generally repetitive and depict animals (terrestrial and aquatic), anthromorphs (humans and ‘culture heroes’16) and material goods (tools, weapons). Invariably they are rendered as petroglyphs – engraved into platforms of the region’s exposed sandstone platforms (Officer 1992, p.7), and pictographs – painted or drawn on the walls of rock shelters and overhangs (Bursill 1993, p.13; Sefton 1988, p.70). Motif numbers vary for both mediums. Most shelters that display signs of occupation contain discernible pigment art or at least evidence of it (Sefton 1993, p.62; Bursill 1993, p.54), yet the quantity of work is often conservative (Sefton 1988, p.84). Similarly, while petroglyphs often exploit large areas of sandstone platforms, others with a similar capacity potential display only one or several figures. Many rock surfaces seemingly ideal for engraving show no sign of human interference (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.9; Bursill 1993, p.41; McDonald 2008, p.56), while others exemplify layer upon layer of continued application. Beyond stylistic traits this dual system of artistic production is unique and differentiates Sydney Basin rock art from all other traditions in Australia where “one medium has been practiced [largely] to the exclusion of the other” (McDonald 2008, p.65).

Typically characteristic of the simple figurative style, perspective is limited but distinct in regard to subject matter. Humans and culture heroes are depicted in frontal form (Image 2.02), while profile depictions are rare (Bursill 1993, pp.68-70; Officer 1992, p.9). Animals, particularly macropods (kangaroos, wallabies, etc.), are depicted in profile (McDonald 2008, p.54) and in motion (Image 2.01). Smaller animals such as echidnae and sugar-gliders are depicted in a ‘leaping’ style (Bursill 1993, p.71): four legs spread out, their form arguably pelt-like (McDonald 2008, p.54) (Image 2.15). Non-figurative or abstract motifs are significant but infrequent (McDonald 2008, p.53) (Image 2.04).

16 A phrase coined by archaeologist Frederick McCarthy in regard to stylised representations of “ancestral spirit beings … who possessed attributes and characteristics different from ordinary people, and were depicted as they were conceived in the mythology [of Aboriginal peoples].” (McCarthy 1977, p.407)
Irrespective of technique, compositions are mostly situated on hillsides and ridgelines (McDonald 2008, p.52; Bursill 1993, pp.58-9), lending further weight to the interpretation of their conjunction with songlines. Petroglyphs in particular have a height advantage over, or extensive views of, their surrounding environs (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.2; Bursill 1993, pp.41-2) (Image 2.03).

[Image 2.04] Non-figurative or abstract pictograph. Tally-like marks painted with red ochre. Abrahams Bosom Reserve, Currawong. Photo: V.Bicego (04.08.13)

In contrast to smaller, intaglio (pecked) engravings elsewhere, Sydney’s petroglyphs are generally abraded. Despite the relative softness of Sydney-Hawkesbury sandstone (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.5) this would have been a labour-intense process by which an initial form was constructed through a number of ‘drilled’ holes (Image 2.06), the space between each then rubbed away to create a complete and distinct outline (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.1; Bursill 1993, p.24). Though unlikely to be uniform, the optimum depth of engravings at the time of production has been estimated to 25mm (Bursill 1993, p.88) and, apart from notable exceptions, schema is generally to the scale of the subject matter (McCarthy 1977, p.407; Bursill 1993, p.55).

Pictographs of the Sydney Basin display greater variety of style and material make-up than their engraved counterparts (McDonald 2008, p.55). Size is largely unregulated, and
schemata vary between linear outlines and in-filled, solid bodies (McDonald 2008, p.46). The latter have more in common with traditions of the Cobar pediplain and NSW southern tablelands (Officer 1992, p.7) and are not a significant percentage of the art surveyed in the Sydney Basin\textsuperscript{17} (McDonald 2008, p.46).

![Image 2.05] Line of mundoes. Wetted for the purpose of photography. Royal National Park. (Photo: V.Bicego, 09.07.10)

![Image 2.06] Mundoe petroglyph. Royal National Park. Erosion has exposed the initial drilled outline. (Photo: V.Bicego, 09.07.10)

\textsuperscript{17} While continuities with more northern Dharawal aesthetics are clear, the increased use of paint (wet pigment) for motifs other than prints and stencils (Image 2.19) is significant in the Shoalhaven area (though admittedly drawn from a much smaller sample of work), as is the higher frequency of what might be deemed abstract forms.
Three medium are readily identifiable: drawings (dry pigment), paintings (wet pigment), stencils (alternatively dry or wet) (McDonald 2008, p.56). Materials used range from a variety of ochre, clay and charcoal (Bursill 1993, p.54), though distribution of material is highly variable. Drawing is the second most dominant medium of pigment art in the Sydney Basin, and charcoal the preferred material. Motifs are largely monochromatic; bi- and polychrome motifs being significant but infrequent (McDonald 2008, p.58).

[Image 2.07] Outlined and in-filled emu schemata drawn with charcoal. Cobbong Creek, Dharawal National Park. (Photo: V.Bicego, 04.08.12)

Despite the seemingly universal subject matter of most motifs, style and subject matter unquestionably correspond with changes in the landscape (McCarthy 1977, p.407). Fish are one of the most common schemata in the region (McDonald 2008, pp.53-54), but there is often distinct graphic differentiation between salt, fresh and brackish-water species in these respective environments (Bursill 1993, p.56). Depictions of marine animals (eg. whales, stingrays, mullet, perch) are found largely along shorelines or at locations with extensive views of saltwater and are almost invariably engravings (Bursill
1993, pp.65-68). Animals more common to Sydney’s hinterlands (eg. emus, echidnae, eels) (Image 2.07), increasingly become the subject of pigment art as one moves in a southwesterly direction and as natural rock shelters become more abundant (Bursill 1993, p.71). The Georges River has been identified as something of a style boundary in this regard (McDonald 2008, p.53): fewer figurative engravings are found to its south (Image 2.08); pigment works become a larger percentage of all ‘art’ found in Sydney’s southwestern hinterlands; and the formality (and clarity) of schema is considerably reduced (McDonald 2008, p.56).

[Image 2.08] Engraving of large macropod. Stokes Creek, Dharawal National Park. According to archaeologist, Caryll Sefton, it is one of the most southerly-located petroglyphs in the Sydney-Hawkesbury simple figurative style.
(Photo: V.Bicego, 14.07.13)

Figurative works aside, the most reoccurring pigment medium is the stencil (McDonald 2008, p.56): negative (outlined) and positive (in-filled) prints of human body parts (most commonly hands), material items (tools, weapons, bowls, adornments), and – in a few cases – plants (Sefton 1993, p.63). Red ochre is the most common material used in the
production of stencils (Image 2.10), followed by white clay (McDonald 2008, p.58; Sefton 1993, p.63) (Image 2.09). As with other schemata, stencil forms are found in relative isolation or as part of larger motifs – some murals have over one hundred stencils (McCarthy 1961, p.100). They are also often superimposed over figurative drawings and paintings, or arguably play a role in such a composition. The most reoccurring engraved schema is the mundoe: engraved representations of the human footprint (Image 2.05 and 2.6) and animal tracks; the former being the more dominant (McDonald 2008, p.53). Like other engravings these are found on exposed sandstone platforms (often in the presence of figurative works) and can be found to trail for considerable distances (Moore 1977, p.321).

[Image 2.09] White clay hand and forearm stencils on back wall of small shelter. Mills Creek, Lucas Heights. (Photo: V.Bicego, 09.06.10)
Red ochre hand stencils: back wall of a low-lying shelter in bushland on the outskirts of Campbelltown. An infant’s hand stencil, left of centre, is readily discernible both through its size and the different hue of paint. Shelter entrance seen in Image 0.10. (Photo: V. Bicego, 09.06.10)

Dating the rock art

The most reliable date given to the initial human occupation of Sydney is 30,000 BP (McDonald 2008, p.36). Bass Point, south of Lake Illawarra, and geographically at the centre of the study area's coastline, displays evidence of being inhabited 25,000 BP (Images 2.11 and 2.12). Consistent occupation of these coastal regions, however, did not begin until the mid-Holocene when the earth’s climate had stabilised, human populations were increasing, and semi-sedentary lifestyles were replacing nomadism (Morwood 2002, p.14). Though the precise dating of individual works remain problematic, it was undoubtedly during “this milieu of escalating sociability” that the “pigment and engraved art of the region developed and flourished” (McDonald 2008, p.349).
[Image 2.11] Location of an ancient midden: Bass Point, looking south towards Kiama. (Photo: V.Bicego, 09.07.11)

[Image 2.12] Some of the ancient midden scatter still viewable at Bass Point, south of Shellharbour. (Photo: V.Bicego, 09.07.11)
The abraded petroglyphs so iconic of the Sydney area are unlikely to predate the mid-Holocene (c.6-5,000 BP) as it has been argued that only the fine, asymmetrical stone tools developed at this time could enable such precise work (Layton 1992, p.220). Yet this does still not automatically indicate an age of great antiquity for all abraded petroglyph assemblages. Rates of sandstone erosion observed since contact suggest most engravings were maintained after their initial production, consistently re-grooved over a number of generations. This, along with the highly exposed nature of these sites, means any ‘datable habitation debris’ (Layton 1992, p.212) has not survived.


In theory, a minimum age may be postulated for pigment works executed so low on shelter walls that they have been partly submerged by datable material. In most cases, however, schemata are situated on higher, prominent surfaces. Radiocarbon dating of pictograph pigments is more reliable when samples have sufficient carbon content, but problems arise when samples display highly diverse carbon dates for a single motif (McDonald et al 1990 in Ford 2005, p.44). Similarly, the dating of silica skins covering
some pictographs provides only “minimum and maximum age estimates for rock art” (Ford 2005, p.97). While it is not a foregone conclusion that occupation debris relates directly to those works present (Layton 1992, p.212), by and large, the imagery most iconic of Sydney is probably from 2,000 BP when shelter occupation peaked (Layton 1992, p.227).

When clearly identifiable, it is the subject matter of the art that is perhaps the most reliable indicator of age. While urban expansion has had significant impact of the habitat of native animals (eg. dwindling populations; eradication of some types from certain areas), the animals depicted in Sydney rock art are often still found in these areas, or were at least at contact. Just as depictions of extinct mega-fauna lend weight to the antiquity of some paintings in western Arnhem Land (Layton 1992, p.212), the subject matter of Sydney rock art places it firmly in the mid to late Holocene.

![Image 2.14](image.png) Juvenile goanna sighted in bushland near the drawings seen in Image 2.15. (Photo: V.Bicego, 05.12.13)

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This in turn provides an exciting opportunity for rock art to support scientific studies into the ways in which Sydney ecosystems and habitats have changed since contact.
Despite the absence of absolute dates for a majority of art sites, a relatively discernible evolution of style exists, particularly in regard to petroglyphs. Though still part of the simple-figurative style, cruder stick-like forms are likely to be earlier productions (Image 2.16); and fuller, rounder, stylised forms, arguably represent a more recent stream of expression (Bursill et al. 2007, p.23) (Figure 2.02).
Significant is the presence of several style stages at the same locations. Archaeologist Jo McDonald (2008) has argued that the differentiation of style, medium and subject is just as likely to indicate change of accepted traditions over time, as “it cannot be assumed that any rock shelter or engraving assemblage is a single artistic event” (p.67). Thus it is clear that compositions would continue to evolve and be added to over time.

[Figure 2.02] Discernible style development in the Sutherland Shire’s petroglyphs. Line drawings (attributed to Lionel Baker) of various macropod engravings near or at (L-R): Uloola Falls, Muddy Creek, Waterfall, and Barden Creek.

[Image 2.16] Engraved anthromorph near Uloola Falls, Royal National Park.
(Photo: V.Bicego, 19.02.12)
This stick-like schema arguably exemplifies an earlier stage of the simple figurative style.
The smaller sample of red ochre drawings and paintings would also appear to be an earlier phase of practice, as – when found in conjunction with other material, such as charcoal – it has invariably been drawn over. Throughout Australia, red ochre has strong spiritual associations, such as with ancestral blood, an essence of life-force (Moore 1977, p.323; Wright 1973, p.153); so much so that the grinding of ochre for its use in paint “could only be carried out by an initiated Elder” (Bursill et al. 2007, p.27). This need not suggest that shelter art was, or became, more secular in nature, but rather there was an accepted change for a material’s use over time.

Indeed, charcoal remains the most prominent material make-up of pigment/shelter art in the Sydney Basin arguably due to the ease of its production. As Les Bursill states:

[C]harcoal was easy to procure and use. Grinding ochre and clays, and making those, were very time consuming. And I’ve done it, I’ve made it. I know I can make a pound of charcoal for every ounce of ochre. So charcoal does give us quick and nasty medium, but it was [practical]. (A1.I01, p.320)

Archaeologist Julie Dibden (2011) has hypothesised that much of the poorly executed charcoal drawings found in Sydney’s south-west hinterlands dates to the early contact period, illustrative of Dharawal peoples pushed to the margins of their traditional territories. In such circumstances, the readiness of charcoal would make it a preferable material.

Recent archeometric investigations (Ford 2005) reveal superimposition was practiced to a greater extent than previously realised. Computer software such as D-stretch also reveals the truly palimpsestual nature of a number of pictographs, drawing out extensive pigment applications now otherwise incapable of being seen by the naked eye. Thus, while there
appears to have been no practice of re-touching\textsuperscript{19}, as evidenced in some Northern Australian cultures, there is an undeniable continuity of mark-making on the same surfaces.

Unsurprisingly, some of the most datable images relate to the early contact period where such subject matter is clearly identifiable. European sailing ships are depicted in several engravings at Maroota\textsuperscript{20} (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, pp.96-100). From these it is clear that engravings were used to communicate contemporaneous issues, and that unfolding events were quickly absorbed into the matrix of local cosmology. While they do not cast doubt on the antiquity of petroglyph traditions, it does reaffirm that figurative rock engraving was a contemporaneous practice at the time of European invasion (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.96; Attenbrow 2001, p.151).

\begin{center}
\textbf{[Image 2.17]} ‘Bull Cave’ at Minto Heights. Early contact drawings now marred by graffiti.
(Photo: V.Bicego, 09.06.10)
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{19} Some bi-chrome figures, particularly where a form has a differing pigment outline, may indicate later additions to established schema, and thus constitute a re-marking as opposed to simply covering older schema.

\textsuperscript{20} North of Botany Bay, and therefore outside the study area.
Sadly also one of the worst examples of vandalism, ‘Bull Cave’ contains some of the seminal instances of ‘contact’ art in the study area. Situated in a medium-sized overhang on the outskirts of suburban Campbelltown, several charcoal depictions of cattle are still clearly discernible under a slather of red spray paint. They have been interpreted as depictions of a herd that became lost in the bush during the early European settlement of the area.

Alongside figurative engravings of kangaroos, wallabies, and fresh water fish, several grinding grooves made by a metal axe at Muddy Creek, in the south-west arm of the Royal National Park, demonstrate that this particular site at least was still being frequented in the early contact period (Image 2.18). It also emphasises the speed with which imported goods were being incorporated into the Aboriginal economy and taking the place of traditional crafted items.

[Image 2.18] Several steel axe-grinding grooves on the cusp of a body of water. Muddy Creek, Royal National Park. (Photo: V.Bicego, 12.07.12)
Of all markings within the rock art ‘canon’, stencils are the most widely distributed throughout the continent (McCarthy 1958, p.35). They are not peculiar to Australia but are characteristic of human visual communication systems throughout history (Moore 1977, p.318). Though their meaning continues to elude explicit interpretation (Moore 1977, p.318), they undoubtedly have a myriad of practical, ritualistic, and compositional purposes, depending on their location, context and style (Turbet 2001, p.143).

The limited ethnographic material from the Sydney region supports the hypothesis that where a singular print or assemblage of hand stencils has been created (usually to the exclusion of other markings), their purpose was “to indicate the number of people that passed by the place [...] and the direction in which they had gone” (Enright 1939 in Moore 1977, p.319). As such, where the terrain becomes increasingly tumultuous in Sydney’s hinterlands, a number of stencil assemblages may have been created to communicate a group’s whereabouts, destination, and social fabric. The relative durability of some works also suggests that, when strategically placed, hand stencils probably proved useful markers of established routes and resting places.

It is understandable then why Anthony Forge (1991, p.40) should question the artistic validity of the stencil. Being a direct impression of the human body it is the most personal and individual of human-made markings and thus transcends the stylistic conventions of its society and means of production (Forge 1991, pp.42 & 44). As such, it can be likened to a signature (Moore 1977, p.318) rather than an artistic device. Yet the assertion that stencils are “not mediated through any symbolic system, [and] are not part of culture” (p.40), is debatable. Stencils evidently have a ritualistic function at some sites, and a compositional role in some pictographs (though these roles need not be mutually exclusive). There are clearly also a multitude of ways that impressions of the human hand

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21 The presence of children’s hand stencils, for example, may indicate a family group, as opposed to an all-male adult hunting or ceremonial party.
(or indeed any other part of the body) might be rendered, the nature of which will ultimately have been determined by the culture of the time. Their individuality does not detract from their specific roles within a particular culture, only that they continue to be mediated by that culture.

At one site along the Georges River (Images 0.10 and 2.10), for example, the entire back wall of a low-lying shelter has been covered in a dense panel of hand stencils. The extensive use of red ochre, combined with the fact that many of the stencils are those of the hands of adolescents and children, suggest a ritual purpose. In some parts of Australia, stencils are made of children’s hands as a way of ‘introducing them to Country’. If accumulatively produced, perhaps this site on the outskirts of modern-day Campbelltown was a place to which people returned to re-mark at significant stages in their lives, at different levels of initiation. It is not simply a record of people who spent time at the shelter\(^\text{22}\) at any one time, nor is it likely to have been a solely aesthetic procedure. Instead, it is a statement about, and validation of, identity, shaped through cultural practice.

Nor should the stencil’s qualities as a compositional device be undervalued. At a shelter situated immediately south of Lake Woronora, an impressive ancestral figure is surrounded and superimposed by a range of stencilled items. Negative impressions of hands, leaves, bowls, dilly bags, boomerangs, and digging sticks, all contribute to a rich tapestry of iconography which, alongside drawn works, probably contribute to several histories. There is an evident rapport between some stencils; a direct line of action between human hands and items of technology. In such cases, stencils may have been statements of ownership, story-telling and ritual practice.

\(^{22}\) The darker pigmentation of at least one of the stencils suggests several phases of production.
Bursill (1993) states that “[t]he availability of suitable rock surface is not an indicator for the presence of engravings” (p.41). Similarly, rock shelters with clear evidence of occupation do not all have extant pigment work. When they do contain art, motif numbers are usually low. This suggests that art was not something created for decorative purposes, nor on a whim, but created when required, and related strongly to the site at which it was located. As a visual signifier, art was a functional means of communication in society. Parameters of accepted expression allowed clarity in the passing on of sacred stories and laws, relating contemporaneous events, delivering specific messages, and, through ritual application, brought individuals into closer contact with the spirit world. Some commentators have thus suggested the very word ‘art’ may be inappropriate in describing such communication systems (Bursill 1993, p.8; Forge 1991, p.39). However, if art “is defined loosely as all humanly made marks which occur in repeatable identifiable forms”
(McDonald 2008, p.43), the risk of projecting modern ideals upon these graphic signifiers is considerably reduced.

Paintings, engravings, drawings and stencils found on rock surfaces throughout the study area remain the region’s most (relatively) extant examples of pre-colonial visual information systems only because of the ephemeral nature of other artistic practices and the largely perishable nature of late-Holocene material goods. Sand drawing, for example, functioned at an immediate educational level and allowed a greater discrimination of audience. As sacred knowledge was passed on carefully, it was not suitable for certain details to be permanently recorded (Bursill et al. 2007, p.49) and designs could be quickly swept away. Body painting created for the purpose of ceremony often incorporated mnemonic designs, the meanings of which were known only to the painter and wearer (Image 2.20). These would be removed from the body once they had served their purpose.

Bodily ‘mutilations’ and adornments (Image 2.20) were more constant day-to-day visual signifiers of a person’s social status, language group, and endowed individuals with special powers. Tooth avulsion and the cutting of cicatrices23 were practiced amongst both men and women, publicly announcing their level of initiation. Women from coastal groups had the little finger of their left hand gradually amputated before adulthood24, granting them a larger bounty when fishing. Men often wore an ornament through their nose made from kangaroo bones (Bursill et al. 2007, p.20), which similarly may have increased their hunting prowess. Material goods were often also decorated in a manner that, spiritually, enhanced their performance.

23 Ritualised scarring of the human body.
24 This two-part operation was called mal-gun. A ligature was tied around the upper section of the little finger at birth, and then around the lower at adolescence, each time resulting in the amputation of the respective section of finger. A possible reason for this was so a woman’s fishing line did not get entangled whilst winding it around her hand. But the throwing of the dead pieces of finger into the sea was also believed to enhance a woman’s fishing abilities, as it was believed the fish that fed on her finger would always be drawn to the rest of her hand. (Turbet 2001, pp.55)
The strong association of paintings, drawings and stencils with occupation sites (rock shelters), combined with a less regulated style convention, does suggest a more secular use of pigment mediums (Turbet 2001, p.146). This is fitting, as there were often several versions of a story – some for general consumption, others more detailed and reserved for the initiated (Turbet 2001, p.129). This does not however “indicate that Aboriginal artists did not perceive of a contextual relationship between the two art forms” (McDonald 2008, p.52), as there are several examples of pigment and petroglyphic art found in close proximity.
Gender roles in art production

As women hunted smaller animals such as echidnae, wombats and lizards, Bursill is open to the idea that they were involved in the illustration of these animals at sites that show evidence of communal living (A1.I01, p.325). It is clear from a substantial number of pictographs that infants participated in the production of this particular art form (Image 2.10) and, it is probable that women, as their primary carers, made their own impressions alongside these (A1.I01, p.325). Nonetheless, there are a number of factors that indicate the rock art of the study area being largely the domain of initiated men, particularly the petroglyphs. Most sites that reveal evidence of occupation or have figurative engravings have axe-grinding grooves in close proximity (Image 2.21). They are elliptical in shape and, like channel grooves\(^{25}\), capture rain and control the direction of water seepage on rock surfaces (Bursill 1993, p.55; Sefton 1993, p.62). Bursill, hypothesises:

I think that axe grooves ... [are] entirely related to [male] behaviours and tools. We know that women weren’t allowed to own stone axes. So I think that almost exclusively men did sharpening of axes and created axe grooves. As for the [pictorial] engravings themselves, hammers and stone objects – probably approaching axes [in design] – would be used to create the pecked-abraded forms of engravings that we see. Therefore it’s unlikely that women participated in that. Also, when I look at the engravings, there’s [...] some, but limited ... feminine subject matter. So if women are shown, they’re almost invariably shown as spirit figures with [significant] differences [to humans] ... Now, when it comes down to drawings, there is a fairly widespread inclusion of women. Because many clay and charcoal drawings are found in shelters, around places families would have been, I think that there’s probably a chance that women had some part in that. I don’t ever see

\(^{25}\) Channel grooves are another significant man-made feature in the study area, but they are far less frequent than axe-grinding grooves (Sefton 1993, pp.62).
any evidence for women doing that, but they may have, because they’re included in quite a lot of it. When it comes down to stencils, I think that it’s clear that men, women, and children, all participated in [the production of] stencils. (A1.I01, p.325)

[Image 2.21] Multiple axe-grinding grooves in close proximity to a large assemblage of figurative engravings, Royal National Park. Natural retention of rain water is evident.

(Photo: V.Bicego, 09.07.10)

As such, Bursill echoes the earlier views of archaeologist Frederick McCarthy (1961) who asserted that much of south Sydney’s hinterlands were vast “sacred totem centres to which the initiated men retired to draw their totems, relate their clan myths, and chant their songs” (p.102). Women and children, he claimed, “lived mainly along the shores of estuaries and rivers, gathering shellfish, small animals and plant foods” (p.103).
Totemism is an intrinsic aspect of Aboriginal spiritual life (Bursill et al. 2007, p.12; Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p. 128; Turbet 2001, p.97), yet the repetitiveness and consistency with which motifs appear in the Sydney landscape suggest it was not the foci of rock art (Layton 1992, p.242). Visual expressions of totemic affiliation arguably result in the concentration of certain representations over others at particular locations, and beyond a general correlation between animal and habitat type, this is not apparent in Sydney’s petroglyphs (Layton 1992, p.243). Similarly, despite slight variances in style – which may simply be evidence of a gradual style change (Bursill et al. 2007, p.23) or the ‘artistic license’ of some authors (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.122) – engraved schemata are constant across a great area. This ‘cosmopolitan’ iconography (Layton 1992, p.242) may be indicative of three factors: 1) extensive patrilineal moieties, 2) the relative abundance of coastal resources, and 3) the Baiame cult; all of which would have been interrelated.

At contact most of the coastal communities of southeast Australia functioned under patrilineal kinship systems (Layton 1992, p.237) in contrast to the inland communities of New South Wales and Victoria which were largely matrilineal. Though inconclusive, there is evidence that these two systems relate to resource management strategies (Layton 1992, p.240): localised totemic affiliation and subsistence patterns often associated with matri-moieties may have been more effective in environments where food supplies were less reliable, while the relatively abundant resources of the coast are likely to have facilitated a broader belief system. As petroglyphs were produced along ridgelines and therefore “concentrated not on the focal points of clan estates […] but on their margins” (Layton 1992, p.243), it is not surprising they should embody a relatively unified totemic system across a network of patri-moieties.
The extent to which such a religious system was ideologically shaped by *patri-moiety* structures, however, is debatable (Allen 1972 in Layton 1992, p.239), as is the notion it was monotheistic. It is generally accepted that Baiame – also referred to as the Sky-God or All-Father (van Toorn 2006, p.38) – was a significant ‘culture hero’ throughout southeast Australia. Late-nineteenth century anthropologists, R.H. Mathews and A.W. Howitt, both report the figure’s strong association with male initiation ceremonies (Turbet 2001, pp.100 & 105). Commentators disagree, however, about the extent to which he was regarded as a supreme deity, as this would depart radically from all other Aboriginal cosmologies. Rather, such a belief may be a direct influence of Christianity during the post-contact era\(^\text{26}\) (van Toorn 2006, p.38; Turbet 2001, p.99) and, in keeping with other Australian Aboriginal belief systems, it is more likely that Baiame and Daramulan – alternatively reported as Baiame’s son, brother or emissary (Stanbury & Clegg 1990, p.117) – were important creator beings of a pervasive poly- or pantheistic cosmology (Turbet 2001, p.99).

What is certain is that alongside their function as increase sites\(^\text{27}\), located at key points of complex cultural landscapes, engravings played an important role in initiation ceremonies. Of this, Dharawal elder and artist, Colin Isaacs, states:

> They were re-done every so many years ... [the men would] all sit down and participate in putting their mark there as they gone through their stages [of initiation] ... [The carvings] are ceremonies [in themselves]. (A1.I02, p.338)

It is believed young men would be led along the trail of large mundoes at certain locations, literally following in Baiame’s footsteps (Turbet 2001, p.152), the story embodied by these engravings being explained to them by elders or possibly *koradj*\(^\text{28}\).

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\(^{26}\) Some Christian missionaries in Wiradjuri country certainly saw enough similarity between the All-Father figure and the Christian God, that when translating the Bible into the local language they made this association explicit. (see R Kenny 2007)

\(^{27}\) Sites where ceremonies are conducted to ensure the health and bounty of specific resources.
“Re-creating traditional dreaming stories”

Reinvigorated old landscapes with stories and stories from pictures is what rock-art research is all about. There are many different sorts of meaning we might derive through archaeology [...] but ultimately these meanings are constructed in the present for use in the future. (Paul Taçon 2002, p.132)

By all accounts the production of rock art ceased throughout southeast Australia with the advent of European colonisation; its production restricted by the dramatically changing cultural climate. This means that interpreting the rock art of pre-colonial societies through a structural approach to archaeology can be problematic, as there are often few points of reference for their surviving iconography (Officer 1991, p.112). To Aboriginal people who have grown up being told the stories of their ancestors, who have sustained strong connections to their heritage countries, this position is erroneous. As Clive ‘Bud’ Freeman, a Jerrawangala man from Wreck Bay, says, “It doesn’t work that way.” Rather, he insists that it is through oral traditions that one’s connection to Country, and its special places, is cemented. “Although we may not have had a [physical] connection with a particular art site,” he adds, “we can [still] go there and understand it” (A1.I21, p.532).

This is reiterated by Taçon et al. (2008), who argue: “Many aspects of [local creation myths] are reflected in the rock art sites, re-enacted in ceremony and passed down to the younger people through story, song, and dance” (p.208). Just as importantly, rock art continues “to strengthen contemporary social and individual identity” and can “assist with the survival of longstanding traditional knowledge” (p.197).

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28 Koradji were ‘clever men’, or sorcerers, who received extensive religious training from an early age. Though inconclusive, ethnographic evidence suggests they had strong connections to prominent petroglyphs, possibly being responsible for their production, maintenance, and use in religious instruction. (Turbet 2001, p.152)

29 The title of a lecture and Power Point Presentation created by Dharawal elder, Les Bursill, and delivered at various tertiary education institutions in the greater Sydney area.
A very personal example of this is recounted by Freeman from his time with the National Parks and Wildlife Service:

Uncle Guboo Ted Thomas talked about the story of the frog ceremony – paintin’ yourself like that frog, using the clap sticks in sort of a chant to get the frogs to sing [...] I had an opportunity years and years later [to see this ceremony depicted in rock art]. I’d only ever been told the story, that in the Illawarra escarpment [...] there’s paintings of this ceremony and that one day we might get an opportunity to see ‘em. And I did, I saw ‘em [just recently]. I got an opportunity to see ‘em, and straight away I knew what that story was about because they were stories that were [still being] told to us. They’re stories that are part of the south coast.” (A1.I21, p.532)

It is for this reason that a more holistic approach to the interpretation of rock art, Bryce Barker (2006) argues, must incorporate, as much as possible, the Indigenous understandings of the art in question (p.83). Aboriginal oral histories have long been a neglected means of understanding rock art; only recently have historians “begun to consider the possibility of arriving at truth without the support of dates or documents” (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, pp.27-28). This is in line with what has been called ‘social archaeology’: that histories, understandings of the past, are created in the present. It accepts that the previous reticence on the part of archaeology (as a western science) to validate contemporary Aboriginal understandings exemplifies “an ongoing legacy of colonialism” (Barker 2006, p.73). If nothing else, Barker argues, oral accounts make us “critically scrutinise the position of our own knowledge system relative to those of others” (p.84).

As such, Dharawal elder and historian, Les Bursill, is a firm believer that knowledge is ‘waiting to be discovered’, that reDreaming is possible. By visiting heritage sites, engaging with them, and bringing sometimes seemingly disparate bits of information
together, one can arrive at an authentic interpretation of rock art and its function in the landscape.

The Royal National Park lies on a sandstone plateau that reaches a peak of three hundred metres in the south, near Helensburgh (the northern boundary of the Illawarra), and gradually slopes down to the sea at Port Hacking in the north. Over 50 million years this sandstone plateau has been eroded by the Hacking River system, transforming it into a landscape of deep gorges, gullies, rocky outcrops, freshwater streams, waterfalls, and pools. The Park contains a myriad of vegetation communities, including subtropical rainforests (predominantly in the south-westerly areas), moist sclerophyll forests, grassy woodlands, sandy heaths (predominantly in coastal areas), and coastal wetlands. This is the region that Uncle Les has made the focus of his research since the 1980s, and it is the area I frequented most often in my exploration of Dharawal rock art. From his study of Aboriginal cosmologies further afield and the way they are manifest in the landscape, Uncle Les was able to explain to me how sites are connected across the landscape:

A site is made up of a number of components of which a drawing and engraving may be one part … When I spent time in the Tanami Desert, over several years, talking to old people, that is when I realised that different elements of the same story are spread throughout the land, and there is a focus for that. A drawing may be a focus for that, or an engraving may be a focus for that, or a feature in the landscape may be a focus for that, and things will surround it … (A1.I01, p.319)

With regard to his theory about a specific engraved figure at Maianbar, its relation to other engraved assemblages across an expansive landscape, and how engagement with these sites and their environments slowly began to unveil its mysteries, it pays to reproduce here a large part of one of my interviews with Uncle Les:
[Between Maianbar and Bundeena there are] a set of whales, a whale and some fish, and a man with three heads and a penis a metre long. Three sites. I had one of those photos up on my wall in my office, and a man named Ian Hughes ... now Doctor Ian Hughes, retired ... came into my office at Sydney University one day and said, “I thought you only dealt with Aboriginal art from this area?” And I said, “I do”. He said, “Well, you’ve got a drawing of Luma Luma on your wall”. And I said, “Oh, wow, Luma Luma? Tell me about Luma Luma.” And he said, “It’s this guy who comes out of the ocean and chases women. He’s a real bad dude, you know ...” He’s horny. And [Ian Hughes] told me the story about how he runs and falls over his large penis, strikes his head, and things stick on his head … [That's how he is characterised in] Yirrkala and Maningrida. So I started calling it Luma Luma because I had a name for it ...

I saw that [many of] the whale engravings were associated with elliptical shapes that could be [mistaken for] shields. That started me puzzling … [Then one day] I was in the bay doing my Masters thesis and a seal surfaced beside me and then swam off, and I saw that the shape that it made in the water was an elliptical shape. I was then [researching] the association with orca and [the whalers in] Eden on the south coast … Listening to the AIATSIS tapes of old men talking down the south coast, they talked about how the orca could be used as a, you know, like a sheep dog … And then Uncle Max Harrison told me a story about Gurruwal the whale, and how he was the bringer of the law, and how he had a spirit form in him that came out and told the law … [just as] Luma Luma was a spirit figure that came out of the whale. And I discovered that whales came into the bay [at Port Hacking]. Vince McDonnell … [also] started doing research on the Luma Luma story, and gradually the whole thing just fell in [to place] ... I realised that these
[sites] were all in a line, and where you stood and watched [from] the only whale [engraving] that isn’t an orca, and the shoal of fish ... when you stand there and look, what is in front of you? A large area of the bay where there is shallows, where the orca would have driven their prey. And [I realised] that the orca [engraving] beside them would have been the whale pair. And I realised there were sets of these orca all along the coast and they had different elements of the story. So at one site at Warumbul it’s the bringing of the law; on the other side, at Jibbon, it’s the calling of the whales; and further down it’s the bringing [of] the whales up the coast. So it just showed me that there’s this whole track of whales leading into this bay, and then leading to the next bay, and leading to the next bay. (A1.01, p.324)

[Map 2.01] Three conceptually-connected petroglyph sites in the Royal National Park, and the course of orca migration along the coast. (Google map appropriated by the author)
‘Luma Luma’: heavily eroded engraving of a unique spirit figure with a three-pronged head and a metre-long cicatrisled penis. Maianbar, Royal National Park. (Photo: V. Bicego, 15.03.12)

Adobe Illustrator outline of the ‘Luma Luma’ engraving pictured in Image 2.22. (Image produced by V. Bicego.)
With the Luma Luma mythology firmly in mind, we can see how its engraved depiction relates to at least two other sites in what is now the Royal National Park – those at Jibbon and Marley headlands (Map 2.01). Combined, these three assemblages exemplify the function of Dharawal art in the landscape. All embody a wealth of animal and human activity but are essentially different stages of the one seasonal event: the migration of Orcas along the coast, their driving of prey into the shallows at Port Hacking, and the arrival of Luma Luma, or Gurruwal, the law bringer. Dreamings were writ large upon the landscape, and by renewing these engravings, and by maintaining the surrounding environs through fire regimes, the Dharawal maintained the cycle of events established long ago by ancestor beings as embodied by seasonal events and other natural phenomena.

In such practices of care, Rose (2001) states:

> The conventional Western division between pragmatic action and mythico-religious action breaks down completely [...] An ‘increase ritual is just as pertinent as a well-organised fire, indeed, these dimensions are simply not separate. (p.109)

Thus it is clear that, as with other instances of rock art found throughout the continent, the link between art-making and productivity in Dharawal country is conceptually intrinsic; we begin to understand rock art as praxis (Dibden 2011, p.9), that art was not just a means of communication but a means of agency. Les Bursill reiterates this point thus:

> When you see a kangaroo [depicted in rock art] ... we realise what that guy is saying, “I'm gonna draw a kangaroo, and then I'm gonna call upon the great creator spirit to come, because when the kangaroos come then the rain and the grass come.” He's using cause and effect ... (A1.I13, p.464)
But there is another import aspect about the process by which Uncle Les came to know, to understand, to re-dream the Luma Luma mythology. It was through the sensory experience of place, embodying what might be called a phenomenological approach to archaeology. Thus, Tamisari and Wallace (2006) argue, “[I]n exploring the power and possibilities of place, we need to give the theoretical and methodological attention to notions of embodiment, perception and experience” (p.222).

The proliferation of dancing male figures attests the fact that engraved assemblages not only depicted ceremony, the reinstatement of law, but were ceremonies in themselves. It was about people being in place, of knowing it physically as much as conceptually.

*The Wawilak Sisters*

Wandjuk Marika (1927-1987) was a senior law man of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land. His family are custodians of the Djankawau and Wawilak Dreamings
which tell of the arrival of the first ancestral beings in Australia, their navigation of the land, and their naming of plants, animals, and natural land formations. As a central figure in the first Aboriginal Land Claim, Marika became a spokesperson for all Aboriginal people during the 1970s, and visited many communities throughout Australia in the latter part of his life.

During a visit to the Colo River near Wollemi (north-west Sydney), Marika identified the Wawilak story in rock art and natural land formations (Marika & Isaacs 1995, p.147). This was later reaffirmed to him in a dream30.

In the 1987 film documentary, *Dream Time Machine Time*, Marika’s daughter, Banduk, gives a brief summary of the Wawilak story according to her own people’s traditions:

One of the sisters was pregnant and had a child at this camp [...] The yellow python snake – they’re called *wititji* – they smelt the younger sister giving birth to the child, and one of the snakes came up and swallowed the child. The two sisters cried and they danced and told the snake, “You’ve taken our child. Give it back.” And they couldn’t stop that.

Wandjuk Marika’s identification of the Wawilak story so far from his own country suggests that, though they might take different shapes, certain stories pervade the entire Australian continent. In some, rather than a serpent, the women are attacked and turned to stone by a dingo; in others, it is the birthing fluids of the women which awakens the rainbow serpent sleeping in a billabong. Local inflections do not hide the similar structure of stories such as these, spread amongst a diverse number of clan and language groups. If we consider the extensive trade routes (songlines) that had developed over millennia, and that this trade would have been in cultural practices as much – if not more so – as

30 Anthropologist Jennifer Isaacs notes, “Receiving songs from spirit ancestors in a dreaming trance state is a perfectly authentic way for men of high degree to receive information” (1995, p.142).
material goods, it is not hard to imagine the same stories found in geographically disparate locations, such as North-east Arnhem Land and the greater Sydney area.

Les Bursill has interpreted a local version of the Wawilak story in his own ancestral country. Only metres from Sir Bertram Stevens Drive, one of the arterial roads through the park (and thus arguably based upon an ancient route), the site in question consists of three sections: a central engraved assemblage depicts two women on their haunches (Image 2.25). One appears to have recently given birth, as a child is engraved beside her, while the other’s birthing fluids appear to have just broken. To one side of the ‘sisters’,

only metres away, is a large depression in the sandstone, which – after rain – is found filled with water. Axe-grinding grooves line this pool, and Bursill believes there is evidence of its natural shape having been deliberately enhanced to appear more placenta-like – its smooth borders are certainly not characteristic of Sydney-Hawkesbury sandstone. To the other side of the female figures is a row of dancing men, similarly engraved into the rock.

[Figure 2.04] Line drawing (attributed to Lionel Baker) of the ‘Wawilak Sisters’ petroglyph assemblage in the Royal National Park.

[Image 2.25] The two central female figures, as seen in the far left of Figure 2.04. (Photo: V.Bicego, 23.07.10)
Standing before the now highly eroded row of engraved dancing men (as seen in Figure 2.04), Dharawal elder, Les Bursill, explains how this site and the surrounding landscape relates to the Wakilak story. (Photo: V.Bicego, 12.07.12)

In Yolngu traditions, ceremony surrounding the story of the Wawilak sisters involves men dancing, as the two women originally did, in order to stop the great serpent in its tracks (Marika & Isaacs 1995, pp.41-42). Such an activity is suggested by the row of dancing men engraved nearby, sadly now almost invisible to the naked eye due to erosion.

If we understand ‘a site’ as being only one part of any one particular story, and that this story takes place over an expansive area, that elements of it might in turn play a part in other stories, the serpent so central to the Wawilak mythology, and indeed other Dreamings, is arguably in evidence at another location in the Royal National Park (Image 2.27 and Figure 2.05). In Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land, the ‘rainbow serpent’ is the bringer of the monsoon rains (Marika & Isaacs 1995), ensuring sufficient grass growth and, as a result of this, the appearance of game. It is logical to assume that such a philosophy was also part of south-east Australian cultures, and that ceremony surrounding rock art sites such as the above, was a means of ensuring these events.
[Image 2.27] Engraved depiction of kangaroo and giant serpent. Royal National Park.
(Photo: V. Bicego, 09.07.10)

[Figure 2.05] Line drawing (attributed to Lionel Baker) of the engravings depicted in Image 2.27 and other nearby anthropomorphic forms.
I had the great privilege of visiting this site for a second time (5 March 2013) with, amongst others, historian Peter Turbet. So moved by the scale and drama of this assemblage, Turbet commented that, in contrast to what he had previously understood, a creator serpent must have indeed been part of local cosmology. Arguably it was through an embodied experience of this place that contributed to Turbet’s understanding.31

In the middle of the day when the sun is brightest, and heat radiates from the platforms of Sydney-Hawkesbury sandstone, these surfaces can seem almost untouched, so advanced is the erosion of some engravings. And yet, by returning to these sites, seeing them under different environmental conditions, new details continue to come to light. At dusk when the light is fading, and the angle of the sun is right, shadows are cast by the smallest undulation in the sandstone, and the outlines of engraved assemblages are dramatically revealed, like the curtain being drawn back on some cosmic play.

It is in moments such as these that the words of Julie Gough are pertinent: “[C]ulture seeps through the cracks and re-emerges scarred but strong” (2001, p.161). As such, an embodied approach to archaeology, putting oneself in the site, will continue to offer valuable means of understanding. Discussing how an engagement with objects and practices from the past has the power still to inform us in the present, Gough adds, “They endure, resist and manifest themselves in different ways, which speaks of how culture is patient with us” (p.161).

_Song_

Much more than the mere rendering of images rock art was almost always performative in nature. To engage in an active dialogue with the natural and spirit world, the production of art was accompanied by song, dance, and other ritualised activities. The

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31 Although outside of the scope of this thesis, the phenomenological approach to archaeology offered by Christopher Tilley (1997) could be a useful extension of this project.
colonial record testifies to the importance of ‘song’ in Dharawal culture. In 1836 Dharawal peoples from the southern Illawarra, joined by their Moss Vale kin, were recorded as travelling as far away as Camden (Dharug country) in order “to learn a new song … an object for which they sometime travel far” (Backhouse in Organ 1990, p.206). While the fact that several of the Aborigines in question “could speak tolerable English”, and wore a mixture of traditional and European attire, illustrates the transcultural nature of the early contact period, the expedition is likely to have been traditional in nature, as “all the men had undergone the ceremony of having a front tooth knocked out of the upper jaw”, indicating their high level of initiation.

Drawing heavily on his own experiences in Central Australia, Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines (1987) is a search for an understanding of this system of navigation. In it he observes that “Songs, not things, are the principal medium of exchange. Trading in things is the secondary consequence of trading in song” (1998, p.57). In the study area, this would appear to be supported by recent, albeit limited, archaeological evidence. Focused on the Woronora Plateau west of the Illawarra escarpment, recent research by Jillian Ford (2005) indicates that art materials were locally sourced. While there is evidence in other parts of the continent of clay and ochre – revered for their spiritual import – being traded over long distances (see McBryde 2000), there appears to be little evidence that goods were imported into the study area from elsewhere for their use in art making. So, “What did we trade from this area?” Uncle Les hypothesises:

Songs. I think this area of the coast was always a copyright area, where people developed new songs, and those new songs and stories were traded to the people further out. (A1.I13, p.462)
The Dreaming as constantly evolving epistemology

Just as Reverend James Backhouse’s journal entry had revealed four years earlier that people were still travelling large distances to congregate and carry out ceremony, in 1840 he attended a corroboree in the Illawarra where people were coming from as far away as Newcastle. This event is depicted in Image 2.28. Clarke records that the song being performed was a new one, and that “On enquiry I find the burden of the song to be: that the white man came to Sydney in ships and landed the horses in the saltwater” (Clarke in Organ 1990, p.252). What this demonstrates is that far from being frozen in time or corrupted, Aboriginal cosmology was expanding to incorporate recent history – specifically, the arrival of Europeans.

[Image 2.28] Alfred T. Agate, Corroboree (Dance), 1845. Engraved plate print, 11.9 x 17.7 cm. David Rumsey Map Collection.

That “constantly making new stories and songs” (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p.14) is intrinsically part of traditional Dreaming practice, is also emphasised in a memorable scene from Chatwin’s The Songlines. Fascinated by Dreamings and their manifestation in
the landscape, the English protagonist is listening and watching Joshua, the Pintupi ‘performer’, recount and enact the ‘Big Fly’ Dreaming:

[T]he story of the Big Fly was beyond me [...] it took me ages to realise that this was a Qantas Dreaming. Joshua had once flown into London. The ‘maze’ was London Airport: the Arrival gate, Health, Immigration, Customs, and then the ride into the city on the Underground. The ‘wiggles’ were the twists and turns of the taxi, from the tube station to the hotel. (p.154)

Through such examples we see that “There is no basis for seeing the dreaming as a mythological past (as in ‘dreamtime’) while it is alive as a *way of talking,*” one “which disrupts the uniformity of everyday [colonial] language” (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p.14). The implications of this philosophy are far-reaching, not just for Aboriginal people’s ability to re-engage with ancient stories and make authentic interpretations, but to form new, culturally significant relationships with the land. Visiting these sites, traveling along long-established songlines, is a powerful means by which to *re*Dream Country. Far from just looking at images, this process necessitates an embodied, corporeal experience of land; it is to take part in a cycle of events, of people continually returning to a particular place, to reaffirm their relationship to it.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a broad overview of Dharawal rock art and considered the retracing of songlines from a social archaeological perspective. Evidence was drawn from interviews with Aboriginal people as well as my own extensive fieldwork. It has demonstrated that a corporeal experience of rock art that is informed by contemporary Aboriginal perspectives can effectively address the ‘gaps in knowledge’ seen as problematic to a detailed understanding of Dharawal cultural landscapes. As connection
to these cultural landscapes remains a core concern of contemporary Aboriginal art in the study area, this chapter offers an approach through which these works can begin to be critically addressed. As the rearticulation of rock art motifs in public forms of art is discussed in Chapter 5, this chapter has also prepared the ground for this forthcoming discussion.
Chapter 3

In context: Post-contact traditions
In order to provide context for the body of public art examined in Chapters 4 and 5, this chapter examines post-contact art practices of Aboriginal people in southern Sydney since the late nineteenth century.

Three broad and interrelated ‘schools’ of practice are identified as being characteristic of the study area: 1) the production of ‘artefacts’ for the tourist trade – popularly associated with the Sydney community of La Perouse, but produced throughout much of the NSW south coast; 2) acrylic painting – which grew rapidly in popularity with increased exposure of the Papunya Tula movement and with the promotion of Koori ‘urban’ art in the mid 1980s; and 3) the recent revival of fibre arts traditional to southeast Australia, ranging from coiled basketry to possum-skin cloak-making and canoe-building.

Importantly, three aspects are identified in each school as being intrinsic to the ideas discussed in this thesis: 1) that they each constitute a ‘contemporaneous tradition’ – either by virtue of their roots in pre-colonial practices or from their establishment as familial or community-based traditions in the modern era; 2) that they remain intrinsically linked, either physically or conceptually, to artists’ experience and understanding of Country; and 3) that though reaffirmations of Aboriginal identity, and thus retaining “a palpable sense of difference” (McLean 2011a, p.20), they are, by virtue of their response to the colonial experience, as well as their intended non-Aboriginal audience, part of the broader dialogue with settler society that has been a feature of Aboriginal art since contact (Smith 2001, p.640).
How Aboriginal art engaged with settler society pivots largely on the way in which Aboriginal artists responded to the challenges of an increasingly modern world. Here I discuss how their art practices, previously of little consequence to western art history, might be approached afresh using some of the central tenets from modernist art discourse; in particular, the notion of the ‘ready-made’ is addressed. But far from suggesting that these traditions might simply be incorporated into its lexicon, it is argued that new understandings are reshaping western art history itself. As McLean (2013) has stated:

[Globalism reigns and tradition assumes the reformist role formerly reserved for the modern [...] Now it increasingly seems that modernism was always global, multiple and divided, rather than Western and singularly reformist. (p.49)]

In all three ‘schools’ connection with Country remains intrinsic to the process and conceptualisation of the art. The harvesting of wood for the production of artefacts (Image 3.03), the collecting of shells for shellwork, the sourcing and preparation of reeds and grasses for weaving, all necessitate an ongoing engagement with Country. Painting, largely done with commercial materials, nonetheless focuses on land through its depiction of local environments and their complex cultural associations. These practices are representative of Johnson, Allas and Fisher’s Storylines findings:

[T]he artists within the Storylines catchment illustrate the multitude of ways that Indigenous Australians connect with country, and show that ‘country’ is a source of inspiration [... many] of whom draw their artistic materials from the land. The collection and preparation of those materials is always a life affirming and rejuvenating part of the cycle of art production. (2009, n.p.)
Change and communication

The petroglyph site mentioned in Chapter 2 (Image 2.18) indicates the speed with which imported materials and goods were incorporated into the everyday life of Dharawal peoples with the advent of European invasion. Where traditional stone axes were sharpened in the Sydney-Hawkesbury sandstone both for practical and ritualistic purposes, the distinctly sharp, square outlines along the rim of this rock pool testifies to their substitution with a steel axe. Doreen Mellor (1996) writes that “Aboriginal culture displays all the dynamism and mobility of a living entity, and its art forms have
accordingly adapted to reflect its changing context” (p.31). Jeff Timbery similarly states, “Indigenous culture has always been like that – it’s always been adapting or changing” (A1.I18, p.496).

Events like the corroboree recorded by Reverend W.B. Clarke (1840) (discussed in Chapter 2) were also a means of exchange. By allowing Europeans to attend, Aborigines clearly hoped settlers might better understand their own world views and circumstances. Even later demonstrations, such as that with King Mickey, famously photographed at the end of the nineteenth century (Image 3.02) were a means of sharing through art and performance. This is supported by the words of Jeff Timbery:

> Our great great grandfathers saw [to] that by demonstrating our culture, or sharing our culture – be that through boomerang throwing or putting on a corroboree … [and] demonstrating our art techniques – be that burning in or making our crafts and tools. They kept our culture alive by that demonstrating and sharing. (A1.I18, p.496)

The nineteenth century anthropologist A.W. Howitt, one of the first persons to record in detail the customs of Aboriginal people on the south coast, displayed annoyance when traditional practices appeared curbed, expecting Aboriginality to be static and fixed. This emphasises, firstly, the process of transculturation by which Australian cultures changed upon coming into contact with new ones and, secondly, a very honest intention to communicate to settlers in ways they might more readily understand – an enactment of Aboriginality. This does not mean these were not ‘authentic’ performances, but rather, Aboriginality was now positioned in relation to, and negotiated with, settler Australians.
Art as commodity / commercial object:

Morphy (2008, after Thomas 1991) argues that in early colonial settings art objects were among the first to be traded. This “resulted in an intensification of local art-producing industries, which often had as much consequence on the internal dynamics of the society as it did on the external relations” (p.16).

Until the Bicentennial the most prolific Aboriginal art from the south coast was that associated with the tourist trade. Epitomised by the Aboriginal community at La Perouse (immediately north of the study area), produce included boomerangs, clubs and shields, made predominately by the men, and trinkets decorated by the women with seashells. McLean (2009, p.923), Morphy (2008, p.177), and Robert JC Young (2001, p.202) all emphasise the significant role that the commodification of material culture had on Aboriginal art practice. On this topic, Aboriginal artist and educator, Garry Jones, states:
artefact production became a significant means of Aboriginal resistance and adaptation, generating for some a significant degree of economic independence from their institutional masters while enabling reinvigoration and continuation of a form of cultural production. (2012, p.50)

The Dharawal associations with La Perouse are strong. Not only were a number of Dharawal people moved there early in the mission’s history (from whom many residents are descended), but cultural practices like shell collecting and mangrove harvesting often took place on Dharawal country – out on the Kurnell peninsula and down into Cronulla. Also, as Aboriginal people came and went from La Perouse in their usual way of visiting relatives for extended periods, styles and techniques were passed on throughout the NSW south coast (Nash 2010, p.12).


Invariably the women’s shellwork consists of small, cardboard forms, such as slippers or jewellery boxes, coated with brightly coloured fabric, and encrusted with seashells in intricate, radiating patterns (Image 3.04).
While shells were a significant material of the pre-contact tool kit, the extent to which they were used in more ceremonial or decorative arts, is tenuous (Nash 2010, pp.5-6). They were used in necklaces early in the nineteenth century in the Shoalhaven area, but it was only towards the end of that century – a time of increasing European settlement – that they become the primary material of commercially-sold trinkets. Essentially, as art historian Maria Nugent (2009b) points out, shellwork was a Victorian era craft that Aboriginal women engaged with for economic survival. Upon falling out of fashion amongst craft circles in the early twentieth century, it found a new market as tourist art alongside Aboriginal men’s wooden artefacts being sold to day-trippers to La Perouse.

Particularly from the 1920s and ‘30s onwards, there was a convergence of typologies – shell-encrusted boomerangs and boomerang-shaped forms encrusted with shells. Just as La Perouse men incorporated images of the new Sydney Harbour Bridge into their designs (Image 3.11), so too did the women establish a tradition of producing small models of the Sydney Harbour Bridge encrusted with shells (Image 3.06).

Far from being a local phenomenon, shell art resonated with Indigenous people’s art practices in other places at the time (Blanchfield & Murray 2003, p.11). When the women of La Perouse began shellwork, tourism was becoming an increasingly worldwide phenomenon and Indigenous societies were engaging in cross-cultural communication through their art (Nash 2010, p.24). “Such strategies,” Burn & Stephen note,

are part of a pattern of counter-colonial expression shared by non-Western peoples around the world [...] as the artists continue to negotiate a space in relation to the dominant Western culture. (1992, p.255)

[Image 3.07] Jessie Stewart, Untitled [cardboard photo frame decorated with shells].

Date of production unknown. Private Collection.

(Photo: V.Bicego, 12.02.11, with the kind permission of Fiona Stewart.)

And yet, as a contemporaneous tradition, Nash offers that the ‘persistence’ of south coast shell work means that its production and design resonated with its makers on an altogether different level than purely economic survival (2010, pp.8-9). Despite continuing market interest, artists have resisted a more intense level of production
because they reject the commodification of such deeply personal associations of home and family-based activities. Such objects, Nash states, “may operate as tourist art or commodities at times but the art market is [no longer] the main motivation” (2010, p.4). The delicate photo frame made by Fiona Stewart’s grandmother (Image 3.07) exemplifies the use of shells in a domestic setting, outside the concerns of the tourist market. Jeff Timbery states that one of the primary significances of his family’s art is:

   everything that’s related to it. So where you go get the shells from, usually we’ll describe those beaches in our family’s language. The place names still have our language. Then the types of shells as well, we’ll use the family’s language. Where you go get wood from for makin’ our boomerangs and that sort of thing, again what sort of materials you use, we’re still making them from the same materials that has been traditionally done for thousands of years. (A1.I18, p.497)

The process of shell collection necessarily entails engagement with country, and “according to oral history [...] continues in much the same way as it has done for over one hundred years” (Nash 2010, p.18). Country is thus defined through contemporaneous interactions and associations as much as it shaped by understandings of the past.

Recalling family outings in the 1950s and 60s, shell-worker Esme Timbery says:

   We used to catch the ferry every Monday – catch the first boat over to Kurnell. The men would walk across the sand hills to Cronulla and collect a certain kind of shell. I walked it a couple of times but it was too far – I was just a kid. The women and kids would sit at Kurnell and make some food while the men would collect ‘buttons’ and ‘starries’. The women collected blue shells on the rocks at Kurnell – you had to boil them because they had a fish inside. We called them ‘gubbens’ you’d get them off the rock with a knife. There was also ‘fans’ – all colours, look like a fan. Men would come
back and have something to eat and then we’d catch the last ferry home.

(cited in Nash 2010, pp.12-13)

Following increased scholarly interest in the shell-necklacing traditions of Tasmanian Aboriginal women (see Blanchfield & Murray 2003), the profile of La Perouse shell work has risen over the last decade. In 2005, Esme Timbery was the recipient of the Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize, for Blue Shellworked Bridges, a model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge exemplary of the La Perouse tradition (Campbelltown Arts Centre 2005, p.53).

Value creation

While shell art has a long history of value within the Koori community, it has long been undervalued as a cross-cultural product alongside the artefact work of Aboriginal men (Nash 2010, pp.30-31). As De Lorenzo states:

Over the last fifty years critical attitudes towards cultural exchange have varied. When Margaret Preston urged her white readers to “Be Aboriginal”, the command was seen as having some virtue, whereas the opposite value operated for Aborigines who were seen as loosing value by adopting white standards and techniques. (1988, p.6)

With regard to the painted woomeras of Albert Namatjira, Burn & Stephen (1992) refer to such transitional art items as ‘non-conforming products’. Resisting classification as either fine art or ‘authentic’ anthropological artefacts, they were previously marginalised and “treated as curios determined by the then undifferentiated tourist and art markets” (p.250).
Esme Timbery’s *Shell Slippers* (2008), commissioned by Indigenous curator, Djon Mundine, for the ‘New Acquisitions’ exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in December 2008, established La Perouse shell art as contemporary art practice (Nash 2010, p.29). While still characteristic of more domestic processes, this installation emphasises the adaptable nature of shell art; its responsiveness to new means of communication and engagement. “Considered historically,” Maria Nugent (2009b) asserts,

the most recent transformation of shell-work into art object is really just one more example of shell-work entering into a new marketplace, appealing to a different cohort of consumers and acquiring additional meanings and value in the process.

Symbolically, the 2008 MCA work operates on a number of levels. As Nash has argued, the empty baby booties speak of the stolen generations, the deep pain experienced by practitioners like Esme Timbery whose sister was removed under assimilation policies (2010, p.29) that continued into the late twentieth century. Visually the slippers also
resonate “with other historical moments, such as the images of shoes belonging to children who perished in the Holocaust” (p.30).

[Image 3.09] Mid-twentieth century boomerang, decorated with poker work, typical of the La Perouse style. Tongarra Bicentennial Museum. (Photo: V.Bicego, 14.03.12, with the kind permission of the Tongarra Bicentennial Museum.)

In regard to Aboriginal men’s wood work, Taçon et al. (2003) argue that the proliferation of figurative motifs on such items was, amongst other factors, symptomatic of Aboriginal diaspora – that there was a transference of imagery from grounded ceremonial sites (such as rock engravings) to portable material culture as a means of retaining knowledge. This idea is supported by Jeff Timbery who, in relation to those rock art images, states simply, “we’ve had to [keep our culture] in a different way” (A1.I18, p.498). Aboriginal artist and educator, Clive ‘Bud’ Freeman, similarly emphasises that there is far more subject and stylistic continuity between pre-contact iconography and those produced on modern artefacts than previously appreciated:

If we think about some of the work that artists in the south east are doing, it’s very much a continuation of that art style. That just says to me that – although we’ve been locked out of Country, and although that rock art may not be a part of cultural practice here in the south east region [any longer] – the style’s still being used, just in different ways. (A1.I21, p.539)
[Image 3.10] Unknown artist, La Perouse wooden parring shield, incised, c.1930s. Private collection. (Photo: V.Bicego, 18.03.15)
Prior to contact with Europeans, most tools and weapons produced and used by men, when decorated, bore mnemonic designs as opposed to figurative ones (Image 3.12). Early ‘transitional’ pieces display a preference for incised decorations (Images 3.10 and 3.11). Today, artists use an electric poker to illustrate these goods (Image 3.09). As Jeff Timbery recalls from his own time amongst his elders, burning-in the image of a kangaroo on a boomerang or shield would occur amidst discussion of the animal. Oral histories in conjunction with the production of this iconography were capable of transmitting traditional knowledge:

[Through] your family you learn the stories being told about how you would hunt for these animals, like how they'd go hunting for kangaroos. Of course we haven't gone hunting with spears and woomeras and nulla nullas, hunting kangaroos, since well before I was born, but the stories still exist. So I can still tell my children about how this is a hunting technique, this is a woomera that's used for launching a spear, [how] you [should] be downwind from creatures when you would hunt for them, [how] you'd find kangaroo droppings [in order] to track a kangaroo [because they] could tell you how long or short time ago it was [there] ... Same with the artwork. It's all interlinked really. It's not just about [images]. It's about all the stories you get told through the artwork or telling the stories. (A1.I18, p.495)

Although the actual harvesting of wood for such implements facilitated an engagement with Country and helped sustain associations with certain places, it is in the iconography and typology of La Perouse wooden art objects that histories and stories were also transmitted. Decorations, though changed from their pre-contact forms, still functioned as mnemonic devices and were the foci of history and culture-making.

Burn & Stephen (1992) argue that by virtue of their Western-style watercolour compositions, the wooden woomeras made by Albert Namatjira transgressed the
‘primitivism’ of traditional utilitarian objects (p.252). Key to such a practice was the ability of the artefact:

to articulate key contradictions between and within cultures, which we may read as (gently) mocking the logocentrism of the colonising culture and its institutions [... T]he woomera-painting, which adapts cultural difference as a ready-made, becomes a counter-colonial statement. (Burn & Stephen 1992, p.255)

While south coast artists had developed an intrinsically more naive style of composition and iconography, their use of artefacts as art ‘supports’ nonetheless parallels this scenario.

[Image 3.11] Unknown artist, La Perouse wooden boomerang, incised, c.1930s. Private collection. (Photo: V.Bicego, 18.03.15)
In the Australian Museum archives: a selection of wooden artefacts from Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland, dating from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. (Photo: V. Bicego, 19.03.10, with the kind permission of the Australian Museum.)

Assortment of largely undecorated wooden artefacts made by Bidgigal artist, Jeff Timbery. (Photo: V. Bicego, 16.06.12, with the kind permission of Jeff Timbery.)
Ready-made

At no time was I made more aware of the ‘ready-made’ characteristic of these artefacts than when I visited Bidgigal artist, Jeff Timbery, at his home in Queanbeyan in June 2012. Alongside similar items taking pride of place on living room shelves and in display cabinets, Timbery had a large box which he unceremoniously tipped out onto the living room floor for me to see (Image 3.13). Here were dozens of undecorated, unvarnished wooden artefacts he had fashioned, ready to be completed when circumstances or inclination allowed\(^\text{32}\). The raw state of the wood, the skilled continuity of their form, their mass assemblage, all evoked connotations of the production line.

Yet no matter how generic and repetitive the typology, these items only mimic the mass production of the factory. Here there is always the aura of a work made by human hands, informed by culture. While the production of artefacts has a performative quality – the performance of the production line – it simultaneously individualised, personalised, and made familiar the mass-produced. Thus, through their acquiescence to, but also discursive use of, market forces (a means of both survival as well as discourse with settler society), Aboriginal artists engaged with, but also transcended, notions of modernism. As such, Jeff Timbery displays a palpable rancour when the term *kitsch* is used to describe his family’s traditions:

> I find it strange that they would use terms like that when what we put into the artwork is culture, is heritage, is ancestral ties to our stories. They mean a lot more than anything else. (A1.I18, p.497)

Similarly, Nash writes:

> The label of kitsch has connotations of poor quality and insignificance. Such attributes are not consistent with the knowledge of the role of [...] art in the

\(^{32}\) Though still an active ambassador for his people, Jeff Timbery is no longer a practising visual artist.
Indigenous South Coast community or with an open attitude to all Indigenous art expression. (2010, p.28)

The ambiguity between the artefact’s role as mass-produced and personalised is explored in the recent work of Garry Jones (Image 3.14). In *Works in Progress* (2013) the forms of traditional implements continue to remain a powerful means of exploring industrial media (such as Styrofoam) while the form and clustered typology of the objects remain quintessentially traditional. Having studied objects such as these in the storerooms of museums (Jones 2012), Jones interrogates the extent to which authenticity and tradition are dictated by medium, style and knowledge.

![Image 3.14](image)

[Image 3.14] Garry Jones, *Works in Progress* [detail], 2013. Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong. (Photo: V.Bicego, 05.04.13)

Similarly, Boolarng Nangamai founding member and artist, Noel Lonesborough, recently created a series of artefacts using glass. *Jerrinja Men’s Business* (2011) (Images 3.15 and 3.16) is a fine addition to the growing canon of south coast art that sees tradition not just continued but also rearticulated in a fine arts context. Combined with its earthy and
aquatic colours, the largely transparent nature of the glass boomerang in the series speaks of both the strength and fragility of south coast culture; the object seemingly solid and delicate at the same time. The blood reds and shades of black of the bullroarers, in contrast, conjure distinctly fiery and angrier emotions, but ones tempered by the fine craftsmanship of each traditional structure.


Painting

Acrylic painting is undoubtedly the broadest and most diverse of the three ‘schools’ of art practice examined here, as it incorporates a major portion of the public art discussed in the following chapters. Painted murals account for the majority of public art surveyed. The study area is not unique in this regard. In their investigation of contemporary Aboriginal art practices in ‘settled Australia’, Johnson, Allas & Fisher (2009) found that a majority of artists “worked only in one medium, and almost all of these were painters” (n.p). While a number of artists ‘withdrew their labour’ in 1988 as protest to the Bicentennial (A1.I02, p.333), it conversely galvanised others to pick up the paintbrush and explore their Aboriginality. Gumbaynggirr artist, Kevin Butler, recalls:

it was in 1988, the year of the Bicentennial, that I started to paint ‘Aboriginal’ art. Because I had been removed from my family, I thought that this would be a good way to get in touch with my lost culture. So I started painting ... A lot of the earlier works are completely different to what I’ve done [for a while now] ... Small [canvases], experimenting with dots ... and the ‘usual’ stuff with the snakes and goannas. But my art work has evolved since then. (A1.I05, p.371)

Although the proliferation of western desert painting styles and iconography has been seen as problematic by some commentators and practitioners, from an anthropological perspective it must be understood as “a shift towards embracing one’s Aboriginal [...] identity” (Johnson, Allas & Fisher 2009, n.p.). This sentiment is reiterated by Dharawal elder, Colin Isaacs: “A lot of the suburban fellas ... they’re looking for a connection, and trying to keep [their culture] alive in the best form they can think of” (A1.I02, p.334).

338 out of 593 surveyed artists
In the cases where artists were producing derivative and imitative work, the [Storylines] team often sensed that they were seeking to assert their Indigenous identity, and thus gravitated towards the styles of artists who had achieved the greatest recognition and success (Johnson, Allas & Fisher 2009, n.p.).

In works such as Jeanette Timbery’s *Mungardi* (1992) (Image 3.17), the western desert influence is clear. A largely aerial composition is rendered in earthen tones, with contrasting areas of dotted country, combined with small figures and representations of wurleys and canoes.

In 2004, Jerrinja educator and spokesperson, Fiona Stewart, along with friends and family, painted two prominent wall spaces at Werri Beach, Gerringong, illustrating how generations of Aboriginal people have utilised the area (Images 0.06 and 3.18). “My stories are about what we’ve done on the land, how we’ve lived and how we’ve survived,” Fiona told me in February of 2011. She emphasised:

[it is the] story of four generations. It talks about my grandmother, my father, myself, and my children. [But] as those generations come down the line, our stories are significantly changing. (A1.I06, p.377)

The same familial and cultural associations with coastal environments in the region (Image 3.19) are explored by Fiona’s sister, Jodi Stewart, in her triptych painting, *Pipi time at Seven Mile Beach* (2008) (Image 3.19). While incorporation of a linear landscape illustrates a European influence, stylistically there is clear influence of the ‘dot’ aesthetic of the Papunya Tula artists. These artistic connections are common place. Trevor
Nickolls, one of the most celebrated ‘urban’ Aboriginal artists, felt it necessary to learn ‘traditional’ styles and techniques popularised by the western desert and Arnhem Land movements (see McLean 2011b). But Fiona Stewart worries that people will not take this kind of art seriously, that there is indeed an “obstacle” between the viewer and a greater appreciation of local peoples’ stories (A1.I06, p.377).

[Image 3.19] Oysters at low tide in the Crooked River estuary, just north of Seven Mile Beach. (Photo: V.Bicego, 20.01.12)

Archaeologist Diana Wood Conroy has argued the need to continually scrutinise the ‘unconscious bias’ by which Aboriginal art is judged by contemporary ‘high art’ standards. Having worked closely with Tiwi, Yolngu and Ngarrendjeri communities, Wood Conroy stresses the need for “the artist’s [own] definition of significance [to be] adhered to” when critically evaluating such works (Wood Conroy 1993, pers. comm. to Jo Holder). She has written:

These women from the Illawarra see the need to reconstruct not only their own connections to the wider Aboriginal culture but to reinvent the myths that give meaning to the land [immediately] around us, and to pass this culture to children, giving them confidence and strength in their own history.

(Wood Conroy 1993, n.p.)

This is part of a letter that Wood Conroy wrote to Jo Holder in response to the disinterest shown in Sydney art circles to an installation designed by the Coomaditchie Artists in the early 1990s (Image 3.21).

[Image 3.22] Coomaditchie Artists. One of the panels hung outside Wollongong City Gallery, 1993. (Photo courtesy of Diana Wood Conroy)
Consisting of eighteen large painted panels exhibited outside the Wollongong City Gallery, the works commemorated the 1993 World’s Indigenous People’s Conference. Coomaditchie Artist, Lorraine Brown, recalls one of the main impetuses at the time was simply to impress upon the gallery’s then-director, Peter O’Neil, that the south coast had a visual Aboriginal culture worth displaying. Brown related:

When we were asked to paint them panels, we went in to [the Wollongong City Gallery to] see [the Director]. When we come out ... we all said to one another, “He doesn’t think we can do it,” because there’s no traditional Aboriginal people here ... He didn’t think we could do the art ... [But when the panels were finally hung,] to see the reaction on some people’s faces ... But his! He just stood and looked at them out the front like he couldn’t believe it. And that gave us total satisfaction ... It was a really proud moment [for us]. (A1.I09, p.422)

Like Fiona Stewart’s concern that her murals might be disregarded as nothing more than ‘pretty pictures’, Brown’s story illustrates the struggle that urban Aboriginal artists face in achieving accolades for their work. On this issue, Johnson, Allas & Fisher write:

A complaint frequently voiced by some of the high profile artists in our [Storylines] sample is that: ‘urban’ Indigenous artists – themselves included – are ignored by sections of the Australian art world who tend to regard ‘Indigenous art’ as only that produced in remote community art centres. (2009, n.p.)

What remains striking about the 1993 Wollongong City Gallery panels (still on display at the Kemblawarra community hall, amongst the apparati of a functioning studio and community space), and indeed the entire body of work produced by the Coomaditchie Artists, is the “utterly different agenda to contemporary cultural theory”. It is neither “self-conscious or self-reflective, and entirely lacking in irony” (Wood Conroy 1993,
pers. comm. to Jo Holder). As opposed to the high profile artists from the eastern seaboard for whom irony and political provocation remain intrinsic tools of their craft, “this is really art about a passionate desire for survival” (Wood Conroy 1993, pers. comm. to Jo Holder).

The panels are remarkable for their confidence of design, colour, and iconography – as if Brown and Thomas’s style had been brewing for years under the surface, only to arrive fully formed. Anyone familiar with the artists’ subsequent work would recognise these panels as theirs. Perhaps it was their unconnectedness with either tourist trade or domestic work that enabled something totally fresh – something with little reference to the spheres which had encapsulated south coast art until that time. Certainly, much of the iconography used is derivative (symbols, motifs, and patterns, are drawn largely from x-ray art and rarrk traditions), but the authenticity of these works, as an expression of Aboriginality, is palpable.

Local inflections

Though arguably representative of a pan-Aboriginal aesthetic, groups like the Coomaditchie Artists are “seeking to establish styles that [reflect] their own localised traditions, their own country, their own distinctive experiences” (Johnson, Allas & Fisher 2009, n.p.). This was a powerful sentiment expressed by numerous artists during the Storylines survey. On this topic, Coomaditchie Artist, Narelle Thomas, offered:

You gotta remember, we’re still learning, too, about our culture, Vince. It was taken away, it was hushed up. So we’re still learning, ourselves. We’re still learning. And we’re learning to teach our kids what we learn. And it’s handed down that way. (A1.I09, p.416)
Artist sisters, Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas, have been at the forefront of the protection and rejuvenation of Coomaditchie Lagoon (Image 3.23) since the early 1990s when they formed the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation. The last of its kind in the Illawarra, the lagoon is a breeding ground and haven for an array of aquatic birds and animals, particularly the endangered green and golden bell frog and the eastern long neck turtle. The health of the area is continually threatened by the neighbouring steelworks, run-off from stormwater drains, and the illegal dumping of rubbish on the lagoon’s southerly sand dunes. Through their community engagement and public artworks, Lorraine and Narelle have successfully raised the profile of the area and galvanised enough continuing community support to achieve its stabilisation (Image 3.24).

[Image 3.23] Looking south-west across Coomaditchie Lagoon. (Photo: V.Bicego, 16.07.13)
Historically, Comaditchie is a meaningful place for local Aboriginal identity also. At the advent of World War II, the remaining Aboriginal population was removed from Hill 60 at Port Kembla, to live in a shanty town on the sand dunes behind the lagoon (see Image 3.25). This was essentially the only ‘mission’ between La Perouse to the north, and the missions in Nowra to the south. Essentially operating from Kemblawarra Community Hall, right on the banks of the lagoon, the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation is also continuing the local activism that began with the meeting of the Illawarra Aboriginal Advancement League between the same four walls in the 1960s.
The naive ‘outsider’ style of depiction evident in this painting of *Coomaditchie Lagoon* (Image 3.25) speaks of the fragile but powerful link between earlier untrained artists from the colonial era, such as Mickey of Ulladulla (Image 3.26).
Brown has said that their hope for the future is for official recognition of their custodianship of the area; to have Coomaditchie registered as a co-managed reserve, similar to what the Yuin community have achieved on a larger scale with Booderee National Park at Jervis Bay (just beyond the southern boundaries of this study). Amongst other benefits, this would bring opportunities of employment for a younger generation. For now, Dreaming poles, pictorial walkways and murals, all in Brown and Thomas’s vibrant style, impress upon visitors that this always was and continues to be an Aboriginal place.

Within this setting familial traditions have taken root in only one or two generations. Of this Brown related:

> You know, [the kids have] gotta realise that they’re east coast people. We’re not desert art people. We paint what we identify with, with what we grew up with. (A1.I09, p.416)

This is where practice departs from modern Western values of individuality and experimentation. That is not to say that Brown and Thomas’s grandchildren produce carbon copies of their work (Images 3.27 and 3.28). Rather, individualism is demonstrated by the subtle variations in style and choice of subject matter.

As such, iconography drawn from other Aboriginal traditions can be read as baseline from which local inflections and personal nuances are allowed to form. They speak of the very real and consistent engagement with country and the wider non-Aboriginal community over the last two decades. Inspired by the traditions of remote communities, their appropriation of motifs and patterns are playful and inventive, and given great local inflection through subject matter particular to these coastal regions. Through this, an “ancient cultural identity and empathy with the land” is reasserted along new lines (Wood Conroy 1993, n.p.). In many ways the iconography speaks of stories lost and found, of stories being written and told right now.
[Image 3.27] Paintings by Coomaditchie children on display at Bulli Family General Practice. (Photo: V.Bicego, 29.09.11)

[Image 3.28] Detail of one of the paintings on display at Bulli Family General Practice. (Photo: V.Bicego, 29.09.11)
[Image 3.29] Collage of recurring iconography in the work of the Coomaditchie Artists. Photos (V.Bicego) from various public and studio works.
With regard to contemporary painting, the adoption of different critical approaches to the practices of remote and settled communities is increasingly difficult to justify. The commercial appeal of remote art, it would seem, is its supposed proximity to tradition. Untrained art from the eastern seaboard conversely lies in a state of limbo: not traditional enough, not modern enough, it is somewhere in between. And yet both remote and settled art share important characteristics: both feature Dreaming stories or personal reminiscences of Country; both (in most cases) utilise modern tools and materials with little technical skill; and both have a heightened awareness of their non-Indigenous audiences.
Weaving and Country

One of the most important Aboriginal revivals of the last thirty years has been the resurgence of traditional fibre crafts. Prior to contact with Europeans, and well into the colonial era, weaving was a medium essential for day-to-day living. It was used for string and rope-making, basketry, and trapping. Coiling (Image 3.31), in particular, was an essential technique used throughout southeast Australia.

In one form or another, people in the study area can recall coiling being practised by their elders; some even remember practising it themselves as children. The lifestyle prescribed by modernity, however, quickly made “the functional qualities of the handmade textile superfluous” (Wood Conroy 1996, p.39); and while, just like the artefacts made at La Perouse, the commercial production of woven goods brought some financial benefit for a time, these crafts had practically disappeared by the late twentieth century.

[Image 3.31] Aaron Broad-Henry, Coiled basket, 2008. Lomandra. 22.5 x 19 x 13cm. Private Collection. (Photo: V. Bicego, 02.02.12)
Coiled basketry is also a notable example of where the direction of influence in Aboriginal Australia is reversed. Having learnt the craft from the Ngarrindjeri while stationed on the Murray River, missionary woman, Gretta Matthews, introduced it to Yolngu communities in the late nineteenth century (Wood Conroy & Trevorrow 1997, p.156). Though now enriched by the innovations made by northern Australian communities, it is a southeast tradition that has returned home, rather than simply being appropriated.

Members of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio, Gerringong, have been at the forefront of the fibre craft revival in the study area. When I spoke with Steven Russell, one of the collective’s founding members, he related:

For me weaving and me artefact making I get [my materials] locally, from off my country. And we don't have to travel too far ... [but] you've gotta find where they grow, to get the materials that you need to weave, to make a basket. And the artefacts such as the boomerangs, spears, you know, there are certain trees that you need to go hunting for. And not cutting the whole tree down, just taking a branch here and there off one tree and leaving it. Not killing it right off. Leaving enough for new growth. New supply. (A1.I17, p.491)

Contemporary weaving and other fibre crafts thus resonate with Indigenous practitioners on a number of levels. Firstly, it is a powerful continuation of tradition and re-establishes a link with the past. Secondly, and connected with this, is that the processes involved with fibre crafts necessitate a reconnection with Country. Through the gathering and preparation of materials, Aboriginal people renegotiate notions of access, knowledge, and agency in colonised landscapes. A pertinent example is the preservation of a small pocket of land, not far from their studio, from which the Boolarng Nangamai artists often source raw material. Having raised their concern with local authorities, the artists successfully
gained a protected status for this area, which remains known only to them (pers. conv. Clive ‘Bud’ Freeman 17.08.12). In an area where Aboriginal people have no legal claim to land and have limited entitlement to its resources, this instance of the “negotiation of [...] power and cultural knowledge between white and black” (Wood Conroy & Trevorrow 1997, pp.161-62) is directly attributable to the reintroduction of traditional textile practices. And thirdly, as Diana Wood Conroy and Ellen and Tom Trevorrow (1997) have noted, weaving provides multiple layers of strength for fragmented communities. Its significance, they write:

comes in re-affirming strengths derived from the transmission of the culture through kinship and [...] [working] in the company of other weavers/storytellers [...] The infinite connections made in the binding of the rushes is like a metaphor for tying the culture together again through strong relationships. (1997, p.161)

[Image 3.32] String bags, 2007, woven by Steven Russell and Bonny Brennan of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio. Made with sisal and nylon, respectively. University of Wollongong Art Collection. (Photo: V.Bicego, 16.08.12)
Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of Aboriginal art practices in the study area since contact with Europeans. It has considered its transcultural relationship with settler society and sensitive connection to tradition. By considering the ideas of archaeologists and anthropologists, the discussion has demonstrated the need for recognising Aboriginal peoples’ own sense of tradition and authenticity; that it is from this de-centred position that new but equally meaningful ways of critically engaging with contemporary Aboriginal art will be made possible. Far from being irreconcilable, the discussion has also shown that important art-historical terms, such as the ‘ready-made’, are capable of nuanced interpretations of this art, provided they too are open to adaptation.
Chapter 4

Going public: The ‘Indigenous-informed’ public art of Dharawal Country
This chapter considers the rapid increase of Aboriginal participation in various forms of public and community art-making in the study area since the Bicentennial. It draws on key components of data collected between 2009 and 2014 (Appendix 3) and hypothesises how concepts offered by art historians, anthropologists and post-structuralist philosophers, might be applied to this large body of work which has so far garnered little critical attention.

Central to a broader understanding of the work is Catherine De Lorenzo’s definition of ‘Indigenous-informed public art practices’: that alongside increasing numbers of public works authored by Aboriginal artists themselves there has been a distinct shift in wider community practice that has sought to acknowledge long neglected Indigenous histories, epistemologies and cultural achievements. This is achieved not just through the subject matter of the public art but through the increased engagement with Aboriginal people during its planning and production. As such, De Lorenzo’s concept emphasises the transcultural nature of the material examined here and reiterates an important sentiment expressed by Howard Morphy: “today Aboriginal art is becoming increasingly an integral part of Australian art, and it will be increasingly difficult to write about the one in isolation from the other (2008, p.3).”

Suzanne Lacy’s concept of ‘New Genre’ is discussed in relation to the art’s continued blurring of boundaries between author and audience, process and product, high and low art. These binary paradigms dominated much of the high modernist mode of critical thinking in the twentieth century, and their deconstruction has been a core concern of
postmodern and contemporary art discourse since the 1960s. A number of key characteristics inherent to New Genre were found to be typical of the art surveyed: site-specificity, local production, and a cross-cultural, collaborative methodology that allows the voices, histories and achievements of marginalised groups, to effectively radiate out into the consciousness of the broader community.

Given the often opportunistic material nature of the public art, I also use the concept of bricolage to conceptualise how it operates on the periphery of mainstream society. On one level the term is quite literal and speaks of the process by which materials are reused, rearranged, and re-imagined, into new forms. The dominance of the mural, from the survey material, is significant, as it coopts pre-existing structures: walls, poles, bus shelters, etc. But its further significance is conceptual.

Though first used by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to describe the myth-making processes of ‘the savage mind’ (1972, pp.16-33), the idea of bricolage was significantly adapted by poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1977) who envisaged it as a subversive political tactic of ‘nomadism’ against the state. My own use of the term towards the end of this chapter is particularly informed by Stephen Muecke in his cross-cultural, multidisciplinary exploration of Roebuck Plains, Western Australia, with Kim Benterrak and Paddy Roe (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984). In an area where Indigenous and settler ideas about land, its history, and people’s relationship to both, rarely seem reconcilable, Muecke investigates Country’s ability to ‘write itself’ through their respective art practices (p.230).

Finally, the ‘nomadic’ qualities of the study area’s bricolage aesthetic makes it an exemplary agent for what Jane Margaret Jacobs (1996) has called ‘the re-Aboriginalisation of place’: that although an increased Aboriginal cultural presence is “not land rights in itself, (it) can [nonetheless] be a meaningful re-territorialisation” of colonial space (cited in Malone 2007, p.159). Through economical, grass-root art
projects, contemporary Aboriginal artists of the study area have written themselves into
the civic landscape and influenced wider community re-thinking of the foundational
myths that inform our relationship to the land and its first peoples.

The data: at first glance

As of 2014 over 300 public works authored solely by, or in association with, Aboriginal
artists were found to have been produced in the study area. All but one of those (see
Image 5.09) had been made since Australia’s Bicentennial. Though some of the earliest
pieces no longer exist, much of this vast body of work remains on display to the public.
Most were designed to be permanent. Those ephemeral by design, such as Sea of Hands
installations and other live-action pieces, though culturally significant, constitute only 9% of
the work examined. Chart 4.01 shows that although the number of works produced
each year since 1988 has consistently varied, regular peaks in production have
consecutively increased in size since the mid-1990s.

The three most dramatic peaks in production occurred between 1992-1993, 2001-2003,
and 2007-2009. Though only conjecture, it is difficult not to interpret these increased
levels of production as direct responses to contemporaneous issues in the public
discourse. The 1992-1993 period was one of great importance in relation to the High
court of Australia’s decision concerning Native Title; the 2001-2003 period immediately
followed Sydney’s hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games where Aboriginal culture and
achievement was used to promote Australia to an international audience; and 2007-2009
saw much national discussion about the Australian Government’s official apology to the
Stolen Generations. As such, while I argue in the following pages that ‘localism’ remains
one of the art’s most unique features, these peaks in production would appear to suggest
intense localised exploration of national and international issues.

34 The dramatic decline in production in the last few years of the chart is far more likely to indicate
a gap in data than any real trend.
Despite varying levels of concentration it is clear from Maps A3.M01-A3.M13 (Appendix 3) that the art in question is extensive and occurs in all three major council areas of the study area: the Sutherland Shire, the Illawarra, and the northern Shoalhaven area (Nowra). Work is highly concentrated in densely urbanised and civic areas. Several significant works are located in more isolated, 'natural environments', such as the Illawarra escarpment (Image 1.21) and various nature reserves, but as these are popular recreational areas the works remain readily accessible and seen by a large number of people. The most isolated work remains a concrete pavement design near the historic Hampden Bridge in Kangaroo Valley (Map A3.M13). It would seem to be the only ‘Indigenous-informed’ public art for some distance.

As indicated by Chart 4.02, the Coomaditchie Artists (CUAC) and Kevin Butler are by far the most prolific authors and facilitators of public art in the study area. Work by CUAC constitutes almost a quarter (25%) of all the work surveyed. Butler’s output is
similarly high at almost 20%. Butler is most active in the northern Illawarra (Map A3.M05), where he lives, and CUAC around the Port Kembla area (Map A3.M07), where principal members, Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas, live. Both CUAC and Butler have a significant presence in the city of Wollongong itself (Map A3.M06), something of a shared territory between them.

![Chart 4.02] Authorship
The next two most prolific ‘author types’ are broad categories: ‘2 or more’ (artists who had produced up to two works) had facilitated 12% of all the work surveyed; and ‘Juvenalia’ (works produced solely by students and their teachers) accounted for 10%. As such, the quantity of work produced by CUAC and Butler is unusually prolific and the work is intensely local by virtue of its authorship alone. To my knowledge, every Aboriginal participant in these projects was a resident of the study area at the time of production, or had strong familial ties with Dharawal country. Of all the non-Aboriginal participants, only two were not residents of the study area.

*The significant role of schools*

Within the survey, works were identified as being located at one of four space types: a civic or public place, an education facility, a community centre, or commercial premises. Spaces deemed specifically as ‘civic or public’ counted for 26%. This is perhaps the broadest category of the four as what constitutes ‘public space’ is open to interpretation. For the most part however, such works are situated in spaces accessible to the public at all hours. The category of ‘education facilities’ included preschools, primary schools, high schools, TAFEs, universities and colleges. Importantly, this was the largest category, with over half (55%) of all work belonging to it.

Education facilities are thus the dominant players in the creation of the study area’s ‘Indigenous informed’ public art. How dramatically this differs to the cultural landscape prior to the 1990s is emphasised by Vic Chapman (Image 0.03). A Yauwaalaray man from the New South Wales/Queensland border, Uncle Vic is a practising ceramicist based in Woonona. He has lived in the Illawarra since the 1950s and was the first Aboriginal school principal in New South Wales. When I spoke with him in January of 2011, he related how earlier attempts to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum, in any way, were not successful. He said:
In my time as principal, I [could not persuade] Aboriginal people [to become] involved in school administration, the running of the school, or committees. And certainly, there was nothing forthcoming in curriculum development ... giving an Aboriginal perspective to various curriculum areas [...] I think [Aboriginal people] hesitated to come to schools because of their own negative experiences with schools. And I can understand that. Teachers were willing to put Aboriginal Studies into operation, but they didn’t know how, and they couldn’t get that assistance from the Aboriginal community, because Aboriginal communities wouldn’t be involved in it. (A1.I04, p.365)

Yet, as the data indicates, from the early 1990s schools and other education facilities have played a central role in the region’s ‘Indigenous-informed public arts practice’.

[Chart 4.03] Position and space type
Physically and conceptually schools and other communal places of learning are very much part of our modern cultural landscapes. They are places where significant numbers of people congregate on a regular basis, and where many of our societal values are instilled. Though not accessible to the general public on a daily basis, prominent and often permanent works of art on school campuses nonetheless have the potential to affect how successive generations of people think and feel about a subject as much as any work located in a civic location.

Increased levels of engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians through public art projects, such as those facilitated by schools, is indicative of a broader, nation-wide shift during the last quarter of a century. De Lorenzo states that in contrast to an erasure of conflictual history (from public space) for much of the country’s settler history, “since the bicentennial [...] artists, reconciliation groups and government authorities [...] have sought to address intercultural issues in the public domain” (2005, p.105).

McLean (2011a) argues that prior to the late 1980s it was almost solely Aboriginal people themselves that “acted as if aesthetic communication between [Aboriginal and settler] cultures was viable” (p.19). “Indeed,” he states, “some saw that it was imperative for their cultural survival, and established relations with sympathetic intermediaries for this purpose” (p.19). Evidence drawn from my interviews reveals that it was not just Aboriginal people who were increasingly ready to ‘stand and be counted’, but that non-Indigenous Australians within the study area began to reach out to them. With regard to the Coomaditchie Artists, the catalyst was their friendship with TAFE teacher and researcher, Sue Edmonds, followed by an invitation from the principal of the local school.

When I sat down to talk with the Coomaditchie Artists in June 2011, Brown recounted:
Sue [Edmonds] got us into painting ... [Narelle and I had] both met Sue down in Nowra when we were doing the women’s program at TAFE. Sue come down there singing all women’s things, you know, so, she was a bit of a character. She wrote her own songs and sang ‘em. It was all women’s issues ... That’s why we knew her when she came [to our house to interview Mum] ... She was working on a book called Noogaleek. They come to [our] home and interviewed my Mum [...] After [Sue] went home, she said, ‘I just had to come back there, ‘cause I can feel the power of that house. I just had to come back and see you people.’ So she starting thinking, ‘What can I do to break the ice again with them?’ So she come out with paintbrushes and stuff like that, and all us women went out in the yard with her. She said, ‘Come on, let’s paint the fences,’ and stuff like that. So we started painting our wooden fences. She broke the ice like that [...] We were doing Aboriginal art all over the fences. That was the first time we decided to, you know, paint.
The Coomaditchie community begin work on the mural at Kemblawarra Public School, 1991. (Photo courtesy of Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation.)

Coomaditchie Artists, Mural at Kemblawarra Public School, 1991. Destroyed by fire some years ago. (Photo courtesy of Diana Wood Conroy.)
Then, when the Principal over here [at Kemblawarra Public School] seen the artwork, he said he had a spare wall over there. He said, ‘When youse are finished doing this, come over and do a mural at the school.’ And he was the first principal that broke the ice with the Aboriginal community here, ‘cause like I said, it was a big no go area for a lot of people. A lot of people didn’t like [mixing with us], a lot of people were afraid of it. So we went and did a mural on the wall over there, and from that one mural it just blew out of proportion. We had people coming and asking us to do murals everywhere ... We’ve been as far as Moruya High school, doing artwork down there. But yeah, it just kept going from there. (A1.I09, p.415)

A Gumbainggir artist from Nambucca Heads, Kevin Butler became involved in community art projects soon after moving to Wollongong in the early 1990s. As mentioned previously, the prominence of his community art in the study area is second only to that of the Coomaditchie Artists and, like CUAC, he has focussed his energies on the education of younger generations. From the outset of this work Butler recognised the necessity of nurturing non-Indigenous peoples’ awareness “of the existence of alternative perspectives” (Butler 1991, p.107) and that this would only be possible with a similarly “critical understanding of the ‘mainstream’ culture” (p.108). It is not enough, he argues, to simply incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum in a mechanical or tokenistic way, rather the structures that have prevented Indigenous perspectives from being shared in the past must be effectively deconstructed through this process. In arguing what role art had to play in this process, he has stated:

The Creative Arts provide an opportunity to present positive images of Aboriginal people today, to discuss other aspects of Aboriginal culture and history through art and to address the cultural context of the arts. (Butler 1991, p.109)
For some students, working alongside Butler on a school art project can, even now, be their first real chance of developing a relationship with an Aboriginal person and to experience Aboriginal culture firsthand. Of these experiences, Butler offered:

Particularly with the young kids, [it’s important that] they can see an Aboriginal person and think, “Well, he’s pretty good”. It sort-of breaks down the stereotypes. Kids will grow up and say, “Oh yeah, I remember Kev Butler ... he came to our school” ... so they’ll have that positive attitude towards Aboriginal people. In a way it’s a step towards reconciliation with the younger generation. (A1.I05, p.374)

Historically, the role that educators and schools have played in this reconciliatory process is not without precedent. In his discussion of the beginnings of the Papunya Tula art movement, Paul Carter (2000) has emphasised the importance of school murals in the
creation of a new visual language between black and white Australians. As a young white teacher in the remote Northern Territory community of Papunya, Geoffrey Barden recognised the communication barrier between himself and the Aboriginal children he was employed to teach; neither knew much of the others’ first language. Bardon saw art as a means of communication, as well as a way of promoting self worth and perhaps a source of income, for the poverty-stricken people of Papunya. He recognised that “If the existing grounds for exchange prevented him entering their world, or their entering his, then another ground must be improvised” (Carter 2000, p.248).

Encouraged by the creativity of the children under Bardon’s care, local Papunya men approached Bardon for the use of art materials and began a series of murals on the walls of the school and neighbouring buildings (Image 4.05). This reinvigoration of tradition garnered the enthusiasm of the Papunya community and eventually an international audience.

[Image 4.05] Papunya artists, Honey Ant Dreaming mural, Papunya Special School, 1971. (Photo: Allan Scott)

Beyond simply being the provider of materials, the degree to which Bardon was a part of this communication experiment is important. As Carter writes:
[Bardon] was bent on creating a new language. To acknowledge this is not to divert attention from the achievement of the painters; nor is it to impugn Bardon’s motives. On the contrary, [...] [it] reinforces the point that what happened in the schoolroom, in the schoolyard and in the painting room involved a convergence of common interests, a genuine exchange across difference. (Carter 2000, p.256)

There are commonalities between this history of the burgeoning Papunya Tula movement and the story previously recounted by Brown, where the encouragement and support of non-Indigenous educators finally provided the conditions for a local Indigenous arts movement to develop. Non-Aboriginal persons were ready to engage with Aboriginal Australians in a meaningful way, and art was seen as a formative means of communication – a common language. As such, public art produced by Aboriginal artists in the study area should not be viewed merely as an extension of their studio practice but as intrinsic to its transcultural nature. Public art projects have nurtured the Coomaditchie Artists’ unique painting style, and made the exploration of local Indigeneity a vital component of engaging with the wider community. It is through the success of these projects that equally strong studio practices have emerged.

‘Indigenous-informed public art’

Collins Rock, one of the many headlands that characterise the northern Illawarra coastline, marks the place where James Cook attempted to land in April 1770 (Organ 1990, p.4). Though unsuccessful, the area has nonetheless retained this historical, almost mythological, association. In 2008 the Illawarra branch of Rotary commissioned Michael Keighery, a multi-media artist who had recently moved to the area, to create a public art work to commemorate the historical event (Images 4.06 and 4.07).
When I met with Keighery in 2012 I asked him about the consultation process involved with *Points of View*. He related:

I knew [the Captain Cook public work at Collin's Rock] was going to be contentious. It was commissioned by Rotary, you know, which is pretty white-bred. I said to them, “I have to talk to the [Illawarra Local Aboriginal] Land Council to find a way to deal with this.” And what actually surprised me was that the Rotary people understood. They were cool with [incorporating an Indigenous perspective] ... that it didn't mean just saying it, it meant actually having people [from the Aboriginal community] involved.
My family and I moved down here [from Newtown] about three years ago. So … I didn't know Wollongong […] and I didn't know how the Indigenous people would handle me feeling the need to both acknowledge and discuss European history in light of its impact on Indigenous culture. And what just absolutely blew me away was that every time I spoke to an Indigenous person the response was really favourable. It was almost like the fact that I had sought permission was sufficient for them, because I didn't go in with a necessarily preconceived idea. (A1.110, p.437)

Points of View is one of the works in the ‘Inclusive’ category of public art examined here; they are works which, though not necessarily authored by an Aboriginal person, are inclusive of Indigenous perspectives or representation. Keighery’s work is clearly not ‘inclusive’ simply by virtue of its subject matter, but rather, his consultative methodology, his willingness to engage with local Aboriginal people, to listen and take onboard their
ideas and concerns, is exemplary of De Lorenzo’s concept of ‘Indigenous informed public arts practice’. It is also typical of the increasingly community-based public arts practice of the study area. The fact that the ‘white-bred’ clients were also open to Keighery’s ideas of consultation indicates a significant shift in cultural thinking from the ‘cultural amnesia’ that had previously prevailed.

In 2009 Keighery collaborated with the Coomaditchie Artists on Sirens of Woolungah (Image 4.08), a prominent ceramic mural situated on the boardwalk of Wollongong Harbour’s foreshore. Drawing comparisons between Classic European and Aboriginal mythology, the work celebrates the region’s shared history. It incorporates archival material such as colonial depictions of Dharawal peoples and early photographs of the area. The collaborative, intercultural methodology of the work is key. Of this, Keighery said:
I like working collaboratively, but I also liked Lorraine and Narelle ... At the time I was really interested to see whether, between the three of us, we could come up with a new kind of format, if you like, for imagery that crosses between a Eurocentric and a traditional Aboriginal [viewpoint] [...] we needed to find a visual language that would sit well together, and certainly to provide something that would enable people to come into it on a number of different levels. (A1.I10, p.435)

Conversation with Tess Allas (A1.I08) further reveals that this kind of cross-cultural engagement has been an intrinsic component of the study area’s ‘Indigenous informed public arts practice’ from early on. Currently an Associate Lecturer at COFA (UNSW), Allas is of Wiradjuri descent and grew up in the Illawarra. In the 1990s she played a vital role in raising awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal art on the NSW south coast through the coordination of exhibitions and then as Aboriginal Cultural Development Officer for Wollongong City Council. Through her initiative, two public works, Gurungaty Water Place (Image 4.09) and Yaroma: Spirit of the Figtree (Image 4.10), were commissioned in 1997 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Indigenous citizenship. These works set the standard of ‘Indigenous informed public arts practice’ in the study area for years to come, as their deliberate pairing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists placed reconciliation at the heart of local public discourse.

With his typical self-deprecating humour, Uncle Vic related to me his experience of this project:

The second of these [projects], was on the site of the demolished Moreton Bay figtree after which the suburb of Figtree was named, [and] was the mosaic featuring the Yaroma. The design was by me, [but] it was substantially the sweat work of a fellow who had recently graduated from Wollongong Uni Creative Arts ... Alistair Cox, from Mount Gibb Pottery. I must give Alistair the credit for doing the hard yards. We went to his pottery [studio] and consulted [with him]. I showed him that he did the Aboriginal person [depicted in the mosaic] with rather European, fat legs, and I said, “You obviously haven’t seen a black fella’s legs!” So we scaled down the legs a bit. (A1.I03, p.350)

‘New Genre’

From the 1960s onwards the ‘cannon in the park’ model of public art (Baca 1995, p.21), as discussed in Chapter 1 (see Images 1.17 and 1.18), was “encroached upon by the world of high art” (Lacy 1995, p.21). Lacy states that “the outdoors, particularly in urban areas, came to be seen as a potential new exhibition space for art previously found in galleries, museums, and private collections” (p.21). Art was a way not only of enhancing public spaces but revitalising the inner cities being hampered by social problems; “a means of reclaiming and humanising the urban environment” (p.21). However, as it was largely designed in the studio and of a single author’s vision, this kind of conceptualism often proved alienating to a public with little interest in art history and a deep suspicion of the modern. As Lacy states, “the ensuing public debate centred on artistic style (eg. abstract versus figurative art) rather than on public values” (1995, p.22).
Just as examples of ‘canon in the park’ public art are found consistently throughout the study area, this later conceptualism is evident also. Some examples from the Illawarra include Robert Woodward’s *Five Islands Fountain* (1981) in the Wollongong Botanic Garden (Image 4.11) and Bert Flugelman’s *Gateway to Mount Keira* (1985) at the University of Wollongong. These are monumental sculptures that dominate their immediate surroundings. It is not without some irony that although their abstract forms often draw inspiration from the region’s unique coastal and scarp environments, their materiality reiterates the region’s more recent steel-making heritage. Intentionally or not this aesthetic reinforces the perception of Wollongong as a steel city – a place of western industry.

![Image 4.11](image.jpg)


I have many childhood memories of playing amongst Woodward’s architectural fountain forms. Like other children who visited the Wollongong Botanic Garden in the summer months, I enjoyed splashing about under its cascading arches and jumping down its
watery steps. But as much as I was captivated by its novelty, I was also frightened by its size and power. It is easy to understand how, once physicalised, this kind of conceptualism might be alienating. When thinking of this sculptural fountain now I am reminded of Ian McLean’s criticism of Paul Carter’s earlier writing for envisaging a relationship with the Australian landscape without first considering Aboriginal perspectives (McLean 1998, p.161). Woodward and Flugelman’s large-scale forms seek to conceptualise a connection between modern society and the environment without first considering the ways in which people have long practised these relationships. It is unsurprising then that in the last quarter century a totally different methodology and aesthetic has dominated the public art scene in the study area, one that is more concerned with collaboration than conceptualism and more concerned with process than product.

Lacy has defined new genre public art as “that [which] uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives”. Most importantly it “is based on engagement” (1995, p.19), challenging modern boundaries between the artist as designer / producer and the audience as passive observer. In the study area and, indeed, further afield, the initial emphasis may be on the educational and reconciliatory role that both the primary artist and participants experience during the design, production and installation stages. But new genre practitioners also understand the way in which community-based projects have a radiating effect into the broader populace. Thus Lacy proposes we reconceptualise the artist / audience paradigm (1995b, p.178) (Figure 4.01), stating “what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself become the artwork” (1995, pp.20).
While Lacy acknowledges that ‘new genre’ might in theory “be made by those at either end of the political spectrum” (1995, p.30), historically it stems from a long lineage of liberal activism, its methodology adopted by groups that had a social message to impart. It thus attracted marginalised groups such as people living in low socio-economic areas, women, ethnic minorities, and gay rights groups. As such, new genre also provides an art-historical context in which to further understand work by groups such as the Coomaditchie Artists. As Aboriginal women with limited education, Brown and Thomas’s work is exemplary of a significant international art movement over the last half century.

Another significant feature of new genre practice also discernible in the public art examined in this study is site-specificity. De Lorenzo notes, “Advocates of the so-called new-genre public art place a special emphasis on cultural memory, on histories and experiences specific to a place” (2000, p.138). As such, a further significance of the two works commissioned by Wollongong City Council in 1997 is that they sought to reaffirm not just the Aboriginal but ‘shared’ historical and cultural associations of the sites in question. Deemed impressive enough that it was painted by colonial artist, Eugene Von Guerard (Image 4.12), Uncle Vic Chapman spoke to me about the significance of the Figtree:
The figtree was important to early settlers from Sydney Town ... white settlers ... and it was used [as a] shade and water spot, and a camping spot, as they travelled to and from work in the Illawarra. And it was significant to the traditional owners as a birthing tree. The women came there to give birth to their children, assisted by the other women. [When] a little fella came into the world, they sang the welcome song, and scrubbed him up in the nearby creek ... (A1.I03, p.350)
When I spoke to Dharawal artist and Boolarng Nangamai founding member, Steven Russell, in May 2011, he related his own familial connection to this history:

My grandfather was born under the figtree at Figtree. The old figtree at Figtree. It's knocked down now, but they've planted another one. A younger one. (A1.I17, p.490)

Conversations with community art practitioners working and living in the study area reveal a growing desire amongst local non-Indigenous peoples to make a connection with the region’s first peoples. People are eager to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into local histories and to consider alternate engagements with the environment. “In a lot of [cases],” Brown related, “when we do art for hospitals or [similar commissions], someone says: ‘We want you to depict the people, we want to you to depict this place ...’” [here, her sister Narrelle Thomas finishes the sentence] “... with your history”. (A1.I09, p.416)

Indeed, when I spoke with the Brown and Thomas in June 2011, they were busy working on three large painted panels commissioned for the foyer of a new medical centre south of Lake Illawarra (Image 4.13). It was an opportunity for the sisters to explain their design process and use of iconography. Brown offered:

This here is the part where the Dreaming stories of the area are, just in white, and it connects each of the panels [...] These are all our special places. We’ve got waterholes, we’ve got midden areas ... everything is connected in that area where you got your GP super clinic. It was a campsite, it was a meeting place, it was a special area. So we’ve got it all connected through [those white Dreaming designs]. But also now as a super clinic, many people, many cultures, will be using it. This will be depicted by all your hand prints, all the coloured hands. (A1.I09, p.417)

Importantly, associations to place explored through art projects are not just of mythological and historical importance, but encompass those that are redeveloping. Discussed in Chapter 1 was the revegetation project at the Little Blowhole in Kiama with which members of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal and Culture Studio have been heavily involved. Since forming a collective in 2005 with non-Indigenous friend, and former TAFE teacher, Kelli Ryan, the artists have been active ambassadors of Aboriginal culture on the south coast and, through workshops and exhibitions, have spearheaded a regional revival of traditional textile practices. The development of a bush tucker and medicine garden alongside their studio at Gerringong has grown to encompass native seed propagation and the supplying of plants for local bush rehabilitation projects such as that at the Little Blowhole.
I met with Boolarng Nangamai founding members, Noel Lonesborough and Debbie Callaghan-Hempstead (Image 0.07), on several occasions while they were working at the Little Blowhole. “[Illawarra Landcare] wanted to have some sort of Koorie influence on [the site],” Lonesborough explained, “‘cause they’d heard a [Dreaming] story about the Little Blowhole …” (A1.I14, p.473). As discussed in Chapter 1, this story has been effectively rearticulated at the site through the creation of mural illustrating the Dreaming of Gurungutch (Image 1.22). But more recently, students from Kiama High School have worked with Callaghan-Hempstead and another Boolarng Nangamai artist, Steven Russell, to produce an installation of three Dreaming poles (Image 4.14). Positioned on the hillside, the poles overlook the coastal site and are illustrated with the diversity of animals seen by Callaghan-Hempstead and Lonesborough while working on the Landcare project (A1.I14, p.474).
Malone has written that: “[T]he inclusion of Indigenous narratives [into urban landscapes] can provide a gateway to an alternative way of understanding place for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples” (2007, p.159). As such, community art projects such as these are of great importance because they intersect with environmental concerns. Health of Country is emphasised as an intrinsic part of local Aboriginal identity and culture and provides an opportunity for Aboriginal people to reshape physical and cultural landscapes. “It’s got a big Aboriginal influence, that place,” Lonesborough told me, “with the Gurungutch legend, with us there, and all the native plants. Yeah, it’s brought an identity to the place” (A1.I14, p.475).

**Bricolage as aesthetic**

From their *Storylines* research, Johnson, Allas & Fisher (2009) found that while government departments and agents in the cultural sector were looking more than ever “for ways to make Indigenous interpretations of place, history and community more visible” (n.p.), one of the ongoing dilemmas of high budget public art commissions is that they tend to favour high profile artists. Invariably this is at the expense of local artists and the local cultural meanings of the sites in question. “In less high profile cases,” they write, “the objectives behind these commissions have been served by drawing in more localised knowledge through the participation of some of the less visible artists” (n.p.). In this regard, public art of the study area has indeed remained localised and favoured local talent and knowledge.

One way of valuing this art is recognising that by being smaller in scale and budget, and negotiated and produced within smaller local collectives, it effectively by-passes larger council and even state-sanctioned bureaucracies. Councils and commercial industries have indeed played a significant role in commissioning prominent works in the study area, but these are outweighed by the number of smaller, community-based projects, that have taken an economical approach to art in the public sphere.
The works considered here consist of two main types: those that coopt and utilise pre-existing structures in the urban landscape, and those that constitute wholly new structures in and of themselves. Accounting for only 8% of all the art surveyed, the latter type is the rarest and is often sculptural in design. They are generally also the result of projects with larger budgets. At 84%, the former type dominates and, though it is a broad category, can be classified as ‘mural’ (see Chart 4.04).

Of all the mural types 60% were deemed ‘fixed’ – that is, they were directly applied to pre-existing structures (see Chart 4.05). In the main, these are walls, pavements, columns and poles, but included other structure types such as traffic boxes (Image 4.15), bus-stop shelters (Image 4.16), doors and windows, and large utilitarian objects such as storage containers. As such, though not sculptural in design, those works utilising structures other than a vertical wall, necessarily became sculptural in execution. Ironically, it is where murals were not fixed, but instead applied to independent ‘moveable’ supports, such as panels or canvases, that tended to embody more orthodox notions of the mural35.

35 Kevin Butler, in particular, has increasingly followed this methodology, as he prefers to make final touches, even to collaborative work, in his studio, prior to their installation.
[Chart 4.04] Form and medium
‘New genre’ public art “shun[s] the chic of modernist, studio-sourced art” (De Lorenzo 2000, p.138). Similarly the materiality of community art projects in the study area challenges modern notions of high art. Through the coopting of pre-existing structures, the creative use of economic material, *bricolage* can be seen to operate on a literal level. This is typical of the kind of ‘improvised ground’ that Carter sees as defining the beginning of the Papunya Tula movement (2000, p.248), where any material at-hand was transformed. Recalling the enthusiasm and creativity of the Papunya artists that characterised those early days, Bardon recalls:

The Pintupi men […] would paint and draw on anything. Men would bring scrap wood or fibro to my flat to ask for [paint, crayons or ink] … At this
time quite a few homes were having new floors laid, with the old [linoleum floor] tiles being dumped on the street. (cited in Carter 2000, p.250)

[Image 4.15] Coomaditchie Artists, Painted traffic box, Princes Highway, north of Gerringong. Date of painting unknown; incomplete at time of installation. (Photo: V.Bicego, 02.05.12)
[Chart 4.06] Infrequent but noteworthy forms and media

- Traffic / electricity box
- Bus shelter
- Door
- Window
- Water tank
- Concrete tunnel / pipe
- Concrete bread oven
- Shipping container
- Fishing boat
- Water fountain
- Fountain / water feature
- Window
- Water tank
- Concrete tunnel / pipe
- Concrete bread oven
- Shipping container
- Fishing boat
- Water fountain
- Fountain / water feature
- Window
- Traffic / electricity box
- Bus shelter
- Door
- Window
- Water tank
- Concrete tunnel / pipe
- Concrete bread oven
- Shipping container
- Fishing boat
- Water fountain
- Fountain / water feature
- Window
- Actual number of works (from total of 304)
- Other structure (fixed mural)
- Sculpture / specially designed object
- Other (media / forms)

[Image 4.17] Painting the bus shelter: Kevin Butler (far right) with students of Kanahooka High School, 2009. (Photo courtesy of Jocelyn Burns.)
[Image 4.18] Coomaditchie Artists with members of the Cringila community, Bread oven mosaic, Cringila Community Park. (Photo: V. Bicego, 14.01.11)

[Image 4.19] Detail of the bread oven mosaic, Cringila Community Park. (Photo: V. Bicego, 14.01.11)
Bricolage as nomadic ideology

[T]he fluid fringe-dwelling position [of nomadism] demand[s] the constant practice of bricolage. (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, pp.149)

Lévi-Strauss used the term *bricolage* in his discussion of mythical thought (1972), a system of knowledge-creation he saw typical of ‘non-literate’ societies, at odds with western science. “The characteristic feature of mythical thought,” he wrote, “is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogenous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited” (Lévi-Strauss 1972, p.17). A similar observation can be made of the iconography developed by artists in the study area (see Images 3.29 and 3.30): here the same icons and symbols are used over and over again; some have been developed by the artists themselves, others drawn from the repertoires of western desert and Arnhem Land artists. On a superficial level they are indeed the ‘limited tool kit’ of the *bricoleur*: graphic illustrations of animals and symbols are repeated, rearranged, recombined, recontextualised. But as Deleuze and Guattari indicate, Lévi-Strauss’s argument that mythical thought cannot produce new outcomes is “especially weak and inadequate” (1983, p.151). Even Lévi-Strauss recognised that mythical thought “also acts as a liberator by its protest against the idea that anything can be meaningless” (1972, p.22). Mythical thought, itself a bricoleur, works with *connotation* as opposed to *regulation*.

The subject matter of the work (see Charts 4.07, 4.08 and 4.09) remains as local as the project participants. They draw upon Dreamings and personal memories of the land. In the main it refers to the natural world, its spiritual associations and/or manifestations, and the responsibility people have for caring for these relationships. Given much of Dharawal land is ‘saltwater country’, there is understandably great focus on coastal settings and phenomena. Stylistically much of the work is naive, reflecting the largely self-taught or TAFE-level skills of the artists. Perspective ranges from the western influence of the
picturesque to two-dimensional simple-figurative forms, and it is not uncommon for both to be combined in the same composition.

[Chart 4.07] Style and content #1
[Chart 4.08] Style and content #2
[Chart 4.09] Style and content #3
In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), the first volume of their seminal, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze & Guattari conceptualise three social ‘machines’ of communication and agency: the primitive, the barbarian, the capitalist. The primitive (the nomad, the fringe-dweller) “is the underlying territorial machine, which consists in coding the flows on the full body of the earth” (1983, p.261). Here, voice (thought) and graphism (communication), the ‘two heterogenous elements of territorial representation’ (p.203), are connected but necessarily independent of each other. Through their independence, nomadism sustains ‘extended [and multiple] filial’ connections and resists rigid hierarchical structures that would otherwise restrict interpretation between sign and signifier.

In contrast, the capitalist machine (the state) is concerned with regulating flows of communication by a process of decoding. By rendering graphism dependant on the voice (exemplified by written language and abstract constructions such as money), capitalism constrains the multidimensional and adaptable nature of communication (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p.261). A significant result is linearity and meta-narrative, exemplified by the foundational myths on which Australia as a modern nation state is built.

Considering Deleuze & Guattari’s ideas, one can argue that the iconographies examined here are in a process of perpetual recoding. Reworked by the bricoleurs of the study area they are still graphism in connection with, but not in submission to, the voice, and thus remain open to new filiations and associations. This is exemplified by the importance placed on exchange, communication, education, and interpretation, in the working methodologies of the artists.

Dooley & Pollard (2012) recognise these qualities in the work of the Coomiditchie Artists, stating:

“[T]hey work collaboratively with many different people, using storytelling to facilitate and structure the production of art and sharing Aboriginal symbols and meaning through the process. They are able to adapt their art
practices to respond to the needs of particular groups they are working with

[...] Collaboration is an important and unique feature of the way the artists at Coomaditchie work. Their art is based on working with other people to shape and influence the art work.” (pp.19-20)

This ‘nomadic’ approach to public art is of course not unique to the study area, nor to Indigenous artists. Rather, nomadism illustrates how cultures on the periphery of mainstream society achieve a level of self-agency, and is thus characteristic of Aboriginal art and culture since contact. It is, Stephen Muecke argues, “a way of life [that] is flexible and adaptive [...] [and] subversive of the dominant culture” (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p.149). While its opportunistic and economic nature might on one level suggest a fragility, an unstable position within the civic centre, this is also what makes it flexible, resilient, and subversive. As De Lorenzo has stated, “simple and determined efforts can change perceptions for new generations” (2005, p.109). The bricolage aesthetic speaks of this steady determination and it is another way of conceptualising the unequal but active exchange of ideas that embody transculturation.

*Site-specificity: a re-territorialisation*

Paul Carter has written that “The act of writing public space involves an enriched conception of graphicality, in which the act of drawing is reconnected to notions of education” (Carter 2006, p.14). The local visual language is enriched, not by its ‘traditional’, unsevered connection to the past, but through its steady, determined search for those reconnections; its iconographies quite actively seeking refreshed meaning. In so doing, it reterritorialises, recodes what the state machine has all but successfully decoded, preventing “a collapse of the mode of inscription in the socius” (Deleuze & Guattari 1983, p.186). As such, the ‘nomadic’ qualities of Aboriginal public arts practice in the study area, even when endorsed by the state, operates by polite subversiveness.
Hetti Perkins (1993) has suggested that all Aboriginal art is fundamentally ‘an agent for social justice’: that “[i]t is this collectively implied or stated position that is probably the only instance where homogeneity of cultural expression can be suggested” (1993, p.301). Similarly, McLean (2013) argues that “much Indigenous contemporary art has a political agenda designed to leverage power in the postcolonial world” (p.55).

Considering the nation-wide cultural amnesia that characterised most Australian public spaces until the last quarter century, this increased Aboriginal cultural presence through public art should not be underestimated. The inherent politicalness of its presence is palpable and its reterritorialisation of colonial space through transcultural art projects marks a seismic shift in cultural thinking. In their analysis of the Coomaditchie Artists’ working methodology, Dooley & Pollard note:

> Aboriginal art in public places builds a sense of appreciation of Aboriginal culture and heritage and makes a strong statement about the continuing presence of Aboriginal people in the communities in which the art is placed. [...] In addition Aboriginal people feel that they have been a part of shaping a public space and building awareness about their culture and communities. (2012, p.24)

**Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed the large body of public art produced by and in consultation with Aboriginal artists over the last quarter century in the study area. It has drawn upon primary data collected through extensive fieldwork as well as interviews conducted with some of the key artists represented in the sample. It has demonstrated that the socially-informed art-historical paradigms of ‘Indigenous-informed public arts practice’ and ‘New Genre’ public art provide a framework in which the complexities of this transcultural art can be effectively addressed. Similarly, anthropological and poststructural perspectives
prove effective in addressing the peripheral but inherently-political nature of the art in its negotiation (reterritorialisation) with settler society on issues of identity and land.
Chapter 5

New (ancient) typologies:
Rock art as contemporaneous tradition
This chapter explores the expansion of Indigenous-informed public art in the study area through the rearticulation of traditional typologies. In particular, it argues that a rethinking of rock art traditions is necessary for a revitalised concept of ‘contemporaneous traditions’. This discussion does not invalidate the findings made in Chapter 4 about the value of current art practices in the study area; rather it is spurred by the fact that traditional rock art is increasingly informing public art projects at the same time that Aboriginal custodians are considering the reintroduction of traditional methods of rock art maintenance. As such, I argue that the intersection of rock art and public art provides a valuable opportunity to further interrogate some of the binary paradigms that restrict nuanced understandings of the active relationship between contemporary Aboriginal art and Country.

New (ancient) typologies in public art

A positive side to the cultural amnesia that has prevailed in Australia’s public spaces is that, with few precedents, Indigenous-informed public art in the early 21st century is afforded greater freedom and artists have the opportunity “to invent new typologies” (De Lorenzo 2005, p.108). De Lorenzo observes that works that stem from a genuinely respectful collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants have resulted in “culturally-sensitive outcomes that do not rest upon a limiting typology” (2000, p.138). She writes,
The purpose of [reconciliatory] dialogue [...] is not for an homogenised resolution of conflict but to gain energy and insight that comes only from confronting our own patterns of thinking and acknowledging the worth of alternative epistemologies (2000, p.137).

In this regard, both De Lorenzo and Tess Allas discuss the 1994 collaborative installation, *The Edge of the Trees* (Image 5.01), by Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence, as a baseline for other public art projects to aspire to. Specially designed for the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney, which marks the site of the First Government House, De Lorenzo calls it a “sophisticated resolution of public art, social history and urban design” (2005, pp.108-109). Not only can it “be viewed as the first of a series of public art projects in Australia to address ‘truth and reconciliation’ themes”, but it remains one of only a few projects in Greater Sydney that deal with intercultural relationships at first contact. The piece responds specifically to the site and also contains audience participatory elements: the movements of people amongst the poles triggering pre-recorded sounds and speeches.

So effective is the work, De Lorenzo posits, that what was originally quite courageous, has now become ‘normalised’; it is so much a part of the site to which it responds that it seems strange to think it had not always been there (2005, p.109). This is arguably one of the greatest accolades for a work of public art.

A subsequent collaboration between Foley and Djon Mundine is *Ngaraka: Shrine for the lost Koori* (2000) (Image 5.02), now situated in the Australian National University’s sculpture garden at Acton.

![Image 5.02](fiona-foley-djon-mundine-nga.png)

Like the *Aboriginal Memorial* (1986), produced by Mundine and the artists of Ramingining, this work looks to old traditions for new typologies in public forms of commemoration. The structure is inspired by traditional burial platforms made by the people of Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land (Isaacs 2000, p.25), with whom Mundine has maintained a strong connection since the 1980s. Dedicated to the Aboriginal persons

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36 Originally designed for the *Shrines for the Next Millenium* exhibition in Rozelle, Sydney, 2000.
whose remains were taken overseas to be studied and exhibited as specimens of a primitive race, the work is solemn memorial to those spirits still not at rest, and a place for their descendants to find strength (Isaacs 2000, p.25).

Echoing middens throughout the entire continent, the ‘mound’ of bleached kangaroo bones operates poetically on a number of levels. Like middens, this ‘shrine’ marks a meeting place, a coming together of family and friends at specific locations over countless generations. But the concentration of bones, sourced from a NSW abattoir (Isaacs 2000, p.26), also produces an affective macabre overtone. As well as being a memorial, Mundine felt it would galvanise discussion around repatriation – something he felt was not happening in earnest at the time (A1.I12, p.452).

New ways of approaching ancient forms in public art have also emerged in the study area. Discussed in Chapter 1 was Alison Page and Tina Lee’s 2007 Merrigong Environmental Sculpture (2007) (Image 1.21), which rearticulates traditional gunyah architecture in its retelling of the Five Islands Dreaming. As has been said of Foley and Laurence’s piece, it is to the credit of the artists that this installation feels like it has always been there. While the artists’ skill and imagination should not be underplayed, it arguably occupies the Mt. Keira site so harmoniously because it is a physical manifestation of a story that has been part of the site for time immemorial.

Though not as ambitious in scale, it is the shiny metallic surfaces of Col Henry’s sculptures that, more than any other sculptor working locally, make him Bert Flugelman’s heir apparent. But where Flugelman’s conceptualism offered a modern, individual approach to the environment, works such as Sea Stories (2009) (Image 5.03) engage with Aboriginal peoples’ relationship to Country. Designed in consultation with the Aboriginal community, this work, situated at Osborne Park, Wollongong, explores the fishing traditions of the area. Far from simply acknowledging the past, however, the textile forms that Henry has rendered in steel, articulate the recent revitalisation of fibre arts in
southeast Australia. Indeed, any of objects in this piece could be found being sold as contemporary Aboriginal art in the study area. As with the Merrigong sculpture, traditional typologies acknowledge the past and but also embody its active relationship with the present.

Sea Stories and the 2007 Merrigong Environmental Sculpture remain important examples of multi-disciplined, research-led public arts practice in the study area. They work effectively by drawing on urban and community planning, architecture, environmental science and landscape design (De Lorenzo 2000, p.141). Few of the indigenous-informed community art projects surveyed as part of this research could be classed as research-led or, indeed, had budgets that allowed such multi-disciplined methodologies. As Johnson, Allas & Fisher note,

The majority of artists documented by Storylines were working outside of the paradigm of conceptual contemporary art that dominates the practice of established urban based Indigenous artists. (n.p.)

Nonetheless, the use of traditional typologies in economical community art projects is evident in the study area. Alongside the ubiquitous painted wall or panel murals, Dreaming pole installations account for approximately 7% of all murals surveyed (Chart 4.05). Like all permanent mural types, they ostensibly operate through bricolage in their opportunistic use of existing structures: poles, columns, bollards (Image 5.04); though some installations have been specially designed. The emergence of this typology arguably stems from those influential pieces by Foley and Mundine that appropriate Pukumani funeral traditions of Arnhem Land. Dreaming poles can thus be seen as yet another local inflection of style and form from elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, as well as an engagement, albeit peripheral, with current Indigenous-informed public arts discourse.
Incorporating participatory and sensory elements similar to those used in *The Edge of the Trees*, The Dharawal Discovery area at Grays Point Public School (Image 5.05) presents an expanded, corporeal approach to the reoccurring elements of art in the study area. Though compact, the space between two school buildings has been effectively turned into a bushtucker garden and discovery trail, both in homage to the Dharawal peoples and a means of engaging with this cultural heritage. The space is bookended by two art works produced by the students: a painted mural (2007) facilitated by Aboriginal artist, Val West, and an installation of Dreaming poles (2008), facilitated by Grays Point teachers. Together they represent a concerted effort by both resident teachers and visiting artists to encourage students to think not just about the cultural and natural heritage of this site on the edge of the Royal National Park, but how it might actively be engaged with through limited means.

[Image 5.05] Painted Dreaming poles (2008) along the Dharawal Discovery Trail. Grays Point Public School, Grays Point. (Photo: V.Bicego, 06.12.12)
It was argued in Chapter 1 that Aboriginal works which engage with western typologies as a means of intercultural communication also invariably subvert them. Just as engaging with modernity was essential in continuing certain traditions (Chapter 3), the process is Aboriginalised rather than simply being assimilated into western ways of representation. Few works that claim to acknowledge or pay tribute to the Dharawal peoples and culture physically embody what might be expected from an orthodox ‘monument’. An important example of this is *The Earth belongs to us all* (1994) (Images 5.06 and 5.07). Situated at Peace Park in the Sutherland central business district, this was a collaboration between Aboriginal artist, Gordon Hookey, Mexican migrant and potter, Lino Alvarez, and the wards of Kirinari Youth Hostel, Sylvania.

Consisting of two sandstone columns and a mosaic pavement, the installation points to a range of influences and intentions. First and foremost it is a genuine memorial to the first peoples of the Sutherland area. It translates the solemnity and gravity of its subject through typologies with which settler audiences readily identify. One knows by its civic location, size, and layout, that it is a ‘memorial’ before being in close proximity to it. But despite the sturdy stone material, the columns and pavement are constructed by irregular stone blocks, slotted together like a jig-saw puzzle. These form images of native plants (such as the Gymea lily), traditional weaponry (such as shields), as well as people and animals; the latter rendered in the style of traditional Dharawal rock engravings.

The columns are arguably a tongue-in-cheek reference to imperialist structures like the obelisk at Kurnell (Image 1.18). By mimicking these forms, the installation interrogates the politics behind the erection of such structures. The inclusion of figurative motifs also makes it deliberately *kitsch*; it is not neo-classical in design, as these kind of memorials usually are, but deliberately deconstructive. Though utilising western typologies as a
means of communication, it nonetheless reiterates that the aesthetic forms of western high art are not of concern to Aboriginal artists.


[Image 5.07] Part of the sandstone pavement of *Pemul Djalarangi*. (Photo: V.Bicego, 07.02.13)
Marcia Langton has argued that Rousseau’s *noble savage* is a persistent concept in the national psyche and prevents contemporary Aboriginal people from taking control of their land and cultural heritage (1996, pp.18-19). This is related to what Christopher Pearson has called the ‘problem of poise’ (1991, p.328); that settler society’s figurative depictions of Indigenous people have, historically, rarely been anything other than kitsch (romanticised) or grotesque (demonised). Both are racial stereotypes. Thus, while the recent rearticulation of traditional typologies in public art indicates a genuine reappraisal of Aboriginal culture, this could also be understood as a conscious avoidance of previously unsatisfactory forms of representation. Perhaps it is for this reason that Brett-Livingstone Strong’s memorial to Pemulwuy, *the Rainbow Warrior* (Image 5.08), never transpired at La Perouse.

Consider the differences between Strong’s unrealised design and that of Foley and Laurence’s aforementioned *The Edge of the Trees*. With the latter, one is encouraged to physically and conceptually engage with the work. It is by walking amongst the posts, observing and listening, that one discovers echoes and traces of histories of that place. Here, history is the intersection of multiple narratives. The participating audience is not dictated to; rather, a nuanced understanding of how historical narratives might be constructed or, indeed, deconstructed, is offered. Moreover, because of its collaborative, intercultural methodology, it speaks to the heart of the reconciliatory process. The singular white authorship of Strong’s *Rainbow Warrior*, in contrast, would have presented the public with yet another meta-narrative. While indeed addressing an important chapter of Australian history that had theretofore been maligned and undervalued, it would nonetheless have failed to articulate and encourage a nuanced understanding of history that is central to the process of reconciliation. When gazing up at such an orthodox structure, domestic and international visitors to La Perouse alike would not have been blamed for thinking settler Australia had not only accepted its history of Aboriginal dissent but was ultimately proud of it. In short, this monument would have
been an impressive public relations exercise that sought to stifle public discussion rather than encourage it, simultaneously undercutting the struggle that both black and white Australians had engaged in to make such histories the topic of national discussion.

Thus we come to the very subtlety of what is required from ‘new typologies’ within indigenous-informed public art. The urban landscape needs memorials of Aboriginal
Culture and history: they are a long-overdue element of our urban makeup and social consciousness. But to suddenly make apparent what has for so long been neglected needs careful, considerate and critical navigation. To simply put in place an ‘Aboriginalised’ version of a settler construct (the ‘monument’), one that does not also critique such a structure, is to lose an opportunity to reconsider the way in which history and peoples’ connection to place is made, to interrogate some of those political machinations that has kept an Aboriginal cultural presence out of the public sphere in official forms for so long. Public space must, as Malone offers, “reflect not only the more recent reconciliation process but also the evolution of the recognition and social inclusion of Indigenous people in Australia” (2007, p.158).

**A new visual lexicon**

Julie Gough has written that “[f]inding the language to express cultural and individual identity is perhaps the greatest challenge for contemporary Aboriginal people in [settled Australia]” (2006, p.131). Art, she posits, “offers the key means to manifest cultural values, knowledge, skills, transformations and continuations across the distance, breakage and endurance of generations, and to other cultures.”

If then contemporary Aboriginal peoples, as individuals and members of a larger, at times often disparate community, are in search of a visual language, one that connects them as a group both to the past and to Country, it is pertinent to discuss the role that rock art might play in the development of a unique regional visual lexicon. Arts practitioners in the study area have a wealth of visual material on their doorstep.

This is not a purely hypothetical question. Data drawn from the survey reveals that 5% (or a total of 15 works) (Chart 4.09) of the study area’s public art referenced Dharawal rock carvings in some shape or form. The oldest piece of ‘indigenous-informed’ public art considered in the survey (and indeed, the only work found to have been produced
prior to 1990), draws heavily on these designs (Image 5.09). Produced in the late 1960s as the entrance mural to the then newly established Kirinari Aboriginal Youth Hostel, the mural continues to welcome residents and visitors alike to this very day.

Archaeologist Paul Taçon argues:

Many Aboriginal people today draw on this imagery to highlight both changing history and changing identity [...] [This imagery can instill] renewed pride, revival of tradition, or contemporary interpretation and relevance for present-day generations. (Taçon et al. 2008, p.197)

The use of rock art schema in new public forms of art necessarily entails, by virtue of its study, a reconnecting with the land in which it is positioned. Like gathering rushes for basket-making, developing a new relationship with rock art would necessitate a re-navigation and renegotiation of Country. In this space:
The members [of these communities] would not only be reunited with potent pieces from their past, but would have a visual lexicon with which to build a current and distinctive visual language. (De Lorenzo 1988, pp.7)

On several occasions I had the great honour of walking Country with Rick O’Brien (Image 5.10), an Indigenous teacher-mentor at Endeavour Sports High school, Caringbah. O’Brien has a passion for exploring Dharawal country and regularly takes his Indigenous students on field trips into the Royal National Park to experience Dharawal rock art in situ (Image 5.11). O’Brien humorously and somewhat affectionately calls the cuts and scratches he obtains during these expeditions as ‘bush medicine’. His humour belies the real sense of healing he gains through engaging with these cultural landscapes.


See Image 2.15 for a closer detail of the charcoal drawing in the top left corner.

The engravings in particular have been the inspiration for a number of painted murals O’Brien and his students have produced at school campuses throughout the Sutherland Shire (Image 5.12). Of these works, he has written:

The aim of the murals is to increase cultural awareness of the Dharawal nation and of the rich legacy these people have left for future generations [...] The representation of these images in the murals is one way that the cultural remains can be shared as a form of visual cultural experience. (O’Brien 2013, p.13)
Discussed in Chapter 2 was Uncle Les Bursill’s relationship with the heritage of his ancestors. Uncle Les has spent decades educating the public, as well as himself, about the cultural landscapes of the Sutherland Shire. Like O’Brien, one way he has promoted this knowledge, and the cultural values associated with it, is through the facilitation of school art projects that utilise traditional rock art motifs. An example of this is a ground-level mosaic situated in the playground of Point Preschool, Oyster Bay. It is just one of several Dharawal-informed art installations that characterise the children’s learning environment.

Discussing his mentorship of the Point Preschool students, Uncle Les related:

I introduce those four year olds and five year olds to Aboriginal culture until they locate it into their own developed beings. And I [ask] them, “Where were you born?” “I was born in Oatley,” “Oh then you’re Bidjigal.” “Where were you born?” “I was born here.” And I inculcate that concept of clan ownership of the land. And I tell kids that were born around here, “Then
you’re Dharawal, you were born in Dharawal Country, and you should learn the language. (A1.I01, p.318)

[Image 5.13] Concrete and ceramic mosaic at Point Preschool, Oyster Bay. Facilitated by Les Bursill OAM and Catherine Lee, c.2010 (Photo: V.Bicego, 14.06.14) Inspired by the engraved assemblage shown in Image 2.27.

Restrictions: rock art as contemporary art

Practically invisible on bright sunny days, and noticed only by those with a keen sense of observation, rock engravings remain the constant factor in the annual Sculpture by the Sea at Bondi (Image 5.14). There’s little doubt that their position and nature were the inspiration for the annual event. What has obviously happened is that settler culture, quite literally, has re-positioned itself in relation to at least this one site. Its connection to an ancient past and its response to its environment arguably make it as contemporary as any other work on display.
Thus, the question remains: if traditional typologies drawn from rock engravings are used in public art to further expand notions of contemporaneous traditions, how do we position ourselves in relation to the contemporary re-engraving of the original works? Is it possible for them to become contemporary public art?

Due to its constant exposure to natural elements and environmental processes, rock art by its very nature is highly susceptible to deterioration. Rainfall on Sydney’s sandstone platforms, and water seepage along the walls and ceilings of rock shelters, are primary sources of erosion to petroglyph and pigment art, respectively (Rosenfeld 1988, p.52). In the absence of continual regrooving, as practiced prior to contact, the gradual loss of surface matter results in the loss of an engraved assemblage’s definition (Rosenfeld 1988, p.46). While individual motifs deteriorate at various rates due to specific micro-climates and unique environmental stimuli (Rosenfeld 1988, p.2), these processes are irrefutably exacerbated by “man-induced changes in the environment” (Rosenfeld 1988, p.1).
Compared with earlier studies, the erosion of Sydney’s sandstone surfaces has increased since the mid-twentieth century (Bursill 1993, p.86).

There is great desire amongst local Aboriginal elders to re-engrave some of Sydney’s petraglyphs using traditional methods. Dharawal descendants Colin Isaacs, Les Bursill, Steven Russell and Jeff Timbery, all interviewed as part of this research, as well as internationally respected Indigenous art curator, Djon Mundine, spoke painfully about the degree to which certain engraved assemblages have now been lost to weathering and urban expansion. They spoke passionately about their hope that those that still exist might be re-engraved and become a focus of local culture once again. All asserted the need for effective community consultation before any such process took place. In conversation, Steven Russell spoke about:

[ ... getting] communities together to rejuvenate the old sites or start new sites. You know, we done rock engravings [in the past], [and we should] try to fix the old ones up where they’re disappearing. When they’re gone, that’s it. They’ll never be the same again. And if we don’t do anything about it now it will be lost … But that’s gonna take some time. Because we gotta try to get community involved and behind us, to support us to do that, so we can get the young ones out onto country and practising something that was practised for thousands of years … The people that we have seen [so far] think it’s a great idea – to get out and practise something that’s not practised anymore. (A1.I17, p.493)

Discussed in Chapter 2 was Wandjuk Marika’s interpretation of the Wawilak story in the Sydney landscape. Visiting the sites that embodied this story elicited both happiness and sadness in Marika. He felt the immense importance of these places and communicated with the spirits that still resided there. But he felt immense sadness at the loss of culture, the rupture between spirit and people caused by the colonial process, that law was no
longer carried out there (Marika & Isaacs 1995, pp.142-147). It would seem that this sadness did not stem from a sense of these places having lost their meaning, nor that this meaning could no longer be understood, rather, that it was not being understood and treated accordingly.

The ‘dreaming’ is not a set of beliefs which is being lost because it is no longer valid, it is rather a way of talking, of seeing, of knowing, and a set of practices, which [...] depends on people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs.  
(Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984, p.14)

Jennifer Isaacs notes that Marika’s interpretations were “not initially accepted by professional Balanda [white people] in the field,” though they were greatly appreciated by the Aboriginal people with whom he met (Marika & Isaacs 1995, p.142). This is unsurprising. Marika’s interpretations challenged entrenched preconceptions, not only about these sites, but the environments they belonged to and, more generally, the authority that settler culture had over them. “At the heart of this issue,” writes Bryce Barker (2006), “is the power to control notions of Indigenous pasts as an ongoing legacy of colonialism” (p.73).

Despite the significance of pre-contact artefacts and sites to Aboriginal peoples’ connection with the past, Aboriginal involvement with such concerns in the study area remains relatively marginal (Bursill 1993, p.7). Unfortunately, apart from perhaps those actually employed by the NPWS, not a single Aboriginal person I spoke with during the course of this research, either in a formal or informal capacity, felt that Aboriginal heritage sites were effectively protected or that Aboriginal people’s views and wishes were taken seriously during consultation processes. This is a serious indictment on the manner in which Aboriginal heritage continues to be treated by the dominant settler culture.
Since the 1970s, when Aboriginal Land Rights started to be introduced, a number of Aboriginal communities have gained custodial roles over sites for which “they could prove a specifically defined and direct traditional association with” (Sullivan 1985, p.142). Unsurprisingly, most successful claims have occurred in parts of Australia where traditional life has been, relatively speaking, least disrupted. Thus, legislation penalises those most disadvantaged by colonisation, arguably perpetuating the colonial modus operandi. And yet, as Aunty Barbara Nicholson told me, Sydney’s rock art is “[l]iving, irrefutable proof of human occupation before whitefellas that should prove Native Title […] They are] [d]eclarations our sovereignty” (pers. comm., 13 April 2010).

Langton (1996) argues that the rapid escalation in the formation of National Parks over the last half century is essentially a neo-colonial continuance of the mapping of the Australian continent; that this perpetuates the misnomer of these areas being un-touched either by Aborigines or settlers, and further prevent Aboriginal people from sustaining or re-developing relationships with their heritage. This, she argues, is essentially another dispossession of Indigenous people.

In close association with the goals of colonialism, the National Park system is also an artefact of capitalism: they represent the re-commodification of areas that either have no desired resources or those that have already been plundered. “As remaining examples of ‘Nature’, examples of local biological diversity,” Langton states, “they are merely remnants of what once existed” (1996, p.27). Thus, they are re-commodified and repackaged as gifts to the public and tourist market (1996, p.24).

The reality is that Dharawal rock engravings will disappear either all together or in their current restricted form as artefact. Thus, the reworking of engravings poses a serious challenge to the archaic notions of wilderness (terra nullius) and the intrinsically linked notion of Aboriginality being lost or frozen in time. To rework an engraving is to create continuity, to quite purposefully produce a link with the past in a space where such links
have not only been discouraged but actively prevented for more than two centuries. It is to turn artefact – both object and landscape – into a once again living site of cultural activity. Consequently, it also challenges to those sacred, once stable, categories of western science and, indeed, the creative arts.

Examples of contemporary people retouching ancient wandjinas in the Kimberely have long been offered as evidence of continuity in such remote areas, but can we seriously contemplate such a cross-over, such a blurring of boundaries, in Sydney – the heart of ‘settled’ Australia? To do so is to not only accept the long Aboriginal history of these landscapes, but their continuance as Aboriginal into the future. This, Langton has argued, continues to unnerve settler Australians. Similarly, Doreen Mellor (1996) has written of the struggle to conserve material objects (the ‘frozen moment as product’) as being a particularly Western priority (p.31). In contrast, she claims, while Aboriginal culture does not deny ‘product its proper place as part of process’, it exists in a continuum where ‘meaning diverges from the static’, stemming from its continual use (and therefore necessary evolution) and its ephemeral nature.

Aboriginal people have the right to be inspired by these images. They have the right to access and experience them not only as cultural heritage intrinsic to the cultural landscapes they were produced, but as creative works that continue to inform contemporary, just as anyone studying western art may learn about the rudimentary principles and histories of Classical and Renaissance art by visiting a museum.

*Song (re)cycle*

When finally realised, Djon Mundine’s proposed public artwork, *The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy* (Image 5.15), will be one of the few permanent and officially endorsed tributes to the Aboriginal heritage of the Sydney area. It has the potential to be a powerful
and resonating piece that reinvests Bennelong Point with a greater Aboriginal cultural presence than simply its place name. Its design draws on traditional petroglyph designs that were being produced throughout the Sydney Basin until the early contact period (Chapter 2). In contrast to the relatively accurate scale with which subject matter was depicted, Mundine’s appropriations have been enlarged, lending a colossal sense of drama to the composition, articulating the performative nature of these traditions for a wider non-Indigenous audience.


During a discussion about the significance of middens as continuing heritage sites, Jerrinja woman, Fiona Stewart, related:

Ever since I can remember, I still get my kids to go and put their shells in this one particular [midden] every time they have a feed. That’s simply to show [...] that when I’m dead and gone, my great-great-grandkids will still being doing what I did with my grandmother. (A1.I07, p.397)
The argument that Aboriginal people should not or cannot authentically engage with rock engravings in a similar way is increasingly difficult to justify. As discussed in previous chapters, Clive ‘Bud’ Freeman argues that enough knowledge has been past down to make authentic interpretations of the rock art; Uncle Les Bursill argues that even where significant gaps in oral traditions exist, ‘knowledge is there waiting to be re-discovered’ through the study of the art and its relationship with the landscape; and Djon Mundine insists that irrespective of a demonstrable link, such sites are Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal people today thus have the right to interact with them, that a distinctly contemporary connection with them is possible but necessary. When I met with Mundine in February 2012, he related:

Land Councils and [other Indigenous] institutions should be organising a re-working of those rock engravings ... [Those sites could] provide a meeting place where people can talk about beliefs [and ideas important] to them. At least it will achieve [activity] like re-grooving the rocks, and you could have a particular event that year. The Greeks have an Easter church performance, you know, like a ritual performance. It's a way of meeting and talking about things. [Local Aboriginal people] could easily do [something] like that now.

(A1.I12, p.453)

Situated in the suburb of La Perouse there is large stone carved with the forms of a kangaroo and a hunter (Image 5.16). These were not made before the arrival of Cook, nor soon after. They were made by Burt Tambar, Bob Simms and Jack Simms during the 1930s and, despite using an ancient technique, used iconography that was being produced on items made for tourists (Image 5.17). The subsequent re-use of this iconography by Djon Mundine for his forthcoming Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy indicates that they are by no means transitional but on the cusp of becoming elements of a new rock art visual language.
Where the engraving of some sites is deemed inappropriate by the community, Steven Russell’s idea about starting new ones is the obvious alternative. It is interesting how this might unfold: what sort of schema would be used; what would they illustrate about contemporary Aboriginal people’s continuing connection to the land? Recalling again the suggestion made by Taçon that tourist trade iconography stemmed from land-based art forms, what might schema look like if it returns once again to the land?

When I spoke with Dharawal elder, Colin Isaacs, he used a fishing net metaphor to illustrate the ever-changing, almost cyclical evolution of culture:

[E]verything that’s in our culture is connected ... Every piece allows extension and shrinking ... whether it be your mob or your ideology. But it’s all redeemable. I can take one or two words from my language, and revive that language with the right people. The Dharawal mob ... they’ve had it, lost
it, and had it back again ... as far as culture and language [is concerned].

(A1.I02, p.338)

[Image 5.17] Wesley Simms, Incised boomerang [detail], c.1930s. Private collection. (Photo: V.Bicego, 18.03.15)
Kangaroo schema identical to the rock engraving seen in Image 6.27.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the emergence of new typologies in Indigenous-informed public art which, through their rearticulation of traditional cultural practices, engages the audiences in a discourse about the nature of history and cultural authenticity. It has considered how public arts practice in the study area might similarly expand by drawing on rock art traditions unique to Dharawal Country. Importantly, it has addressed how rock art as ‘contemporaneous tradition’ necessarily challenges entrenched foundational myths concerning Aboriginal peoples’ continuing connection to Country; and thus why, when critically engaging with the contemporary Aboriginal art of the study area, it is an important avenue of investigation.
Conclusion

This research has considered how art history might more effectively address contemporary Aboriginal art practices from the greater southern Sydney region through a multi-disciplined methodology. In particular it has addressed a large body of work that has until now received little critical attention: public art produced by or in consultation with Aboriginal people since the Bicentennial.

The collection and analysis of data concerning these art practices confirmed Johnson, Allas & Fisher’s (2009) observation that most Aboriginal artists in the survey were “working outside of the paradigm of conceptual contemporary art that dominates the practice of established urban based Indigenous artists” (n.p). Drawing on current ideas about the heterogeneous nature of modernity, this thesis finds the art in question is best understood historically as a strategic transcultural engagement with modernity; that rather than markers of acculturation or assimilation, artists have been able to make from modernity something intrinsically Aboriginal, ensuring a level of agency in society.

Public art, especially, through its often collaborative and transcultural nature, has enabled a re-territorialisation of colonial space in which Aboriginal identity in relation to land is negotiated with settler society and, through which, aspects of Aboriginal culture are integrated into the wider community. Socially-informed art-historical concepts that take into account national and global trends in the public art-making of marginalised groups provide a strong context in which to critically engage with this art.

Aboriginal artists living and working in Dharawal Country today continue to explore their connection to the land and its complex histories despite neo-colonial and structural insistence that such connections are, at best, conspicuous. Confronting this disconnect are post-structural approaches that art theorists and historians must consider if they are intent on critically engaging with Aboriginal art in the study area. Ideas drawn from anthropology, archaeology and human geography, provide opportunities to reconsider the
authenticity of ‘contemporaneous traditions’ which, through their rearticulation of pre-contact practices, will continue to be an important strategy for artists in the region.

Thus, the conclusions of this thesis are:

1. That an effective art-history analysis of southern Sydney Aboriginal art must be cross-culturally sensitive and multi-disciplined (Morphy 2008); in particular, ideas from anthropology, archaeology, and human geography, will provide strong ground for such an approach.

2. That the ‘Indigenous-informed public art practices ’ (De Lorenzo 2000) of southern Sydney should be understood in the context of historically and strategically transcultural art practices that have sought to engage settler society in dialogue since contact (Smith 2001) as well as being a means to ‘Aboriginalise’ colonial (and neo-colonial) experience (McLean 2013).

3. That far from the stereotype of the ‘urban Aboriginal art-school trained sophisticate’ artists of the study area have focussed on the maintenance of familial traditions with a strong conception of Country (Johnson, Allas & Fisher 2009; Kleinert 1994).

4. That an understanding of Country as a complex network of cultural landscapes can benefit from a social archaeologically-informed study of local rock art (Taçon 1999, 1994), necessarily countering the foundational myths of colonial and neo-colonial culture (Head 2000).

5. That, as already evidenced in a number of public art works, a renewed relationship with these ancient art sites significantly informs contemporary Aboriginal identity and artistic practice, and offers new typologies needed in a progressive public arts practice (De Lorenzo 1988 & 2000).
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Appendices
Appendix 1

Transcripts of interviews

A1.I01: First interview with Les Bursill OAM (24.11.10)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

Amendments to this transcript were made by the interviewee.

I met Les Bursill in September 2009 while attending one of several themed bushwalks organised by the Illawarra Greens. As a Dharawal elder and historian, Les had been asked to come along and tell attendees a little bit about the local culture. I told him about my research and he later emailed me a number of documents pertaining to Dharawal rock art, including his 1993 Master of Letters on the subject. We have been in correspondence ever since, and I am greatly indebted to him for his support and sharing of knowledge. It is also through Les that I have met a number of other rock art ‘enthusiasts’ who have aided my research: Martin Webb, Lionel Baker, Bruce Howell, and Rick O’Brien.

This interview took place at Les Bursill’s home in Engadine. Between recordings we drove to the Point Preschool at Como, which is one of many places Les has regularly taught local children about Dharawal culture. Through his teaching, several motifs from local rock art sites have been incorporated into permanent mosaic works at the preschool.

PART I

Vincent: First of all I’d like you to tell me about your background and your connection to Dharawal country.

Les: Ok. Well, until I was about twenty-five or twenty-six, I didn’t know that I was Aboriginal. We knew there was a mystery in our family. There was a ... quote, humour ... dark secret. But we didn’t know what it was. As I approached my thirtieth birthday, my great-grandmother, Philadelphia Field, literally on her death bed, revealed to us that she and her brother had had sexual intercourse over a number of years, and that my grandmother was a progeny of that relationship. And we thought that was the dark secret. But as we found evidence and information we discovered that her family came from a group of Aboriginal people living in and around Marshall Mountain, Kangaroo Valley. Her grandmother, Susan Ellis, [was] the daughter of King Ellis, who was the king, proclaimed by MacCarthur, of the Aboriginal people of the South Coast. We started to investigate, and found letters, and photos indicating our connection to those people, the Dharawal people, the Wodi Wodi clan. And we found government documents saying that ... you know, implying our Aboriginality. And so from about my thirtieth birthday onwards I really knew with a certainty that I was Aboriginal. I began to investigate Kangaroo Valley very thoroughly, and for a long time I thought of myself as nothing more than an Aboriginal person of the Wodi Wodi nation. [In] Kangaroo Valley we found a connection to our convict forebear, William Roland, who was sent down to work for Henry and John Osborne on their farm. He married Susan Ellis. And we found a convict ring and stone where he had evidently been chained-up each night. We found documents referring to him as being a man assigned to work in the bush, to look after the cattle and the well-being of the Osborne family in Kangaroo Valley. So gradually my knowledge of my family became greater. I actually even found some crochet work in one of the museums in Kangaroo Valley, on one of the farms down there, where Susan Ellis had worked, with her name on it. So I was really quite excited. When I turned thirty-eight, my wife, Barbara, who had married me very young, who was very bright, finally worked up the courage to go back to university, because she had matriculated by never gone on [to tertiary education]. She started doing her degree in English Literature at the University of New England, [and] I after twelve months of watching her, became imbued with the same spirit. Even though my grades and performance at school was pretty dreadful, I wrote to the university. They set [me] a simple exam to do, and [my mark] was sufficient to get me into university. In the year before that, I had gone to Sydney University [and] attended lectures in Islamic cultures, other cultures, and the Vietnam War. These were non-degree courses [for adults]. In fact, I signed up for a first-year degree in Psychology. And having done reasonably well ... I mean, I was getting passes, I wasn’t doing very very brilliantly well ... Then asked them about archaeology, because I wanted to follow up on my Aboriginal history. They said that, really, they didn’t do anything [like that], [that] the archaeology was all Egyptology or Petra. And that’s what led me to ... again, my wife was going to UNE, [where] they had a department called Pre-History. They actually had plans in the future for doing Aboriginal archaeology and hunter-gather archaeology or anthropology.

Vincent: So what year was this around?

Les: Arrr ... 1984. I was working at the Sydney Morning Herald. I was managing the pre-press and photo-composing sections of that, and I was having a very hard time there. I’d been a manager there for five or six years, and it was very tough. So I decided to resign and took up university full-time for the first year at UNE, studying archaeology. I was absolutely captured by archaeology. I did some [study of] origins of early humans, and included in that was some work on Aboriginal Australians. I was reading a lot of stuff about that. In those days there was quite a big argument about whether Aboriginal people were
transitional, in other words, were they regional variances of modern humans. That was really interesting, because Aboriginal
people have many of the features of Neanderthalensis. So I was very interested in following up that. I became very very
committed to archaeology. I just fell in love with it, and started doing work in that area, gradually doing two or three subjects a
year. In the end I was just doing Archaeology and Ancient History. That was all I was really interested in. After Archaeology
and Ancient History I did some Geography and Geology, and I did some modern history, and some Viking history.

Vincent: At that time was there a lot of information in that course about local archaeology?

Les: There wasn’t very much, no. There was some, but it was mainly western desert Aboriginal. When most people think in
Australia of Aboriginal people, invariably it’s of the guy with the spear and the one foot on the knee. And that was really the
attitude, that that was the only Aboriginal people that existed. It was only in the second or third year of university that I really
started looking around, and I started having long discussions with Ian Davidson. He was the senior lecturer there. He’s now an
Emeritus Professor. He’s still a good friend of mine. And in that [discussion] I started saying to him that Aboriginal people
were not to be measured by their skin colour, because I found that being brown didn’t make you Aboriginal or an expert, but
rather the depth of your knowledge and your commitment to culture. So that was my focus from about 1987 onwards. In 1989 I
had just about done everything I wanted to do. I had my degree, I think I got my convocation in 1989 ... I can’t remember. I
never even bothered to go and get it, but they sent it to me in the mail. And after a time off, because I really felt drained, you
know, I put a lot of work into it ...

Vincent: Why didn’t you bother to go get it yourself?

Les: I thought it was rather a soft sort of system, that I would go up and pick it up. I thought, nah, nah, I’ve done it, and they’ll send
it to me, and that was it. [I thought.] I don’t have to participate in their silliness. But anyway, in 1990 I decided to go on and do
a Master degree. I’d had discussions with Professor Grahame Connor. Grahame was of the old school, the old English
Archaeology school. He was very proper, [with] the pointed white goatee beard, you know, that sort of guy. And he was fairly
dissemissive of me because I was a very practical person. I liked to do practical stuff, and I always applied a practical approach
to everything I did. He didn’t like that. He was more esoteric and theoretical. He would do some practical work, of course, but
he felt that I was too devoted to the field, and he was more devoted to the theory. I wrote a paper in third year criticising
Grahame Connor’s work, which was not bright, it wasn’t clever to do. [He had argued] that parts of Africa had actually
developed iron founding in the first century. I criticised that, and said that clearly iron founding arrived in the central part of
Africa as a result of trade with the Chinese and others. I pointed out in my essay that there were caravan trading routes all
through that region and they all tended to focus on this one particular place where iron had suddenly blossomed. And I said
there was a connection between Celenod ware and iron founding, [indicating to me] that the iron founding had come from
China, where iron was being made for maybe four or five hundred years previous. I did some same-size maps and overlays
and overlays, and proved my point, and Grahame Connor got really pissed with me. [He] gave me sixty [percent] as a mark,
and told me that I was more an anthropologist than an archaeologist.

Vincent: So this was an essay that you knew he would be marking?

Les: Yes. (laughs) I did even better with Mike Morwood. I told Mike Morwood that he was a dil, because he was dating an axe that
Percy Trezise had dug up and handed to him. He was trying to say that he could date that because Percy could point to the
point in the trench where he had dug it out of. And I said, “Mike, it’s lost its context. You can’t. Percy Trezise is nothing but an
amateur meddler”. And of course, Percy Trezise found all that rock art at Quinkan, and Mike and Percy were great buddies,
and “how dare I say that”. So I got a bad mark there as well. But anyway, I enjoyed my [time at] university. And when
Grahame Connor told me that I was more anthropologist than archaeologist, well, I decided to do my Masters of Letters. I
decided to focus on the anthropology, the rock art, that element of it. Initially I thought I would get Mike Morwood as a
supervisor, but Ian Davidson actually said to me that he’d like to supervise me. And so I spent the next two years working in
the field and writing. With about six months to go, in the eighteen month process, Ian Davidson virtually told me to stop doing
anymore work, that I had too much information, [and that] I had to start putting it together. He told me that I was going to pass
because of the work I’d put in.

Vincent: Before you tell me anymore about the actual thesis, just to put it in context, have you always lived in this area?

Les: Okay, where have I lived? Well, I was born in Hurstville, on the banks of the Georges River, literally. And I lived in Hurstville
Grove ‘til I was about four. My mother and father were very poor. My mother came from a poor Aboriginal family. There was
sixteen of them living in a little weatherboard cottage in Hurstville Grove. And by the time I turned four the family were
becoming quite stressed, there was lots of arguments and fights. So my father [persuaded] his father to build a garage in the
backyard, and my father actually paid for that garage to be built. My mother and he moved into that garage with myself, and
we lived in there. My brother was born there when I was about seven years and eight or ten months of age. They managed,
through the War Service, to purchase a block of land in West Street, at Blakehurst, and I moved there at around my eighth year.
I lived there ‘til I was twenty, when I was called up into the military. During my time in the military I met my wife, Barbara,
and we lived, for a short period of time, while I was serving in the military, at Lakemba. Then we bought this house here [in
Engadine] in 1966, and we moved here in 1966. And I’ve lived here ever since then. So for, let’s say, twenty-one and a half
years, I lived in St. George area, and then I moved here. And I’ve been here for forty-four and a half years.

Vincent: So [at that time] were you aware of all the rock art around this area?
Les: No, no. In fact, when I first started working in archaeology, I rang Sandra Bowdler and several other prominent archaeologists, and said to them that I was very interested in finding out about Aboriginal camps and caves. They were sort of amused by my interest. I said to Sandra Bowdler, “Where would I find...”, urgh, and Betty Mann, I think I spoke to as well... “Where will I find some shell middens?” And she said, “Where do you live?” And I said, “In Sutherland shire.” And she said, “Look down at your feet”, which I thought was pretty rude at the time, but of course she was absolutely right. And so that was the level of my knowledge. Then, in 1985/86, I was working for Sutherland Council as a community volunteer, and I was offered a small grant to write and prepare a paper for the Bicentenary. I was given a grant of about five or six thousand dollars, and I put together a team of people. That team of people was to go around and start looking for and finding Aboriginal living sites, and we called it the Aboriginal Living Sites Survey Team. [The paper] was published as a seventy-nine photograph series of slides [and distributed] to all the highschools in the shire in 1988. We won a small prize for our [report], and that really fired me up. I had seventeen people working for me. Lionel Baker was one of them, and Frank Purvis, Alex Peterson... oh, I can’t remember all their names, but some really good people with good photography skills. We used to do grid searches of areas, and put two years of work [into it]. I think there were thirty odd sites known in those days. We doubled that to about seventy-five or seventy-six sites. And then that kept going after the Bicentennial. Not [with such] big numbers [of people], but it kept going. Other people [were] coming and going, and gradually, you know, working [with] people like Lionel, we just doubled our sites. We went from seventy to a hundred and fifty, and then two hundred, and then three hundred...

Vincent: So at that stage had you seen [the work of]... oh, I’ve forgotten his name. The guy from the turn-of-the-century. He’d done all the sketches of the rock art, of the engravings...

Les: Oh, I’d see them all...

Vincent: ... Campbell

Les: Yeah. Campbell. And what’s the other one? Mathews. Yeah, at that stage I was really starting to get really into it. I was reading a lot of Joseph Birdsell and Nicholas Peterson. I was in contact with Fred McCarthy, and Fred was...

Vincent: What was he like?

Les: He was a funny old bugger. A little old guy. Deaf as a post. I drove over to his retirement village in Cammeray a couple of times with Lionel. There’s a photo of him on the web with Lionel and I. And we talked about [the project]. Many of the sites had been surveyed and found, and we got a copy of the 1965 periodical that came out. We found that map, and started re-finding them. Of course though, they were very general descriptions, and they were sometimes hundreds of metres out of their [recorded] locations. But it wasn’t enough just to have their drawings and their say-so. For my Masters thesis I had to go and actually revisit the sites and take my own photos. Lionel was a great help there, really was a great help. And so that just got me deeper and deeper and deeper into the puddle. By the time I’d finished my Masters I was thoroughly hooked on it all.

Vincent: So what would you say to the viewpoint that there simply isn’t the knowledge, whether it be traditional Aboriginal knowledge, or western scientific knowledge, to make reliable interpretations about the rock art?

Les: Well, Vince, this is only my opinion, but I think that’s bullshit. I think, quite honestly, that if you go back through some of the early settlers’ material, you can winnow out a vast amount of information. I mean Tench, Dawes, King, oh, almost any of them... Mitchell... there’s dozens and dozens of people... Flinders, Bass. You have to read it and understand what they’re saying and how they’re describing it in their day, and the words they’re using, but... for instance, the language, there’s lots of language left. People like Janet Matthews and Luise Hercus and others have recorded language for the last fifty or sixty years. People before that wrote it down. People like Threlkeld created [documents]. People did maps of areas and locations. So the knowledge is there, but it’s very widely spread. You need a lot of work to gradually draw it all together.

Vincent: I like your saying. I’m paraphrasing it, but you said “knowledge is waiting for anyone willing to search for it”.

Les: Absolutely. It’s there. It’s just like getting gold out of sand. You’ve got to do a lot of shuffling [for] a little bit of gold, but it’s there and, you know, there’s probably a ton of it there in the end.

Vincent: You’re a very active member of your local community. Tell me about some of these activities. I mean, even this morning, you were telling me about your Legacy work.

Les: I am a very active person in my local community, because I believe that we have an obligation to repay for our existence. It’s not enough just to sit here and eat good red meat and drink red wine, and just live life to the full, because we live in a paradise and we need to compensate the world for us. And so I’ve always... now, for thirty-six years, worked in the local community. I’ve worked for the council, I’ve worked for different departments, I’ve done roadside cleanups for five years, I’ve done bushcare and weed control, I’ve done Heritage Committee [work]... I’ve been on half a dozen committees... I’ve always worked in the local schools, I’ve given my time freely, I’ve worked for the local TAFE, at the local universities... I’ve worked with every university in Sydney, every single one, at many of the campuses... and it’s just my belief that you have to be involved in this community. I mean, we’re given paradise. We have to support it. We really have to do our work. Currently, what am I doing? I’m the Chairman of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee for Sutherland, I’m the community member for the Heritage Committee of Sutherland, I’m the Vice-Chair for the Regional Gallery at Hazelhurst, of the Divisional Chairman for...
Legacy NSW. I’m a guest lecturer for TAFE NSW at Loftus, I do all of my lecturing and talking for all of the various Probus and Lions and other clubs around the area, promoting, always focusing on Aboriginal issues ...

Vincent: Do you ever sleep? (laughs)

Les: I spend an enormous amount of time in bed and watching television! People say that to me, but I’ve always had two or three jobs. When I was a young man, I came out of the army and I was working for the Sydney Morning Herald. I would finish work there at midnight and I would go down and work in the press room there ‘til three or four o’clock in the morning. [I’d] then come home and go and work for a gardener, a tree lopper, or I’d go and work for a carpenter, I’d go and dig trenches ... [I’d work] for various plumbers and electricians. I’ve always done that, I’ve always been at two or three jobs, and I’ve always had many activities. I mean, I worked full-time when I did my degree, and I worked full-time when I did my Masters and I had second jobs. I’ve spent fifteen years teaching at the regional evening college at Sutherland. I didn’t quit that. While I was working at Corrective Services I also was lecturing part time at Sydney Uni and at Wagga Wagga university.

Vincent: So when you say that there’s always an element of informing people about the Aboriginal ...

Les: Oh, it’s always around Aboriginal culture.

Vincent: What do you tell people?

Les: What do I tell people? Well, I try to inform people about Aboriginal culture. I think Aboriginal people get a really bad press. I mean, we bring it on ourselves. We’re very argumentative, quite often very destructive, very ignorant ... many Aboriginal people are exceptionally ignorant, and bigoted, and biased, and racist. We have to fight against that. So I’m always out there trying to bring the best elements of Aboriginal life to the fore, talking about the cleverness of Aboriginal people, talking about their technology, talking about their skills, talking about their art, talking about their stories, talking about their family life, and trying to get past the drunken, violent, modern Aboriginal persona. I just try and do that. Even when I was lecturing at the University of Sydney at the Yuroung Garang Aboriginal unit there ... I was doing drug and alcohol and mental health and counselling ... it was all about Aboriginal people. I always brought in elements of culture into that, so that I kept away from the negative aspects of it. I see my job in this world as to invigorate and bring forward Aboriginal culture, and everything I do is focused on that.

Vincent: I found it really interesting that you said, when you finished the Living Sites Survey, that you gave out copies to the local schools. I mean, it’s definitely important to inform adults who haven’t had that education ... but to start informing kids at a young age [is very important]. I think one of the reasons behind this study is because when I left school and, you know, started navigating the world on my own terms, I realised that we weren’t taught anything [at school] about our local history, whether it be European or Aboriginal. And just in regards the rock art, solely, there is just such a rich history here. I was actually very angry that I hadn’t been told about it. In regards school [education] ...

Les: I started off thinking that I needed to get this into universities. And my first job as a lecturer at university was in 1989 for NSW University at their St. George campus. I went in there and I was talking to their senior lecturer, and I said to him, “So you’ve got plenty of Aboriginal material in your library, and everything?” And he said, “Oh yes, we’ve got heaps of books and everything. You’ll be well supported”. I went in there and looked, and there was maybe ten or a dozen books on Aboriginal culture, and they were all western desert. And I just said to him what a joke this was. I actually supplied forty books of my own to the university, had them all marked up, and they were all on special lending privileges only. That’s where I started lecturing, but ... I found that university is not a place for education. University is about adults specialising in a particular area, and things like archaeology and anthropology ... unless you’re becoming an archaeologist or anthropologist ... they’re just courses you do to fill in the points you need. So I was very disappointed there. I started teaching at evening college, and while there was a very great interest, and I had classes for three or four years teaching anthropology, gradually as I taught all the groups in that area, I started running out of class numbers. Teaching at highschools and primary schools, yes, but it’s just a flash in the pan, there’s very little, just tiny amounts. Gradually I realised that the place that I have to focus my energies is in the kindergartens. And for the last eleven years I’ve taught primarily at kindergarten. I teach at TAFE at Child Studies, and I have three kindergartens in the local area ... preschool, we call them now ... where I am the Aboriginal elder. I go and do the smoking ceremonies or welcome to countries, I advise them, I give them stuff. I give them woomeras and boomerangs, anything I can get I can give to those kids. I introduce those four year olds and five year olds to Aboriginal culture until they locate it into their own developed beings. And I tell them, where were you born? I was born in Oatley, oh then you’re Bidjigal. Where were you born? I was born here. And I inculcate that concept of clan ownership of the land. And I tell kids that were born around here, then you’re Dharawal, you were born in Dharawal Country, and you should learn the language. I started learning the language in 2000, and I really use that language as much as I possibly can. Anyone who asks me, I’ll give them a copy [of] sixteen and a half hours of tape recording. I’ll give them that, I’ll tell them where the songs are. I’ve paid hundreds probably thousands of dollars of my own money to get this all compiled, and I send it out. So, kids, preschool kids, is where you need to get. Get ‘em young. Catholics say, “give me the child ‘til he’s seven, and I’ll give you the man”. That’s my philosophy.

Vincent: Okay, we’ll start talking about the rock art, specifically. In contrast to the continual re-grooving of the engravings, there doesn’t appear to have been a local tradition of re-touching shelter works, drawings or paintings.

Les: No.
Infact, there’s so many superimpositions and different aged levels of activity that each depiction seems to have had a finite purpose or lifespan. Have you seen any indications of re-touching?

There’s a couple. One or two.

‘Cause that’s really in contrast to areas in the western desert where ...

I don’t think there [was a local] concept of re-drawing or re-painting. Sometimes things are painted over with clay and a new painting put on. And that’s been good because I’ve got many many paintings where I’ve got one layer of clay peeling off and revealing art underneath. And I’ve got many areas where hand stencils are over kangaroos which are over Wandjina figures which are over something else. I think this tells me there’s continuity. And the other thing, of course, is we’re only seeing the remnants of what was here. I don’t think this was a terrifically big population area. It’s a rich and lovely place to live, but I can’t see Port Hacking being home to more than a couple of hundred [or] a hundred and fifty people. I can’t see Cronulla and that whole Peninsula out there being home to more than a hundred [or] a hundred and fifty people. So when you think about the vastness of the place and the denseness of the scrub, I think that probably what you’re seeing is that there’s fairly limited use of the land, and that’s what may be reflected [in the art].

Well that’s actually something me and Martin [Webb] have discussed. From one perspective, where we’re sitting right now, this place is full of art. But really when you think about the thousands of years that that was created over, and the small population, really, it’s a sporadic use of art, wouldn’t you say?

It is a sporadic use of art. And a sporadic use of shellfish. I’ve done the figures on how many shells have been removed by looking at the ballast heaps and doing the calculations on the amount of ballast dumps to take on shells and transport it to Sydney. I can come up with a figure of ten-thousand tonnes of shell transported out. But if I go and measure how much ten-thousand tonnes of shells are, it comes up to about six-hundred grams of shells a week for people. So we can work it out. And I think my wife Barbara did a survey on living, and she estimated that in one river valley area only fifteen people lived there for a few weeks a year. So what we’re seeing is an accumulation, probably between twenty- and thirty-thousand years of sporadic use which then looks like a lot, but it’s not. It’s just very very thin.

But the population size was also, in a way, deliberate. They knew that the land where they were living would only support those small numbers.

They probably did know ... but we’ve got to think of it from the other way. We don’t say that they took an active role in limiting their population. I’ll say it the other way. The land took an active role in making sure that they didn’t have a big population. As soon as you have too many kids, they die, because they starve to death or they don’t get enough water, or whatever. So I think the land controls the people rather than the people controlling the land. I think that’s probably what it is. I don’t think I did answer all that question, did I?

Yeah. I asked you whether you’d seen any evidence of retouching.

Very limited.

In a 2006 documentary series, How Art Made the World ... have you seen that ...?

Uh huh.

By Nigel Spivey. He describes Aboriginal rock art, and the ceremonies that surround it, as the first multimedia experiences ...

I think he’s a very clever man.

In comparison to you, obviously, I’ve hardly seen anything ... but the sites that I’ve been to, I think, what are these images telling us, what’s the story? And then I thought, well, maybe it’s not the complete story. Do you think, in a way, those images were a visual focal point for a larger story that was being told at the time?

In 2000, Ian Davidson said to me, “When I ask you to go and look at an Aboriginal site, I want you to think about what is an Aboriginal site”. And I said, “what do you mean?” And he said, “well, I’m not going to answer my own question, but I’m going to say to you again ... if you go to an engraving site or a cave with a drawing in it, is that the site?” I thought, what does he mean? And that started me thinking. So in the last twenty years, I’ll I’ve done is think about ‘what is a site’. What I’ve discovered is that a site is made up of a number of components of which a drawing and engraving may be one part. So, when you look at a site, you don’t say, “Aha! This is about such-and-such”. You have to say, “What is this about, and what does it connect to, and how can I now survey the rest of this area, which might be several square kilometres, and draw it all together?” When I spent time in the Tanami Desert, over several years, talking to old people, that is when I realised that different elements of the same story are spread throughout the land, and there is a focus for that. A drawing may be a focus for that, or an engraving may be a focus for that, or a feature in the landscape may be a focus for that, and things will surround it, but not in the western sense of being a circular surrounding ...
Vincent: They won't be one singular contained narrative.

Les: That’s right. So, when they talked about multimedia [in ‘How Art Made the World’], yes, I would say that Aboriginal paintings, engravings, drawings and stencils, are hieroglyphs writ large. You know when we’re kids and we’re first starting to learn to write, we did the big letters, very simple? Well, I think in cultural terms, Aboriginal art is that first step in writing. And I think if you go to the Egyptians, you’ll see that that’s the second step, in their hieroglyphs. And then if you go to the Babylonians and their cuneiform, you’ll see that that is the third step. And if you go finally to Arabic, you’ll see that that is the final ... that is the step we’re in today. So I’d say that Aboriginal paintings, engravings, drawings and stencils, are writing writ large, stories writ large. And sometimes one letter tells us a whole story. One character in that sentence tells us the whole story. So I would go and look at a place and I’d find an engraving of a kangaroo and a hooked boomerang. I’d say, “What’s this about? A kangaroo and a hooked boomerang?” And I’d say, “No. Let’s start looking at this country, and let’s start imagining this landscape before we interfered with it. Oh, this is a great meadow on a hill with a billabong at the bottom. This would be perfect for kangaroos. This would be where you would come to look for kangaroos. Green grass. There’d be kangaroos, emus, a whole lot of grass eaters would be here. You’ve got water, and you’ve got height, and you’ve got advantage. And that’s what this engraving’s about. Let’s go and look at other parts of this engraving and see what they say. So that’s how I draw it all together.

Vincent: When I first started researching, people kept saying there was so much magic, so much superstition, in that traditional culture. I thought that was a very western simplification. But in regards art perhaps being a part of a magic ceremony ... Les: I’m going to stop you right there. I’m going to say to you, stop separating church and state. That’s only in the western world. In the Aboriginal world, church and state are all together. If we look at Sharia law, the Islamics do it. You live in the world, the world is sacred, the world tells you what to do. The courts are simply an exemplification of that sacredness. In the Aboriginal world, that’s the way it is [also]. The trees aren’t sacred individuals, but they are sacred as a part of the whole landscape. Everything we do is imbued with magic and mysticism and spirituality, every single aspect of it. And to just take one part out and say, this is spiritual or magic or superstition ... that’s crap. It’s all tied in together. One slides smoothly into the other, constantly.

Vincent: I just meant, once again, as a focal point. I haven’t actually read any work by Julie Dibden ... I can’t get any of it ... I’ve only read works where people refer to her. She states that a lot of the charcoal art, the very formalised charcoal art in southwest Sydney, is probably post-contact. I think she’s trying to argue that we’re seeing the ramifications of a society being pushed out to the borders, a loss of structure ...

Les: I’d like to see her evidence for it. I think she’s over-generalised it, if that’s what she’s saying ...

Vincent: Well, once again, I haven’t actually read anything by her ...

Les: Well, I would rephrase that, and say much of the charcoal art that I’ve seen is very formalised. It may be post-contact art because some of it doesn’t have many of the stylistic elements that I would expect. But it’s only maybe forty percent [of remnant art]. There’s another group of charcoal art out there that is very common. The other thing is charcoal was easy to procure and use. Grinding ochre and clays, and making those, were very time consuming. And I’ve done it, I’ve made it. I know I can make a pound of charcoal for every ounce of ochre. So charcoal does give us quick and nasty medium method, but it was also used ... I mean, I’ve shown you [rock art] where there’s charcoal and ochre, you know, multichrome, drawings in this area. I can tell by the shape and form of them that they are either just contact or pre-contact, so ... I think she’s got a point, but if she’s saying all [charcoal drawings], no. If she’s saying some, maybe. If she’s saying a proportion, yes.

Vincent: [Your mentioning] how time consuming some of those traditional techniques were to create paint materials [has reminded me] ... in 2008 you had a day down at Boolarrang Nangamai where ...

Les: We made them, yeah.

Vincent: Tell me about that day.

Les: Well, it’s quite interesting. Boolarrang Nangamai [Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio, Gerringong] is populated by a group of Aboriginal people who are probably relatives of mine, but they probably don’t realise that. I do, because I know where I come from. There’s a great deal of superstition, fear and misunderstanding of Aboriginal culture. And what I was trying to do [that day] was re-introduce them to the concepts around Aboriginal painting, engravings, drawings and stencils, and give them the impact of it. And also to re-introduce some traditional methods. So I proposed an idea where by we would get ochres and charcoal, various colours of ochres and charcoal and clays, and we would make up emulsions and paint sticks, and ground charcoal and things like that, and we would have a day of it, and we’d do some painting. And I was teaching an Aboriginal policeman, Robert Potts. He wanted to learn [these processes]. He was taking over my job [in Correctional Services], because I was retired at that point. And so we spent a day ... I think we spent more than one day, maybe a couple of days ... grinding ochres and grinding charcoal, and burning charcoal, and making paint sticks. It was just fantastic. And it was very effective. They learnt how to do it, and that was the whole purpose of it. It wasn’t me doing anything. It was getting those guys to engage with their traditional culture and materials.
Vincent: Had you done those processes before? Had you tried ...?

Les: Myself? Oh, of course ... before I went down there. I didn’t want to make a complete arse of myself. So I’d done some trials before that. And I’ve still got a mortar and pestle here, and occasionally make ochres. I actually made a whole set of different ochres and clays and charcoal for the school kids at TAFE. We’d go down there and paint them up with their ochres, charcoal and clays. The kids love it. I went and bought forty or fifty film [canisters], you know, those little plastic film containers. I would fill them up ... to fill one of those up is an hour’s work ... and I filled forty or fifty of them up, and I gave them out to schools.

Vincent: So it really is a time consuming [process] ...

Les: Incredibly time consuming job. You should try to make some yourself.

Vincent: Let’s move on to conservation issues [in regard to local heritage sites] ...

Les: Sure. (laughs)

Vincent: Don’t get you started? (laughs)

Les: Aww.

Vincent: Twenty-one years ago a Ministerial Task Force concluded that the National Parks and Wildlife Service was an inappropriate body to oversee Aboriginal heritage ...

Les: Gosh.

Vincent: ... and that an Aboriginal Heritage and Culture Commission would be better attuned to deal with these issues. To your knowledge has such a group ever even been close to being created?

Les: Look, Vince, this is going to come as a shock to you. Australia is a racist country. It doesn’t like Aboriginal people. We all want to go home to Blighty, and we’re all really English under the skin. And Aboriginal culture, (whispers) ...well, it will go away if we let it rot away. No. Look, in 1990, I said what that Commission said. I researched what National Parks were doing ...

Vincent: I got [that information from] your article ...

Les: Did you?

Vincent: Yeah. “Preservation and conservation of Aboriginal sites in southern Sydney”.

Les: Right. The fact is that the National Parks have no interest in conservation, in anything, European or Aboriginal. They’re not racist in that regard, they’re anti-heritage. But they don’t have any money. They run out of money from running their own vehicles, quite often.

Vincent: So it’s a combination of indifference and lack of budget?

Les: Indifference and no money. I don’t think that they’ve ever ever ever come to the idea of setting up a Commission. That Heritage Commission in ... you know, the New South Wales State Heritage Council [now the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage] ... has actually changed rules and everything, but when you look at those rules, and if you’re a cynic like me, really those rules are to stop people suing National Parks for their malfeasance, rather than anything else. No, I think the National Parks is abysmal, appalling, shocking, awful, lousy, rotten, nasty, evil. And I don’t think their doing a good job.

Vincent: Well, you’ve actually hit on a few of the questions I wanted to ask. Aunty Barbara Nicholson, who ...

Les: Yeah, I know her.

Vincent: She gave me a good quote, “that Aboriginal heritage sites are proof of Aboriginal sovereignty of this land” ...

Les: Absolutely.

Vincent: ... and I was going to ask you ... but you’ve already answered the question ... even on a subconscious level, do you think the lack of conservation is because people just want to get rid of that proof?

Les: They do, they do. Probably [only] ten or fifteen percent of Australians have an interest in Aboriginal material. I’ve worked all around this area [for] thirty years now. I can tell you quite frankly that people on the foreshores of all the bays, and Port Hacking. ... eighty-five percent of them have gone to great lengths to destroy, bury, hide, or simply make vanish, any Aboriginal occupation [sites] on their land. I’ve been threatened with shotguns, by people when I’ve gone there to look at their
land, knowing that there was engravings or drawings in their backyard. I know that quite often those caves will be walled in and filled in with sand or soil to hide them. I know that people dig up the middens and get rid of the shells. I know that people jackhammer out the drawings and engravings. So I have to draw from that [the] conclusion that there's an eighty-five percent resistance level. And I did that in 1990 ... I discovered that.

Vincent: And that comes back to the issue of education. I think a lot of those people would feel differently if they'd been brought up being told about the importance of those things.

Les: I'll tell you a story, and you can draw some inferences from it. I guy rang me several times, aww ... twenty-five years ago ... twenty years ago, 1990, somewhere there. He rang and said, "Oh, Mister Bursill, I understand you used to teach computing at Sydney?" ... I used to teach computing ... "Can you help me? I've got a real problem. I'm an architect-surveyor, and my computer's got a virus" ... and in those days viruses were simple but people didn't know how to deal with them ... "and I just [wondered] if you can recover my data, because I've got hundreds and hundreds of drawings and citings and things". I went down and I spent thirty hours at that guy's place, working ... and we preserved it all. And he was so grateful to me. He started talking to me about what I did, and I was telling him I was very interested in Aboriginal rock art, and that I was Aboriginal. He said, "Oh yes, there's lots of art 'round here', 'cause he was living on the foreshores. And he said, "Where I used to live, in Burraneer Bay, out in my back lawn there was a big rock shelter with a whale and two sharks on it". And I said, "Oh, wow. A whale and two sharks? Gee, I'd like to get a photo of that." And he said, "Oh yes yes'. Anyway, at the end of the day I said to him, "Righty-o, everything's fixed. We've got it all back. Now, what was your old address?" I [wanted to] go and have a look at the backyard. Do you know what? He couldn't remember the street where he lived in, or the number of the house. Isn't that amazing? A man with that brain power and intelligence, and he couldn't remember his street number or street name? He was terrified I would go and cause some [trouble]. The fact is that Aboriginal people don't have any rights. If I was to discover an engraving in my backyard, the only thing I might be limited in doing is to do any harm to it. There is a beautiful engraved snake on the driveway of a house in Waterfall. I know that those people living in that house painted it up with household paint. They did anything they wanted to it. And when I went back a few months ago to look at it, it'd been paved over with concrete. I know that there were some kangaroos on a rock jutting out into the footpath in Main Street, where you do the loop to come out onto the highway. Main Roads came along and ... the rock was in the way of putting a footpath down, so they simply jackhammered the rock off. No one asked questions [such as] 'should we preserve these kangaroos?' They just jackhammered the rock down to groundlevel. This is in the last twenty years. So, people don't give a shit about Aboriginal stuff. And, as you say, it's threatening. And National Parks is threatened. National Parks do one thing better, though ... they hand over responsibility for the conservation of the rock art to La Perouse Land Council. I've spoken to people at La Perouse Land Council. They don't even know that there's rock art in the Park. The two men, who are supposedly the Aboriginal sites officers, have no training ... well, they have five we...
Vincent: Using it as an example, what could be done [to] a site like that, to not only protect it from weathering, but also as a tourist [attraction] to make money to fund [its own] conservation?

Les: Okay. Let’s protect it from weathering. Let’s clearly mark the half a dozen graffiti engravings that are on the site. Let’s put boardwalks around it so that people don’t walk across it. Let’s put a walkway up to it. Let’s start charging admission. Let’s make it worth money. Then when we’ve got enough money, let’s put an acrylic layer down, maybe six or eight inches deep, you know ... a bunded pool of acrylic ... and then colour that acrylic to look like sandstone, and re-cut the original drawings into the acrylic so that people come to the place they know. They’ve done it at Lascaux. They re-dug a cave next to the cave at Lascaux, and they repainted that cave in the same [way] as the old cave. Now when you go to Lascaux, you go into the phony cave. But it looks and feels the same. I think that’s what we should do.

Vincent: So re-cutting is definitely an option for you?

Les: Absolutely. But not with a chainsaw or stonesaw. I mean re-cutting in the traditional way.

Vincent: Yeah, of course. [In your 1991 article,] you quote Mike Morwood. He said that no re-cutting should happen unless you can prove [an unbroken] connection [with past practices] ...

Les: Yeah, I agree. I think only those people from this area ... I put my hand up ... should do it. Or there should be Aboriginal people trained specially to do it.

Vincent: You mention [in the article] the Waverley Council’s re-cutting of the Bondi engravings. Why did that meet with a mixed response?

Les: Mixed response? Is there something positive about it that I don’t know about? It was a negative response. Let’s rephrase that. Well, it was done by an Italian stone cutter using a stonesaw. I mean, he followed the original lines, but he lost the whole meaning of it. It’s not to be done for depth or sharpness or clarity. It’s to be done to renew the spiritual aspect of it. So it should have been drilled and pecked and rubbed in the normal way, not cut with a stonecutter. Have you ever seen those drawings?

Vincent: The after [shots] ...?

Les: Yeah. I might even have photos of them. They’re awful.

Vincent: I’ve seen small jpegs online. They don’t give a very good picture of what [it looks like] ...

Les: No.

Vincent: So as long as it’s done in the traditional manner, you’re up for ...

Les: Re-cutting them? Yeah. And so long as we understand what they’re about.

Vincent: Well, I suppose that’s an issue. Would you meet with resistance ... even within the Aboriginal community ... [regarding] what some of those [engravings] are about?

Les: Well, yeah, because they think all the whales are right whales or humpbacks. And they’re not. They’re all orcas. So I might meet resistance there when I tell them I’m going to re-draw an orca. They’re going to say, “Oh no, it’s humpack”. And I’ll say, “Really? Where’s the hump back?”

Vincent: Marine animals are such a prominent subject matter of the engravings. What’s the significance of the whale for this area? Whether it be orca or ...

Les: Well, from what I’ve understood, from some elders [whose] knowledge fits very closely to what I can see ... in other words, there’s something to support them ... I believe that the marine animals that are drawn around here are animals that would have had a fairly significant role in Aboriginal lifestyle. The whales, particularly the orca whales, are part of the Luma Dharawal Dreaming: the reinvigoration of the law each year on the annual cycle. The orcas come into the bay and drive in front of them other marine mammals or fish. The locals [would] feast on those, and there is a short period of abundance in the year where the large communities can get together. The law can be sung, and dancing and ceremonies done. When that comes to an end, that [Luma Luma] spirit is ritually killed and returned to the whale.

Vincent: Tell me about your discovery of the Luma Luma story.

Les: Well, initially, when I first started looking at sites, I saw individual engravings as sites. And so I had a set of whales, a whale and some fish, and I had a man with three heads and a penis a metre long. Three sites. I had one of those photos up on my wall in my office. And a man named Ian Hughes ... now Doctor Ian Hughes, retired ... came into my office at Sydney University one day and said, “I thought you only dealt with Aboriginal art from this area?” And I said, “I do”. He said, “Well, you’ve got a drawing of Luma Luma on your wall”. And I said, “Oh, wow, Luma Luma? Tell me about Luma Luma.” And he said, “It’s this guy who comes out of the ocean and chases women. He’s a real bad dude, you know ...”
Vincent: Horny.

Les: He’s horny. And [Ian Hughes] told me the story about how he runs and falls over his large penis, strikes his head, and things stick on his head ...

Vincent: He was talking about [stories from] Yirrkala, wasn’t he?

Les: Yirrkala and Maningrida. So I started calling it Luma Luma because I had a name for it. Then, through a series of events, I discovered ... when Jo McDonald was writing her PhD, I had quite a conflict with her over the fact that she was talking about shield shapes that had the cross of St. Georges, cross of St. Andrew, cross of St. Michael, in them. I got very upset that she had anglicised Aboriginal drawings. I felt that was wrong. And she said to me, “well, the shield shape in your area doesn’t have anything in it”. And I said, “there aren’t any shield shapes in my area”, and I sort of stormed off in a huff. I went and looked at what she was talking about, and I saw that the whales were associated with elliptical shapes that could be shield shapes. That started me puzzling. So now I’ve got whales that aren’t whales, they’re orcas, because I’ve now identified the fish in them. They seemed to be always chasing an elliptical shape. I was in the bay doing my Masters thesis and a seal surfaced beside me and then swam off, and I saw that the shape that it made in the water was an elliptical shape. I was then reading about the association with orca and Eden ...

Vincent: Eden on the south coast?

Les: ... Eden on the south coast, and how the orca used to work with the whalers. Then Uncle Max Harrison told me a story about Gurruwal the whale, and how he was the bringer of the law, and how he had a spirit form in him that came out and told the law. Then I discovered that Luma Luma was a spirit figure that came out of the whale. And I discovered that whales came into the bay. And then, listening to the AIATSIS tapes of old men talking down the south coast, they talked about how the orca could be used as a, you know, like a sheep dog, and that you had to be careful of them ‘cause they would eat you as quickly as they’d eat anything else. And so gradually the whole thing just fell in [to place]. And I started doing more and more research, and I found another guy, Vince McDonnell. He started doing research on the Luma Luma story, and gradually the whole thing just unwrapped, and there it was. I’ve got my own Luma Luma story. And I realised that these [sites] were all in a line, and where you stood and watched [from] the only whale [engraving] that isn’t an orca, and the shoal of fish ... when you stand there and look, what is in front of you? A large area of the bay where there is shallows, where the orca would have driven their prey. And [I realised] that the orca [engraving] beside them would have been the whale pair. And I realised there were sets of these orca all along the coast and they had different elements of the story. So at one site at Warumbul it’s the bringing of the law; on the other side, at Jibbon, it’s the calling of the whales; and further down it’s the bringing [of] the whales up the coast. So it just showed me that there’s this whole track of whales leading into this bay, and then leading to the next bay, and leading to the next bay.

Vincent: And this, combined with figures we’re seeing now that are very similar to the Kimberley wandjinjas ... what does this tell you about ...?

Les: Well, I’m on a whole new pathway. Once I realised there were wandjinjas actually drawn in the rock shelters [here], I’m starting to re-look at all the engravings, and I’m starting to find wandjina heads. Even out at Jibbon, there’s a Baiame figure out there and he’s got a wandjina head. He’s got wandjina lines coming out of his head.

Vincent: The little fat fella?

Les: (laughs) Yes. I was out there last Friday ...

Vincent: They must still be very faint.

Les: Very faint, but you can see him. You get him [at] the right angle, and you get him wet, and you can see them. They’re there. So I’m starting to see this wandjina culture. And why wouldn’t it [have arrived here]? The Luma Luma character comes from there, the wandjina characters come from there. And what it’s starting to show me is there’s this tremendous flow of information.

Vincent: Well, I sat down one weekend a couple of weeks ago and just read this old book from the ‘60s, called “The Art of the Wadjina”. I can’t remember who wrote it.

Les: I’ve got that book as well.

Vincent: And in it [the author] says there’s evidence that the wandjina came from the southeast [region] of the Kimberley to the [Kimberley] coast. Maybe it came from even further southeast?

Les: Yeah, it came from here and went to there! No, it came from there. But he’s seen a connection. But I like the part where it says wandjina is restricted to the Kakadu-Kimberley area. Oh yes, I love that, because I can say, oh yeah? And I’ve already given a talk to National Parks about wandjina ...
Vincent: The gentleman I was telling you about before ... his name’s Lloyd [Nelson] ...

Les: Yes, I know of him.

Vincent: He was very interested in the photos I sent him of the wandjina ... the one I took, and Caryll [Sefton]’s one ... because at one stage he started using the wandjina in his art work. And he went through the protocols of making sure that everyone was okay with that. So he’s very fascinated that there is that figure from this part of the [country] ...

Les: We’re going to go down to a kindergarten, where I’m going to show you where I’ve introduced the wandjina shapes in a very very very modern form into [the children’s] art. Would you be interested in going for a look?

Vincent: I’d love to.

Les: Turn that [recorder] off. We’ll grab some lunch while we’re out.

PART II

Vincent: Okay, it’s the same day. It’s after lunch, nearly 1:30PM. Les has kindly taken me down to ...

Les: Point Preschool

Vincent: ... Point Preschool at Como. And they’re doing some fantastic work there, really incorporating knowledge of Aboriginal people from this area into their ... syllabus, for lack of a better word, the preschool syllabus. Yeah, it was really great to see. So what have you got out of that?

Les: From working with them? I’m just really excited to see them having a level of real knowledge, and starting to spread that through the community, so that those kids, when they grow up, will just take for granted what people of our generation are horrified [to accept] ...

Vincent: And still deny.

Les: And still deny. That’s all I get out of it. Nothing else.

Vincent: So, we’ve covered a lot of ground with the things I wanted to discuss, but there’s just a few things, some of them will re-tread similar ground, but ...

Les: I don’t mind.

Vincent: ... they’ll be a bit disjointed. We’ve talked about this before. In some of our past discussions you’ve argued that women were unlikely to have been involved in the creation of paintings, engravings and drawings. Once again, what is your reasoning for this?

Les: Okay ...

Vincent: You also believe that this may relate to the absence of certain subject matter.

Les: Let’s start with axe grooves, as the biggest and most common form of engraving. I think that axe grooves are entirely related to Aboriginal men, and it’s entirely related to their behaviours and tools. We know that women weren’t allowed to own stone axes. So I think that almost exclusively men did sharpening of axes and created axe grooves. As for the engravings themselves, hammers and stone objects, probably approaching axes [in design], would be used to create the pecked-abraded forms of engravings that we see. Therefore it’s unlikely that women participated in that. Also, when I look at the engravings, there is no elements of femininity in them at all, and there’s very little ... there is some, but limited ... feminine subject matter. So if women are shown, they’re almost invariably shown as spirit figures with [significant] differences [to humans]. Webbed feet, extra fingers, things like that. So I would suggest that more than ninety percent of all engravings are men’s prerogative. Now, when it comes down to drawings, there is a fairly wide-spread inclusion of women. Because many clay and charcoal drawings are found in shelters, around places families would have been, I think that there’s probably a chance that women had some part in that. I don’t ever see any evidence for women doing that, but they may have, because they’re included in quite a lot of it. When it comes down to stencils, I think that it’s clear that men, women, and children, all participated in stencils. If we go and look at multichrome or bichrome paintings and drawings, I think that they are very very clearly related to men’s activities and spiritual activities. I don’t see a lot of multichrome [and] bichrome art in shelters used by communities. But that’s basically how I base it.
Vincent: The stencils, specifically ... what were their purposes?

Les: (laughs) I don’t know. I think very much like, “Kilroy was here”, it’s a sign of occupation. For a long while there I tried very very hard to analyse hand stencils, and certainly I found that [authors] of particular hand stencils had done hand stencils over a wide area. They had crooked fingers or different hand shapes, and I noticed that. I did for a little while notice that there were different disparities in the finger placements. There were some with fingers wide spread, there were some with fingers together, there were some with fingers separated in differential gaps. There may be some message system in that, but I’m not sure, when it comes down to it.

Vincent: If you’re going to run with the idea that it was a sign of presence, the reason for children having their hands done [might] be to indicate, okay, well this was a family group here, as opposed to an all-male hunting party ...

Les: I think you’re probably reading a lot of western theories into that. Why is it that you see with women and children’s hand, quite often, the whole arm? Have you seen that?

Vincent: Yeah ...

Les: Quite often you’ll never see the whole arm of a man, but you’ll sometimes see a whole arm of a woman and child. I think that ... presence. Leave it at presence. I think that’s a great simple answer. It’s a mark of presence.

Vincent: Do you think the same for stencils that aren’t [of] the hand? [Such as those at the site] you call the ‘White Wandjina’ ...?

Les: It’s got an axe and ...

Vincent: It’s got everything. It’s got what I think is a dillybag, what looks like a digging stick, boomerangs ... a huge amount of material goods stencilled.

Les: Maybe people have been pleased at having some accoutrement. Or perhaps particular things yielded up a harvest that was better. Or a spear or an axe brought an animal down that was better. I don’t know. I’ve got no idea. I think stencils are something really enigmatic.

Vincent: Going back again to the Luma Luma depiction ... once again, we’ve talked about this [in the past] ... it seems obvious to me that the penis is subincised. What’s your understanding of that traditional practice?

Les: If it is a subincised penis then it really makes it a very important site. And I think it would fit in very closely with him being a spirit man and a law giver.

Vincent: But in everyday life what was the [significance] ...?

Les: Well, only the most senior men had subincisions. So it’s to show how senior he was.

Vincent: But what did it symbolise? Because there’s theories ...

Les: That knowledge is power. It’s who he was.

Vincent: There was theories that it’s meant to replicate a vagina.

Les: I know. I didn’t know if you wanted to go into that. I believe that all male circumcision and subincision and cutting of genitals is all related to fertility and all related to emulating women’s periodic cycles. I know that men manipulated the vas [deferens]. They cut it so that blood came out of the glans. What is that for? To show they’re fertile and they’re as fecund as women. I think we don’t really know enough about traditional behaviours to identify what that’s all about.

Vincent: So it’s your understanding that not all men were subincised, only great knowledge holders?

Les: Only very powerful people. [It would have been] very painful too.

Vincent: I imagine it would have been. Having mentioned senior people of great knowledge, what’s your understanding of the kuradji?

Les: Kadaicha. You mean the ‘clever men’?

Vincent: Kadaicha?

Les: Well, that’s how I say it. My great-great-grandfather was a clever man. I think that usually those people had a knowledge of animals, or plants, or the environment, or Country, that far exceeded the general knowledge, and that they were able to manipulate that knowledge to produce what was apparently magical outcomes. I think that also they quite often worked together to bring people down through fear of the unknown, causing death. I know that they were pragmatic, but they knew themselves that quite often singing someone wasn’t always going to be effective, and so they had other methods of making
sure that the people who were sung, died, to enforce their own power. I know one of the classics is that if a person had been sung and was showing no signs dying, a feather-foot, kadaicha man, might come in and, with a long sharpened kangaroo tibia, slip it into their hearts through the underarm [and] puncture the heart. Bleeding [would stop] immediately, as the heart stops pumping. People were often murdered like that. Then you withdraw the bone and close the arm, and the wound is not visible. We know that that happened, that people had ways of killing you or poisoning you so that their powers of singing were considered to be very powerful. And in fact, by doing that, they literally did will some people to death, [because] some people took them onboard very seriously. But I think they had lots of other roles than that. My great-great-grandfather Ellis ... MacCarthur refers to him as Doctor Ellis ... was a specialist in plant foods. And so MacCarthur used him to get foods for his animals. So these people were the specialists of their day, in a society that really already knew the environment very thoroughly. These guys knew the fine tweakings of it. So they were very powerful men ... and women.

Vincent: There were female ...


Vincent: We were talking, just now at the school, about the women going fishing in their canoes. I’ve heard they would have little clay ceramic bowls that they would burn coals in [at night].

Les: No. They would line the base of their canoe with kaolin clay and they would light fires on that.

Vincent: That makes my question irrelevant, then. I was going to ask whether any of this pottery has survived.

Les: No. They would make their base of clay in their canoe. There’s no pottery in Australia.

Vincent: You touched briefly on some of the research you’ve done in other communities, with finding connections. What are some of these communities?

Les: Where I’ve found connections? Well, the communities I’ve mainly worked with are up in the Arrernte ... well, around Alice Springs. There’s about four communities around Alice Springs [that] I’ve worked with. And well, I’ve found that their stories are far purer than the ones down here. The ones down here are full of ... even the ones I consider are [of] relatively good quality ... are still full of moral values that just don’t exist in traditional stories. Things are a matter of fact. People are good or bad as a matter of fact.

Vincent: So was the Black Duck Dreaming one of the stories you saw [connections to] ...?

Les: Oh no, no, no, no ... well, one of the communities I’ve had dealings with is the Wreck Bay [Nowra] community, and that’s the Black Duck Dreaming. And when I’ve gone up into the Centre I’ve talked to different people about Goanna Dreaming, Kangaroo Dreaming, Emu Dreaming, and Black Snake Dreaming. And they all have resonance for down here, as well. So all I really found was that ... I found a purer form of Dreaming story that relied on you extrapolating a lot of the information for yourself. I’ll give you an example. Some of the best horror movies are the ones where you never see the monster. Aboriginal Dreaming stories are not horror stories but quite often in you never see the monster. It’s not there. It’s what you draw from it. The Undred-Undred emu story ... this is the way ‘hundred’ is said in the centre ... I just tells the story of how emus came into the centre and [how] they moved from waterhole to waterhole. And that’s the end of the story. So there’s no moral principle. It’s just telling you that emus moved from waterhole to waterhole.

Les: So some of the stories we have on the east coast have obviously been westernised?

Vincent: Even the ones that are apparently very old [have] still got western elements in them. So that’s something I’ve discovered. I’ve also discovered that stories from different areas ... Pitjanjara, Arrernte ... the stories are modified to take account of environment. So, you know, the story might be fixed in a particular area, but once it moves from that area to the next area, where it might be told again, it quite often mutates to that area and takes in those elements, and then probably becomes fixed in that area. And I’ve seen that down here, as well. That’s what I’ve learnt from that.

Vincent: Okay, back to conservation. Once again we’ve touched a bit on this. Despite its duty of care, the Department of Climate Change and Water is actually responsible for a significant amount of destruction of [heritage] sites. Would you agree?

Les: (laughs) What’s to disagree [with]? Yes.

Vincent: Is there such a thing as a ‘minor’ site?

Les: I rang someone in the Department of Environment and Conservation and Water, or whatever it is ... DEC-W or something ...

Vincent: It keeps changing.

Les: It keeps changing. I had read that they were agreeing to allow a particular rock shelter [to be destroyed] which had some paintings in it. I don’t remember exactly what the paintings were [of] ... or maybe it was an engraving. [I had heard] they were allowing it to be destroyed because it was one of many representations of that style. I rang this person in [DECCW] and said to
them, “Look, I think what you’ve said makes a lot of sense. I’m going into the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where I’m going to pull down several of the Van Goghs, because you don’t really need them, and they’re running out of space in there ... I mean, they’re just representative of Van Gogh. How many do we need? One or two, maybe. We don’t need three or four.” And the person said, “are you mad?” And I said, “Well, no, but you guys think that way about my art. Why shouldn’t I think that way about yours?” And they couldn’t understand that. So what is my view? I don’t think that ...

Vincent: [Your argument] was probably a bit too poetic, Les ... (laughs)

Les: Too poetic? (laughs) Well, I remember that National Parks agreed that all of the sites on Mill Creek could be buried under rubbish. They agreed to allow that. And then when the tip never reached that level of, you know, spread, that National Parks were quite loathed for some years to take [the sites] back onto their register. Now, I don’t understand that at all, Vincent. I don’t have any comprehension of what they’re talking about. And think about the Burrup Peninsula, where there are something like eight-hundred-and-forty engravings that are going to be destroyed so that we can mine gas there.

Vincent: Where’s the Burrup Peninsula?

Les: Western Australia, at the top. Shark Bay.

Vincent: Oh yes. And the SEAM Gas extraction, or whatever it’s called ... they’re trying to do that down my way, as well.

Les: I think they should do it under Sydney, under the CBD.

Vincent: You once said that Aborigines were great colonisers.

Les: Yes, they are.

Vincent: What did you mean by that?

Les: Well, it is my belief that Aboriginal people, seeing the advantages of someone else’s land or Country, would move in. When I go around and look at lots of the sites, there are caves that are very admirable places to live, but they are not well protected or they are not high and therefore they don’t get used. So if a well protected, high site with a commanding view of the environment is the preferred location, one has to ask why. And it seems to me (it is because) people were keeping an eye out for their neighbours.

Vincent: That sort of deconstructs one of the strongly held [beliefs] about how Aboriginal people never took anybody else’s land. Whenever people talk about how Europeans invaded and took over their land, they say, “you don’t see that in Aboriginal culture”.

Les: Who doesn’t see that?

Vincent: I’ve heard that said before heaps of times.

Les: By who?

Vincent: I can’t remember.

Les: Well, there you are, see. They’re consigned to your memory blocks as zero. I think that’s bullshit. I think that Aboriginal people, and the more intense their environment ... like, let’s go to the Murray Islands, where the environment was rich but intensely farmed. People had corner stones and land marks clearly delineating their land. The whole concept of the tenure of land, as averse to the tenure of Country, was clear. It became the basis for Land Rights Act. So I think that Aboriginal people have always been colonisers of other people’s Countries, stories, and activities. I don’t think they did it every day, and they certainly didn’t do it to the scale that Europeans did, but certainly if someone saw country that wasn’t being utilised and it was full of goodies, people would move in. Isn’t that common sense? Should I stay here and starve to death while there is fish over there?

Vincent: I seriously cannot remember who I heard say it, but I’ve heard it on several occasions ...

Les: Someone idealising Aboriginal people.

Vincent: ... usually when they’re discussing how different European and Aboriginal society is ...

Les: Oh, there’s a huge difference ...

Vincent: ... and they’ve said, “Look at history. There’s no record of Aboriginal people taking over another clan’s land”.

Les: What? There’s heaps of records of that. Bungaree, or Bongaree, who came down from Twofold Bay, moved into Sydney and occupied areas of Gadigal Country and set up his camp there. Now, he’s not Gadigal, he’s from Twofold Bay. But there was no
one in the Gadigal Country because they’d all been wiped out. And he moved in there. Bennelong was a Wangal Dharuk man from up around Parramatta way. When the people moved in here, he established himself in Sydney Cove. And later, when Phillip gave him a block of land, he took over Bennelong Point, which they named after him, funnily enough. So I think there’s heaps of that. And Aboriginal men fought over women. A young girl in your camp might give me a bit of a smile, [and I’d] come and fight you to get the rights to take her back to my camp. Aboriginal people were people, just like you and me.

Vincent: [Do you think the] reason for having [a camp with] a good outlook was because of that? Because there does seem to have been a tradition of nicking other people’s wives. (laughs)

Les: Absolutely. Wives, and probably access to resources. No one ever took the land. No one ever put a fence around it and said, “you can’t come in here”. What they said was, “you can’t take the resources from here”. That was the difference.

Vincent: You have an interesting theory that it was actually cowpox that decimated the local community.

Les: Decimated, that means one in ten. It was fifty percent. [It was] halved, let’s be honest. Decimated means to pick one in ten. Okay, I’ve had many arguments with many people over this, and it’s probably never going to be resolved. What I will say to you is this. We know that a disease swept through the colony within a few weeks. It was reported that every Aboriginal shelter and campsite around Sydney had bodies in it. Now, I believe it was almost certainly not smallpox, because there were no reports of its subsequent spread into the European population. Now, cowpox, the symptoms of which are similar to smallpox, is a non-lethal virulent disease to populations that have built up some level of immunity. It was common to people working with cattle, like milkmaids. But to Aboriginal people, it would have been lethal. And we know that there were outbreaks of such a disease amongst Aborigines each time Europeans expanded further and came into contact with them. It may possibly have even been measles, but I don’t believe it was smallpox. As for the conspiracy theories about the deliberate release of smallpox into the Aboriginal populations... these are based solely on the fact that the surgeons of the First Fleet bought with them jars of scabs of smallpox victims. We know that, prior to that, colonists in North America engaged in chemical warfare by placing infected scabs in blankets and then handed them out to Native Americans. This effectively destroyed large populations. That’s where the suspicion comes from. But the reality is that the infected scabs brought over by the First Fleet would have been benign by the time of their supposed release. The most likely reason for the spreading of disease was because of the trading of Aboriginal women and girls. Aboriginal men were particularly desirous of metal goods brought over by the Europeans. They gained access to them by the sexual favours of Aboriginal women. Sexual activity would have allowed a rapid spread of disease throughout the Aboriginal population of Sydney.

Vincent: Back to conservation. The policy of non-disclosure obviously hasn’t ...

Les: It’s crap.

Vincent: ... protected anything, really. So, once again, going back to education, [surely] it’s better to educate the public, and get them to respect [heritage sites] ...

Les: But Vincent, this is not something we discovered last week. We’ve known this for thirty or forty years, that if you educate the public and make the sites available, the sites will do far better than if you hide them and restrict access. People discover them and think they’re the first and only people to discover them, and deface them with their own names. [They] do whatever they like, because no one is going to catch them. So you educate and publicise. And that’s been my role since 1986. I’ve done that as much as I can.

Vincent: Is it too late now?

Les: Yes.

Vincent: It is?

Les: Yeah.

Vincent: Some of the engravings are ...

Les: Well, I showed you a photo in there, of those dancing men. [They] were quite clear in the late ‘80s, and you go there now and it’s a bare rock. I can show you a photo of a whale and thirty-nine fish, and you go there now and you can see two lines and that’s it. Aww, it’s awful.

Vincent: In 1994 Michael Organ wrote an article titled “Conspiracy of Silence”, basically accusing the NPWS, developers and archaeologists, of having a monopoly on this type of information ...

Les: Is that why Michael Organ isn’t popular in the archaeological community ...?

Vincent: (laughs) Probably.

Les: ... and why he’s beloved in the Aboriginal community? Why I think he’s wonderful?
Vincent: Organ essentially suggests that this is to prevent the general public from knowing about the destruction or deterioration of sites as opposed to protecting them from the public.

Les: I am shocked. ‘Course it is. What other reason could there possibly be? I mean, it’s been going on for so long [that] it’s just a joke. And National Parks have actually come and threatened me a number of times.

Vincent: Do you think the publicity of the few successful cases where people have been taken to court [for damaging sites] ...?

Les: Which few?

Vincent: Has there [been any]?

Les: No!

Vincent: None?

Les: Never. No one’s ever been prosecuted. It’s a law without any teeth. I caught a man and his son defacing a rock art site. I got his name, I got his car registration number, and I took it to the rangers in the National Park in 1994. What happened? They never even bothered to follow up. They couldn’t care less. They want [Aboriginal heritage sites] gone. They want furry four-legged animals. Look, just for God’s sake don’t let anyone hurt the deer, that’s National Parks’ attitude. And let’s grow more of that tea tree bush that burns like a hell-fire when we have bushfires. [National] Parks are an absolute disgrace. They harbour a few, few, few, exotic plants, native exotics, and the rest of the whole place just falls into ruin. They pull down heritage buildings without question, they burn down heritage-listed hotels and buildings. They are not interested. I could take you to a site, now, of a Tar papered and macadam floored car pavered shack with a date going back to the late 1850s, and the National Parks are not interested in it. They don’t care about it. Yet it’s one of the earliest occupations by Europeans in the [Royal National] Park. I can take you to a site where there’s extinct animals drawn on the walls, and National Parks are not interested.

Vincent: How can this be changed? What’s going to make them ...

Les: A revolution, machine guns, and a brick wall. That’s my view.

Vincent: It just sounds so impossible.

Les: No, I don’t believe you’re exaggerating. That’s my view.

Vincent: How can this be changed? What’s going to make them ...

Les: A revolution, machine guns, and a brick wall. That’s my view.

Les: Sounds so impossible that you doubt that it’s true. Is that right? Can that possibly be true? Isn’t he just exaggerating this?

Vincent: No, I don’t believe you’re exaggerating. I’m just thinking, what can be done?

Les: Well, your PhD thesis isn’t going to do much because there’s been half a dozen of them saying the same thing. My Masters thesis in 1993 said the same thing. So if education, knowledge, publicity, urgency, all don’t work, what is going to work? Money works. Make [heritage sites] valuable. What is the least threatened animal in Australia? Sheep.

Vincent: The Myna bird. (laughs)

Les: The Myna bird as well, okay. No, sheep. Why is the sheep not at risk? Because it’s a money earner. We fleece it, we kill it, we eat it, we use its skins. Let’s turn Aboriginal rock art into the sheep of Australian tourism. Make them valuable. Then they won’t go away. People will fight to preserve them.

Vincent: Well, you could argue that in some circumstances it is. Like you said before, when people think of Aboriginals they think of the western desert. When people think of Aboriginal rock art they think of the Kimberley. Is that to do with this real incapability of European-Australians accepting that [Sydney] is Aboriginal land?

Les: Ask yourself this question. How many housing developments will be affected by people visiting the western desert? How many housing developments or infrastructure changes will be required by people [going] to Kakadu to look at the rock art? How many impacts will it have if we’re going to start developing Aboriginal sites in the Sydney Basin? “Oh fuck, they might want to come to my house!” Oh no, heaven forbid. You think about it. The places they direct you to are over the hill. ‘Not in my backyard’ syndrome. “Oh, you want to see Aboriginal stuff? Over there! Over there! Over there!” But it is here. It’s more here than anywhere else. Even in the heart of the most developed part of this country, a place where there are six million people living, there are still nine-thousand sites in the Sydney Basin. Think what it must have been like before we had six million people living here.

Vincent: Well, a lot of [W.D.] Campbell’s drawings are of [sites] that no longer exist, aren’t they?

Les: Of course they are.

Vincent: Last two questions. And the first one is the last one on conservation [issues], and it regards how Aboriginal people are consulted ...
Les: Are they? Wow, that’s amazing.

Vincent: This year the DECCW amended their policy on consultation with Aboriginal communities, in trying to make it seem more stringent.

Les: Wow, wait there. Now, I’m the Chairman of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee, I’m the Vice-Chairman of the regional gallery, I’m an archaeologist-anthropologist, I’m Aboriginal and a traditional owner, so they must have consulted me. Did they?

Vincent: Well, I’m just saying, it’s all tokenism, surely?

Les: I’ve got [a document] here for you. You can have a look at what consultation is. A local archaeologist has written to me and said, “We need to consult with the local Aboriginal community. Can you tell me Merv Ryan’s phone number again so I can ring him?” And I said, “Well, Merv Ryan now has dementia. He’s no longer the chairman of the [Aboriginal] Advisory Committee ... I am. And June Riemer is no longer the Chairman of Kurranaulla ... it’s Deana Schreiber. We are the people you need to talk to.” What happens then? Silence. Why? Because I’m garrulous, educated, forceful, and out there. You consult with me, what the fuck, you might get an answer! I get angry because I get contacted by [someone] who rings my house once and, [when they] don’t get an answer, and don’t leave a message on the machine, say, “Rang Les Bursill. No answer”. I ring them back and say, “No answer? I’ve got a mobile phone, a home phone, and two internet addresses, and you can’t contact me? Don’t write it in your fucking book that you can’t contact me. You can contact me, but you just didn’t try very hard. You made one effort, and it didn’t work.”

Vincent: And to double the insult, it seems to me that even if the consultation was appropriately carried out, with this whole Area 3A, the Minister for Development has absolute power over [the outcome].

Les: Here’s an example. They find a shallow valley with eleven marked trees at Camden. They want to develop it. Oh, you can’t develop it, these are marked trees. Oh, okay. You go back a week later, the marked trees have been pruned to eight feet above the ground. Just stumps in the ground. They’re not going to survive. What happened here? Aww, there was some evidence of white ants, so to protect the locals we cut all the limbs that had evidence of white ants. Really? Evidence of white ants would be in the base. Aww, no, no. Come back a week later, all the stumps are gone. Where are the stumps? Aww, we took them to the Local [Aboriginal] Land Council, and they said that if we gave them one of the marked trees in a glass case, we could cut the rest out. Oh, how much was this worth? Twelve million bucks. Oh, so how much went to the pockets of someone at the Land Council? And that’s last year.

Vincent: An Aboriginal Land Council, you mean?

Les: Yes, Camden - Thirlmere. We’ve even got the name. But is there evidence for it? No. It’s awful. Money speaks, and poor people listen.

Vincent: This wasn’t one of the questions I planned, but throughout the day we’ve talking about disagreements within the Aboriginal community. What’s your advice for a non-Aboriginal person, such as myself, who is grateful to two people who are willing to sit down and talk to me, but who have very differing opinions?

Les: Well, I’m an elitist. I rely on people of high intelligence and education. That’s the people I listen to ... My advice to you, find someone you can talk to, find someone who will deal with you, and listen to them.

Vincent: Well, look, thank you very much for your time ...

Les: You’re most welcome. You know that, Vince.

Vincent: And thank you for all the support you’ve given me. Not just today, but all the information [you’ve passed on to me over the last year] ... Thank you very much.

Les: Well, you’re the fifth or sixth PhD person I’ve worked with. I like doing it. I like helping these PhDs become successful.
A1.I02: Interview with Colin Isaacs (14.12.10)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

Though originally from Sydney, Colin Isaacs has lived in Inverell, northern NSW, for almost thirty years. I became aware of Colin’s art via his website and was keen to interview him – despite the unlikelihood of us being able to meet in person. Having established contact with him in November 2010, however, he agreed to a phone interview the following month. I supplied him with the relevant participant information documents via email, and he sent his signed consent form to me in the post.

Of all the interviews conducted in the course of this research, this is the only one that did not occur ‘face to face’ with the interviewee.

Vincent: Tell me about your connection to Dharawal country.

Colin: Well, it’s my mother’s country.

Vincent: You were born there?

Colin: Yeah.

Vincent: Where specifically? Where did you grow up?

Colin: La Perouse, Sydney, area.

Vincent: Do you have a totem that you identify with?

Colin: I’m from the Whale People … the Warrigal(?), mate.

Vincent: And tell me about the circumstances in which you moved to Northern New South Wales. How did that come about?

Colin: My great-grandmother sent me.

Vincent: Why was that?

Colin: How can I explain … it was [for] high spiritual [matters]. I was sent for a reason. I didn’t even know where Inverell was before I came here. My elders are the ones who sent me in this direction … [especially] my great-grandmother.

Vincent: What was her name?

Colin: Emma Cook(?). ---- ---- ---- (((??)) high spiritual. ---- ---- ---- (((??)) Christianity, and that.

Vincent: And how old were you when you went to Inverell?

Colin: ‘Bout thirty.

Vincent: Where you making art at that time? Is it something you’ve done throughout your life?

Colin: I’ve been doing it all my life. The whole family’s artistic. It’s just that a couple of us have kept it up more than others.

Vincent: Your work encompasses so many mediums. You’ve got glasswork, woodcarving, pokerwork, painting. What makes you decide on one of those for a particular work? Do you feel one expresses your work better than the others?

Colin: No, no. As an artist I want to explore all mediums. But by its own token … it’s just like another sheet of paper to me. Whether it be carving or the dimensional(?) type carvings, it’s like another piece of paper to me.

Vincent: In particular, with your painting, you combine … sometimes in the same piece … realistic aspects with very stylised pattern work. I’ve seen that in a lot of Aboriginal work. It’s quite an interesting approach. I mean, the only work I’ve seen of yours, obviously, is from the internet … but there’s one called ‘Sea Wasp’, ‘Billabong’, ‘The Bringing of Life’ … and in these cases the landscape is quite realistic. But then you’ve got a human being or an animal that’s very stylised. How did that style come about?

Colin: When I was a young fella making art or doing artefacts, the old fellas would come along and tell us what we could or couldn’t do, especially in the way of visual art. So rather than clash with one of the elders on imaging, I thought I’d create my own imaging, and cut out the problems of what’s (((??))) and what’s sacred. So I create imaging that can be shown to all without any restriction or cultural boundary. But also, I’d say that no matter what culture in the world, if you had somebody else come through you got a bit of their influence on it. And … I suppose it goes back to the Archibald Prizes, too. Because I wouldn’t be
able to compete in an area like traditional art ... my elders outdone me, a hundred to one. In European art, I liked the influence and wanted to learn how to do it. And my grandmother ... she was the one that kept praising me every time I done something different. So I suppose that’s where the major influence is for that. It’s diversity that I wanted to achieve.

Vincent: And what was her name?

Colin: Kathleen Davison(?). Her maiden name was Callaghan(?).

Vincent: I just wanted to discuss that diversity, because there are [also] canvases with a very flat perspective. The whole background might be the one colour, and then you’ve got an animal or some action happening ...

Colin: Well, [you] got a pair of them 3D glasses?

Vincent: Yeah.

Colin: Put ‘em on and have a look at my art then ... and you’ll see why [some of] my art is that way.

Vincent: Wow. Okay. I’ve got a pair of them somewhere. I’ll have to dig ‘em out.

Colin: Put ‘em on and look at the art, and you’ll see what I’m on about. All my art does it. Doesn’t matter if it’s the woodburning or the paintings.

Vincent: In some of your works you’ve got your own take on the X-ray style. What’s your understanding of that traditional style?

Colin: I’ve been trying to develop another form or style that [will] explain [information] to you, and you’ll remember the bulk of it ... Simplifying structures, and making them more specific, to bring them in-line with a more modern concept. With the edging ... it’s still traditional ... but all I’ve done is made it more uniform. [With] everything that I sketch like that, I’ll usually have three or four purposes in mind, not just the one purpose of doing it. At one stage there I was interested in doing posters. I started off with carving and stuff ... most of that art can be done into relief work and casting ... ‘cause I was interested in casting at one stage. So ----(?) comes out ----(?) for that.

Vincent: You said before that you’ve been making art since you were young, and that [the influence] was from your family. So [are your skills in] woodcarving and painting all from your family? Did you train professionally at any stage?

Colin: I was introduced to Australia’s top artists, but I wasn’t trained [‘professionally’] in any way. I’ll quote one of them, for you ... I’m “a raw product that has the potential”. That’s what they said when I was fourteen.

Vincent: What do you think are some of the common misconceptions about contemporary Aboriginal art amongst the general public?

Colin: The general public ... they think we’re all one mob. They tend to stereotype the art. [When they see my work] a lot of people will say, “They’re not dot paintings”. And I’ll say, “That’s because my mother’s mob didn’t do dot paintings. My father’s mob did, because the ----(?) like it.” Basically I’m trying to bring an old culture into a modern way ... a more open, domestic dialogue. And that will break down barriers.

Vincent: So reinvention is really important in keeping tradition alive, isn’t it?

Colin: Yeah.

Vincent: It may seem a bit like a contradiction in that way, but to keep tradition you have to reinvent it to a certain extent, don’t you?

Colin: Yeah. I see a lot at the art shows I go to. You’ve got a lot of contemporary young artists, and they’re coming out with some fantastic stuff. It’s just that I like more ----(?), in a lot of ways. Just for me to get to use European colours and that, it took a lot of mind-racking ... Am I stepping outside my boundary? Am I allowed to do this or not? And then all the old people started to come out with them colours. So that changed my mind (laughs). And that was about the 1980s.

Vincent: There was a big boom in contemporary Aboriginal art in the 80s, wasn’t there?

Colin: Yeah, but I never got to see it. There was a mate of mine(?) teaching a lot of people at that time ... ----(?) by sales, but I didn’t get into all that. In ’88 I was actually on strike. None of my art was for sale in the year of the invasion. I was politically sensitive to that one. You know, I come from La Perouse.

Vincent: That’s something I’d like to come back to ... but my next question was: what’s the general reaction from the public to your art, specifically?

Colin: A lot of the comments have been Mickey Mouse comments ... “You Beauts” ... and some people overseas have really loved the stories(?). But I haven’t had any negative comments.
Vincent: Do you think that ... for lack of a better word ... ‘urban’ Aboriginal artists don’t get enough attention in comparison to [remote communities] like Papunya? ‘Cause people wax lyrical about [that type of] art. I mean, it’s fantastic work, you could never deny that ... 

Colin: Yeah. No, that’s where a lot of the stereotype come from. ‘Cause they all thought we done dot art.

Vincent: And what I didn’t know ... Lloyd [Hornsby] pointed this out to me when I spoke to him ... a lot of that work is based on the European tradition of Pointillism.

Colin: Yeah, it is.

Vincent: No one can deny that those [Papunya] artworks are a very real expression of Aboriginal identity ... but there is an outside influence in them.

Colin: Oh, yeah. I point that out to a lot of people. Because they [go on about] the dot paintings, and I say, “Listen, let me explain something to you. Europeans have a lot of problems [understanding] our art [because of] the unilateral lines and stuff. So they come in with dots. That was a missionary influence. Then, all of a sudden, everybody’s looking at dot paintings as [representative of] Aboriginal Australia.” Mind you, there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just that some mob don’t belong to the dots, and some mob do. A lot of the suburban fellas that seem to get into it ... they’re looking for a connection, and trying to keep [their culture] alive in the best form they can think of.

Vincent: I’ve noticed that when I’ve spoken to a few artists on the south coast about the use of dots ... because it’s something that I still don’t quite understand ... I do get a bit of a mixed response. You know, I’ve had some people tell me, “Look, that’s not our tradition, so we try not to use it too often”. But then I’ve had other people say, “Look, you know, I can do what I want”.

Colin: Well, there are some who have boundaries in both camps, like I do ... because of my father and my mother. But usually the bulk of them people are all married into the one nation they come from. My parents didn’t. So, when I’m here ... New South Wales, east coast side ... it’s all New South Wales influence. And you do see parts of my father’s influence and tradition, with the dot paintings there. But the carvings stuff, that’s strictly a East coast - La Perouse area sort of thing ... the style of carvings. I mean, others do carvings, but not like La Perouse mob.

Vincent: I found it quite interesting that one of your paintings is titled “Dharawal”, and yet ... if we were to base it completely on stereotypes ... it looks a lot like desert art. Lots of dots, lots of earth colours. I just thought that was interesting, because Dharawal is eastern seaboard, very lush green environment ... and one would assume to see it painted like that.

Colin: Well, there’s traditional land, and there’s traditional spiritual culture that’s still found there. And who am I to change that? It’s just an inference to it.

Vincent: Okay. Well, tell me a bit about your father and where he came from.

Colin: My father, he’s a Noongar man. His tribal name is Marybone(?), which is the main family in western Australia ... the bottom half. Two-hundred-and-twenty-eight clan groups come under him ... or under my uncle. My father died. He came from South Bay [and the] Kimberley mob. That’s all our mob from our father’s side. And he passed away about ’94.

Vincent: Have you ever visited that country?

Colin: Once. And I was quickly escorted back across the border by the Federal police. (laughs)

Vincent: Do you want to tell me why?

Colin: Aww ... they just didn’t like my company. At the time they said, “You’ve got twenty-four hours to get across the border”, even though it’d take thirty-six hours.” (laughs) That was back in the early days. Nah, it’s just the people I was travelling with didn’t want to do the paper work over in Western Australia. And they were just told, “Don’t come in the state. Leave the state. Take whoever you’ve got with you”. And I was going home to finally get to have a visit, so I thought I’d grab a lift.

Vincent: Did your father talk to you a lot about that country?

Colin: Yeah, but more the cultural side. ‘Cause Dad looked at it this way ... “I’m here for a while, then I’ll eventually move back home”. And he talked about his mob(?). And I’ve been talking to them(?!) a lot.

Vincent: This is something I asked Lloyd, as well, because he’s a Yuin man who isn’t living in Yuin country ... While I’ve been doing this art history course at uni, we come across this term, ‘disporic’. And it essentially refers to people who have very strong connections to their homeland but no longer live there for a whole range of reasons ... 

Colin: Yeah. That’s me, too.
Vincent: ... because, to be honest, I forgot you were Noongar as well as Koori ... but it emphasises to me even more [your physical dislocation] from those two heritages, because you’re living in Northern New South Wales ...

Colin: Yeah. Well, you feel out of place, even amongst your own people. Growing up [in La Perouse], where everybody and my relations there all headed in and out ---- ----(?) my brothers and sisters have ---- ----(?), and that’s only because the Noongar spirit ---- ----(?).

Vincent: So do you feel perhaps that Northern New South Wales is a neutral place?

Colin: Well, in tribal days this was the homeground of my enemies. And I’m married to one. (laughs) But ... we get the word anawarg(?) from the Koories and the Murries that married ... create neutral ground between the two nations, and create a bumper(?) . So any battles will not be fought in the north, they’ll be fought in the south where there is no bumper(?) . I wouldn’t say, “Come on. We’re gonna get them fellas, over there, who are in-laws.” They’d expect you to come. Nor would they do that the other way ‘round. But if you had to take a choice, then to which interior do you move? Theirs or yours? Here, it’s a case of being the odd bod ... the new fella in town. Everyone just didn’t know me. Once they got to know me, they put me in charge of their politics, adopted me, and expect me to be the full-on leader for ‘em. So, their fight’s my fight. Because Kumara(?) is the continent we all sit on. We’re all counted as one, regardless of the nation we come from. We’re all subservient to that. God didn’t just make a little bit of Dharawal country and added some of the others later. He made the continent of Kumara(?) and shared between all the people ... created their nations. See how that works?

Vincent: Yeah, yeah. Just going back to art again, quickly ... Obviously, this is something you picked up at La Per ... you know, the traditional tool making ... Is that something you teach other people now?

Colin: Yeah, I’ve been teaching that ‘til early this year. I was teaching my ---- ----(?) how to make spears, ---- ----(?) out of stone, a couple of tommy axes and stuff, and we bound them with snow(?) . That was over at Walker(?) during NAIDOC week.

Vincent: Is it important for people to reconnect with those old practices?

Colin: Oh, yeah. Because who are you if you don’t know who you are and where you come from? I suppose we have a saying, initiated men are whole, but by not going through that extra step you are missing a piece. You don’t have that bora ring, you have a chip in it, so to speak. Traditionally it needs to be b----(?) . Like, you see a lot of these young fellas, contemporary artists ... or should I say suburban artists? ... do anything to get that cultural boundary ... and that’s indelible(?) in their ideology. They just seem to express it better. But I mean, anybody else on to something needs to know where it’s going. You see a lot of young fellas today – this is in the arts, ‘cos I come across it a lot – the influences that they have outside the art are totally non-Aboriginal ideology-type things ... they’re European suburbanism. But get ‘em sitting down there, or restrict their movements, and give them some [traditional] art to do, and they get right into that culture, it comes out in ‘em. And these young kids, they really impress me with some of the stuff they come out with.

Vincent: As I mentioned earlier, Lloyd Hornsby is another artist I’ve spoken to, and he said he’s been very inspired to mentor young Aboriginal men ... inspired by you to really get into that. Can you tell me a bit about your role as a mentor and some of the activities you do in your community?

Colin: Well, I suppose when I came here there wasn’t really any commercial art or tourism or anything. I came here hoping to learn more and it turned out I ended up being the teacher. But they were still expressing their cultural ideologies and from that we extracted visual art. That’s a case of sitting down with ‘em ... I mean, I’ve been doing it for thirty years now, on and off ... and now we’ve got an abundance of artists but no place to sell the stuff. I think that’s one of the downsides to most of the art ... seeing these young people coming up.

Vincent: Well, I suppose that comes back to the lack of appreciation for ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ art ...

Colin: Well, I’ll tell you what happened while I was down in Sydney. When I was doing traditional art I was competing with my elders, in which case ... I wasn’t very good competition then. And around about that time [people thought that] if it wasn’t done in ochres and stuff, it wasn’t traditional. But the argument is that if a traditional man is doing it, it is still traditional. When I was in Sydney, a lot of the art they were looking at there was a combination of [how] I was trying to ... you could say, integrate the arts, like that landscape [style] with traditional stuff in it we were talking about earlier. It was more to find better tools and mediums that left an impact with a minimum amount of effort as to translating and ... trying to reach people. That’s the direction I take back then, and I suppose I still do it.

Vincent: But in general you find that the type of art you, and the community around you, are making, is hard to sell?

Colin: Well, the ---- ----(?) seem to be selling a bit. We look at other countries and see how governments support indigenous people in their tourism. In Australia, it’s not propped up in the manner it should be. Most artists up and down the coast, when you’re going into the realm of eBay and stuff, are totally undervaluing their own art. They’re getting sales up [in that way], but at the same time ... between the quality ones and the ones that are starting to make a name for themselves amongst them ones, the prices are really hammered down because of just how much they sell them for on eBay and that. Like, we had people come here wanting to buy art for two-hundred or three-hundred dollars. Well, I was getting that when I was in Sydney thirty years ago. [I
haven’t] come all this way to sell my art for the same price. I think what it is ... money wasn’t an issue [then], it was just a need to supply?]. What I put into the art was actually me. The smaller stuff I’ve done ... I’ve done for the love of it.

Vincent: Yeah, I think it’s a real shame. I don’t think I’ve met any artist down this way who feels they could survive on [just] selling their art. I can’t think of any local Aboriginal artist I’ve met who doesn’t have to do another job as well.

Colin: Well, put it this way ... I’ve done every other job, and never made money out of art. I couldn’t survive on the art. I’ve had a whole bunch of substitutes to help finance that.

Vincent: Do you have any theories about how that might be remedied ... even if it does involve getting Government help in some way?

Colin: Put it this way, ---- ---- ---- ----(?). Government help, as far as the general or suburban [art scene is concerned]. But what I see a lot of comments about is, “You don’t come from a colourful(?).” Now, that’s stupidity because all of Australia is colourful areas. The second thing people always ask me is, “Can you put your skin or tribal name on it?” And I say, “What for?” And they say, “They’ll buy it faster”. And I say, “Hey, I’m not selling my skin name and I’m not selling it as a gimmick. They buy the art from Colin Isaacs regardless of those other names.” If I was a writer [working] under a pseudonym, that’s fine, that’s acceptable. But artists [tend to] want their name that they use in everyday life on their work. We used to find that [buyers weren’t receptive] if you didn’t have a traditional name ... or [were from] an area they didn’t consider traditional, [like if you were] living in Sydney, in suburbia. And I think the bulk of Aboriginal people identify La Perouse, Sydney, and other towns, as traditional tribal areas, regardless of what the modern world see them as. All the sites around down that way ... and land that doesn’t even have the sites on it [anymore] ... I consider that sacred land.

Vincent: Well, that’s something I’d also like to talk about. But just before we leave the topic of working in the community ... in regards to the kids, specifically, do you think art is an integral part of encouraging that sense of pride in their identity?

Colin: Yeah. There’s not much left that we can identify with other than the land we’re walking on, for a lot of areas. So the next thing beside the colour or(?). the pictures is the ideology of what you express. And they just have to learn to express their cultural grassroots, which is kind of like ---- ----(?). It just comes out natural when you put a pencil or a paintbrush in front of them.

Vincent: Where you live in Inverell, what’s the traditional tribal name there?

Colin: Gurrabull(?).

Vincent: What’s your understanding of Baiame, or the Baiame religion? Would you call it a religion?

Colin: It’s not a religion as youse know it.

Vincent: Yeah. It’s something a bit untranslatable, I find, between European and Aboriginal culture.

Colin: Yeah. It’s like money. We’d use ochre, and youse would use dollars and gold. (laughs) But Baiame is why I am here. Baiame is everything that we are, because we are only a piece of his imaging. We’ve got a lot of expectations to live up to. ‘Baiame’ translated is the ‘Great Spirit’. People call him God, in Christianity, the Muslims call him Allah, but each culture in the world that has been visited by this spirit would have their own interpretation of the name they call him. I’m quite subservient to him. As far as I’m concerned, I work for him. I’m privileged to have great kids and a normal family life.

Vincent: Do you ever watch that show, ‘Living Black’, on SBS?

Colin: Yeah, occasionally I do.

Vincent: A few weeks ago they had a segment on how Islam is the fastest growing religion amongst Aboriginal Australians. And I’m just asking different people whether they feel that Abrahamic religions are reconcilable with Aboriginal spiritualities. Because, like you just said, to you, Baiame is the equivalent of an all powerful God.

Colin: Of what you call God, yes. It’s the same person. After all, you can’t have too many Gods running around on the one planet. We have one true God, and those are what we believe him to be a symbol of(?). Like, Christianity, we are blessed to have faith and belief without having to see. But more so with ours, no one take’s that name in vain, where, in Christianity and European countries, they quite frequently use their God’s name in vain. We don’t. But we don’t even know how to swear properly in language. We used to bastardise our language.

Vincent: (laughs) I’m surprised you’ve said that, because at times, when I’ve asked people how much traditional language they know, they’ll say, “Enough to swear in”. So they basically joke that some of the few words they still know are the swear words.

Colin: (laughs) Nah, look, if I was to swear at you in traditional manner, I’d be running the crap out of your parents and grandparents. But it still wouldn’t be defamatory words, it would be the attitude.

Vincent: So what’s your opinion about the revival of languages?
Colin: [They] should never have been lost, and [the revival] should have been done years ago.

Vincent: One of the other fellas down this way that I’m hoping to interview [is] Vic Chapman. He’s [originally] from ...

Colin: Say hello to him for us.

Vincent: Oh, you know him, do you?

Colin: Yeah.

Vincent: Well, when I went around his place, he was telling me about the revival of the Yuwaalaraay [language] ... is that how you say it?

Colin: Yep.

Vincent: And he was really excited about it, you know. They’ve got books and everything. It was pretty spectacular.

Colin: See, things like that ... You put all of these things back, or [put] the basic things back, and you’ll find all the trouble that’s been happening for the last thirty, forty, fifty years become the tail-end of (?) things. Culture and language – when you start putting them back, you put pride of place back. But more so, you bring the connection to Country back ... with everybody. And not just that individual, because that one can influence a hundred. That’s the way we look at it.

Vincent: If it reached the stage where non-Aboriginal kids were being taught [Aboriginal languages] ...

Colin: So they should.

Vincent: You agree with that?

Colin: Yep.

Vincent: ‘Cause I wasn’t taught anything in school about Aboriginal history, in general, and definitely not about my local area. And when I left school and started finding these things out for myself, I felt very cheated [that I hadn’t been told previously]. We’ve got such a rich history here in the Illawarra, and I think getting kids, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to learn the local indigenous language, would be very special.

Colin: When we look at South Africa, which country was its twin? You’ll find Australia was its twin. We got jailed six months, or something like that, for speaking our language in front of whites. The bigotry that was there still needs to be removed in the social ideology of funding, to allow more access ... to redeem that. They spend millions going looking for the old diggers from the [World] Wars. Yet they won’t spend hardly anything just to bring our people back home.

Vincent: Well, it’s like Lloyd said ... they spent forty-eight million dollars on that bloody campaign to get the soccer world cup here, and yet we’ve got people telling us down here that there’s not enough money to do anything about conserving the rock art here.

Colin: That’s right.

Vincent: And as Lloyd said, that’s just bullshit. [These things just] aren’t being prioritised ...

Colin: [It’s] not so much bullshit [as] ... what they call genocide in action. And it’s perpetrated in two parts ... By lack of cultural awareness, and the ignorance of bigotry. Why would you spend all that money lodging an application with not a chance of getting through? Because they’re rigged things. I used to wonder why they spent so bloody much sending people up to the moon when there’s all these starving people? Why would other countries go and work on nuclear research when their country’s starving? It used to really confuse me, but they call that politics. Politics allows you to let your people starve and go without. It’s like this stupid war they’re doing. Went from one war to a couple of wars in different countries, and who’s paying for it? The Australian people. And more so where they slashed the funding for this, this and that ... especially the Aboriginal section of it ... They shouldn’t have been allowed to touch that, because it’s not our war. The Government has enough resources of their own to do this without creating a shortfall. And the war is just an excuse for it.

Vincent: I just wanted to talk about the rock art down this way. Were you familiar with that when you were growing up as a boy?

Colin: Yep. I’ve got a piece of stone from one of ‘em, and a piece of ochre.

Vincent: And when we first spoke about a month ago, you said you were one of the last people with training or authority to maintain [some of the art]...

Colin: My aunty was. My Aunty May Timbery. She’s the one that chooses ---- ---- ----(??) relations, who’s gonna do it, and who’s got permission to go and do it. She still gives me permission. I can’t give myself permission. It doesn’t matter how many years
ago she give it to me, it’s still current. But I’m not the elder that has that [authority] … I’m one of the ones who’s subservient to her, to do that on her behalf.

Vincent: Aunty May Timbery? Is she still with us?

Colin: Yeah. She’s about eighty-four … something like that.

Vincent: So what does that process involve? Does she see a site that needs a bit of maintenance and …

Colin: Well, they were [originally] re-done every so many years … [but] since the Europeans incursion on our doorstep, they haven’t been done for about two-hundred years.

Vincent: I’m not aware of any ochre works that have been repainted, but I know that definitely the engravings, which are very unique to Sydney, were continually re-grooved, maybe as part of …

Colin: Well, see the one they keep showing … the orca, the killer whale?

Vincent: I’ve seen a few of them.

Colin: That one, more so, was usually [done by] the warriors. So they’d all sit down and participate in putting their mark there as they gone through their stages.

Vincent: So it’s your understanding that those engravings definitely were part of ceremonies?

Colin: They are ceremonies, not ‘a part of’. Everything else is attached to the carvings there. Not the carvings attached to the ceremony. That’s what I [understand].

Vincent: Okay. And was it a case of the [re]carving renewing the spiritual aspect of [the site]?

Colin: Well, everything’s spiritual … everything that was done. [Maintenance depended on] a particular time of year, a particular type of classification, and would have been in the ranks of clan groups. And then you would have had elders … elders with authority, who would be a sentinel for each site or the clan groups. You put all the clan groups together and you’ve got all the symbols.

Vincent: And did the kudaitcha have any role in regards to engravings? What’s your understanding of the kudaitcha?

Colin: Well, they’re law men. Plus there was different ranks of clever fellas. It’s starts off with clever fella as the lowest rank. Then they go up to … say, emu men, then dingo men … stuff like that. You also had the ochre men, then the kudaitcha. But the emu fellas, they’re on top of that. There’s all different ranks of kudaitchas, and they all have different names as well. But they’re one of your law men. He’s more like your moral conscious for your tribe and your people. Also, the tribes that might come to visit … Each mob had their own ochre men and clever fellas. My Uncle Harry Callaghan(?), he was the last initiated man going through the b-----(?) at Armidale … back in the ‘40s. That’s what he was, one of the kudaitchas.

Vincent: Did you know him, personally?

Colin: Yeah. He was there for most of my young life. When I started to go to highschool … that’s when he passed away.

Vincent: And so … to your knowledge, he was the last?

Colin: For that area. I don’t say last for all the other areas that belong to Dharawal … Just that he was the last initiated men. And I remember it well, ‘cause they had some unusual things happening there. Some of the old people used to sit down and make sure we knew all the stories back to front and front to back. And we’ve kept the same stories for most of our lives.

Vincent: We were talking about the revival of language, earlier. I don’t mean to underestimate how big an ordeal it would be to revive language … but do you think initiations are something that could ever be revived, or that people would want to have revived again?

Colin: Well, let me ask you, as a fisherman … if I throw a net out and it didn’t have all the links, how much fish would get away? It’s like the fishing net. Everything that’s in our culture is connected. And where the knot is, that’s where the secular(?) is. Every other piece in between allows extension and shrinking … whether it be your mob or your ideology. But it’s all redeemable(?). I can take one or two words from my language, or any language, and revive that language with the right people. The Dharawal mob … They’ve had it, lost it, had it again, lost it, and had it back again … as far as culture and language [is concerned]. That’s over a fair few years, but the history of La Perouse is that(?) the kudaitchas come back and teach everybody. But the last lot that came back … I was a young kid then. I was around about eight [years old].

Vincent: This isn’t a question I had planned to ask. I only just thought of it now, sorry.
Colin: Alright.

Vincent: What’s your understanding of the reasoning behind [the practice of] subincision?

Colin: Well, see ... with that one, we’re kind of bordering on ... I can’t ...

Vincent: No, no. That’s fine. If you don’t want to answer that, that’s fine.

Colin: Yeah. I like living. *(laughs)*

Vincent: *(laughs)* It’s just something that intrigues me, because I’ve heard a lot of different theories thrown about as to why it was done. But, anyway ...

Colin: Basically, it’s to do with health. Health. That’s about the nearest thing I can tell you about it.

Vincent: Yep. That’s fine. We’ll move on. Still in regards to the rock art ... and I’ve discussed this with a lot of people who have a general idea but no [conclusive theories] ... What’s the purposes of the hand stencil? Is it as simple as, “I was here”?

Colin: It’s also another thing. If he’s chasing you, he can come through those hands and find out where you are.

Vincent: Arr ...

Colin: You understand that then?

Vincent: Yep.

Colin: The old fellas used that. You’ll find in most of my [canvas] paintings [that] there’s hardly any hands in it. There’s only a couple.

Vincent: ‘The one of the kudaitcha has hands in it, doesn’t it?’

Colin: Yes. That’s ‘cause he’s allowed to come through there. *He’s got* *(?)* to come through everywhere else that I do my art. Look ... the old clever fellas would link up ... like a phone link up. It’s a psychic thing between that handprint and the energy of the person that put it there. It can be used. Put it this way ... If I upset someone up in the Northern Territory, and I took off ‘cause I know they’re after me, and I’m going all around the country to keep ahead of ‘em ... while I’m doing that, that’s fine. But the moment I run into a handprint that’s traditionally done, and I look at it ... I’m in Shit Street. I gotta get out of there, real fast. That’ll give you [an idea] of the kind of magnitude ... ‘Cause they’ll zoom in on you straight away, them old clever fellas.

Vincent: I didn’t think of that. That’s interesting.

Colin: Well, because I’m more traditional ----*(?)*, that never leaves my ----*(?)* ... anything to do with the spiritual side.

Vincent: ‘Cause there’s variations, aren’t there? There’s the outlined ones, where ochre was blown over the hand. And then there’s the actual prints, where the hand was obviously rubbed in paint ...

Colin: Yeah, but the moment I put my hand there, I put my word there, my honour there, my energy there. I’ve allowed others to use that like a network on the computer, for those who have the ability. Doesn’t matter if it’s the outline or the actual print of the hand itself. The symbol is recognisable by psychic abilities. I can’t find words to explain it.

Vincent: No, no, I get what you’re saying. Aunty Barbara Nicholson told me that rock art is proof of Aboriginal sovereignty. And yet there’s nothing really being done to conserve the rock art down here ... by the Government or the National Parks ...

Colin: Well, you need two things to happen. One, people need to jump up and down about it consistently and often enough ‘til they do something about it. And two, to foster ---- ---- ---- ---- *(?)* into the Government’s domain.

Vincent: Do you think even on a subconscious level the Government’s lack of conservation is an attempt to get rid of that proof of Aboriginal sovereignty?

Colin: Definitely. That’s what it is. Put it this way ... If I wanted you to go away, I’d remove your flag and remove everything that says you’re of English descent. [I’d] tell you you’re Australian now, and this is what is, and this is what you’re going to be. But at no time did I ask you. At the end of the day, you’ll only have one opinion. They’re trying to deprive me of my heritage, my rights, and my sovereignty. It definitely is an attempt to remove that. And like I said, the word ‘genocide’ just keeps showing up in my mind when it comes to these things.

Vincent: Yeah. Genocide means the destruction of culture as well as the actual people.
Colin: That’s right. It’s coming up to two-hundred-and-twenty-two years [of European occupation] ... and I’d say it’s less than seventy-five years ago that people began to take notice [of our culture]. I mean, we can’t expect everything to change over night, with attitudes and everything ... but we can expect the Government to be a bit more consistent with what they’re doing. You can get help for just about everything else in Australia. Why not rock art?

Vincent: Well, just this year they amended their rules on consultation with Aboriginal people in regard to heritage sites. But to me it’s still tokenism, because at the end of the day the Government has this thing called Area 3A ... and it doesn’t matter what consultation has taken place, it doesn’t matter what people have said, the final decision always rests with the Minister for Development and Planning. The two main things affecting rock art are ... the natural weathering, which, along with pollution and the absence of maintenance, will continue to happen. The other thing is that there’s just blatant destruction sanctioned by the Government, for development. So the irony is that the National Parks and Wildlife Service is meant to protect rock art, but in many cases it’s responsible for [the destruction] ...

Colin: There’s a lot more to this National Parks and Wildlife Service than a lot of people realise ... on a political level. When they had the meeting to decide what they were going to do with the Aboriginal money, and they decided to put it into the National Parks and Wildlife Service ... they chucked all the Aboriginal elders out of the meeting while they discussed that, and then let them back in after that. So if you think we’re best buddies with National Parks and Wildlife … we’re not. I’ll do stuff with ‘em, but I’m not a real fan or supporter of them.

Vincent: Specifically around the Sydney region, one of the ideas that has been floated around is to take guided tours [of the sites] and make money [for their conservation] that way.

Colin: Well, see, you have another problem. Even though it’s our rock art, if we were to go there and start working on it and doing stuff, they’d send out the National Parks [rangers] and say, “You can’t touch that”. That’s the problem with maintenance. There’s no interaction between the established owners and those custodians who would say they are [the traditional owners]. Those caretakers aren’t appointed by us, the [Aboriginal] people, they’re appointed by the Government.

Vincent: Yeah, I haven’t heard too many Aboriginal people say good things about the Aboriginal people working in the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Colin: Yeah. Each has a symbol in it.

Vincent: I just wanted to talk specifically about some of your artworks now. You’ve got a two-part painting called “Coastline Creation”. Can you tell me a bit about that one?

Colin: Well, I don’t hold them to blame for how things are. Half of them do have cultural qualifications. But the other half are what you call ‘coconuts’, because they’re only interested in the money, and they had nothing to do with their people prior to that. It’s a job with Aboriginal art that they think they’re qualified for because they’re Aboriginal. That’s not to say everyone is like that. I’ve got relations that work with the National Parks, but they’re restricted by the boundaries of the guidelines they’re given. You can’t blame them for the boss’s directions.

Vincent: And is that a specific landscape?

Colin: It’s an area coming from Kempsey to Armidale. You see all the funny hills there, where all the hills? and ridges start to break up ... the sharp declines and stuff?

Vincent: One of the paintings I wanted to ask you about was the one called “Dharawal” … we’ve sort of already touched on that. But you’ve also got a three part painting called ‘Walkabout Track’, which is sort of in the same style.

Colin: Yeah. It’s actually talking about tribes and boundaries ... different land groups that were in the one area. That’s more what that’s about. And the totems ... Each symbol in it is a totem for that clan group. It’s like ... as a tribe we had the whale ... As an individual, the squint(?) wallaby, for me.

Vincent: I’m assuming you’re referring to three specific tribes [by using a triptych]?

Colin: Yeah. Each has a symbol in it.

Vincent: Can you tell me what tribes they are?

Colin: Well, one of the groups up here ... there’s the C----(?) clan groups, and they’re cousins. Like, I’m extended family to ‘em. So I do a bit for them, and they do a bit for me.

Vincent: When I first spoke to you, I asked you about the [painting of] Dubay Mountain, ‘cos that’s just such a powerful image. And I know that there’s parts of it that you can’t tell me [about] ...
Colin: Actually there’s a whole heap of stuff [in it] I can’t tell you about. (laughs) It’s one of them hills where ... there’s a women’s site up there ...

Vincent: And that’s further down on the south coast?

Colin: Yeah. Going towards ... aww, what do they call it?

Vincent: Galugua?

Colin: No.

Vincent: Pigeonhouse?

Colin: Pigeon Top Mountain. It’s down towards that, on the far south coast.

Vincent: And that rock is the embodiment of ...?

Colin: Well, that side on top ... us men just never went up there. Mostly I was just paying homage to women [with the painting]. And it signifies that they have laws and rules too. A lot of people, in the ideologies, think that women had no say, no nothing. Well, they did. Like, up here, the matriarch rules. Down home, it wasn’t the matriarch that ruled, but the matriarch had a heavy influence in what was ‘coming down’.

Vincent: I can’t remember the name of the author, but I read a really interesting article about why there’s that perception ... that women didn’t have their own rules and laws. It’s essentially because when Europeans started doing anthropological work, it was often European men ...

Colin: Yep.

Vincent: ... and so there was a reluctance or obviously a necessity not to talk to women about specific things. So a lot of the recorded knowledge about Aboriginal spirituality comes from the men’s perspective.

Colin: Yeah, well that would explain why that [knowledge] is missing [from anthropological records]. See, even for me, as an Aboriginal going into another tribe with a big Mama (?) in that area, wanting to do research, I cannot go up and talk to the big Mama direct myself. I have to use a liaison. It’s what customary law sets down. Back a few years ago, we were having a big party here, and my sister-in-law was at the door handing out the tickets. She would have to walk away from that door while I go through. And when I’ve gone through, she can come back to the door and collect tickets off everybody else. And that’s going back into the traditional strictness. So ... you didn’t approach the women. The women approached the women. So where you’ve got a lot of writers and authors [who] were male, back in the early ‘40s and everything, you won’t find much with women’s business in it. That would be one factor. And the other [is] the isolation and suppression of culture during those times.

Vincent: I don’t want to go into it too deeply, but I just wanted to ask ... That scenario you just told me about, with your sister-in-law ... Is it a case of you never being able to speak to her, or is it just in special circumstances ....?

Colin: I can speak to her and that, but it would be considered culturally ‘out of place’. But in the modern world it seems to be more casual, the association with your wife’s sisters (?). It’s like ... if some woman got hit and she was bleeding, under traditional law we would be shamed to look at her, because of the insult of her bleeding and us men not knowing anything about it.

Vincent: One of the other paintings I’m pretty sure we spoke about ... but I can’t remember what you said about it, I’m sorry ... was called “Firesticks”.

Colin: Firesticks?

Vincent: Yeah. It’s on your website. It’s of a rocky cliff face with plants growing of it, and it’s got very different shades of light coming through.

Colin: Oh yeah.

Vincent: That one just intrigues me. What’s the story behind that one?

Colin: Kirriwee (?) ... he was the fella that invented fire, and he used to cook up and everything. And Nullidjan (?), he was watching Kirrawee (?) with the fire, cooking, and smelling the food and that. And he decided he wanted some, but he didn’t know how to get the old fella to teach him. So Nullidjan (?), he waited ‘til he went to sleep after having a big meal and [was] filled up, and he snuck down and took the firestick, took it back to his tribe, and started showing them how it worked and how to cook and all that. Anyway, Kirrawee (?) woke up, thinking I’ll cook another fish and all this, and he couldn’t find his firesticks. He seen the footprints going off in the distance, and he followed Nullidjan (?)’s prints. When he caught up with him, he took the
firesticks back and said, “You only had to ask. You didn’t have to steal it.” So he turned Nullidjban(?) into a bat so he’d never feel the warmth and the rays of the sunlight and of fire. So that’s that story.

Vincent: So is Nullidjban(?) the word for bat?

Colin: No, that’s just the name of the individual who stole the firesticks and shared ‘em out with all the rest of us. (laughs)

Vincent: All your woodcarvings are really fantastic, but the one that I just think is so powerful is ... I think it’s an echidna ... the one where the face is coming out of the top of the echidna.

Colin: That’s a carving all in itself. That’s like ... In the old days we weren’t allowed to eat the echidna if it was travelling. If it stopped and burrowed in or something, we could grab him and eat him. Otherwise, the old clever fellas sent the message with him, the echidna. That’s why a lot of the messages never got through. They got eaten. The more older people would understand what I’m talking about there ... with the message in the animals. That’s what that [carving]’s about.

Vincent: Okay. ‘Cause I’ve noticed the echidna appears in quite a lot of your work.

Colin: Yeah, because there’s a message to go everywhere.

Vincent: Okay. That’s interesting. And some of your other sculpture works ... on your website, obviously ... you’ve got one called “Message Stick” and [another called] “Pelican”. Can you tell me a bit about those two?

Colin: Yep. Let’s see ... A lot of the work that I do doesn’t have so much kangaroos as the main feature, or koalas, or things like that, because they’re all like stereotype art things(?) . I’ve concentrated on the little things that are not normally spoken about or done. So it’s a case of imaging in another way to emphasise that there’s more to this than what is generally done. ‘Cause all the little pieces have got to go in. That’s what they’re about. And see with the artefacts I do ... Now, I done a full set, and one fella come over to me and said, “What’s this thing here? This little stone ...” And I said, “That’s a dagger.” [And he said] “But we didn’t see Aboriginals with daggers and that.” And I said, “Well, that’s because they’re not east coast Dharawal mob.” Our mob, and central desert mob ... the Timbery family, and the Northern Territory [peoples] ... had daggers too. Sister ----(?) used to say, “Give me a piece of information about one little missing piece they just didn’t know about or think about.” So [it’s the] same with “Message Stick” and stuff like that. It’s just to put the ideology in without treading on other elders’ toes by putting a cultural word in that they wouldn’t want to be there. Like, I don’t use the wording ‘Dreaming’ too much. That’s very rare that you’ll find that attached to my work, because I don’t believe in stereotyping or over-abusing the use of that ideology. At one stage there you couldn’t buy a painting unless it was “something Dreaming”. That used to piss me off. (laughs)

Vincent: Well, this is a bit different ... Last year I went up to stay in Yirrkala for a month, with the artist, Banduk Marika. And she told me that she doesn’t use the word ‘Dreaming’ either ... Not for that reason, that it’s over-used, but [because] it’s not actually a very good translation of what ...

Colin: We do.

Vincent: ... Yeah ... of what [is referred] to as ‘Dreaming’.

Colin: Yeah, that’s along the same lines. It’s the commercial side I don’t like. Like I said, I use my own name rather than the tribal name as a gimmick to sell it. They should like my art as my art, not for what my name is.

Vincent: And what about the “Pelican”?

Colin: The carving? Well, he’s a full branch, turned upside-down, and then carved. Like, the wings [are] the branches going up in the tree, in the feet plus the ----(?) . And I just got a tommy axe, chopped him out, because back home we’re always used to pelicans coming into La Per and squatting down. And they’re a powerful bird. Great imaging. At the same time, the white fig tree was delivered by the pelican. And that’s a part of our Dreaming. Shall I tell you that story?

Vincent: Yeah. Go for it. I’d love to hear it.

Colin: What it was was ... Baiame looked down upon the earth when he heard all this noise and yelling and screaming, and wanted to see what was going on with his creation. And when he looked down he seen everybody playing and having fun and singing out to each other, and showing respect to the elders, and helping them and everything, and he was impressed. He turned around to the pelican and the eagles and the finches, and said, “Now, look. Go to my garden there. Take out one of the white fig tree, and take it down to this mob. And give it to them as a gift for the respect and love that they show one another. I’m impressed. And I give them this tree under that condition. Anyway, everyone’s down on the ground playing around having a good time, and then a shadow comes across the land, real dark. And they looked up and they see the tree coming down from heaven with the pelicans and all the birds holding on to the leaves, the finches. Finishes, big thunder in the ground stamped in, and all the elders come up with the rest of the mob behind ‘em. And they’re looking at the tree, and they’re lookin’ at the big mob of birds in there. The pelican, he walked forward. He said, “Baiame gives you this gift for the respect and love you show each other. This is yours for while ever you do this.” Anyways, a few years pass, and a drought come across the land. And then the
next year the drought got worse. ---- ---- ----(?) of habit. People were walking long distance from their ----(?), and struggling under ----(?). One fella says, “Aww. Alright, I’ll just take a couple extra white figs ‘cause I have walk so far to come back here.” The next fella come along, and he decided to do the same thing. Before long, everybody’s fighting over this white fig ‘cause there wasn’t enough to be shared around. And they’re all accusing and blaming each other. And Baiame heard all this screaming and yelling and that, and he’s thinking, “I wonder what my creations are up to today. I’ll go and have a look”. So he ----(?) in down upon the earth, and there’s everybody fighting and arguing and bickering at the white fig. And he listened, and he understood. And he said, “This’ll never do. Pelican, come here. Get the finches and the sparrows and the eagles, and go down and rip my tree out, and bring it back to me.” And so they did. And while they done this, the pelican stood forward, and all the elders stopped bickering over it, and turned around and said to the pelican, “Pelican, if this is a gift from Baiame, and it’s ours, why you tearing it out and try to take it away from us?” And he answered, “Baiame has given me a message to give to you. This gift was given to you for the love and respect you shared amongst each other. Until you do this again, and become one, he will take this tree back to heaven, otherwise it will wilt in the greed and spite that’s here. So they took it back, and all the elders sat down and talked amongst each other, and said, “Yes, we have got to come together as one. And when we get our white fig tree back, we’ll share it amongst ourselves as well as the other nations around us.” So today, we all still wait for the One to come, to help bring the white fig tree back. So that’s that story. Does that make sense to you?

Vincent: Yeah, yeah, definitely. I mean, I haven’t heard too many Dreaming stories, and that’s definitely one I haven’t heard.

Colin: Well, that one is a Dharawal one. And that one is the name of my new company. White Figtree.

Vincent: Oh okay. An art company?

Colin: No. We’e a conglomerate. How can I say it …? We’re creating a new breed of business people. And it’s about ----(?) the market ----(?), What’ll happen is … It’s like that story. The fruits from this business will be shared amongst the rest of us. It’s not just for my mob. But it’s our private company.

Vincent: Well, very best of luck with it. I hope it takes off.

Colin: Oh, it’s ---- ---- ----(?) now. Like, I’ve got UN and World Health and all that, using our products. We’re well on the way to being a full-on … ‘You beaut, we can help ya’ type of people.

Vincent: Good on ya. One of the other pieces I wanted to ask you about was the painted tortoise shell … turtle shell.

Colin: Yeah. It’s got a history.

Vincent: Is it a real shell, or is it something you carved?

Colin: No, it’s a real one.

Vincent: And I noticed … Is it a whale painted on the front?

Colin: Yep. Well, that’s my mob. And you wouldn’t paint a turtle on a turtle shell. (laughs) Nah, it’s just that the arch of the whale and the arch of the turtle shell … they’re the same shape. So I put something [on it] that says ‘me’ and ‘my mob’. Well, I’ll tell you [the history] … The turtle itself was killed in 1950. And the age of the turtle at the time it was killed was about two-hundred-and-fifty, two-hundred-and-forty years. It was hanging on the side of a barn for about seventy years. My brother was up there helping them to clean up and he asked them about this old turtle shell, and they said, “You can have it”, because it was all peeling off … the shiny stuff. But I decided to get it painted up and not let it go to waste. It’s also that … he might be deceased, but let me put something on you to remind you that you had life too … that you’ve been through that journey. So that’s what we do to the turtle shell. It has a spirit that needed to be honoured.

Vincent: A lot of your pokerwork … I mean, I was asking you about it last time … you said they’re very large pieces.

Colin: Yes. Six foot by four foot.

Vincent: They’re very detailed as well.

Colin: A lot of people see ‘em as real detailed …

Vincent: You don’t?

Colin: Not as much as I’d like to do ‘em.

Vincent: Okay. The one, in particular, that I wanted to ask about … I mean, most of them on your website are untitled … It depicts an ocean scene with whales and dolphins and sharks, and you’ve got this old fella, cross-legged, [and] I’m assuming [he’s] teaching the children around him about these animals.

Colin: Oh yes. That’s a six foot by four foot wood-burning.
Vincent: What does that [one] depict?

Colin: Well, it’s more about ----? grounds. And the symbol further up [near] the top of the wood-burning ... like circular shapes ...

Vincent: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that ...

Colin: ... they’re harbours. They’re like from Kempsey, Sydney, Wollongong, Nowra.

Vincent: Okay. ‘Cause I was wondering about them. I thought, well, they’re not an animal ...

Colin: Nah, nah. It’s just to say, this is the harbour, and this is the river system that feeds that harbour.

Vincent: Okay. That’s interesting. The other two ... they’re a bit different in style. For lack of a better word, they’re a bit more ‘realistic’ ... “Irawarra” and “Kudicher”. Is that how you pronounce it ... Irawarra?

Colin: Yeah.

Vincent: I remember you telling me about that one when we first spoke. Can you tell me about that one again?

Colin: The Irawarra one is the one with the waratah in it. It’s just to remind me of home ... [from] homesickness. And then, with “Kudicher” and that, that’s more to explain ... I think the word is astro-travelling.


Colin: That’s our version of that, with them old clever fellas. That’s to say they ride on the breath of the wind.

Vincent: Feather-foot.

Colin: Feather-foot, clever men ... they all do that.

Vincent: And that’s one of the few works with the hand in them.

Colin: Yeah. It’s specifically there for him to let youse know that he ---- ---- ---- (?) other people’s energy.

Vincent: Well, I’m really glad I asked you about that, ‘cause that’s one thing I hadn’t considered. You’ve got a painting called “Wik”.

Colin: Wik? Oh, that was from all the politics ...

Vincent: You wanna tell me about your involvement in that campaign?

Colin: Yeah, well, I went to the Wik debate, and the Government was trying to seize land and everything ... as they all are. And seven of the major conglomerate companies were in Australia. And what I did with the Wik painting was to just point out what we did ... what our role was. While everyone was debating that, and arguing that, we rung ATSIC up at that time and was talking to ‘em about it. And what it was ... they didn’t know about displaced people’s land court case. And so we explained that to ‘em and then they went back in to bat, and that’s when it got really intense there. Soon as they realised what we were talking about, that’s when they started talking about charging them gabbars for treason ... the pollies. That’s because this was a court case done, and they had no right to be arguing Wik in that manner. So, the idea there ... if we done the painting, the imaging ... we took them on and knocked a couple of them out of play. So that’s what that painting is about. That’s more the politics ... in the old style.

Vincent: So it’s a depiction of a victory?

Colin: Yeah.

Vincent: Once again, I don’t know if this is something you want to talk about ... I vaguely remember you telling me that when we do the interview you’ll elaborate on it a bit more. When I first spoke to you about a month ago you said you’d just been in court over another land rights issue, I think it was.

Colin: That was a sovereignty issue.

Vincent: You want to tell me a bit about that one? I’m assuming sovereignty is something you’re very involved with.

Colin: Yeah, that’s my goal. There’s a whole allegiance of us that don’t want the Native Titles and other crap like that. We want our sovereignty fully restored. So there’s a whole bunch of us patriots. But once we got it, we don’t mind integrating it. But we’d like to have a say how our mobs are integrated(?), not the Government telling us what they’re going to integrate for us. The argument that was on ... the court thing ... was social injustice, and the sovereignty, and the laws of occupation that we’re currently judged under. At the same time, under tribal law ... you done the crime, you get punished, [and] that’s it, it’s never
mentioned again. Under European law, that’s just an excuse to keep using it, to hold you back and pull you down. But what the argument was there, was First People of the First Nation of the continent of Kumara (?). I had my own sovereignties and laws and culture, and I have to stand by them. I’m guilty of nothing more than ---- (?) under my law, let alone under white law. Because the laws they’re talking about are similar laws. We have similarities in our laws, even though ours are more moral.

Vincent: And what was the result of that case?
Colin: Well, they gave us a token slap on the wrist and chucked us out. No fines, no nothing.
Vincent: So what had you actually done that they took you there?
Colin: Being the victim of assault by police.
Vincent: Oh, okay.
Colin: Mind you, everyone said two (?) attempted murders by the police.
Vincent: And they haven’t been picked up for it?
Colin: They will be. The courts might have finished with their part of the criminal prosecution of that law, but I’ll go pick it up and take it home to civil law, and they’ll take it a lot further than what they can under criminal law. It’s already half a done deal. I have confidence.
Vincent: One of the things I think I’m going to argue in my thesis is that, particularly with south coast Aboriginal art, in comparison to European art ... I mean, there are notable exceptions ... but I think European perceptions of the land are very literal. Whereas whenever I see Koori art I see another dimension there ...
Colin: Yep.
Vincent: ... It strikes me that it doesn’t matter what injustices are done to the Aboriginal people ... when I see their art, I’m always reminded of that saying, “This always was and always will be Aboriginal land”.
Colin: We’re all taught that.
Vincent: I see that every time I look at a Koori artwork. It just shows me there’s positivity there ...
Colin: Yep.
Vincent: ... Which is ironic considering just how much injustice has been inflicted upon Aboriginal people in regards to their land ...
Colin: They want to make it stronger.
Vincent: ... Do you think that’s too simplistic a reading of that?
Colin: No, no, no. That’s a ---- (?) statement. Like, with my art, the affinity with the land is because I know that land ... everything that’s in it and on it. But by the same token, I don’t need to be there to know what it smells like. The bottom line is my great-grandfather never surrendered this land, neither did his son, neither did his grandson, nor myself. So as far as we’re all concerned it’s still our land. Everybody’s just occupying stolen property. That’s to put it in a blunt phrase. We have community people that come and ask Aboriginal communities if they can buy the land, even though they don’t have to ask us. Them people that done that, they show a lot more respect, because they talk to community. The others just took an ---- of what they assume will be right(?). That’s my opinion.
Vincent: I think even though there are problems with consultation ... I agree with you. I think it’s important for people to show that respect. But I feel that on some level it will always be tokenistic until it’s actually a legal obligation to consult with Aboriginal people, and actually take on board their concerns.
Colin: By the same token, the Aboriginal people have got to get off their arses and become more proactive. It’s fine to sit there and say, “We need this funding”, but we got things done long before funding was invented. The motivation, in the last few years especially, has been turn out the bottom of where they’re going, but they’re going to revive it all back up again(?). That’s a pity. What it is is all the old radicals were scorned. The inspiration that drived us there, and that momentum, is now under a more domestic teamed (?) conception which, in most cases, half the people can’t access it.
Vincent: Well, look, I think the reality is that individuals can only do so much before they get burnt out. I mean, not just for Aboriginal causes, but any cause, there are fighters in there ...
Colin: We got the same statistic all the world round.
Vincent: ... and unless that next generation doesn’t pick up the baton ...

Colin: That’s what they tell everyone when they pick it up. My first lot of students ... after you’d finished doing everything, they sat down and started talking [about] wanting to get into [undesirable] things. A perfect bunch of coconuts. And they’re all looking at me real stupid. Why am I calling ‘em coconuts? And I said, “Well, it’s simple. This is what you’ve been taught, it’s for a reason and a philosophy and an ideology. It doesn’t belong to me, it belongs to you and your forefathers. Why is it that you spit on it and turn your back on it by taking up these other bad social habits that take you in the opposite direction to where your goals are?” And they still go and do it. But the moment they stop being that, and remember what it is and where they are, they realise they can’t be nothing more, but nothing less. No matter how high up that social ladder I go, I go as a grass roots person.

Vincent: I told you before that I don’t feel that I ... or anyone ... is taught enough, or the truth, about Australia’s history, specifically in regards Aboriginal people. Do you think Australia’s ready for that? Do you think people are starting to listen?

Colin: Well, if [teachers and educational institutions] ain’t ready, you gotta ask what the fuck are they there for? You know, all this education and understanding, and coming into the modern world [with] more liberated democracies, yet they carry on like they’re still back in the Victorian period or the end of the colonial period, when it comes to certain debates. When they want us to debate something that they’re interested in they’ll go ahead any way to try and push it through regardless. So why should we listen to them when they have no time to listen to anybody? Anyway, this new group we’re setting up, we’re not dealing with Government, we’re not dealing with corporations or land councils, we’re dealing with the individual, because we’re fed up with all the politics that they use, and the people they use, just to achieve a goal that doesn’t benefit the rest of the community, it just benefits party policy that they pick up in Canberra, all the funding bodies.

Vincent: So tell me a bit more about this corporation you’re setting up and how you envisage that’s going to help.

Colin: Well, one, it’s a private enterprise. It’s not a corporation that can be tampered with or messed with by funding bodies or Government. Two, it’s designed to help the people. Like, half of my profits go into ---- (?!) the people. No other companies are doing that. But if we had more Koori companies willing to go down that road ... if they become successful, they’d help alleviate the problem, rather than sitting there listening to everyone talk about problems with the Government and funding. These more successful groups should get out there and start becoming more proactive. We’re trying to stop the pendulum, and have a go like a clock ... all the way around, not back and forwards for each generation. Aboriginal Australians held up three times. We all take different methods of ideology for that teaching. The company is an assistance ... sticking to culture ---- (?) sticking to business, we need to venture ahead but we need to take the rest of us with us so we’re not short of people. Depends how big we get, I suppose. At the moment we’re off to a good start ... a fair way. But we really got to demonstrate that we can maintain our own and maintain that flow of funding and stuff. So we’re, pooling (?) with economics and integrated cultural ideology. That give you an idea?

Vincent: Very best of luck with it. I hope it does achieve the things you want.

Colin: We’re going down the south coast, too, and helping all the mobs down that way, too.

Vincent: Oh, great.

Colin: Yeah, we’re going state-wide. We’re going to do the whole nation, at the end of the day. So, we got big plans. Whether we get there or not is another thing.

Vincent: You, individually ... do you come back to the south coast at all?

Colin: I’ll go wherever the hell they’ll send me. It’s one of those things where the elders are dictating where I am. Me and my like(?).
A Yuwaalaraay man from the NSW/QLD border, I first met Uncle Vic through the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation in December 2009. I approached him primarily in regard to his 1997 collaborative work, “Yaroma: Spirit of the Figtree” – one of the first Aboriginal public art works commissioned by Wollongong City Council – and his participation in the ongoing “Pullingjang” exhibition series. Yet, as the first Aboriginal school principal in NSW, and as a long term resident of the Illawarra, Uncle Vic has a wealth of experience and knowledge that helped me understand local Aboriginal art and culture in a wider context. With his compassion and self-deprecating sense of humour, it is always a privilege and a pleasure to chat with him.

This interview took place at Uncle Vic’s home in Woonona.

Vic: I was born the 14 March 1932 at Currawillinghi Station which is about 6 Ks out of a little place called Hebel, in Queensland. Hebel itself is six Ks over the Queensland-New South Wales border and a hundred and five Ks north of Lightning Ridge. As the last of fifteen children born to Patrick and Lesia Chapman ... Lesia MacRae, she was. Actually his name was Charles Earnest Chapman, but as he was born on St. Patrick’s Day, 1875, he was always called Patrick. Thereby hangs a tale which we won’t go into at this point. They were both descendants of the Noongaburrah, or the Kurrajong people, who spoke the Yuwaalaraay language.

Vic: My early childhood, to the age of about twelve, was divided between three places ... Currawillinghi Station, the small town of Hebel, Queensland, and Goodooga, New South Wales, which was about forty Ks away. Being a large family, at the low end of the socio-economic scale, dictated how we occupied our time and how we entertained ourselves. Fortunately, for all of us, it was a close family, and we interacted with related or unrelated families very easily. Those pursuits of necessity required no money, or little money, and were based on simple pursuits... like raiding the hive of wild bees.

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Vic: One of the questions I had on my list was: would you consider your upbringing a cross-cultural one? So you’ve sort of answered that. But in times of need ... was there still that knowledge of the bush? Where to get things when you needed it? You were talking about raiding the wild honey nest, for example. Was there still that knowledge there?

Vic: Yes. My father and mother still possessed that sort of knowledge which was shared with us. Sadly, as time went on though, there was a decline in transmission of ideas and knowledge.

Vic: I’ve heard quite a few people [compare] the way black people were treated in Australia to the way black people were treated in South Africa. It’s seems to me the only real difference was that it varied from state to state in Australia, whereas it was made a lot more official [and uniform] in South Africa. In that way the Australian history books have been able to dodge it, because it was never as official as in South Africa. What types of segregation did you witness [while] growing up?

Vic: This interview took place at Uncle Vic’s home in Woonona.
Vic: Though policies relative to indigenous people were not standardised from state to state, I think it could be said that the thrust, the intent, the plan, was identical. And I think it could quite safely be said that the only difference between apartheid in South Africa and the Aborigines' Protection Acts in Australia would be in the spelling. Legislation produced regulation that had almost monopoly control over the lives of Aboriginal people, no matter what hue they were ... whether they were black with flat noses and skinny legs, or whether they were not as obviously Aboriginal as, perhaps, say I am. If people knew your ‘pedigree’, if people knew you were of Aboriginal descent, the same regulations and rules applied to you as to those darker persons. It dictated with whom you could associate, where you could live, where you could sit in the picture theatre, whether you could try on a shirt or a garment when you went into a shop. And you were always served last irrespective of being first in the queue.

Vincent: And how much you got paid, of course.

Vic: ... how much you got paid, and whether or not one could be guaranteed secure passage through the State School system where I worked for almost forty years. As principals in NSW public schools, we were guided by two handbooks - one dealing with property and the other dealing with personnel. The Teachers’ Handbook that dealt with personnel stated that a person of Aboriginal descent could be barred from the public school system on the protest of one white family. That regulation survived in the Teacher’s Handbook until 1972 and was acted upon up until the late ‘60s. It was clearly demonstrated and a constant reminder that we, as Aboriginal people, did not have citizenship status. How Aboriginal people, of whatever “caste” were perceived and treated, was widespread. As already stated, the regulations had almost almost monopoly control over the lives of Aboriginal people. In places like Walgett ... where my brother is at the present time ... not so long ago there was a curfew. Aboriginal people, who were living out of town in camps and on missions, had to be out of town by sunset. Australia’ treatment of its First People, though not attracting the same disfavour as South African apartheid, continued unabated.

Vincent: Do you remember what age you were when these things really came to the fore of your mind?

Vic: As we were growing up, we were conditioned to know our place. It was like that “Two Ronnies” comedy sketch ... “He’s upper class, and he’s lower class”. One certainly knew one’s status.

Vincent: We’ll talk about you becoming a teacher and then, obviously, becoming a principal, in a moment ... but what prospects did you feel you had as a child growing up? I mean, kids are asked these days, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” Did you feel you even had a choice when you were young?

Vic: The schools I attended, Hebel State School and Goodooga Public School, were one teacher schools with a high percentage of Aboriginal enrolment. All of those kids felt destined for ... if they were female, domestic work, and if they were male, the pastoral industry ... shearing, or yard builders, boundary riders, etcetera ... and I had the same expectations. However, I was fortunate to have a teacher who was exceptional for his time - a man named McKinnon, who didn’t have that sort of bias. He thought I had some academic promise, and suggested I sit for a State Bursary. And that was the launching pad.

Vincent: Well, we’ll definitely talk about that, later, but I wanted to ask you about the Yuwaalaraay [language] ... (mispronounces ‘Yuwaalaraay’)


Vincent: So did you grow up speaking that [language]?

Vic: The speaking of Yuwaalaraay? It depended on, I suppose, who lived with us at a particular point in time. If we had grandparents, uncles, aunties, older relations or visitors [staying with us], the language was freely used. As children we sort of learnt from those people speaking Yuwaalaraay [and] Gamilaraay – which are very similar, about seventy per cent compatible. So we could understand both Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay. Although we had a reasonable grasp of it, we were dissuaded from speaking it when we went out because of general disapproval - particularly at school, where caning for speaking Yuwaalaraay - Gamilaraay was common. With the passage of time, leaving home for high school, teachers college, and work, etcetera, resulted in no language maintenance, and consequently I forgot it.

Vincent: Were people being taken from their families because of speaking the language? Did you see any of that?

Vic: No, I didn’t see people taken from their families because they spoke their language, but there was a constant fear of removal. We feared the local policeman who, besides being the constabulary, had the title of ‘Protector of the Aborigines’. As such he had the power to take kids away from their families on whatever pretext. When we saw police coming to our place - to Currawillitinghi Station, or to the house that we subsequently moved to in Hebel - for whatever reason, it was loudly announced in lingo, “Biliirmman yanaa-waa-na” – “Policeman coming”.

Vincent: In your interview with Tess Allas, you spoke about the Baagi vase ... Is that how you pronounce it ...?

Vic: Baagi, yes.
Vincent: ... your grandmother, and your childhood experiments with the clay down by the river ... 

Vic: The black mud. In retrospect, I reckon it would have been very good for throwing on the potter’s wheel. I always felt that I could model forms, shapes ... animate or inanimate ... from the mud on the river bank. I also felt that I was reasonably competent at sketching and drawing. That was to serve me well when I turned to ceramics. I used those skills to great advantage, too, when I began teaching ... before the advent of gee-whiz teaching material and IT technology. During the course of a lesson I was constantly drawing on the blackboard which seemed to effectively grab attention. So it was a really good resource. So, yes, as I told Tessie, that was probably my first [artistic] experiment - making things from clay on the banks of Ballandool Creek.

Vincent: And the Baagi vase relates to childhood memories of your grandmother and the creek ...?

Vic: Yes. Re the vase itself ... I threw the master piece on my potter’s wheel after which I made a two-piece mould of it. The vase was cast in the mould using white Earthenware slip. The usual processes of bisque and glaze firings followed using a black underglaze and Duncan clear. At the time, I was doing illustrations and designs that related to family activity or memories of family. With this particular one, I was remembering my old grandmother, who passed away many years before. She was a great fisherwoman ... hardly spoke any English, smoked a bent stem pipe which is featured on the top of the vase. She made her own fishing lines from wine corks ... which were really precious at the time ... and the green fishing line one could buy at the shops, and commercial hooks. The three panels on the vase feature stylised fish and stylised fish gills, cross-hatchings which represent the cloths which she used to pick up from the banks of the river and throw into the water when the fish got a bit lazy ... when they stopped biting. As children we were allowed to go fishing with Granny if we promised to behave ourselves. When we saw the old girl throwing cloths into the river, we used to say to one another, “Baagi womba!” – “Granny’s mad!” Evidently, she wasn’t mad. CSIRO established that this was a sort of fish communication and the cloth throwing guaranteed a good catch. I went back to the place where my Granny used to fish in January last year. In the article that I wrote for the Maritime Museum, who subsequently bought the piece for their collection, I said that “it will be interesting to relive the moments long gone, to test Baagi’s old theory of fish communication, and hope that in these modern times that the fish come online.”

Vincent: Tell me about how you started as a ceramicist in seriousness. It was in the ’60s, wasn’t it?

Vic: Yes, well, it had a rather interesting beginning. A friend at the time took the liberty of enrolling both of us at Wollongong TAFE. He was an old ex-Spitfire mate of mine, also a teacher, who, unbeknown to me, enrolled us both on Thursday nights in a class conducted by Gillian Grigg, a graduate of the Bernard Leach School of Ceramics. After the initial shock, I found that activity quite therapeutic, being stressed at the time from taking on external studies with the University of New England. Enthusiastic, I bought an electric belt-driven Dilly wheel and built myself a three cubic feet top-loader electric kiln from a plan in “Pottery Australia”. Much of the material used in the construction was scrap – I thought of the dump switches and frames from old beds. I also had some help from friends and other contacts at the Steelworks who acquired and cut to size the material for the construction of the kiln’s external and lid. I wound Kanthal wire for the elements on quarter inch rods and recessed the elements into special MPK26 bricks. It turned out to be quite an efficient top loading kiln.

Vincent: And this was at your old place at Woonona?

Vic: Yes. It was an ideal setting for a pottery. There was space for storage of clay, drying cupboards, display shelves, pottery wheel, kiln and every piece of equipment I needed for developing my pottery skills. By this time I had joined the Wollongong Ceramics Society and met some of the well-known potters of the time. Potters Bep Klumpes and Karl Preuhs were emerging as local ceramicists who offered good example in construction and firing techniques. We were influenced by ceramicists Ivan Inglund, Grahame Oldroyd and Allan Peascod who lived locally and were destined to appear on the world scene.

Vincent: Most of your pieces have a very simple and distinct black and white colour scheme. What attracts you this palette? How did it come about?

Vic: Like all potters, or ceramicists ... whatever you’d like to call them ... I went through phases with regard to construction and decoration such as raku, hand-building, wheel work, slip-casting, and different methods of firing. The ceramic pieces with the simple and distinct black and white colour that you refer to emerged after I left teaching twenty years ago. My new next door neighbour at the time was Robert Reid, a very competent ceramicist. He’d recently arrived from Scotland and finding out I was a potter, encouraged me to enrol at St. George TAFE in a course called Industrial Processes ... which was just a fancy name for finding out I was a potter, encouraged me to enrol at St. George TAFE in a course called Industrial Processes ... which was just a fancy name for finding out I was a potter, encouraged me to enrol at St. George TAFE in a course called Industrial Processes ... which was just a fancy name for finding out I was a potter, encouraged me to enrol at St. George TAFE in a course called Industrial Processes ... which was just a fancy name for how to make moulds and how to slip-cast. Around about that time also, I developed a keen interest in the Yuwaalaraay people, and \ decided to illustrate their stories using black under-glaze on white earthenware slip-cast ceramic pieces. It was an instant hit. I did try some colour underglaze, but it didn’t have anywhere near the same appeal and effect. The decorations depicted Yuwaalaraay stories like “How the Porcupine Got its Quills”. They depicted childhood memories like going fishing with my old Granny, buildings that featured in my lifetime - the school I went to, the place where I was born, birds and animals that were in the locality ... And sometimes even uniforms!

Vincent: And they’re all functional, aren’t they?
Well, the bulk of my work is destined for functional or utilitarian use and a small part of it was ornamental. In the process of becoming a potter I became very aware of shapes and colours and design. In the making of these pieces I strive to please myself rather than anybody else. However, the fact that other people admired what I created did give me some pleasure. More times than not I’ve given away what I’ve made, rather than sell them.

And what about the poker work? When did you get into that? Is that a relatively recent thing?

Yes, that’s relatively recent. I just thought I’d have a break from making ceramic pieces. I have a friend in Park Road, Bulli, who makes Lazy Susans and timber constructions and I thought I would transfer the ceramic works’ designs to a different medium.

So tell me about the Yaroma mosaic that you collaborated on. How did that come about? And what’s the story depicted there?

This was a project that was undertaken by Wollongong City Council in 1997. [It was one of] two Reconciliation projects to coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of the ’67 referendum which guaranteed Aboriginal peoples citizenship rights. [Both projects] involved a person of indigenous descent and a non-indigenous person. Tess Allas … Tess Maclean, as she was then … was Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officer at Wollongong City Council at the time, and I’d suggest that she was the instigator of these projects. The first was the water fountain (“Gurangaty Water Place”) in the [Crown Street] mall, which you’ve probably seen … and it tells the story of Gurangaty, the water serpent who was guardian of the water supplies. I suppose [it’s] an early form of quality control if you listen to the story of Gurangaty. It was designed and executed by Lorraine Brown and the late Nick Brash. The second of these projects on the site of the demolished Moreton Bay figtree, after which the suburb of Figtree was named, was the mosaic featuring the Yaroma. The design was mine but the rest was substantially the work of a fellow who had recently graduated from Wollongong Uni Creative Arts, Alistair Cox from Mount Gibb Pottery. I must give Alistair the credit for doing the hard yards. We went to his pottery [studio] and discussed glazes, clay bodies, firings and the design itself among other things. Alistair was the [main workman, even though] he sort of hid in the background when the [project] was done. The figtree was important to early settlers from Sydney Town- white settlers who used it for shade and water and a camping spot, as they travelled to and from work in the Illawarra. It was significant to the traditional owners as a birthing tree. The women came there to give birth to their children, assisted by the other women. [When] a little fella came into the world, they sang the welcome song, and scrubbed him up in the near water and a camping spot, as they travelled to and from work in the Illawarra. It was significant to the traditional owners as a birthing tree. The women came there to give birth to their children, assisted by the other women.

I think it is a traditional story associated with this particular fig tree.

And, to your knowledge, is the Hairy Man something unique to this area, or is he found elsewhere also?

I understand he’s peculiar to this area. Regrettably, the mosaic, [which] is of significance to both traditional owners and newcomers, is hidden away in this little park at Figtree, out of sight and out of mind of the Council who seem to deny its existence. I’ve contacted them on a few occasions regarding this important piece of public art.

Personally, I found it very hard to find. ‘Cause after I met you down at Coomaditchie [in 2009], and you told me about it, I was determined to go and look at it myself. And I went around in circles for quite a while trying to find it. It’s hidden away by the trees.

Well, the morning glory has more or less taken over.

But [the mosaic itself] is surprisingly in very good condition.

I’m glad to hear it.

So a bit of discreet tree pruning might be in order ...

Well, Council did attempt some cutting back of morning glory and other shrubbery. However, there was little attempt at cleaning up or regular maintenance that followed. The area on which the mosaic is situated is subject to flooding, it’s not very well monitored and often one sees evidence of the site being used as a camping ground.

Yeah, there is.
Vic: But fortunately, as you say, it hasn’t suffered too much damage.

Vincent: A more recent [public work you contributed to] was out at Shellharbour. I don’t have a photograph of that [yet] ...

Vic: Oh, I have photographs of that.

Vincent: Yes, I remember you showing me. And you did that with Coomaditchie ...?

Vic: The mosaics on the amenities block there at Shellharbour pool were created by the Coomaditchie artists, led by Lorraine Brown and her sister, Narelle. My involvement was in a purely advisory capacity. I was able to inform them about clay bodies, the use of templates and under glazes, etc. In two of the murals here we used seconds unglazed commercial tiles that were destined for bathrooms but had a small fault. It was amazing how quickly Lorraine and Narelle mastered and understood the techniques, the use of under-glazes, and bisque and glaze firing routines.

Vincent: I’d like to talk about Lorraine and Narelle out at Coomaditchie in a little while. But before we move on to them ... In my thesis I’m intending to argue that public artworks [by, or contributed to by, Aboriginal artists], on one level, put an Aboriginal presence back into a landscape where it might have been denied for so long. And it certainly introduces people ... who don’t frequent art galleries ... to at least an element of Aboriginal culture. Would you agree with that?

Vic: Yes. Let’s go back a bit. I think serious attention and appreciation of Aboriginal art was first attracted by the Papunya Tula group in the early 1970s. This was a deliberate attempt by these people to pass on lore and culture to future generations of Indigenous children. It was the beginning of the contemporary Indigenous art movement as we know it, spreading to Indigenous communities near and far. It led to the enormous popularity and high profile Indigenous art today, both in Australia and abroad. The spread in the popularity [of local work], I’d say was helped significantly by Wollongong City Gallery ... the programs that were in place there, and especially with the many incarnations of Pallingjang. With money from [the NSW] Museums and Galleries Foundation, the Pallingjang series became a travelling exhibition travelling New South Wales, Queensland and to the Top End. I was fortunate enough to be asked to do the floor talks at most venues. The purpose of it was to showcase local Aboriginal artists.

Vincent: And it really was the first of its kind, specifically for the [NSW] south coast, wasn’t it?

Vic: Yes, we broke new ground. I personally had developed a strong connection with the [Wollongong City] Gallery over a number of years ... as a tour guide, as a donor, as a patron, and as co-curator of one in the Pallingjang series. So we were tickled pink when the Pallingjang series took off. Wollongong City Gallery has perhaps one of the best collections of Aboriginal art in any regional gallery. It started with Dr Fines – a Sydney neurologist who practised in the Illawarra for a number of years – and his wife, who had an interest in Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal art. They gifted to Wollongong City Gallery some eighty-thousand dollars-worth of bark paintings and related material. Wise selection and purchase and then Pallingjang added to that great collection. At the time of the first Pallingjang exhibition, the large outside panels featured works of the Coomaditchie artists – mainly Lorraine Brown and her sister, Narelle. Another milestone in the acceptance of Aboriginal art – particularly at the local level, was when Kevin Butler became the first artist in residence at Wollongong City Gallery. Local Aboriginal art really did take off at this particular time. It showed that local Aboriginal artists were gaining confidence, their art practice matured, and their work was being accepted in public places. Yes, it did advertise local Aboriginal art that would otherwise be left unnoticed in art galleries.

Vincent: Despite the support and encouragement that Wollongong City Gallery has shown local Aboriginal art, the reality is that a lot of people [still] don’t go to art galleries. So, in some ways, I think public works [help raise that profile even more]. The Coomaditchie artists really do stand out. They’ve done a lot of public works. I mean, straight away I can think of Belmore Basin ... there’s three works within a very small vicinity of each other. You’ve got the mural on the cafe wall, you’ve got the mosaic of the snake, and across the road you’ve got Osborne park [with the Storylines project]. I think that even on a subconscious level this introduces people to things that maybe they haven’t considered before. I mean, I’m not saying it’s rocket science. A lot of people might think it’s naff ... Aboriginal art or not, they might think public artworks are naff ... but I think it does place a presence back somewhere where it’s been denied.

Vic: Oh, I have photographs of that.

Vincent: Is being involved with public works something you’d like to continue to do in the future?

Vic: Well, I have been ... not as prolific as Kevin Butler, or the Coomaditchie artists or as important. My work appears in the form of ceramic panels in schools and community centres, here and in the A.C.T. ... and the emphasis is on Aboriginal history, family, and identity.

Vincent: What do you think characterises the Aboriginal art of the south coast, here? Do you think there is a ... connecting theme?

Vic: The artworks we have seen, I suppose, touch on local stories ... like the story of the Five Islands ... They’re about family ... And there’s some political emphasis, particularly in Kevin Butler’s work. One painting of Kevin Butler’s I’d really love to have is [of the walk across] across the [Sydney Harbour] Bridge in 2000. One sees these hordes of people coming across the Bridge.
Everyone but one is laughing. There’s one little face there that has a frown on it ... complete with spectacles and bushy eyebrows.

Vincent: *(laughs)* I think I know who that’s meant to be.

Vic: Yes. And that was bought by a friend of mine ... Simon Hurford. Another one of Kevin Butler’s political statements was used in the launch of the document, “Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Children Report”. Wollongong City Gallery purchased that powerful painting. It depicts a road maze leading to a home on the top of a hill. In the home at the top of the hill is an Aboriginal person welcoming home her child. The road that that child had to negotiate to finally find its family, is shown as a maze of identity confusion, alcoholism, prisons, institutionalisation, etcetera.

Vincent: I was actually going to ask you ... and I’ll be asking other people ... about Kevin Butler. Obviously I haven’t seen as much local work as you have ... but I find that his is the most overtly political [of local Aboriginal art]. Earlier last year there was a sort of open day at the University. Steven Russell from Boolarang Nangamai was asked to speak because a couple of the Pallingiang works were [on display] there ... alongside non-Aboriginal works. And after Steve had got up and done a Welcome to Country, and so on, one of the painting teachers at the University, [Richard Hook], pointed out that the Aboriginal landscape depictions seemed a lot more positive than some of the landscape paintings done by non-Aboriginal people. And ... I find that non-Aboriginal depictions of land are quite literal. Some of the paintings and prints that were there [illustrated the] degradation of the landscape, pollution, etcetera ... Now, that’s not to say that those issues aren’t of concern to Aboriginal people, [because] obviously they are. But when I see paintings, by Aboriginal people, involving the land, [they] always remind me of that saying, “This always was and always will be Aboriginal land”; because despite all the injustices that have been perpetrated against that land, the depictions are positive [because] they draw on [traditional] stories, they draw on memories ... There’s different dimensions to these works that aren’t common to non-Aboriginal depictions of land. Obviously there are exceptions, but the ones that were [on display] this particular day, were very literal, very straightforward depictions. In that way these [types] of Aboriginal works do have a political element, because they do remind me of that saying. But Kevin Butler is the only [local] Aboriginal artist I’ve seen so far who does very overtly political paintings. Sorry, did that all make sense? I’m sometimes not very good at explaining myself.

Vic: Yes. Well, I think there are other Aboriginal artists who exhibited in the Pallingiang series [who have made overtly political work] ... I think it was Julie Freeman who had an installation that talked about the Home at Berrima. She had made this installation from bricks that she’d found ... old bricks that had been used in the fence at the entry to the complex ... and an old gate ... So that was featured towards the front-end. Towards the back there was this great blown-up photograph of the kids who were taken away, and who were taken to that particular home. Above it was a suspended cross made from just a tree branch ... bits of branches from a tree. And I think Mally Smart was another. It was so long ago that I was involved with Pallingiang ... She showed the impressions of her naked body, and her mother’s. [They were] body prints on canvas. She’d convinced her mother and father to do the same. Accompanying that series there was a picture of the womb where the egg couldn’t be fertilised ... because she was infertile. So then there’s those sorts of protests as well. But Kevin Butler, certainly, was prolific ... certainly is brilliant *(laughs)* as we like to say, if you can get him out of bed. He’s inclined to sleep in.

Vincent: I can’t get hold of him!

Vic: Yes, he’s very elusive. In 2000, at the time of the Olympics, he had two very, very striking paintings ... one showing the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Opera House, and the harbour, in typical Kevin Butler style, entitled “Eora 2000”.

Vincent: I know the one [painting of Kevin’s] that stands out for me ... the one I’ve got in my mind is a very dark painting with nuns and ...

Vic: Oh, yes ... and rulers and clerical collars and so on ...

*(We are browsing through the first Pallingiang catalogue whilst talking, and Uncle Vic points out Julie Freeman’s painting, “Muwingarli”, [1995]*)

Vic: That was a good one by Julie Freeman. I like the departure from what people have come to consider the signature of Aboriginal art. At the New South Wales Parliament Indigenous Art Prize, it was good to see the diversity of artistic styles emerging, and the departure from what has come to be recognised by local artists as the signature of Aboriginal art: the distinctive Papunya Tula dots and symbols, and the x-ray and crosshatchings of the Top End and Tiwi style of art. The Indigenous Art Prize, and also the Pallingiang series show the richness of Aboriginal experience ... the memories of the artists ... those experiences stretching back in time, both good and bad ... that history that was sort of hidden, swept under the carpet. The reliance on Papunya Tula and the Top End artistic expression was very strongly discouraged by Peter O’Neil – then Director of Wollongong City Gallery – at the time we started the Pallingiang series.

Vincent: The Papunya Tula stuff is heavily based on Pointillism though, isn’t it? The Impressionist practice of ...

Vic: Well, I’d say the Papunya artists were around a little bit before those fellas! *(laughs)*

Vincent: I don’t mean the themes of [the Papunya] paintings. I mean the compositions ...
The dots were used in the ground drawings and the body paintings. The ground drawings were obliterated when they danced over them, and the body paintings were washed off with perspiration. When we were doing the cull for NSW Parliament Indigenous Art Prize one of the judges was Djon Mundine who’s a very interesting fellow.

He’s funny.

He’s a little, short-arse fellow, with dreadlocks down to the ground. He doesn’t say much, but he’s worthwhile listening to. He’s very well-informed on Aboriginal art. It was Djon Mundine and the other judge, Larissa Behrendt – a Yuwaalaraay woman, and Professor of Law at the University of New South Wales – who, on seeing any indication of imitating the styles of the Top End, immediately eliminated that entry.

Okay, I find it interesting that you did that. I can understand why ...

Well, that’s the protocol. You don’t take someone else’s design.

Sometimes I find it a very blurred line between what is copying and what is influence. Do you know what I mean?

Yes. But it’s breaching copyright as well.

Sorry. I’m not contradicting you, at all.

No, no, I know.

I think it’s one of those areas that can be very complicated.

Well, that’s the protocol. You don’t take someone else’s design.

Yes. True.

So protocols are definitely important, but there’s also a sense that [Aboriginal artists] ... to express themselves ... feel that they need to do what they need to do.

Yes. But there seems to be a pretty wide acceptance now that it’s not only the dotted or x-ray stuff that is Aboriginal art. Aboriginal artists are being influenced by art schools as well. They’re training at art schools.

TAFE seems to be a very important place for a lot of local artists.

Yes. And ... (laughs nervously) prison also seems to be a place where Aboriginal people seem to realise that they have this sort of talent.

You’ve sort-of already answered my question of what you think the biggest misconception about contemporary Aboriginal art is. You’ve said a lot of people think it’s [only] the dots and the x-ray styles ...

Yes. (Handing me some notes) They were my notes on my speech ... Somebody interviewed me at Parliament House [on that subject]. So I got a piece of paper from someone and just jotted down some bits and pieces. You can keep that ... I made a copy for you.

Thank you. Beyond Wollongong City Gallery ... which, I think we’re both in agreement, played a very significant role in local Aboriginal art ... do you think, for lack of a better word, urban or non-remote Aboriginal art, is slowly gaining acceptance? I’ve heard a couple of Aboriginal people say that even at the Art Gallery of New South Wales there’s not a very good representation of south coast art there. You walk into the New South Wales Art Gallery and you see Arnhem Land art ...

That possibly depends on the directors of these galleries ... what they purchase, what they’re prepared to hang. For a very long time, at Wollongong City Gallery wouldn’t buy [works by] local artists. For instance, Wollongong City Gallery hasn’t got a painting by Alan Upton. I think he’s a very clever artist ...

Just for the benefit of the tape, there’s an Alan Upton painting directly above us [in Uncle Vic’s sitting room] ...

“Figtree, 1888”. And it could be mistaken for [a painting by] Eugene Von Guerard. The colours, the clouds, the skyline, the Cabbage Tree palms ... all very, very Eugene Von Guerard.
Vincent: We were talking about this painting when I was last here. You said he’s never ...

Vic: Never even heard of Eugene Von Guerard.

Vincent: *(laughs)* It’s a dead ringer for his work.

Vic: He paints from historical photographs.

Vincent: Is that one of the reasons why they won’t buy his work? That they see it as derivative?

Vic: I don’t know. I don’t know why. And initially they wouldn’t buy local Aboriginal art. I don’t know if I was amongst the first person of Aboriginal descent to sell work to Wollongong City Gallery *(laughs)* ... they bought three of my platters showing Yuwaalaraay stories The Gallery was very hesitant to buy local work ... Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. However, now they’re doing that quite freely.

Vincent: I think they’ve probably realised [that local work is] the attraction of visiting a regional gallery.

Vic: I truly regret that Alan Upton’s work is not represented in Wollongong City Gallery. I’m very happy to have a piece of his.

Vincent: Oh, it’s beautiful. Let’s talk specifically about your work. I’d like you to tell me some of the stories that are [illustrated] there. We talked about the Yaroma mosaic, but this *(referring to a photograph)* is a Lazy Susan *(of yours)* that I bought from Jumbulla [Aboriginal Discovery Centre]. And it’s ...

Vic: “How the Black Swan got its feathers”.

Vincent: Is that a Yuwaalaraay story?

Vic: Yes. Just briefly ... the swans were attacked by eagles who stripped them *(of their feathers)*. The crows took pity on them, and dropped their own black feathers down onto them.

Vincent: And that’s a motif you’ve had on other pieces, isn’t it? I’m assuming your designs are *(found on)* multiple pieces. Because I’ve seen a ceramic version of this [Black Swan design], and then of course there’s this [Lazy Susan] pokerwork here.

Vic: Yeah. I’ve unashamedly admitted where these stories *(and my inspiration for the designs)* came from ... It’s in your notes there. I learnt some of these stories as a child. However, when I came down here in 1955, from the country, to teach at Waniora P.S, near Bulli High, immigration was at its height. There were lots of people getting off the boats ...

Vincent: *(laughs)* Lots of Italians ...

Vic: *(laughs)* ... Yes, your mob, as well ... to work in the mines, and to escape war-torn Europe. The Department of Education *(aimed)* to build a school every mile. And they virtually did that. But when Ruth *(Uncle Vic’s wife)* and I came down here at that particular time, these schools opened with minimal resources – a box of white chalk, a duster, and a blackboard. No coverings on the floor, no heating, no fans, no screens, etcetera. The only reading material was the school magazine for each grade, supplemented by the Department of Educator’s issue of what was called Designated Supplementary Readers, supplied in multiple copies. Titles like “Climb a Lonely Hill” were of great interest to beginning readers. One of the books supplied was “Australian Legendary Tales” by K Langloh Parker. When I saw the name K Langloh Parker, it rang a bell with me. As I flicked through the pages, I saw the stories of Gaya-dari the platypus, and Wayamba the turtle, and Piggi-billa the echidna - all stories I knew. And I became even more interested because Kate Langloh Parker was one of the first white women, or white persons, to write favourably about Aboriginal people. Apparently while growing up she mixed freely with Aboriginal people and was saved from drowning by her black playmates. Kate was the wife of the owner of Bangate Station where my mother was born and she collected the stories of the Aboriginal people there, and wrote about their customs. Being well liked by the Noongaburrah people, the Kurrajong people, from whom I am descended, the Noongaburra people gave her a special name for a woman, “Yinnerah”, a name which indicated great respect. Those stories were illustrated by Elizabeth Durack, of the Durack family, who were cattle kings in the Top End of Australia. Elizabeth Durack had been taught to paint by Jubbul, who was an Aboriginal person in the employ of her family. I must admit I rely very heavily on her style of painting.

Vincent: Do you have a copy of that book?

Vic: Yes, I’ve got a copy here somewhere. [Hers] is very similar to that. *(Points to the photograph of the Lazy Susan with the “Black Swans” designs).* I’ve altered the crows, the swans and their surrounds a bit, but you could recognise the design of it.

Vincent: It’s very beautiful, Uncle Vic. As soon as I saw it I thought it’s just a very beautiful composition.

Vic: I made a platter in late 2005, early 2006, for a friend of ours. He was firstly a friend of our son, John. Grahame is one of Wollongong’s top lawyers and a great collector of ceramic pieces. Mine will probably be the poorest example he possesses! But as well as giving him the story of how the Black Swan got its feathers, I gave him another interpretation. I saw one of these crows as Grahame, another as Peter, who was in the seminary with Tony Abbott, and he’s now with Bendigo Bank. So it was...
Grahame, Peter, and Simon — another of John’s great friends. And these (pointing to the swans) were Ruth and I. The feathers represented the outpouring of their sympathy and comfort. So that was my interpretation following John’s death.

Vincent: Did you want to talk about your son?

Vic: Yes. John was our younger son. He was a surveyor ... regarded as the best surveyor in town. He succumbed to acute myeloid leukaemia in 2005 and died seven weeks after diagnosis. He was very proud of who he was and what he could do. He had many and a mixture of friends, indicative of what sort of person he was. This one here (pointing to another photo of one of his works), I think I told you the story of the crocodile ... the fellow from the Alligator River.

Vincent: And you’ve got a larger [version] in your study.

Vic: Yes, that’s the original canvas that was given to me at the Liquorland checkout.

Vincent: Oh, okay. (laughs)

Vic: I thought I’d make a copy of it.

Vincent: Tell me about this little fella, here. (Pointing to a photograph of another ceramic piece.) He’s cute.

Vic: That’s the story of the little fellow who was prone to stealing people’s food. Finally getting his come-uppance he was turned into a little lizard ... Wallu-harli, the sleeping lizard. But the story that I like to tell kids at school (... looking through photographs of his work) I don’t know if you have that one here ... is about Gaya-dari, the platypus. It’s the story of the ducks who tell their ducklings not to go near a certain place in the river. This particular duck defies the warning, goes to the river, and is kidnapped by the water rat, who takes her for his wife. He monitors her very closely, doesn’t let her out of his site. Then one day, while he’s dozing, she escapes and returns home. The two eggs she lays eventually hatch. She takes her offspring down to the water for a swim, and that’s when the other ducklings notice the difference ... bill like a duck, and feet like a duck, but they have four legs and fur, and so on. They made it so uncomfortable for these creatures that looked different that they went to live up in the mountain streams. Of course it was the platypus! Reflecting on the story, they’re able to deduct that it is about obeying your parents and not discriminating against people who are different. Similarly, Wayamba, the Turtle is a cautionary tale.

Vincent: And you’ve branched out into the wine casks ... boxes ...

Vic: Yes. That was just a diversion, I suppose. I got sick of putting the designs on Lazy Susans ... (laughs) which Tessie girl very rudely called Lazy Vics! The shape of the ceramic piece dictates what pattern or design one puts on it. (Pointing to photographs of some of his more oval shaped bowls) Those shapes suggest to me a shield ... hence a shield design. This one is shaped like a coolamon which was used to carry things in. I’ve put in the coolamon a codfish ... in Yuwaalaraya, “goodoo”. The place where you catch cod is “goodoo-ga” which is the name of the town where I finished my primary schooling.

Vincent: Tell me about the old fella.

Vic: It’s the story of what we call Wirinun. The Wirinun is a clever man. This is Wahn the Wirinun – the crow wirinun ... You see the crow sitting there. Wirinun was able to influence people’s thinking, able to convince them to die ... by auto suggestion.

Vincent: Is ‘clever man’ translatable to ‘sorcerer’?

Vic: Yes. Well ... ‘witch doctor’. I suppose there was a real element of psychology there.

Vincent: Oh, definitely.

Vic: On here is the story of Piggi-billa. This fellow here ... daen or man ... was a cannibal. Research does indicate that cannibalism did exist amongst Aboriginal people.

Vincent: It was a part of magic, wasn’t it?

Vic: They didn’t kill to satisfy hunger. It was sort of a ritual thing that when an enemy was killed a strip of flesh was taken and consumed ... I suppose [it was] very akin to holy communion where it is said one eats the body of Christ.

Vincent: Did you see that documentary that was on ... last year, I think it was ... about William Buckley?

Vic: No.

Vincent: Some of the evidence that cannibalism was practiced comes from him.

Vic: Oh, I believe there’s substantial evidence to support cannibalism amongst Aborigines.
Vincent: He recorded that there was a dispute between two groups. And the final victory was to consume an element of your enemies, because it meant that you took on their power in some sort of way.

Vic: I don’t know, but maybe it gave rise to the saying, “I’ll have a piece of him”! *(laughs)*

Vincent: *(laughs)* I don’t know. But it’s funny that [cannibalism] is a very controversial issue.

Vic: Well, I’m currently reading “The Triumph of the Nomads” by Geoffrey Blainey, and he cites evidence for cannibalism, in the book. It’s also noted in the writings of Daisy Bates. [You’ve read] Daisy Bates?

Vincent: I’ve heard of her.

Vic: Actually, she was the wife of Breaker Morant. It was an adulterous relationship that she had with a bloke called Bates. However, there’s lots of evidence for cannibalism in Geoffrey Blainey’s “Triumph of the Nomads”.

Vincent: Well, when I was interviewing ... Have you heard of Les Bursill?

Vic: Yeah, yeah.

Vincent: ‘Cause one of the other controversial things is infanticide.

Vic: Yes, that too.

Vincent: Even in a recent documentary I saw on Pemulwuy, they say Pemulwuy was known for his lazy eye, which he’d had from birth. And they said that was actually very strange ...

Vic: It’s amazing that he survived.

Vincent: ... because Aboriginal people were very aware that to survive they needed to be in the peak of health. So, babies [born with abnormalities] ... their spirits were ‘re-released’. [The people in the documentary] discussed the topic very discreetly. But Les was telling me that when he went out on one of his research trips to the Centre, he was told it was actually very common that if a baby was very close to death and they knew they couldn’t do anything more for it, that they would them leave there for the dingos to take.

Vic: Yes.

Vincent: And that’s what made him think, well, maybe Lindsay Chamberlin’s claims were true. And someone also told me that here, locally, if twins were born, one would always be killed.

Vic: Yes. There was a certain practicality about it as well. A woman could only handle one baby besides the other things that she was carrying, so one of the twins was killed. The same thing happened to old people who couldn’t face up to the journey ahead of them. Anyway, Blainey talks about birth and death, and that sort of thing, in his book. Very, very interesting.

Vincent: Tell me about [these ones]. *(Points to photograph of the Hunting series)* You said one was from an old colonial [painting].

Vic: That’s the hunting series I did. Inspiration for the series was sparked by an early colonial painting of two natives fishing in a bark canoe. The almost silhouette status really appealed to me and I decided to record food gathering by both men and women using the same technique.

Vincent: And are these just little snapshots [of pre-colonial life]?

Vic: These are just little snapshots. Yet often, when I told stories about my granny, I would decide to do a series on ... say, fish, and how different people depicted fish ... American Indians, the Mexicans, Aborigines, etc..

Vincent: What about these larger works? *(Points to another photograph)*

Vic: This is the story of how the sun was made. Here is the good spirit who decided to keep the fire going to light the world each day. Around him are the emu, the native companion and the kookaburra who play important roles in this story. And this is the story of how all the tribes came together to divert the attention of the man and woman who had discovered fire but were selfishly keeping the secret to themselves. The painting shows the big corroboree that they had [as a means of distraction].

Vincent: Colin Isaacs has a painting called “Firesticks”, and he told me a similar story. The old fella who had invented fire was cooking [one day], and the smell attracted another man. And instead of asking him to share [the secret of fire with him], he waited until the old fella went to sleep, and then he nicked the fire. And when the old fella woke up, he followed the footprints and found [the thief]. And he said, “You could have asked me. You didn’t have to steal it.” So as punishment he turned him into a bat so that he would never feel the warmth of the sun or fire again.
Some of these stories are about getting wives. A lot of the gatherings were not just for the purpose of trade or ceremony or secret men and women’s business. Such is the story of Wayamba the turtle. Wayamba went out hunting and met Oola and her three daughters in the bushes...

Vic: 

Vincent: And they’re goannas, are they?

Vic: Lizards. And he kidnapped Oolas and took her back to his camp to be his wife. The people at the camp reminded him, “No, we’ve already got a wife picked out for you. You had better take her back. Besides, the Oolas will come to rescue her.” Defiantly, he replied, “No way”. And so he prepared himself with a shield, a boomerang, a woomera, a nulla nulla, spears, and so on. They advanced on him and drove him back to the edge of the creek. And his last resort was to put his shield over his head... which is how the turtle came to be.

Vic: 

Vincent: Because of your focus on these stories, but given the fact you’ve lived outside your homeland for so long, would you consider yourself a diasporic artist?

Vic: Arrr ... I guess I could be described as a diasporic artist. I think other people would call me another sort of artist. (laughs) But I won’t go into that.

Vincent: What do you mean?

Vic: (laughing) A bullshit artist.

Vincent: (laughs) No.

Vic: Well, I left my traditional homeland when I was about twelve years old on my education journey. That journey took me away from what we call (Yuwaalaraay-“ngurrumbaa”, or traditional homeland. But I still felt a strong link with that place.

Vincent: And you have plans of going back there when you pass [away].

Vic: Yes Ngurrumbaa is inherited through the father. It’s also our two sons’ ngurrumbaa. When they departed this life their remains were returned to that special place. That’s where I’ll be taken as well, when the time comes, by my grandsons. It is also their special place.

Vincent: What have you endeavoured to teach your children and your grandchildren about their heritage?

Vic: There is no formal teaching or deliberate indoctrination. What they know about Aboriginal heritage is gleaned from family interaction. Like all family members –indigenous or non-indigenous – they are bound to be curious about past family history. I think our past history is full of interesting, even historic, moments. Should a family member wish to know something specific about our people the query is dealt with conveniently and as well as possible.

Vincent: Just before we move on, I wanted to discuss the controversy surrounding Paul Ryan’s work... But perhaps we should leave that for next time.

Vic: Well, I can give you [a copy of the public] comment I made on reactions to the exhibition.

Vincent: Okay, well we will talk about it now, then. One of the last times we met we talked about the controversy over Paul Ryan’s recent exhibition, “No Country for Dreaming” [2010]. There was a lot of local Aboriginal... ‘dissatisfaction’ with it. What do you think that was over?

Vic: Well, I’d say ignorance. [I’m] not being nasty... [By ‘ignorance’ I mean] not knowing the facts. There were two people who made that protest, and I said, in the comments I made about their reaction, that I admire and respect them as representatives of Aboriginal people, They have every right to form and hold opinions on many and any [issue], [but they’re] not necessarily the opinions held by all Aboriginal people.

Vincent: Who were the two people?
Davis and the artist, Paul Ryan ... which was excellent, really excellent. And they didn’t attend the follow-up ... the talks by Joe Davis on the Gallery’s collection of paintings of traditional Wadi Wadi land. So, the whole thing was in support of local Aboriginal people and local Aboriginal culture. And it was a corrective history rather than anything else. I think the complainants failed to ... Perhaps they’re not very familiar with disciplines like art and literature which are so subjective, and that means even more controversial issues are added to the equation. But the exhibition certainly was controversial and confronting, but it was also informative and disturbing. And it was open to your own interpretation as anything is.

Vincent: I didn’t get around to seeing it. By the time I’d heard of the commotion surrounding it, it was already finished. But I’ve seen pictures. And I suppose, in a way, it relates to my theory of public art ... placing an Aboriginal person back in that landscape. Even though the scenes Paul Ryan depicts are disturbing ... as you said, it’s a corrective history, of sorts. It’s a more realistic view than [denying the Aboriginal history of the Illawarra].

Vic: It certainly was interesting. Three very high profile people were there [at the opening] ... Dr Joe Davis, who’s a fantastic teacher and historian; Paul Ryan, of course, who’s been shortlisted for the Archibald [Prize]; and Richard Tognetti. Richard and Paul were board riders in their high school days. And a lot of the backdrops to the paintings were the [Illawarra] Escarpment. The complainants missed that.

Vincent: I did my [Bachelor of] Creative Arts course with Richard Tognetti’s brother, Simon.

Vic: I taught Simon how to make his first pinch pot.

Vincent: Arr ...

Vic: He was in my class at Pleasant Heights [Public School], when I was Assistant Principal there.

Vincent: I bought one of his pieces for my mum.

Vic: Yeah? Oh, I remember little Simon. But if I can just make a last comment on the Paul Ryan exhibition. I wouldn’t say it was courageous, but I did think it was a step towards corrective history. The three messages, to me, were ... The ‘soft landing’ experienced by white settlers under Phillip’s governorship, contrasting with the strong resistance handed out to invaders at other times and at other places. You know, they had a soft landing. And the second thing that was fairly apparent in the paintings was an awareness of the deteriorating relations between the two cultures. The black fella with no country. “No Place for Landing” was one of the canvases that showed that. And the third message was the price of protest ... “The Locals Hanging Around”, and they were ‘hanging’ around, from the branches of trees! Paul Ryan has a fascination with language and literature as well as the paintbrush, and he used that in the titles to give added power to his imagers. In conversation with him it was evident that he had a very good understanding of early settlement history and the flow-on from that time to the present day. As well he had a very genuine empathy with Aboriginal people, and [the complainants] missed out on that.

Vincent: Do you think another element [they disapproved of] might have been the homosexual theme [of some of the paintings]?

Vic: That was brought up by one of the complainants, yes ... as though [the paintings suggested] all Aboriginal people were homosexual. The argument [put forward by this complainant] was that there was no homosexuality amongst Aboriginal people, which was rather bizarre. [It’s hard] to accept either of those arguments. I said it was regrettable that the exhibition caused division, and that perhaps a prior engagement with the stakeholders could have averted some of that strong reaction. It was hoped that a projected forum, with Garry Jones, and John Monteone from the Gallery, might resolve the matter. Others suggested a forum comprised of all the concerned parties. And I said at the end of that little script (referring to his public comment) that if, at the end of [such forums], the parties continued to disagree, I hoped they didn’t disagree disagreeably.

Vincent: I’ve got two questions that have come out of [what you’ve just said] ... One, you said you’ve spoken to one of the main complainants since then. Has their opinion of the exhibition changed?

Vic: We didn’t discuss that. But perhaps that was a smart tactic. The exhibition wasn’t broached at all.

Vincent: Secondly, you said that [those involved with the exhibition] tried to get in contact with elders ... That brings us into the arena of consultation. Do you think they genuinely couldn’t be reached? Or are elders sick of being asked about things?

Vic: I don’t know why an elder wasn’t available. But when I was working in schools I found it very difficult to get Aboriginal people to come into schools to be involved with curriculum development ... to give an Aboriginal perspective to curriculum. I suppose it was on both sides ... There was a hesitancy by Aboriginal people to come into schools, perhaps because of the bad experiences they may have had as students. And teachers were also hesitant because ... well, there was that gap. They realised there was a gap between white fellas and black fellas, and didn’t know anything about Aboriginal culture. But they were willing to learn. It was my experience that teachers were willing to learn about Aboriginal culture, but we couldn’t engage the Aboriginal community ... in my time teaching, anyway.
Vincent: Well, look, I have to say there’s been a number of people I’ve found it hard to get in contact with ... not so much get in contact with, but hard to get a real indication of whether they’re interested in participating in my research, or not. I don’t know whether that has to do with a difference between how white and black people interact, or not.

Vic: Yeah. Well, we’re the most studied people known to man, and for what purpose? I think there’s an element of that. Our situation is still very much the same ... and it’s not a very attractive situation that we find ourselves in. We’re still climbing out of a big hole. And I’m glad I was engaged in education, because I think that is the way out of the hole ... Education.

Vincent: That sort of takes us to the question of the Apology. How do you feel about it? And do you feel it’s made any tangible differences? Although I think I know the answer to that ...

Vic: I think a lot of Australians would see the apology as an empty gesture. But I think a lot of Aboriginal people see it as having a symbolic as well as practical effect ... That health and well-being are directly connected to how people feel about themselves, their family members, and their sense of security and identity. The policies of child removal by governments of all persuasions, dotted throughout Australia, treated Indigenous people not just as bad parents, but as racial inferiors. And acknowledging how much of a mistake this was does really matter ... which was Rudd’s intent. And this national change of heart, and by incorporating the oldest civilisation on earth into the Australian consciousness, is something of which we should all be proud ... of which we can be proud. It’s [all too] easy to see Aboriginal people as members of dysfunctional communities, disruptive mobs hanging around public places with nothing to do but be a nuisance, and offend the sensibilities of others. In fact, they are also people ... whose beliefs, confidence, and self-esteem, are at such a low ebb that it’s going to take a long time to rekindle the inner spirit that drives other Australians. So, I think the Apology can help light that flame. That’s my reaction to the Apology.

Vincent: So how do you feel about the Northern [ Territory] Intervention?

Vic: There’s a dramatic exhibition on at the present time at the Newtown Gallery. It’s called “Vanishing Point”. And it’s about ... I think it’s about the Northern Territory Intervention. It condemns the changes [made] to the laws that apply to welfare, law enforcers, and landrights, etcetera ... those laws that were enacted by John Howard in 2007 ... and which also continue under the Labor Government, which rather surprises me. [Laws enacted] supposedly to address the claims of widespread child sexual abuse in Northern Territory Indigenous communities. And there’s a general feeling amongst Indigenous people that this is just another example of government, of whatever persuasion, writing the rules without inclusion or consultation of the people it affects ... and getting it wrong again. There are serious issues of violence, and sexual, substance, and alcohol abuse, in those communities, but the Intervention has failed to impact on, or to convict any perpetrators of child sexual abuse or members of paedophile rings. And Brendan Penzer, who’s the curator of the iNTervention exhibition, writes that in the context of its importance), it can only be analogised with the search for weapons of mass destruction in order to wage war on Iraq by U.S. allies in 2003.

Vincent: That’s actually a very good comparison.

Vic: A very good comparison. While I do believe child sex abuse, paedophilia, domestic violence, exists there, and in other Aboriginal communities, I think it’s a problem that Aboriginal communities themselves have to face up to. I believe it’s a similar problem when it comes to reconciliation. Aboriginal communities have to be reconciled amongst themselves. We can see this in the community in which we live. We have so many camps in Wollongong ... the uni camp, the TAFE camp, the Kenny Street mob, the Coomaditchie mob ... and they’re all fighting against each other. They all have great talent, and if they’d only combine that talent ... what a great place this would be! So there has to be reconciliation amongst ourselves, and it has to work before it can happen on a larger scale.
Like our first meeting, this interview took place at Uncle Vic’s home in Woonona.

Like our first meeting, this interview took place at Uncle Vic’s home in Woonona.

Vincent: Last time we spoke, we talked a lot about the Coomaditchie mob, in passing, but can you tell me how you actually first got to know them?

Vic: I think my first exposure to the Coomaditchie artists was through the [Wollongong City] Gallery at the time of the first Pallingjang [exhibition].

Vincent: In ‘97.

Vic: Yes. It was an interesting time for the gallery. It was more or less saturated with Aboriginal art. They were really trying to [promote it]. And part of [the promotion] were the [exterior] panels which were done by Lorraine [Brown] and her sister Narelle [Thomas]. So that’s where I made my first contact with them.

Vincent: And you helped them with [their] mosaics?

Vic: Yes... That was the flow-on. They recognised me as an artist ... not that I considered myself an artist ... but that was their surmising. I think they were some mosaic work.

Vincent: And do I remember correctly ... you said once that you went out to Coomaditchie Hall to teach a workshop?

Vic: Yes. I did. I took to them certain skills that they didn’t have at the time. I remember saying to you that I was angry with them because, after having shown them once, they were better than I was! They were very quick learners and rapidly absorbed what I had to give about mosaic making and under glazes.

Vincent: I’ve attempted to go and see and photograph as many of the public artworks as possible. And the mosaic on the back wall of the amenities block down at the [Coomaditchie] hall ... it looks like it’s in progress ... bits of mosaic here and there alongside the outlines of larger shapes, as if it’s unfinished ... But when you look closely at some of the broken bits of tile, you can see pictures of fish from the original [commercial] pieces. I thought that was a very nice touch ... re-using those designs.

Vic: Right. There was something similar in the mosaics at Shellharbour. Not every piece of the mosaic was clay. They’d use some from pieces of broken pottery. And they fitted in very well.

Vincent: Two other exhibitions you’ve been involved with were ‘In the Interest of Bennelong’ and ‘Messages from the Fringe’. Can you tell me a bit about those?

Vic: Oh, that was a long long time ago. Tess Allas played a very important role in those exhibitions. I was just the provider of pieces for the exhibition. In one of those exhibitions, the Baagi vase was noticed ... Okay. It made its debut ... Yes ... and rose to fame. But I was really just a provider of some ceramic pieces for those exhibitions.

Vincent: Do you have a favourite phase or style of ceramics?

Vic: Not particularly. When I first started ceramics there was a very ... I suppose, very English influence through the Bernard Leach School. I wasn’t particularly impressed with form or colour that it seemed to suggest. So I started experimenting with colour. I’m not a very organised person, consequently some of the experiments I did with glazes weren’t successful. I didn’t exercise much control over the manufacture of glazes ... I didn’t test them rigorously, and in the process lost a hell of a lot of pots. The glazes ran or didn’t turn out as I thought they would ... So it was very costly.

Vincent: And you had your kiln downstairs at your house at Woonona, where you were for many years ... but you’ve moved to this retirement village now ...

Vic: Seaview ... Illawarra Retirement Trust.

Vincent: But you’re still working from your [current] garage, essentially?

Vic: Well, I have a lot of material in the garage ... a lot of ceramic material ... but I mainly do decoration [of ceramic pieces] at a big table like this. *(Uncle Vic and I are sitting at his dining room table)* And I haven’t got a kiln anymore ... I gave it away.
Vincent: So where do you fire your works now?

Vic: I fire my works at Albion Park Rail ... at a place called Blazing Kiln, which conducts classes in ceramics, and sells slip-cast green-ware, and does firings.

Vincent: So the garage is mainly your brewery, then? (laughs)

Vic: (laughs) Yes, the garage is mainly my brewery.

Vincent: Okay, well, let’s move on to [the subject of] teaching. Tess Allas’ biography of you ... on the Dictionary of Australian Artists Online ... states that you worked as a shearer’s rouseabout and cook before becoming a school teacher and then principal. To me, that seems like a pretty big leap. Can you fill in the gap for me?

Vic: Well, actually, it wasn’t a great leap. University and tertiary students are doing the same sort of thing these days ... working in holiday time. That’s virtually what it was. My father, worked on the land from a small boy until he got down off his horse around about ninety years of age, so we had a great exposure to the sheep industry. And as was the case in those times ... sixty or seventy years ago ... young Aboriginal boys or men usually worked in the pastoral or cattle industry, and young Aboriginal women worked as domestics. That was their clearly defined roles.

Vincent: So [then] you applied for a state bursary ...?

Vic: No, I didn’t apply for it. My teacher at the time, Mr McKinnon, thought I had some academic promise and suggested I sit for a state bursary. We didn’t know exactly what that meant but were assured people we trusted that it was a good thing to do. My parents were convinced and so on a Wednesday in November 1944, all the other kids got a holiday, and I had to sit for a state bursary ... which I was [not happy about] ...

Vincent: (laughs) It must have seemed very unfair at the time, but it obviously paid off.

Vic: True. And that’s where it all started. At the end of 1944 my parents received a telegram from Mr McKinnon ... who of course didn’t sit it out in places like Goodooga over the summer holidays ... he was in Sydney, somewhere ... congratulating me on becoming a state bursar. When high school was mentioned, no one in our family had a clue what that entailed. We thought education finished at the village school ...

Vincent: So is that generally what is now Year 6 standard?

Vic: Correct. So then there was a bit of a frenzy getting new shoes, new clothes ... which I’d never had before. [I’d always] had hand-me-downs. The day finally came for me to set off for Dubbo High School ... which, at the time, was the nearest full-high school from the Queensland/New South Wales border. There were intermediate highs which went to third year ... but Dubbo was the nearest full-high, going to fifth year. It was the centre for education, I suppose, in those days. Students came from Hebel, just over the Queensland and from Bourke, Cobar, Nyngan and other towns in North Western NSW were enrolled here. Boarding houses galore and hostel accommodation absorbed the country clientele. So that’s where I went ... Firstly, from Goodooga to Brewarrina, on the back of a truck. [I had] very little instruction, because my parents didn’t know what sort of instruction to give me.

Vincent: Was it scary?

Vic: (laughs) Yes, it was bloody frightening! It was arranged that I stay at the boarding house owned by Mrs Frost, an Aboriginal lady, in Brewarrina, seventy-six miles away. I stayed overnight there, and took a taxi to the station at Brewarrina the next morning. I saw a train for the first time and finally worked out, just by watching people, how to get a ticket and how to board the thing. So I travelled to Dubbo by train, leaving Brewarrina at about half-past-eight in the morning and getting into Dubbo at about half-past-five in the afternoon.

Vincent: And how did you enjoy high school at Dubbo?

Vic: First up, it was quite frightening and confusing, but as you know, one adjusts to different situations. In this instance it was a very quick adjustment and a very big adjustment from a one teacher school to a high school situation. I did reasonably well academically. I think I was afraid to fail, because my family were very interested in what sort of progress I was making, and it would have been a real let-down if I had failed. Should one have failed, the bursary would have been discontinued, so grades had to be maintained. I became a prefect in fourth year, and in fifth year I became the captain of my school, which was ... I thought quite prestigious. I still have my badge which I’ll show you.

Vincent: (laughs) That’s pretty good going, Uncle Vic. I was a Prefect [at my school], and I wouldn’t have the first idea where my badge is now.

Vic: I didn’t dare lose my captain’s badge. It’s nine carat gold, and it’s appropriately inscribed. It’s my favourite badge - far superior to the Centenary Medal and Public Service Medal I possess.
Vincent: So were you going back [home] for the holidays?

Vic: Yes. That’s an interesting part of the secondary schooling story. This was the first time I’d been away from my mother and father, and away from my siblings ... the first time I’d been more than twenty miles or forty Ks away from home ... and I was by myself this time. Aboriginal families have the reputation for being very close, and we certainly were very close. I was plagued by homesickness and used to go home at every opportunity. At times like Easter, when I would take a day off school and catch a train from Dubbo to Brewarrina ... the train leaving Dubbo at about nine o’clock in the morning, and arriving at Brewarrina about six in the afternoon. [Then] I’d wait for the mail truck, which would leave Brewarrina and travel the seventy-six miles to Goodooga. My brother ... who turned eighty in September last year ... and who still remains close to me ... used to be waiting up for me. He’d have the bacon and eggs and everything ready for me, and we’d talk through the night. Between twelve and two o’clock the next day, the mail truck would turn around to go back to Brewarrina ... and I’d be on it. I was home for twelve hours. It was worth every minute of it, because I was so damn homesick. So it was back to Brewarrina, onto the train again, and back to Dubbo.

Vincent: Wow. So that was essentially a two-day trip ...

Vic: Of almost constant travel, yeah ... with a break of about twelve hours in between.

Vincent: You said your parents were very keen for you to explore this new opportunity. What were your siblings’ thoughts about this?

Vic: They were mixed. Sometimes I felt they were very supportive, and they were very interested in what subjects were being studied ... What was French like? What was Latin like? What was Science like? All these things they’d never heard of. So in a lot of ways they were very supportive. But sometimes I felt they were not supportive, and probably were resentful that I had this opportunity and they didn’t. I can understand that, because I wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. Many of my brothers and sisters were much brighter than I was. And so, in that sort of mood, I was sometimes called (Yuwaalaraay-) “Dhiira” – “Who do you think you are?” I think it’s inevitable in a household where there’s no books, in little places liked Hebel and Goodooga, where most of the people that surround you have limited education ... one’s liable to speak a certain brand of English, a sort-of a shorthand English. It’s a minimum of words, vocabulary is not extensive ... almost mono-syllabic. It was this exposure to books, using bigger words, using different sentence constructions ... [that made me sound] different to my family. So they thought, “This fellow’s trying to look like some toffy nose”. Consequently I was “Dhiira” – “Who do you think you are?” which was quite hurtful.

Vincent: I’ve found myself in situations where I’ve consciously changed the way I construct sentences and the types of words I use ... with different people.

Vic: Yes. I’ve become very adept at that sort of thing. And my sons were particularly good at what I call ‘changing gears’ while talking to people. They could engage their relations on the banks of a river with what we call Murri English ... Aboriginal English, or they could speak a refined version of English - or versions - in between.

Vincent: Strange [how language works], isn’t it?

Vic: I’m glad I was able to do that. And I think it’s good to see people do that.

Vincent: I think the trouble is that a lot of the time you’re not talking down to people, but if you don’t modify your language they think you are.

Vic: Yes, it’s not always a conscious decision to talk down to people. Sometimes you don’t realise you’re doing it.

Vincent: And then you went to teachers college?

Vic: Yes. I did apply for a university scholarship, but my grades weren’t good enough. I had thought of doing dentistry. But I think the gods made the right decision, because I was awarded a teacher’s college scholarship.

Vincent: [Did] you know that dentistry has the highest rate of suicide for any occupation?

Vic: Well, I’m thinking teaching should have the highest rate of suicide! [laughs] I’ve had some very daunting moments in forty years of teaching. I was so grateful [I had the opportunity] to go down that road, because I was able to do for others what my mother and father couldn’t do ... to read, and write, and compute. Being literate is quite powerful ... It empowers you. My mother and father realised that, even though they weren’t literate themselves.

Vincent: I can’t remember who it was, but someone once told me that if you know how to read you can do anything.

Vic: Yes.

Vincent: In a way, that’s true, because if you know how to read ... it doesn’t matter if your opportunities are scarce ... you can educate yourself to a certain extent. But if no one takes that first step to tell you what these symbols ... what these bits of ink are, then you’re stuffed.
Vic: Yes. But it doesn’t just stop at the ability to read and write. I think it enables you to vocalise what you’re thinking. And I couldn’t do that, even after I’d graduated from teacher’s college. I couldn’t get up and make a speech. I had difficulty putting words together. I had difficulty vocalising my thoughts.

Vincent: Are you talking about a language thing, or an anxiety thing?

Vic: I guess it was a little of both. Maybe the time spent boarding at the Church of England Boys’ Hostel contributed to a solution. The Hostel was attached to Holy Trinity Church which we attended on holy days and special days and at least twice on Sundays.

Vincent: That must have been fun. (laughs)

Vic: Oh, it was great fun. Particularly, in Fifth Year, when we were allowed to study in the vestry ... where the clergy donned their vestments before a church service. That was a privilege that was abused when we knocked off the communion wine and the wafers. (laughs)

Vincent: (laughs) Hey, if you hadn’t, the priest would have.

Vic: So when I came down here … having graduated from college, and taught three years in the country. I was still a churchgoer and became very good friends with the rector of St. Augustine’s at Bulli. To help him out one Sunday I was asked to take a service … Evensong. That was my introduction to lay preaching which I was involved in for about twelve or thirteen years.

Vic: Tess Allas writes that in 1975 you became the first Aboriginal school principal in New South Wales, and possibly Australia.

Vic: Yes.

Vincent: That’s quite a distinction.

Vic: Well, I suppose something like that was inevitable. As Ecclesiastes says, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens – a time to be born, and a time to die,” etcetera. And it was time for a dusky bloke to become a principal. (laughs)

Vincent: But are you proud of that?

Vic: Arr ... yes. I think anyone is proud of progress he/she makes.

Vic: And what school were you first principal of?

Vic: Gwynneville P. S. Actually, I had always favoured the classroom over the office. I was a very good classroom teacher, even though I do say so myself. I really enjoyed it. Some results you don’t see at the end of the day … you don’t see them at the end of the year ... You probably see it in ten, twenty, thirty, forty years. But sometimes you could see then ... the difference you were making to the kids' personality, behaviour, capacity to learn. The years spent as a teacher was a very rewarding time for me. I enjoyed it from the day I started teaching til the 16th December, 1990 ... my last day in the job.

Vincent: Sorry, just to clarify ... Are we talking primary school or high school? Or did you do both?

Vic: Primary.

Vic: And I guess it’s the same with most teachers [who] teach so many kids over the years ... You must bump into a lot of people who remember you as their principal?

Vic: As their Principal and in other roles. I started teaching in 1952 on Mudge Relief Staff. After three months I was appointed to Mendooran P. S. – a small school with two to three teachers. I spent the rest of ’52, ’53, ’54 there, and then came down here in 1955 to Waniora P. S., next to Bulli High. I spent some thirteen years at Waniora as a classroom teacher, even though I was on List 2. At that particular time my position on the promotions list entitled me to be head teacher or assistant principal, but I elected to remain an assistant teacher because I liked the classroom teaching. Of necessity, that sort of thinking had to change. [Ruth and I] had two sons, and there was need for money. So I accepted ... I think it was 1968 ... the position of deputy master at Woonona Primary, just down the road here. That meant a jump in salary of two thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. I was now on the Executive Path, ending up as Principal not so many years later. As principal I visited every classroom at least once a week and made it my business to know every child by name in the school. I thought that was an important part of my role as leader. And I think it was also a great incentive for teachers to give of their best.
Vincent: *(laughs)* You were checking up on ‘em ...

Vic: Well, I don’t think they regarded me as a spy checking on what they were doing. I think rather they saw me as someone who was interested in what they were doing. And I had a certain capacity to engage kids. When I first came down here in 1955, the immigration program was in full swing on the south coast here. There were people getting off the boats from Europe ... particularly Dutch, German, Italian ... with little or no English. Despite the fact Australians had a reputation of being very friendly and egalitarian and all that sort-of stuff, there was great resistance to these people who looked different, who spoke a different language, who ate different food, who were attired differently in some instances – because they came here from war torn Europe and had nothing much at all. I felt for those kids who were, in lots of cases, not exactly despised by teachers and citizens, but certainly weren’t well received. People were suspicious of immigrants. When they heard them speaking their language they would say, “Why don’t you speak bloody English?”

Vincent: That must have brought [some memories] back to you.

Vic: So true. I had an empathy with what was happening to those kids. I had been marginalised as those kids were being marginalised. It was interesting ... many years later, [at] the fiftieth anniversary of Wanniara School, I was invited to be MC at the Dinner/Dance. During the program at Woonona RSL, my role was interrupted by a group of ‘Dutchies’. These were my ex-students who had become vets, architects, teachers, etc. ... They had succeeded in this place that gave them a hell of a bashing when they first got here. They made lots of speeches and presentations for looking after them as kids. My own childhood experience was my best training for becoming a teacher. It wasn’t the teachers’ college I went to, or the university work I had done, or the TAFE work that I had done ... It was coming from the other side of the fence. I knew what it was to be marginalised, and knew what it was to have the arse out of your strides. In this job one meets lots of kids who are just like I was ... jumping through the same hoops that I had jumped through. As I say, I think that was my best preparation for teaching. When I became a principal, and in-school jobs were advertised, and I’d interview teachers who were [potentially] going to work in my school ... Some of these people had not one degree, but two degrees, three degrees ... my first question to them was, “What did you do before you became a teacher?” Anybody who had done something other than teaching had their foot in the door. Life’s experiences matter in this game. Some teachers have never left school ... They went through primary, secondary, tertiary, and they came back into schools. I’ll always remember a man called Eric Hawcroft at teachers college, in one of the last lectures to us before we graduated, said, “When you go out into the teaching world, remember you’re a man among kids, and a kid among men.” And it’s so true, particularly for those who hadn’t experience of life in the raw.

Vincent: Well, you’ve sort of already answered my next question, which was: As an Aboriginal man, do you think you were able to bring something to your teaching and principal roles that other people weren’t? You’ve said that you felt an empathy with immigrant children or people who were on the outside [of society]. But in regards ... at the risk of using an umbrella term ... the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ kids at your schools, do you think just the presence of an Aboriginal man in such a position broke down some barriers ... some stereotypes?

Vic: Yes, I do. I do think it was important ... and it is still important to have an Aboriginal presence ... not only in schools, but everywhere. Some years ago I gave a talk to about ninety Aboriginal teachers at Federation House in Sydney. They’d asked me to talk about what I’d done, how I’d become a teacher, and my experiences as a teacher. And I said to them, “Do you realise that in 1952 there was one person of Aboriginal descent in the teaching service? You’re looking at him. In 1953 there was a hundred percent increase ... There were two of us. Do you realise that week, in Alice Springs, there’s a convention of Aboriginal GPs?” It’s important that this sort-of thing happens ... That we have Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal doctors ... even Aboriginal check-out chicks! We have to permeate society. Unfortunately, I think there’s a tendency for Aboriginal people to stick together in little clumps or communities, not go into mainstream jobs ... but into jobs fully reserved for Aboriginal people. My niece’s son is a pharmacist, working out there in the big wide world at Narrmione. Our son, John, was regarded as the best surveyor in town. He had a Bachelor of Surveying from UNSW, and he, too, was working in the big wide world out there ... not working for an Aboriginal organisation.

Vincent: I think [Aboriginal] doctors, definitely, would help in some of those remote communities ... [Not] just another white person telling you what to do. Maybe they need to see themselves in those positions.

Vic: It’s interesting that in a place like Walgett ... the GP there is a Yugoslav. Dr Matic would have at least five medical degrees, and yet he elects to stay in a place like Walgett ... which is barren of everything. But he loves it there. He loves the people, and they love him. The black fellas think the sun shines out of his backside ... and the feeling is returned. Therein lay one of the great misunderstandings. A lot of judgments are made about people of different ethnic backgrounds without sound basis. Aboriginal people because a lot haven’t met Aboriginal people ... they haven’t talked to Aboriginal people. One good example of that would be my mother-in-law. When [Ruth and I] decided to get married in 1955, there was a great resistance to our marriage on the basis of Aboriginality. But after a year or so, after lots of conversations between my mother-in-law and me, she saw that I wasn’t such an ogre ... that Aboriginal people are not ogres.

Vincent: So as a teacher, or in your role as a principal, did you take any direct action in introducing the students to Aboriginal culture? I remember, when we last spoke, you said you found it hard to get Aboriginal representatives to come in and give their perspectives. So obviously there were some attempts.
Vic: Yes. It was difficult in my time as principal. I failed to have Aboriginal people involved in school administration, the running of the school, or on committees. And certainly, there was nothing forthcoming in curriculum development ... giving an Aboriginal perspective to various curriculum areas. Perhaps it could have been my fault, but I don’t think so. I think they hesitated to come to schools because of their own negative experiences with schools. I can understand that. Teachers were willing to put Aboriginal Studies into operation, but they didn’t know how, and they couldn’t get the assistance they needed because Aboriginal communities wouldn’t be involved in it. I think one of the great things about being an Aboriginal person in a school, as I find even now, is it’s an opportunity [to provide people with a] corrective history. Even now, people feel ignorant of Australian history. I think one of the smartest reminders of that was in the Bicentenary year, when Aboriginal groups produced a little badge which showed a map of Australia with a Koori flag superimposed on it, and had “White Australia has a Black history”. That was very clever. The black history [of this country] goes back forty-thousand-plus years and the black history since 1788 of which I was a part. I saw aspects of that history and unfortunately, sometimes I still see it.

Vincent: I don’t remember being taught very much Australian history at all, let alone history that involved an Aboriginal perspective.

Vic: [At school] I remember learning a bit about the First Fleet, and I remember learning a bit about our involvement in the two World Wars, and that was it. It was really only when I left school, and I starting reading ... particularly, Henry Reynolds ...

Vincent: The first book I ever read by him was called “Why Weren’t We Told?” And the title is very poignant, ‘cause I kept asking myself, “Why wasn’t I told this stuff?”.

Vic: Yes. I’ve a copy of that book.

Vincent: So do you think there has been any progress in school curriculums since your time as a teacher?

Vic: Yes. I think there is a greater understanding of Australian history ... of that black history ... that white Australia has a black history ... because not only white people are writing about Australian history, but black people are writing about our history, too. In our universities we have some very prominent black people. So the history is better read, better written and better understood. Unfortunately, there are still Aboriginal people who keep plugging past injustices ... and the “poor fella me” image prevails. There was a time when that was the case, and it’s important never to forget those times ... because they are certainly part of our history. But it time now to shift the focus, as Wesley Enoch, [Artistic] Director of the Queensland Theatre Company and the first Indigenous person to hold that position, says. I think he’s pretty right when he says he’s been saying for a decade ... that the dominant narrative was [once] the stolen generation. Now it’s more about alcohol, abuse and neglect, and the definition of Aboriginality is disadvantage. Disadvantage becomes a sense of identity ... It’s a race to the bottom, in a lot of Aboriginal communities. And that’s not community building. [Some] of these people want to be in jail ... It’s a mark of “I’m an Aboriginal fella” ... Which is rather sad. It’s easy to sentimentalise the past but as Wesley says, our connection to the past is so tenuous. There are some things we must leave behind. Let’s get rid of this “poor fella me” attitude.

Vincent: I wanted to ask you about tertiary education, also. As you said before, a lot of Aboriginal adults will have had a largely negative experience of school ... and one of the things I keep coming across when researching local artists is that many have gone to TAFE as adults. Do you think that’s changing? Do you think the current younger Aboriginal generation is more likely to see school through to year 12?

Vic: Yes, I think they will. There are a lot of Aboriginal kids, of course, who go straight through the system as with white kids. There are also Aboriginal kids who have difficulty with the system as it exists. I think it’s been shown those kids who are having difficulty with the system leave school because they don’t see it having any relevance for them at that point in time. They are inclined to return to studies further down the track when they are just that little bit more mature and they’ve had time to consider the future and when they can handle situations that were previously thought to be difficult. Also I think there are those changes that make it easier to navigate the system. The money’s there, the assistance is there ... like at Wollongong University, and other universities, where there is an Aboriginal Education Unit. That’s why I was so involved during Dr Arthur Smith’s tenure at Wollongong University. We talked about this sort-of thing, including my education journey ... of being lost and lonely and homesick, and of how in that frame of mind it is difficult to deliver the best results. So Arthur Smith and I talked about the establishment of an education unit like there is at the University now, meeting in an old Demountable 10, I think it was. There is probably no official record of those deliberations ... but that’s where/when the seed was sown.

Vincent: An acorn of an idea ...

Vic: Well, some people may recognise the key players. But it doesn’t really matter ... It eventually happened, that’s the main thing.

(We take a short break from the interview, during which we continue to discuss the pitfalls of education – past and present.)

Vincent: I’ve just discovered that Uncle Vic did a bit of boxing in his teachers collage years. Do you want to repeat what you just told me?

Vic: We were talking about money being made available to Aboriginal students ... ABSTUDY, and that sort-of thing ... and how nowadays there are some cases where it isn’t necessary because some parents of Aboriginal students are on pretty good
salaries. In my case my mother was still taking in washing and ironing, and cleaning people’s houses ... and my father, who worked on a sheep station where the pay wasn’t very generous. So Government support for Aboriginal education would have been quite welcome. As it turned out I earned my passage via scholarships and was supplemented by what my Mum and Dad could afford to give. When I was going to teachers’ college, and my scholarship money was nine pounds seven shillings and sixpence a month ...barely a fortune... so I took it upon myself to go into the boxing ring at Forest Hill Stadium and at the Showground. The bouts were usually four three-minute rounds, with a minute in between each round. A win realised three pounds. So if you had four wins in a month, that was better than your scholarship grant. If you lost, one pound came your way.

Vincent: How did you fare?

Vic: Aww ... (laughs) I wasn’t the greatest. I wasn’t as good as my brother, Tommy, who was feather weight champion of Australia in 1944-5 ... or my other brother, Paddy, who fought the great Dave Sands who turned out to be a world-class boxer.

Vincent: Uncle Vic was just showing me a book called “Black Diamonds” ...?


Vincent: ... and there’s a great photo of his older brother in it.

Vic: I’ve learned to win all my fights now by a hundred yards. (laughs) But you wanted to talk about language revival ...?

Vincent: Yeah.

Vic: In regards language revival ... (hands me a copy of a letter) This is a letter I wrote to John Giacon who is Italian. He’s a linguist. He speaks Italian, obviously, and German, French, and a couple of Indigenous languages. He’s now doing a doctorate in Indigenous languages at ANU. John was the leader of the language revival program of Yuwaalaaraya and Gamilaraay at Walgett in north-west NSW. I wrote the letter to him in support of language revival and in the hope that funding would be forthcoming.

Vincent: We started talking about language revival when I first came around [to your place] a couple of months ago. It’s just really exciting to see there’s literature ... books to teach kids how to speak Yuwaalaaraya. It’s really great. But I guess what I find particularly interesting is ... and this applies to any culture in general, not just to language ... to some extent there has to be a bit of reinvention. [People often] talk about traditional cultures and traditional languages like their set in stone ... frozen in time. The reality of culture and language is that it’s always changing. I mean, you pointed out to me that for things which there aren’t traditional words ... you invent [new words]. I think the example you gave me was the word for cow ... ‘has milk’, was the translation, wasn’t it?

Vic: Yes.

Vincent: And computer is ‘electronic brain’?

Vic: Yes, computer is “gayrragunbirri”, which [literally] means “electricity brain”. But I think that’s always been so ... New words are always coming into language, and they exit when they’re no longer useful. But with Aboriginal languages ... particularly with Yuwaalaaraya and Gamilaraay... their demise came about because it was flogged out of them. You just didn’t speak your language in public. It’s a very effective way to destroy language.

Vincent: I was chatting to a guy recently ... he’s doing a PhD also, but in a completely different field to mine ... and he’s probably like a lot of people who live here [in the Illawarra], very ignorant of Aboriginal culture. And he said to me that he didn’t understand why local [Aboriginal] people didn’t speak their [traditional] language anymore. He assumed they must not be interested in it. And I said, “Look, if someone says to you, ‘If we catch you speaking your language, we’re going to take your kids from you’ ... you stop speaking your language!”

Vic: True.

Vincent: Because it’s a matter of survival there and then, as opposed to cultural survival [in the long term].

Vic: I think there are a lot of languages throughout the world that almost reached extinction, but over time and because of changed circumstances they come back able-bodied again. At the Illawarra Folk Festival, the other night, I was talking to Ted Egan ...

Vincent: Ted Egan?

Vic: You don’t know [of] Ted Egan? Everybody should know Ted Egan! Ted is a champion of Aboriginal people. He went up to the Northern Territory as a young man in the Public Service, and I think, at the time, he had the [white preconceptions] of Aboriginal people, and tried to carry the policies as a patrol officer in a white fella way. Realising what was being done to Aboriginal people he became a convert, and is now a great champion of Aboriginal people. [He] speaks several Aboriginal dialects, and in recent years he was appointed Administrator of the Northern Territory. [He’s] a very self-effacing, very humble sort-of a man. I was talking with him about indigenous languages and revival of languages after I’d delivered the Welcome to
Vincent: [Earlier] you said you feel things are progressing with Aboriginal perspectives in education ... When it comes to language revival, do you think we’ll ever see Dharawal or Yuin taught in our [local] schools?

Vic: I think too much [of those languages] have been lost. Still there’s a lot of material around on Dharawal, but it hasn’t been developed. Their revival programs are certainly nowhere near as advanced as the Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay programs. At this stage they have a word list of sorts but no dictionary ...

Vincent: But do you think people are ready to learn an Aboriginal language at school?

Vic: Well, they’re doing that out at places like Bourke, and Brewarrina, and Walgett, Toomelah, Boggabilla and those sort-of places. Perhaps there’s a stronger case for teaching the languages peculiar to those places where many descendants of the Y/G people remain.

Vincent: Not just to Aboriginal people?

Vic: Not just to Aboriginal people.

Vincent: You’ve been awarded a few awards in your time. Would you like to tell me about them?

Vic: Well ... awards really don’t mean very much to me. As I said [earlier], the medal that I prize most is my [School] Captain’s badge ... Ninecaret gold, and inscribed with ‘Captain, Victor Chapman, Dubbo High School, 1949’. It’s my prize medal. I think the important thing about [awards, like the] Public Service Medal, are the stories that go with them. What thrills me most are the people who nominated me for those awards. I didn’t set out intending to influence or impress anybody. I suppose what I’m saying is that I’ve met some very good and interesting people in my life ... and they’re the ones who said I should have a little gold star, such as the Public Service Medal. And the Centenary Medal also a story. I was at the point of

Vincent: Out of all the teachers I’ve had, there are three or four who really stand out. And I don’t just mean what they taught me ... their attitude as well. That will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Vic: Agree

Vincent: A good teacher is worth a lot.

Vic: I agree with you. But I think, in some ways, it’s a two-edged sword ... I enjoyed teaching, and the kids enjoyed having me around. One thing that I’m very grateful for is that I was able to draw. Pre gee-whiz IT stuff, while I was talking to the kids, I was constantly drawing on the blackboard which grabbed their attention. That was the best teaching aid I ever had ... a stick of chalk and a blackboard. And that gave some enjoyment to kids ... just drawing. And, as I say, the other important thing ... my best preparation for teaching was coming from the other side of the fence. I knew what it was to be marginalised, and there are lots of kids in the system who were marginalised and needed help. Some needed material help, some needed emotional help ... and I think I’d been through the whole gamut of feelings and emotions and knew instinctively when they were vulnerable.

Vincent: You were going to tell me about the Public Service Medal ... [you received it in] 1991, is that right?

Vic: 1991, yes. Government House allowed two people to accompany the recipients. Naturally, my first choice was my wife, Ruth, and then the next choice was my son, John, because he was living locally and Murray was living in Adelaide. So we went to Government House, and it was a very exciting time. The medal came in a little black case about the size of a spectacle case. I came back from receiving the medal from Peter Sinclair, the Governor at the time ... and John said to me, “Give us a look at your medal, Victor George.” So I passed him the case ... which had [the letters] PSM on the front. John was quick to say, “Streuth! They forgot the O.” (laughs) And the Centenary Medal also a story. I was at the point of refusing it, because two people for whom I didn’t have a great regard for were involved with the issue of the Centenary Medal. One was the Archbishop Peter Hollingworth and the other was Prime Minister, John Howard. I felt that Federation was not
necessarily a day which should be celebrated by Aboriginal people. I’ll read you what I said. *(Uncle Vic is holding a clipping of an article written about him in the Illawarra Mercury at the time of his receiving the Centenary Medal)* … “I considered not accepting the medal, because whilst Federation gave birth to many of the structures of contemporary Australia, it was powerfully driven by white-race fears: fears of the Chinese, and the Afghans ... And it put in place a White Australia Policy that wasn’t taken away until 1972. And many Australians still feel that the fears that informed Federation still live in the undercurrents of the current Government.” In the end, I decided to accept it out of respect to the [Wollongong City] Gallery’s Director, Peter O’Neill, who was a great friend of mine, and who nominated me for work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. And it says here, *(referring again to the article)* “But Mr Chapman, now retired and living in Woonona, carried with him the words of novelist, Eva Sallis, another Centenary Medalist, and President of ‘Australians Against Racism’” … and these words gave me strength. I said, “I accept the Medal as a momento of dark times and unreconciled Australia, in which some things are tainted, but in which many Australians have acted in an unprecedented and memorable way to counter the rising storm.” An interesting episode connected with the Centenary Medal was that it was delivered to me at [my house] at 73 Stephen Drive, by courier ... In a little white box, in response to loud knocking said, “I got a box of medals for ya, mate”. And I said, “Shit. I thought it was a bloody pizza.” *(laughs)* Howard ... because this region was represented by the Greens....

Vincent: Michael Organ.

Vic: Michael Organ. So the medals to recipients in the Illawarra were sent out in pizza boxes. In areas where there was a Liberal representative, they conducted special little ceremonies. Michael Organ made contact with all the [local] recipients, and had a public presentation at the [Wollongong City] Gallery.

Vincent: That was good of him. I thought it was strange that you received it by mail. So [John Howard] would only go into liberal electorates, ay?

*(The photograph that accompanies the aforementioned Illawarra Mercury article is actually of Uncle Vic at the Yaroma mosaic. I read the caption out-loud ...)*

Vincent: “Vic Chapman, who received the Centenary Medal, visiting the Gurungaty Water Place”. The bloody [Illawarra] Mercury! They always get those little details wrong.

Vic: Yes, trust the Mercury to stuff it up. *(He hands me another newspaper article from that time.)* But I found this one rather flattering.

Vincent: *(reading parts of it out-loud)* “... But perhaps the worthiest recipient of all is Vic Chapman ... Vic Chapman is a great Australian. There will be many people in the Illawarra whose lives he has touched over the years who will applaud heartily at his honour today.”

Vic: Yes. I have written in the front of my diary, “Excreta tauri sapientiamfulgeat” which, in Latin, translates to “Bull shit baffles brains.” *(laughs)*

Vincent: *(laughs)* And your siblings couldn’t see the advantages of you learning Latin!
A Gunbanigirr man from Nambucca, Kevin Butler is one of the most prolific Aboriginal artists practising in the Illawarra. Though his studio works have brought many accolades, his high profile is due in no small part to the number of community-based art works he has facilitated since moving to the region in the early 1990s. Over twenty percent of all the public art surveyed as part of this research was made by or in association with him - an output second only to that of the Coomaditchie artists. I am greatly indebted to Kevin, then, that he agreed to meet and talk with me.

This interview took place at Kevin Butler’s home in Thirroul.

Vincent: What's your connection to the north coast [of NSW]? I know you’re from Nambucca ...

Kevin: That’s correct. I was born in Nambucca, 1962. The Gunbanigirr people ... that was my clan. At the age of two weeks old I was taken away from my mother by the Aboriginal Protection board and raised by a non-Aboriginal family in Sydney ... living in Granville at the time.

Vincent: Were you ever told what the excuse was for your removal?

Kevin: No.

Vincent: So your non-Aboriginal family never gave you reasons why ... false or true?

Kevin: [Quite a few] years later I managed to access my files ... down at a place at The Rocks, there ... they have everything. And there was nothing mentioned about [it in the files]. I was basically just taken away as part of the Assimilation Policy.

Vincent: And have you subsequently met with your biological family?

Kevin: I have. I was involved with the organisation, Link Up. I came to them in 1986, and they managed to trace down my family. Sadly, my mother passed away the year before, so I never got the chance to meet her. But I do have a brother, and I met him in 1990, plus heaps of cousins, aunties and uncles.

Vincent: Have you developed a close relationship with them?

Kevin: Well, the last time I went up there was 2000. Unfortunately that was for my brother’s funeral. He passed away, and I haven’t been back since. So I think it’s time to get back up there and see the family again, yeah ... Sort-of like a healing process.

Vincent: In what other ways have you been involved with Link Up?

Kevin: Every six months they have their meetings and a get-together with all the Link Up people ... only in different locations. Sometimes in Dubbo, sometimes in Wreck Bay. And it’s a weekend where everyone gets together, you know ... have a big talk, have a big feed ... all that kind of stuff. So there’s still the involvement there.

Vincent: So, as a member of the Stolen Generations, what did the prime Minister's Apology in 1997 mean to you?

Kevin: Well ... it was very emotional to watch. He passed away, and I haven’t been back since. So I think it’s time to get back up there and see the family again, yeah ... Sort-of like a healing process.

Vincent: Did you go to the ceremony?

Kevin: No, unfortunately. I was working at Wollongong City Council ... doing an art project with the locals. But I got to watch it on the TV. And ... it was good. I think it was most definitely overdue. And it was good to hear it from [Kevin Rudd], not from the previous fellow in office.

Vincent: I think if [John Howard] was honest with people, he might have used the phrase, “when Hell freezes over”.

Kevin: Yeah. But with Mr Rudd ... [the Apology] was very significant, I think.

Vincent: So there was some sort of closure?
Kevin: A little bit. But there’s still pain there, you know. Apologies or compensation won’t bring back dead relatives. It won’t bring back the time we’ve lost.

Vincent: What’s your opinion about the compensations?

Kevin: I personally wouldn’t go for it. Like I said, money won’t bring back anything. I’m just happy the way I am, you know. I’m living my life to the fullest.

Vincent: This may seem like a strange question in regards my project topic, but it’s a question I’m asking most people ... What’s your opinion of the Northern Territory Intervention?

Kevin: Ooooh, that’s a tough one ... I don’t like it. It’s a racist intervention ... the controlling of people’s lives and their money. It’s scary, because it’s sort-of going back to the days of the Protection Board, you know, when people were under rule and couldn’t move without permission. I don’t like it. Plus, in the Northern Territory, they’ve removed the anti-discrimination law. That’s just as bad.

Vincent: I think it’s a ‘one step forward, one step back’ type of thing. Even if the claims of child abuse were true ... To remove human rights from a group of people, that’s very big step back.

Kevin: Very much so. And they just shouldn’t just target Aboriginal people, because, let’s face it, there are good and bad in all races. Sure, there might be some child abuse there ... but not everyone’s involved. And not every man beats his wife, either.

Vincent: In 1995 your painting, Assimilation, was used in the Bringing them Home media campaign ... It was turned into a poster, wasn’t it?

Kevin: Yes, that was an honour. It was a painting based on my journey, and a composite of everybody else that was stolen. It was shaped in a maze. And you started off in the middle of the maze with the Aboriginal Protection Board, and you worked your way out, trying to avoid all the obstacles that occurred to young, individual people. Such things as loss of identity, racism, not knowing what side of the fence you’re on, drug and alcohol issues, death, suicide, domestic violence. But the good thing about this maze was there was a way to come out ... and it led to the home ... the home of the people where you come from.

Vincent: That’s one of the paintings Uncle Vic waxed lyrical about.

Kevin: God love him. That particular painting was purchased by Wollongong City Gallery as part of their permanent collection.

Vincent: Uncle Vic said that around the time of Pallingang, and around the time you became Artist in Residence ... that was a really exciting time for Wollongong Cit Gallery, in regards Aboriginal art ... that things were really taking off.

Kevin: Definitely. Wollongong City Gallery really does have the particular honour of having a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in their collection. They’ve had several NAIDOC Week exhibitions, and of course, Pallingang, as well.

Vincent: We’ll come back to that topic a little later, but just going back a bit ... What was it like growing up in Sydney, in a non-Aboriginal family?

Kevin: Well, to be honest, they weren’t very nice people. No, it wasn’t a good time. I felt isolated, being the only Aboriginal person there. They had three older girls of their own ... and I was new, I was different. It just wasn’t good.

Vincent: And before coming to Wollongong, you moved back to Nambucca?

Kevin: Arrr ... no. After living in Granville ... when I was about fourteen we moved out to a place called Menangle ... out past Campbelltown. And they had a couple of acres with horses and that. Then when I was about twenty or twenty-two ... something like that ... I moved out to my own various places around Sydney.

Vincent: So what eventually drew you to the [NSW] south coast? Why Wollongong?

Kevin: Well, at the time, I was living in Darlinghurst ... not far from The Cross, there, in just a one-bedroom flat. And the place was a rat-race, you know. Too expensive, hoons everywhere, drugs, prostitutes, and what-not. There were people using drugs in the alleyways ... and as you came home you’d see them shooting up. And I thought, “Nah, I can’t handle this anymore”. So I come down here about 1990, and haven’t been happier since. Yeah, my career’s taken off down here.

Vincent: And were you painting before you settled here?

Kevin: I was ... sort-of on and off.
Vincent: Just dabbling ...?

Kevin: Yes, dabbling. You could say that. But then I met Tess Allas, and my career sort of took off from there.

Vincent: So she encouraged you a lot?

Kevin: Yeah. She was working at the Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the time. And she's the one who got me all these commissions ... public artworks, and that.

Vincent: How did you begin painting, though? What first drew you to it?

Kevin: Well, I'd always drawn, as a kid. I'd always had the gift, and I enjoyed it. And it was in 1988, the year of the Bicentennial, that I started to paint 'Aboriginal' art. Because I had been removed from my family, I thought that this would be a good way to get in touch with my lost culture. So I started painting then, and the rest is history.

Vincent: Would we recognise some of those earlier works?

Kevin: A lot of the earlier works are completely different to what I've done [for a while now] ... Small [canvases], experimenting with dots ... and the 'usual' stuff with the snakes and goannas. But, as you're well aware, my art work has evolved since then.

Vincent: At any stage did you feel restricted as to what you could paint and how you could paint it? For example, when I've spoken to local artists, there's very mixed opinions about how many dots you can use ...

Kevin: Certain dots, certain totems ... you have to be careful of. You don't want to be stepping in other people's footsteps. You have to respect other tribes and their beliefs. So there are certain things I can do, and certain things that I can't. But I think I've now managed to do my own stuff in my own particular way.

VINCENT: The dolphin is a reoccurring image in your work ... Would you say that?

Kevin: I certainly would. And the reason is, as you know, that I come from Nambucca Heads, which is right on the water, there. I believe I have saltwater in the veins. Even now, I'm living here on the coast. I'm a very coastal person ... I'm particularly at ease when I'm near the water. If I go out west somewhere, I feel like I'm dehydrating. So I have that affinity with the coast, and not just dolphins ... [but] whales, coral reefs ... anything that lives in the sea.

VINCENT: And is there an average amount of time it takes to do a canvas? Like ... [For the benefit of the tape] We're sitting in Kevin's kitchen, and there's quite a large canvas next to us. How long would that one take you?

Kevin: Okay. (points to his head) Well, it usually starts up here in the head ... in my imagination. I might quickly draw a sketch ... might roughly draw one on paper. And then I'll start with the background. For example, with a water scene, I'll do a blue background with the sun and sky and everything. But a lot of times, in fact, nine out of ten, I'll make it up as I go along, and the result is pretty good. So, yeah, having a good imagination, I think, helps.

VINCENT: And is there an average amount of time it takes to do a canvas? Like ... [For the benefit of the tape] We're sitting in Kevin's kitchen, and there's quite a large canvas next to us. How long would that one take you?

Kevin: Well, this particular canvas here in front of us is 180 cm x 120. Other ones I've done this size I can do in about two and a half weeks, if I put my mind to it. And that's like eight hours or more a day. As you know, I'm pretty nocturnal. Sometimes I'll still be out there [in the studio] painting when the sun's coming up.

VINCENT: Well, Uncle Vic did say you were a night owl. (laughs)

Kevin: Yeah. I think my record was twenty four hours [to do a canvas]. But [generally] I like to take my time. So we're looking at two to three weeks for a big [canvas].

VINCENT: (referring to the nearby canvas, which is still in progress) Does this one have a title?
Kevin: Arr ... not yet.

Vincent: It’s actually a great example of the style we were just talking about. It’s got a dot pattern, but also a naturalistic depiction of a landscape.

Kevin: Yeah. It’s a contemporary style. Lots of bright colours. In fact one of my friends referred to [this style] as Koori Pop Art. I thought that was quite good. But I don’t have a title for this one yet. But something will come.

Vincent: Even unfinished, it’s very impressive. Okay, so ... You settled in Wollongong in 1990 ... And you became the Wollongong City Gallery’s first Artist in Residence ...

Kevin: [Their] first Indigenous one. There were about two or three prior to that.

Vincent: Oh, okay. I thought you were the first, irrespective [of race].

Kevin: No, no. But it’s still a good record to hold. It was an honour. Yeah, that was quite good. Back in ‘96, I had the use of the rent-free studio there, and I think there was about two or three thousand dollars to buy equipment. And at the end of the year, I had the solo exhibition.

Vincent: That must have been exciting.

Kevin: It was very good. I enjoyed it.

Vincent: [Did the exhibition receive a] good response?

Kevin: A good response. A good turn-out [of people] came to the opening, too. And in another way it sort of launched my career within the community. A lot of people got to know me ... the Aboriginal community and non-Aboriginal people ... Wollongong Council, and all the schools. Yeah, it was good.

Vincent: Tell me about your involvement in Pallingjang. Have you exhibited in all of them?

Kevin: In every single one, yes. They’re pretty good. You get to work with good friends and fellow artists ... hanging out with them in the gallery. And it’s really good exposure.

Vincent: I think the first one I went to was the last one [in 2009]. And I just felt there was a great amount of pride in that room [at the opening].

Kevin: That’s it. The last one ... Pallingjang IV ... that’s still running, actually. In fact, it’s opening in Huskison, this weekend, at Laddie Timbery’s [gallery].

Vincent: Oh, okay.

Kevin: It’s travelled all over the state, and doing quite good.

Vincent: So what do you think characterises Aboriginal art of the [NSW] south coast? Do you think it stands apart from [art made in] other parts of NSW and Australia?

Kevin: I think it does, yep. Going back to the water theme, as we mentioned earlier, a lot of the artists here on the coast have the saltwater in their veins, as well. So their themes relate to the water, or to certain areas, like ... the one there [in Pallingjang IV] of Pigeon House Mountain, down the coast there. And people relate to living on the missions down on the coast, as well. So yeah, it’s all based on where they come from and where they live ... I suppose what you could call ‘localism’.

Vincent: One of the observations I’m planning on making in my thesis is ... I find a lot of non-Aboriginal depictions of the land very literal. Obviously there are exceptions. But I really am always reminded of that saying, “This always was and always will be Aboriginal land”, when I see Aboriginal depictions [of the land], because they’re always more than what the eye sees ... Personal memories, but also Dreamtime stories, in many of them. [Considering] the injustices that have been done to Aboriginal people and their land, I would have thought a lot of the paintings would have been very political. Some of yours, certainly, can be very political. But in general I find a lot of the south coast stuff very positive because of that [aforementioned] attitude, “This always was and always will be Aboriginal land”. Does that make sense to you?

Kevin: It certainly does. There’s a saying Aboriginal people have ... that “we don’t own the land, the land owns us”. We look at the land as being our mother ... Mother Earth. So we have an affinity with the land. It’s part of us, it’s where we come from. That’s
why we respect it ... that’s why, in our art work, it’s very striking. A thing, too, about Aboriginal people ... When we do our art, it comes from the heart ... particularly with myself ... and that shows a lot in the art work.

Vincent: Why do you think we don’t see more overtly political work from local artists? I mean, in a way, paintings that are of the landscape, and that are of Dreamtime stories, are political, because it’s a reaffirmation of identity. But we don’t see many overtly political issues ... whether it’s the Stolen Generation, sovereignty issues ...

Kevin: Well, I’ve done a few in my time ... the Stolen Generation, black deaths in custody, drug and alcohol abuse ... you know, things that affect out people. There are quite a few Aboriginal artists that do political art work. You know of a fellow called Adam Hill?

Vincent: Arr ... oh, yes, yes. He does very pop-art type of work, doesn’t he?

Kevin: Yeah. He’s a mate of mine. And another guy, called Gordon Hookey, is also very political. Not just those two boys ... there are a lot of people out there.

Vincent: Oh, I know. But I guess I find that more of a Sydney or North [coast] school [of Aboriginal art]. There’s quite a distinction once you get south of Sydney. In general, I find the south coast art more ...

Kevin: More mellow?

Vincent: Yeah. Am I imagining that?

Kevin: Oh, no. It depends on the artist, it depends on the area. But Sydney artists are very political, yes. It’s like any Aboriginal country ... different areas, different styles.

Vincent: What do you think are some of the common misconceptions about contemporary Aboriginal art?

Kevin: From a non-Aboriginal person’s view, I think, they believe that because you’re Aboriginal you must paint art that has to be dots and kangaroos and snakes, and what not ...

Vincent: People still think that?

Kevin: Some people do. But I think as times are changing, particularly in the last twenty years or so, urban Aboriginal art, as we like to call it, has become accepted, and people are seeing the changes ... this generation, next generation, as well ... and just fitting into the mainstream. I think it’s good too.

Vincent: Adam Hill’s stuff is really exciting.

Kevin: Oh, yeah. It’s really bright and colourful ...

Vincent: Yeah, it’s amazing stuff. Tess Allas, in the Dictionary of Australian Artists Online, writes that as of 2007 you had worked on twenty-seven murals. Now, you’ve just shown me a new mural [you’re working on], and I know that number has grown since 2007.

Kevin: Yes, indeed.

Vincent: What attracts you this medium or the process involved in those types of projects?

Kevin: One, I like working on big things. The bigger the better!

Vincent: (laughs) So size matters!

Kevin: Indeed, particularly for art work. It’s [the] challenge too, you know ... to get out there and do something that will be appreciated by everyone who sees it. Like, particularly when I go to schools and community groups. Working with students ... they get a lot out of it, the teachers get a lot out of it, the mums and dads, they get a lot. So, yeah ... It’s just my way ... My gift ... The way I share my gift with other people.

Vincent: One of the projects I was hoping you could tell me about, as an example of this type or work, is the Bellambi Surf Life Saving Club. ‘Cause that’s one I see all the time when I go riding on the bike track [by the beach]. How did that [project] come about?

Kevin: Okay. Well, I got contacted by the Principal there [at Bellambi Public School]. She had obviously seen my work on other projects, and she wanted me to come along to the school, also in conjunction with Wollongong City Gallery, to do the work.
We got together with all the kids there at the school and discussed what we were going to do. We told them that we had eight panels that were going to go outside the surf club. So each kid, from Kindergarten up to Year 6, got a turn of working on the job. And, as you said, the end result speaks for itself. It really livens up the surf club. It’s actually not been graffitied on since the murals were hung up ... which is a miracle.

Vincent: And that was one of the reasons for the project, wasn’t it? To stop graffiti ...?

Kevin: Yeah, to ‘put a halt to the hoons’, as the Illawarra Mercury referred to it. But yeah ... it never got touched. And I do believe that the children have an unwritten law that they don’t graffitied each other’s art work. I mean, I’ve seen graffiti on the walls around [the panels], but none actually on the art work. So that’s quite amazing ... that they still haven’t been touched.

Vincent: So, in that type of situation, as you’re doing the work with these kids, what do you endeavour to teach them? Whether it’s about general things, or Aboriginal culture?

Kevin: It’s a lot of things. I believe it’s not just putting a pretty picture on a wall ... or on a canvas. It’s learning about the Aboriginal culture, it’s the kids, out of home, learning to do this and that. It’s also good for them that they’re not [just] learning something from a text book or a video, that they’ve actually got someone coming into the school and talking to them, you know, a hands-on approach. And they just love it. They just get right into it. It’s really a cultural thing. I also believe that, particularly with the young kids, [it’s important that] they can see an Aboriginal person and think, “Well, he’s pretty good”. It sort-of breaks down the stereotypes about people. A lot of people think, “They’re just a bunch of lazy drunks, sitting around the park, doing nothing.” But this is a good way [to counteract that mentality]. And I believe that kids will grow up and say, “Oh yeah, I remember Kev Butler ... he came to our school” ... so they’ll have that positive attitude towards Aboriginal people. In a way it’s a step towards reconciliation with the younger generation.

Vincent: Do you think there’s a substantial gap in how generations feel about Aboriginal people? Put it this way ... As I told you earlier, I’ve tried to get around and see as many of the local public works as possible. And there was an incident when I went out to the Cringilla Community Park, where Narelle [Thomas] and Lorraine [Brown] had participated in the making of a mosaic at the bread oven there. When I got there, there were these two young white fellas having their lunch break there. They seemed nice enough. But when they enquired about what I was doing, why I was photographing it, etcetera, and I said I was writing about local Aboriginal art, and that some Koori artists had been involved in this work ... The stuff that came out of their mouths! I was really quite taken aback. They looked like they were in their early twenties. So hopefully the generations after them [will have a better attitude].

Kevin: Well, I think with younger kids ... Aboriginal culture really does seem to be getting out there to them at the moment ... and having a positive effect. And even in the [popular] media ... I’ve noticed [a positive change] in the movies over the last ten years or so. I mean, Bran Nue Dae ...

Vincent: Oh, that’s a great film.

Kevin: Yeah. I could name a few. But I think things look good for the next generation of kids. They don’t have to have the burden my generation, and the one prior to that, had to carry.

Vincent: I’m intending to argue [in my thesis] that, apart from the issues that a public art work addresses, just their presence in the public landscape puts an Aboriginal presence back into that landscape. I was taught nothing about Aboriginal culture, at school. And I think a lot of the public are like that. So, to walk around, and see an artwork ... even [if only] subconsciously it puts that presence back in their mind ...

Kevin: Yeah.

Vincent: ... you know, “There’s a Black history here, and we’re still here”.

Kevin: Well, that’s right. And I think it’s getting accepted. Everywhere you go now there’s art everywhere. So, people can see it, and they realise that the Aboriginal culture is strong. And, as you said, when you went to school, as it was for me, there was hardly anything on Aboriginal art, or Aboriginal culture in general. Nowadays, kids are getting a lot of it ... from what’s taught at school, from the internet, and from visits from local artists and elders.

Vincent: Well, I know that Boolang Nangamai do a lot of going out to schools [where] they teach them the traditional weaving and stuff. So it’s good.

Kevin: Yeah, it is.

Vincent: That brings us to the [subject of the] school curriculum. In 1991 you published an article called “Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum”, concerned with the lack of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom, and the superficial way they might be
implemented. I suppose, in a way, you’ve partially answered this question, but twenty years on do you think things have changed?

Kevin: In those twenty years things have changed, yeah, definitely.

Vincent: Specifically in regards to the curriculum?

Kevin: In particular, yes. For example, if we go back to [the subject of] Bellambi Public School, they had the honour of winning an award ... I can’t remember the title of it, it was an Aboriginal word, but ... an award for the acceptance of Aboriginal culture. It’s schools like that have embraced the culture ... A lot schools now have an Aboriginal Liaisons Officer, a lot of schools now have Aboriginal teachers, which is good ... Uncle Vic Chapman, for example, had the honour of being the first Aboriginal headmaster in New South Wales. A lot of schools are embracing our culture. So I think since [1991] we have made a positive step forward, and we’re still going.

Vincent: Like the many murals you’ve done, you’ve participated in close to thirty exhibitions, with a wide variety of people and groups. Once again, we don’t have time to go through them all, obviously, but which ones stand out for you, and why?

Kevin: Okay. Well, the first one would have to be the very first exhibition I [was a part of] in 1990, which was called “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”, and that was held at the Sydney Opera House. Since then I’ve had some other good ones, particularly at Wollongong City Gallery. Let’s see ... there was one in 2000, at Homebush Bay, during the Sydney Olympics. That was an honour, to have that one, there.

Vincent: And that’s around the time you did the painting Uncle Vic was telling me about? The one of the walk across the Bridge?

Kevin: Exactly. And of course the Pallingiang exhibitions. There were four of them. And I’ve also had works at Parliament House, in Sydney. And there was one at the Wollongong Court House ... the year they had what they call the Law Week exhibition. 2006, I think it was ... Yes, 2006 I was featured artist at Wollongong Court House. So, yeah, I’ve had some good exhibitions in great locations, mainly here in the Illawarra.

Vincent: And I suppose, like you were saying about Pallingiang, it’s not just about the pleasure of having your work on display, but it’s the communal aspect of meeting with other artists, friends, colleagues ...

Kevin: Oh, yeah. You connect like one big artistic family. And it’s an honour to share my work with those who come in to see it, as well.

Vincent: Is it time for another solo exhibition?

Kevin: (laughs) That was one of your questions that caught my eye.

Vincent: Well, I just thought ... Even though you have a lot of work on display in public, I was surprised that your only solo exhibition ...

Kevin: Was my first one in 1996, when I was resident artist. And ... I think the answer is obvious ... but yes, I definitely want to do another solo one. I’ve got an itching ... I’ve got all these ideas ... all these paintings ...

Vincent: (looking around the studio) Well, it looks like you’ve currently got [enough] work for a solo exhibition.

Kevin: Oh, yes.

Vincent: You seem to also be one of the very few local [Aboriginal] artists who have been able to live off their art.

Kevin: I am, very much so. With my community work ... I’m usually doing a dozen schools a year, and getting good money for it. So, yeah, I’m living comfortably off my art, which is good. It’s my passion. I enjoy doing it.

Vincent: Why do you think more local [Aboriginal] artists aren’t able to [live solely off their art]? Do you think there’s still a lack of interest in urban, or more specifically, local [Aboriginal] art ... in comparison to, say, Papunya Tula, or Arnhem Land?

Kevin: I know [what you mean]. I suppose it could depend on the individual person, as well. There are a lot of talented people out there that are not being recognised for their work, and it’s quite a shame. But I think it’s just a matter of getting out there into the community, networking with people, getting yourself known as a name. It’s hard work, but it pays off in the end. Just get yourself known. That’s the way to go.
Vincent: We talked about [your painting of] the reconciliation walk across the [Sydney] Harbour Bridge. Was that the only [painting] involving the Harbour Bridge?

Kevin: That was the only one I did, yep.

Vincent: Okay. ‘Cause Uncle Vic seemed to think you had a series from 2000. He said [one] had ‘Eora 2000’ in it.

Kevin: That was one for the Sydney Olympics. Eora being the [traditional] name of the Sydney area. That was the other one I did [in 2000]. I’ve got a photo of it somewhere ...

Vincent: But he was wrong about the John Howard caricature in it?

Kevin: He was, yes.

Vincent: I suppose another work of yours that gets seen by a lot of people ... and not necessarily the same types of people familiar with your local work ... is the permanent exhibition at the Australian Museum. There’s like a maze of paintings ...

Kevin: That’s correct. That [installation] was based on the Assimilation painting we mentioned earlier, that the Wollongong [City] Gallery has. The staff there at the Australian Museum contacted me, and asked if I could create a three dimensional installation based on it. And that’s part of their permanent exhibition called Indigenous Australians. So, yeah, that’s still on show, up there.

Vincent: It’s very dark.

Kevin: Very dark. I think that was my mood at the time, you know.

Vincent: I wanted to ask you about one of them. They’re all very powerful, but the one that always stands out, for me, is the one set in outer space ... and there’s like a spirit floating above a planet or the moon ...

Kevin: I’m just trying to picture it, myself ... ’Cause a lot of my work, too, is very influenced by [outer] space. They say we come from the stars ... the astronomers and all that. But I like science fiction as well, so I’m very much in tune with the spiritual aspect of [that concept]. Not being a religious person, myself, it’s just something that attracts me. But I’m just trying to picture that art work you just mentioned ...

Vincent: Oh, I’m probably not describing it very well. Because, apart from the photos in these books (points to three Pallingjang catalogues) I don’t have many samples of your work. We’ve talked about how your art has evolved over the years, and how you feel you’ve pretty much found your niche ... but is there anything emerging in your work at the moment? A new phase or anything ...?

Kevin: Not at the moment, no. I’m pretty happy with what I’m doing.

Vincent: Is there something you envisage doing in the future that would be quite different? Something you have yet to try that you’d really like to do ...?

Kevin: There is one painting that has been on my mind for the last few years ... a big painting I want to do. They say every artist has that one painting that they’re remembered by ... like Da Vinci and Mona Lisa. I have an idea of doing a very very large canvas that [will be] based on a book I read called “Blood on the Wattle”. You may have heard of it.

Vincent: I have, yeah.

Kevin: It’s about Aboriginal massacres that have happened over the years. So I’m looking at doing something based on that ... Rainforests, as I have in [some of] my paintings, with policeman, white men on horses, you know ... guns going off and shooting people and that, and a lot of red in the painting. So I want that one to be like my Sistine Chapel.

Vincent: It’ll be your “Guernica”!

Kevin: Yes! So ... once it’s finished, if I get hit by a bus the next day and drop dead, it doesn’t matter, ‘cause at least I’ll have finished that art work! Hopefully that will be something people remember me by. But I’m sure they’ll remember for everything else I’ve done, too.

Vincent: Oh, of course. But I’ll definitely keep looking out for that painting.

Kevin: Yes. So, maybe, as we mentioned earlier, the next solo exhibition ... paintings like that might appear.
Tell me a bit about yourself, your family, and your connection to the south coast.

Well, my family come from the south coast. My mother’s tribe was here before my father’s tribe. Unfortunately, I haven’t [been given] all the information [about] my mother’s side, so I’ve taken after my father’s side, which I was brought up with. I was born in a hospital, and then come out to Gerringong. And living in Gerringong, we lived on a mountain, which had many other families up there. And we lived off the land. As I grew up ... around eleven and twelve, I think ... families started disappearing off the mountain.

I’ve roam[ed] on this place for forty-three years now. I’ve brought about my Dreaming within myself ... my story. And I’ve promoted it into this area. We are still under tribal law, I believe very much so, because I as a person carry the four elements: wind, water, earth, and fire. We have been made with those elements since the time of our gods ... when we were created as part of the land. We are now sitting in human form, but if you go beyond the human form, you then come to realise that these stories of the land have been part of your journey. And we speak of these stories in this human form. So I’m very connected up to my past life. This is something that we can’t run away from. We’re gifted people of the land, and we need to utilise those gifts so we can grow in the essence of life.

My father worked for the council, and the [Local Aboriginal] Land Council, and ATSIC. He was very [involved with] the Government. In his time of being he was known as a famous footballer. But we want to be noticed for the cultural people that we weren’t looked at [as] before. In my community I’ve [gone] into the schools and I’ve told them about our Aboriginal culture. My stories are about what we’ve done on the land, how we’ve lived and how we’ve survived. I painted those murals on the [Werri Beach public amenities] so that people can [understand that]. [But] it’s like an obstacle to [some of] them. They see my picture, and think, “Oh, that’s pretty!” But in that picture is my story of four generations. It talks about my grandmother, my father, myself, and my children. It shows what was here when my grandmother was here, what was here when my father was about, what I done when I was here, and what my children do today. As those generations come down the line, our stories are significantly changing rapidly [due to] the food chain of today. So my story is about survival, and growth in light where we first become.

People say [that] after you finish here you go back to your totem. Well, growing up, we didn’t hear about totems, and tribes, and languages. We grew up with our own language, which was a humble language, and a body language, and we already knew right from wrong. It was only when we come into contact with white people that we had to change our way of living because we had to respect their wishes, their language. So we changed. Our family slowly but surely changed into people that we weren’t aware of. So we’re now living that life of a white-skinned person with a black identity. We’re very connected to our lands, but because we’ve been structured over the last few years to commit to society, and to commit to our communities so we can get what we need from the earth, it’s slowly has lost our senses in the cultural issues. The only thing we can hold onto is the things we’ve been brought up with, with the things we’ve been fed with. We grew up with strong people from the land that walked tall, proud, and strong, and that’s what I live by today ... my old people’s stories. Do I seek those stories? Yes, I do. Do I follow my dreams? Yes, I do. Do I see an outcome of my vision? Yes, I do. If I’m unsure of a question, or someone, or something, that’s in my way, I take a deep breath and I ask my ancestral beings to guide me to such a space where [I can ask] “Is it right, or not? Where do I go for an answer?” I believe the only way you’re going to find yourself is to look back within yourself.

Just to clarify things ... You mentioned your father and your grandmother ... Can you tell me their names?

My father’s name was Roy Stewart; his tribal name was Yunamyna(?) , and he was born under a tree at Batemans Bay on the Clyde River. was my grandmother’s name was Jessie Stewart. Jessie was actually a Campbell before she married a Stewart from the south coast.
It seems to me that in some ways you had quite a traditional childhood, but in other ways not-so-traditional... ‘cause you said there wasn’t [traditional] language or a lot of the knowledge you now wish you had. But at the same time, you were living off the land...

Fiona: Well, a quick example, would be when I was in class at school. I’d be listening to the birds outside, and I’d be watching the animals, ‘cause they’d be telling me stories. The teacher was trying to teach me about numbers and letters, but because I was so fascinated by the land, I couldn’t keep focus on the teacher. So when she [tried to] get my attention, the first thing I’d say was, “What?” And she’d say, “Get up and get in that corner. Don’t you speak to me like that. Don’t you ask me, ‘What?’”. But to me, asking what? in our home was natural. If you didn’t understand something, automatically it was what? or why? Now, things like that at school stopped me from getting an education. Because the teachers thought I was rude by expressing that word, what. But I didn’t have any other expression. Beg your pardon or excuse me weren’t used by our family. There was never a time when things like that had to be said, because everything just fell into place. We were in a unit. It wasn’t like we were in a [western] family, we were in a unit that already knew. So, therefore, I missed out on a lot of education, because I was classed as one of those children that didn’t want to learn or listen.

I left school at an early age, and I left home at an early age. I found that I was much like the Indigo kid... a crystal that never really formed on the land. It’s like... it’s in touch with everything, and it just won’t grow from one species. It’s gotta grow from a lot of different sources, ‘cause a lot of those things on the land are our vitamins for our body. And if we don’t get in touch with those things, our oils in our bodies dry up, we dry up, and then we die off. The medicines in the hospital, they can never fix us, ‘cause [in the beginning] we weren’t medicated souls. We were pure souls from the earth, from the life force itself.

So a lot of schools, yes, they tried to teach us how to read and write and to get an education. Some of us pulled through, some of us never. But I look back and feel so glad I didn’t get an education, ‘cause [otherwise] I would not know who I am. I wouldn’t have followed my culture, I wouldn’t have followed my dreams, and I certainly wouldn’t have spoke [to] and thought the animals were something [significant]. I would have listened to the teacher saying, “You’re grounded, you’re in the naughty chair for a week because you keep looking out the window.” Well, that teacher that used to do that to me in school, in primary years... now she’s at the age of sixty or seventy... she sends all her students to me. She comes to me now, because she had not been educated about cultural life. She realised, “Hey, I need to find out about these Aboriginal people”, because one of her family got in with an Aboriginal, and their child was performing all these different things. They thought there was something wrong with this child, but there wasn’t. The child was very spiritual and very connected to the elements of the earth. The white families didn’t really want to have the child because it was all bruised. So that was a big lesson for her. She had to learn that when we have our babies they do come out bruised.

Fiona: It’s something to do with the blood. I think...

Vincent: Why?

Fiona: You mean an appearance of bruising?

Vincent: Wow.

Fiona: They always have them on their buttocks. And you’ll notice their fingers will have a different colour to their body. That shows what colour that child will be. Now, these are things you can check for yourself, ‘cause they’re real. They’re still here with us today.

Vincent: I’ve just never heard of that before, that’s all.

Fiona: That’s why I was giving you the example about the teacher. Like, I know she wanted to teach us to have an education. I wanted to learn too. I didn’t want to be the different one out. I wanted to have all me friends. But all the way through I didn’t really fit in, ‘cause I was such a strange child. I was allowed to go playing with my friends, but if I seen something or heard something, I knew that I had to stop and deal with that. Whether it was an ant, a butterfly, a bird, a dog, a cat... Whatever the animal appeared, I had to stop and deal with that situation. Many of my friends in my younger days... they were a little bit scared of me. [They’d say] “Fiona can move things”, and “Fiona can do stuff”. But because they [were] fascinated [by me], I didn’t like ‘em. I didn’t want nothing to do with them, because to me this was serious. It wasn’t a joke, that I could do magic. I’m not a magic woman. I was just someone that got placed on this earth to reunite us people back together somewhere along the line... I’m not sure where or when it’s gonna happen, but I know that’s what I been put here for. And through my stubbornness, I’ve achieved so many things within myself and in my culture, that now I look at myself as an elderly person. I wasn’t stubborn, I was just sacred. I was a sacred person who couldn’t talk a lot about the things that was happening around me because, by those things getting condemned, they were getting pushed away, pushed aside and out the door. And it was “out of mind, out of sight”. So I stopped telling people about my significant stuff, and I started taking myself serious.
When I lost my father, that’s when all the dreams started comin’, and they were really heavy. I went to the local mayor, Sandra McCarthy, and I spoke to her about what I wanted to do in the community, and all the things my father had done that’s powered our community. She said there’s funding for people that can bring out significant stories. So then I started tapping into the funding to bring my paintings about. But the white people from Kiama that was on that panel told me I couldn’t do all four walls [as originally intended] because it’d be destroyed by destructive people. And at that moment a miracle happened. There was a knock at the door, but when I come to the door there was nobody there. At that moment, a man that was sitting with us jumped up and said “That’s Roy Stewart!” And I looked at him, and I looked at the door, and I seen my father standing there like he did. And Sandra McCarthy, that grew up with my dad, she just held my hand and she said, “It’s time that we knocked down with Fiona, because what she’s saying, it’s really happening”.

So they blessed me there on the spot with, “Okay, you can have the buildings, you can have the money, you can have all of it. We don’t want a part of it. We just want to know who you are and what you’re about.” They looked at me at that moment as if I was fascinating, you know … there was miracles happening around me at that moment, and people had seen visions and heard things. I guess they handed things over to me without love. They give ‘em to me because they were frightened of spirit, they were frightened of what was going to happen next, and they had no answers. And I knew that spirit had kept them in a humble and a quiet little place. That’s when I received all the paper work, and I quickly signed it. I quickly signed it to do this. Before I signed it I said, “I’m doing this for both of us ... for white and black. And I’m going to open a business for non-indigenous and indigenous. I’m gonna teach youse people about our way of life, not the life that we’ve [been leading]. ‘Cause I respect you as white people, and I respect [our] community ... I respect all walks of life. But if you don’t respect me, you’re not gonna grow. It’s got to be two ways.”

As much as I hate what the white people have done ... they’ve killed us, they’ve raped us, they’ve brought diseases, they’ve done all these horrible things to us ... [that] isn’t the people that walk around with us now. Those were people that came into our country over two hundred years ago and done all that. So we [can’t] keep holding onto that. You gotta let it go. I’ve let what’s happened go, and yes, I believe if we didn’t get invaded we wouldn’t be living [the way we do] now. But this isn’t the life we should be living [now]. We should still be on the land. We should be teaching the white people to come eat with us off the land, come speak to us on the land, giving to the land with us. Not so much as ... going out and finding a dance that you know nothing about, learning that dance, and then bringing it to these people in the community, and let them see you in that movement. You [may] make all your money ‘cause you’ve done your dance and the community’s got a high [off it] … but you come away from there feeling nothing. You spend your money, and when the money runs out you’ve got nothing. But if you get in there and promote your well being, you don’t need money to keep you on a high. You will be rewarded through the spirit of the heart of the land. That’s where your next story comes from.

So I try and explain to people, if kids are not gonna learn in schools, don’t force them to learn in schools, because they’re gonna get out of school with just as much knowledge anyway, but they’re on their own purpose of life. These kids that we look at in the schools these days, they need to be classed as gifted kids. They’re not stubborn, they’re not bad kids, they’re not ADHD children ... None of that was brought about in our lives. This is only because humans can’t control other humans. And it states it in the Bible, that your worst and most vicious enemy is going to be the same person as you are. You know? A black fella will take a black fella down any day before a white man will get him. White man will take white man down before black fellas get him. It’s all in the same story … Sometimes you gotta give a little to gain a bit. And I’ve figured us black people have always given and we’re not gaining. Simply because a lot of us are out there thinking, “Oh, if I go and do that, I’ll get the money.” And then I’ll get noticed.” You’re only getting noticed for that moment. What are you gonna do when you walk away from that scene? ‘Cause you’ve just promoted something that’s come from someone else, not from you, again, to make a bit of money and to shut the white skin people up. ‘Cause they’ve wanted you to do a re-enactment or a performance ... But you haven’t done it right. You’ve replayed something. I’m not about replaying. I’m here to tell the people my story, what I’ve grown up with and seen and lived with.

Mario Valeoz from our council, he didn’t want to give me money. He denied me my culture. He didn’t believe in my stories I told him. He didn’t want to know who I was. He would always go against me in the meetings, and often enough he’s put me out of the rooms [when] they’ve talked about Aboriginal culture. I wasn’t allowed to sit in those meetings ‘cause I’m an Aboriginal person. So I personally have had lots of run-ins with our community service worker from our community, just trying to be nice to him by telling him our stories so I can promote them. [But] it was spirit that kicked the whole thing off. It was spirit that went to him and was tormenting him that much he needed an answer for something. So then that was my chance to make a cut with him. “Okay, this is what’s happening with you. I’ll give you this if you give me the rights to get out in public. I need to be in the public eye. No one’s gonna know my stories, no one’s gonna heal, no one’s gonna get anywhere without me being this person and getting out there freely as a free spirit and telling people the people who we are of the land.”
Vincent: Okay, the south end.

Fiona: That was at the south end. And it is ‘Respect’. And why I put that down was ... Well, when I lost my father I lost myself in a big way. I had no answers. He was my spirit guide, my father. He was the answer to everything. Not just me ... he played a big role in this community and amongst other communities all over. So when he passed on, something inside of me died off, because it was such a big hurt, it was such a big loss, like ... I went on walkabout. And people said to me, “Fiona, you’re off with the fairies. What’s wrong with you?” And I started getting a little bit depressed, thinking people are seeing me like I’m losing it. But how could I be losing it when I’m Dreaming something and I’m seeing it the very next day? So I shut myself off from my family. I closed the door on them. And I thought, “I’m just sitting in my own skin.” ‘Cause we’ve all got issues about our fathers, we’ve all got issues about our mothers, we’ve all got issues about each other. But I’m wondering if they’re feeling any spirits hitting them like they’re hitting me. Every time I went to speak to my brothers and sisters we’d get into an argument. So I knew they weren’t ready to hear what I had to say. I was getting condemned and put down for my intelligence.

So then I went back into church, and I [went] to all these different places looking for answers ... ”Why am I Dreaming? Why am I seeing spirits? Why is all this stuff happening?” Then I realised, the night before my father died, he told me all this stuff and wrote it all down. I’d given [the document] to my brother for him to use in his eulogy. I don’t really know to this day [everything that is] stated in there, but I know [that giving it] away got me in my dreams. So whether my father wrote that down for me to promote, and I didn’t get to do it through the right, written version, he entered my dreams and I followed my dream.

Now, before the toilets come, Sandra sat me down again and she said, “Are you sure you’re seeing all this stuff?” So I gave them a prediction. “In two days time, this is what’s gonna happen. My Dad’s sitting here right now telling me to tell you this, Sandra, because without you and this miracle happening I’m gonna get nowhere and neither are youse as a government.” So two days went by, and then a miracle happened. They’d kept telling me that they had no money, and all of a sudden they were granted so many thousands of dollars. So she rang me straight up, and I punched in for fifteen-hundred dollars to get my paintings up and done. Then I contacted me cousins. Then I got the business up and running. And then I thought, “The first thing I’m gonna do is me Dream.” [But] Mario still did not want to give me the toilets. I said, “Mario, we prayed over a situation, and I put a promise to youse as a human. Really, Spirit carried that through that other side and has made this happen.” When he looked into where that money come from, it came from an Aboriginal funding [body], but nobody had tapped into it. So they utilised that money and gave it to me, and that’s how I come to get my stories in the paint on those toilets.

Those [painted] stories talk about when I was young ... when I would get disciplined. My grandmother would take us down [to the beach] all the time. Did we know we were in trouble? No. We would just be going fishing. On the way of fishing my father would be speaking to the boys about their business, and my Nan would be speaking to us about our business. But it wasn’t til I got older and realised she [only] ever sits one of us at a fire. And there was no questions asked about who was gonna sit there. It was just something that was happening in their lives at that time. Now, my father and my grandmother has passed on. I often look back and I know in my heart everything they done with us was all planned. They had meetings before they took us fishing. They knew who was gonna be sitting on the sand with that person before that other one went in the boat, or the other ones got taken upland. So we got disciplined through our grandmother, and she disciplined us through the elements of the earth. Because she did not believe in nastiness. She didn’t believe in stopping people from growing in their own life. My grandmother loved all walks of life. She would not even let us kill a fly. We weren’t allowed to kill insects or animals, because they was from Dreamtime. She knew all that. So we were sorta brought up in a space where everything was free. Free spirits. “Don’t be scared of spiders, they don’t bite you. Snakes can’t hurt you. Nothing can harm you.” [If] a snake [was to] come in here, now ... it’s like, “okay, well, it’s just passing through, like a person”.

Vincent: You mean you didn’t kill animals unless you had to?

Fiona: They only killed what they had to eat. D’ya know what I mean? And when they done a lot of their hunting, it was right on that time of day. So now in the mornings we might go and get an orange juice from the fridge. Well, in those days, when we got up in the morning the first thing we did was hit the mountain. All the fruits would be out on the trees. We would just go out and eat that. By lunch time we’d be onto something else. We learnt to feed ourselves in the bush. But when we look at people now, and they’ve got diets and everything in the shops, it’s exactly the same. They get up, they have juice for breakfast. Then they’ll have their water crest. And by lunch time they might have a bit of potatoes or something. Well, we had our own hunting and gathering routine.

Vincent: You lent me a copy of an interview with your father, and one of the things he talked about was that it’s harder to do those things nowadays because there’s all these restrictions. A lot of the native animals are protected, and when it comes to the marine world there’s restrictions about how much you can take, and you’ve gotta have licenses ... That must really hamper reconnecting with that lifestyle.

Fiona: Well, it’s not [a traditional lifestyle] now that we have a fight with [the authorities]. [What I say] to my nephews about their children, my great nieces and nephews, whether there’s a law out or not that [prevents us from accessing] the bush or the waters ... if we don’t [show] our children those places, they’re not going to be traditional kids. You’re not a traditional owner just ‘cause you’ve eaten things from the land. When you go to a shop you’re buying things from the land, such as fish, crabs,
puppies, oysters, all in the shops. But you [should] have to hunt and gather it [directly] from the land. I can honestly sit here and say all my sisters and brothers are traditional people, full of the land. We have come through that tribal law. Now, my nieces and nephews, yes, they’re all traditional, they’ve eaten off the land. But now they’ve got their own kids, if they take their kids in the water, they’d be lucky to eat [anything]. ‘Cause if they get caught taking something from the water, they’re jailed. So the sneaking game’s on again.

It’s like the stolen generation again. The bush and water are there, all your tucker’s in there, but who’s gonna be the game one to go in to see what white fellas are gonna do? Are they going to listen and understand why we need this food? Are they gonna let them off? Or are they gonna drag ‘em out and lock ‘em up? “I’m sorry, I have to fine ya. This is my job.” Well, okay, we can accept that, but what we’re not going to accept is all these rules and regulations for us Aboriginal people to stay out of the water and off the land. That will never ever be. It can never be. ‘Cause whatever Spirit provides you with, that’s yours to take home and fill your wellbeing. My great nieces and nephews, if they’re kept out of the water, that’s our race wiped out. We’ll have reached the white man’s level, ‘cause over the years we’ve let ourselves fall into their pattern.

Collecting and hunting for other people, that’s where it all went wrong. Someone decided to go out and do a favour for the white people when they come. It was like, “If you do me a favour, I’ll give you a bit of bread and sugar. If you go and get me six mutton fish and five lobsters, I’ll give you a bit of milk and sugar.” Now, because our hunting and gathering was spot on, we [thought we] couldn’t go wrong with that [kind of arrangement]. My father might bring home thirty lobsters, but if we want to have some milk for breakfast, we gotta give the farmer up the road five of those lobsters. If we want sugar on our cereal we gotta give another two to the next neighbour. But that’s what’s brought us into this society, and we’ve suffered for it. And my stories up there [on the murals] basically say that if you don’t keep eating off the land and from the water, you definitely will not be traditional.

We need to stand tall and strong and fight them in a way that makes them see we’re worthy of what we’re saying. We have to put it to them straight, “This is the truth. If we don’t live, you’re not going to live. We carry the eye of the beholder. Each and everybody’s got this in ‘em. If you’re not switched onto your spirit journey of wellbeing, and you don’t know who you are, you don’t know who that next person is. You don’t know their real life story or history. ‘Cause behind that one face is many other things that make up that person.”

And that’s basically like the paintings. It’s a pretty picture, what I’ve drawn. But did I want that? No. I had a different outlook all together. The day we got to the toilets to do the pictures, I had my plan, but the colours and the symbols [turned out] different. These are the things that come within Spirit. We couldn’t get the colour right. It wasn’t until I thought, “Okay, if we’re meant to do this, it’s gonna roll, and it’s gonna roll properly.” So me and my cuz had a little prayer, and then we started mixing the colour. And as soon as we got that first colour right, it was right all day. We couldn’t go wrong. So many [passer-bys] wanted to get stories off us [that day], but it’s like, “We can’t just tell you about what we’re drawing, because it’s not finished”.

Vincent: The one at the south end is actually a depiction of the view of the beach from that spot.

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: And it’s not until you get up close to it that there’s all these little stories happening ... people down on the rock shelf, sitting around the fire on the beach ... I think you said one of the depictions is your dad fishing?

Fiona: Yeah. I put my dad on there, ‘cause that’s where he used to do a lot of fishing. In the rocks my kids used to catch crabs for his bait; then I’ve got another one of my son in the waves, surfing; and then I’ve got me and my grandmother on the beach, sitting around a fire.

Vincent: Oh okay, so it’s you and your Nan?

Fiona: Yeah. So I tell that story, “Okay, here’s me and my nan sitting down under law. She’s actually telling me law. My father’s standing on the rocks, fishing. But have a good look. You can’t have a fire there on the beach anymore. You just can’t. You can’t just freely stand out there and go and gather for your baits. You gotta buy them at the shop. There’s a lot of things within that story that people have looked at and thought, “Oh, that’s mad Fiona. That’s what youse used to do”. “Well, hang on a minute. Have a good look and tell me what’s so different and significant, ‘cause within those four generations there’s so many things that’s changed, for now.” So when people come to me on the rocks, or anywhere, and they’re fishing ... the question always comes about. They always say hello ... doesn’t matter if they’re strangers, they’ll always say hello. [And I’ll say] “Having a good day? What are youse catching?” And they’ll start skyping up about, “Ah, you know, we tried to catch this and that, and we spent thirty or forty dollars on bait.” As soon as they tell me that, I think, “Well, why didn’t you just go buy yourself a feed from the shop if you spent that much money? Really all you need to do is get to the water with nothing and get in there. Honestly, no fish is gonna go eat a frozen prawn from the prawn shop.” You know?

Vincent: Infrastructure ... white people think that’s so important to our culture. You buy the bait from the bait shop, buy the fishing rod from wherever, you know ... it’s actually a very long way to go about doing things.
Fiona: That’s right. Even when we go swimming, even when we take our kids to the beach [we have excess baggage]. I’ve noticed a lot of young Koori mums … and even I did it, ‘cause I’ve got twins that are turning twenty-one this year, and another that’s twenty … [when they were little] every time I’d go to someone’s house I’d take spare clothes with me just in case. I’d be taking a wardrobe of clothes with me that I didn’t need. My father used to go clear off his head over that. “Let the kids play in the dirt,” he’d say, “Let ‘em do this, let ‘em do that.” But then we’d say to our father, “But hey, we wasn’t allowed to do that”. But he was allowed to do that [as a child]. He’s made us [understand] why we’re so different. Our children, as clean and as educated as they are, they’ve still got their black hearts. They’re still black and attached to the ground. They’re not gonna change their ways. And with the generation that’s come through now, they’re showing us we haven’t slipped up, because we’ve kept our old ways.

Vincent: So was the reason for your father not letting you do that type of stuff as a kid because there was a pressure on Aboriginal people to seem civilised?

Fiona: Yes, exactly. See, when my father came into the community, he was given a job and a uniform to go with it. That was at Kiama council. Before he settled here, he was a plant operator in Sydney. He had three children up there, which is my older two sisters and brother, and then he came down here and got onto the council. Then he had my other brother and my other two sisters. [And not only did he get] onto the council, but he became a famous footballer for this area. And I hated him being that [public] person. The community didn’t realise [at the time], but I speak about it a lot now. When we were younger we weren’t allowed out, we weren’t allowed to go to any of our friends’ homes. We used to have to get up, go to school, come straight home from school. And in our home we carried a completely different language to outside of our home. Our home was about you, yourself, and I, basically. We already knew everything [we needed to know], and we lived in a really humble house.

People looked at my father for the famous footballer. For us to go to football with my dad, my mother would get us up, she would dress us, and because I would be the youngest one I’d be dressed first. She’d have my hair done in curls, and all me socks and pretty silk ribbons and dresses on. And I’d have to sit in this one spot til she got the rest of them dressed. Did she realise what she was doing to my self-esteem and my growth? No, she didn’t. She actually stopped it, ‘cause that’s what made me hate white people. Here I was, thinking, “We’ve got to do all this just to go to the football, just to sit there so the crowd can go on about my dad. Well, that not’s much [of a] life. It doesn’t mean anything.” I hated it.

Vincent: So he was buying into that pressure of appearances?

Fiona: Yes. It was all about that.

Vincent: As an Aboriginal man in a community where he was well thought of, I suppose [your father] did feel some sort of pressure.

Fiona: He loved it. He’d been given things as an Aboriginal person that no other Aboriginal got. He was the first Aboriginal to make the Australian side. Great Britain. He had to travel out of our country [for that]. He was the first Aboriginal to do a lot of things. But did we [really comprehend] that when we were younger? No. It’s only when he died, all these things [made sense].

We realised, “Gee, our father was famous. He’s a legend. Did you know this? Did you know that?” He was in so many different worlds, had so many different faces, and knew so many different people, that he’s left an image and imprint on their life, that white people from our community still today cry about the way they see us as walking around [now]. Should we be walking the way we are? Should we be tall and strong? Should we not be who we are today? I often hear from white skin people who had very good encounters with my father while they were growing up, and how he fed their growth. I say to them today, “You’re very knowledged. You have all that knowledge from my father. But I lived with that.”

So for me to gain that knowledge back is, for me, to gain his power back. Because I let myself go … When he left, I left. I’ve been around the bend and back again. I just got myself back on track … probably about five years ago. And I thought, “I’m not looking back”. ‘Cause I know, if I do, I’m gonna be stuck. I’m gonna be forever fighting the government. I’m gonna forever be coming up against white skin people, holding grudges against them for things I shouldn’t keep. So I don’t stress. I don’t see a need to stress about lands. I get very upset about the human race, whether they’re white, black, or whatever culture they are, because if they’re not on the understanding of what I am, then we’re not on the same rhythm of life. I don’t need people like that around me, because if I get negative vibrations [from them], I’m not in tune. I’m an energy person. I will collect their energy, and I will perform like them. So I’ll keep right out of their sight, mind, and vision, and I’ll meditate and ground myself again. Then I’ll put a coverage over me so I don’t get caught up with that energy. ‘Cause I tend to agree with people a lot. Because I like them to feel they’re no different to us, they’re just not educated. They’re educated in a different way. And we can be like them, ignorant to the fact – don’t want to know about ‘em, don’t want to know their history – but then they’re never gonna know ours.

I used to be a door mat, you know. I’d sit down and let people walk all over me and I’d listen and everything. But now I think I’m more of a doorbell. You press the button and I’ll make a noise, but it won’t be the noise I was makin’ before. The noise I make now is very abrupt, it’s very disturbing, it’s not on the good level that I used to be on. Because … Are people ignorant to the fact of who we are? or are they just stalling time and asking us more stories and not moving [forward]? or are they just sitting back creating jobs for themselves?
Vincent: I think it’s a combination. I think you’re always gonna get people of any race who are against others. I think no matter how much the Aboriginal community does, and no matter how much the white community does also, there’s always going to be people from the white community who will deny the importance of Aboriginal culture here. But I think a lot of it is also ignorance. One of the reasons behind my project is that I was born and bred in the Illawarra, and I didn’t know about any of this stuff. It’s only when I left school, where they didn’t teach us nothing about Aboriginal culture, that I started reading for myself... you know, Henry Reynolds, he’s written a lot about Aboriginal history. And it’s funny, one of his books is actually called Why Weren’t We Told? And what you ask yourself when you turn those pages is, “Why wasn’t I told about any of this stuff?” So, as a white person, that’s one of the main reasons why I’m doing this project. Because I don’t think a lot of people do know. And if you don’t know about it, you’re not going to be concerned about the state of things.

Fiona: That’s right. And that’s why I don’t blame a lot of people. It’s like... Okay, we grew up in a white community. So when we grew up, a lot of our cousins didn’t really want [much to do with us]. They loved us, but we was a special thing to them. We didn’t play and have fun with them. If they touched us, that was very special. Did we realise [why that was] when we were kids? No. You don’t know it when you’re growing up. It’s only now, in the last few years since me dad’s died, that I’ve learnt I have to respect him. By respecting him, it’s making sure people come to me [for the right reasons]. Because I can be a very tricky person. If someone’s come to me, and they’ve got a bad vibration, I feel that. So I’ll be [suspicious] of them. It’s a fear thing. It’s like they fear me before they even get to me. And I might fear them, even though I don’t know that person. But it’s because they want to talk about something [without asking the proper questions]. And every time they go to ask that question, it’s like my spirit somewhere will stop them and it will discipline them in their spirit, and then they’ll rethink about that question.

I’ve actually had people say to me, “I’ve been wanting to get to you for about four or five years. But every time I’ve come to you it’s stopped me, ‘cause I’ve wanted to ask you this or that, but really I wanted to ask it to you like this”. And I say to people, “That’s good, because you were connected to my spirit. So I know that you’ve seen what the eye of the beholder carries. I know that after you asking me this question and me answering that question you can’t be ignorant to the fact, because Spirit sent you to me. But your friend that sits with you is jumped on your bundle-wagon and had a ride with you because they’re fascinated in what you want to learn about. But they’re not allowed to know about it, because their parents have told them not to get involved with Aboriginal people. They’ve had encounters with Koori people in the past that’s either written off their family or disturbed them in such a way that they’ve gone, ‘I don’t want nothing to do with black people’. And it’s kept in their family for generations.”

I only ran into a lady two years ago that actually wanted to touch my skin. Her great-grandfather [had] told her that black people carry the dark side and that’s why we’re dark, and she really believed it. So she told her kids, and they told their kids. Now, this lady’s outlined a lot of her children’s kids... I think there’s probably three of four left, but they’re not near her. So she came to me just wanting to know things. And she said, “All those years I’ve wasted by not even acknowledging Aboriginal people.” ‘Cause they weren’t even allowed to acknowledge us. Even now, we’re having babies but they’re getting taken off us, and they’re getting bred into white people’s families, and they’re getting structured into another culture. When they grow up they don’t even realise they’re black.

Now, I’ve seen that a lot in my time. I’ve watched a brother and sister live together and have children. That brother was adopted out when he was young, and so was the girl. Somewhere, randomly, after twenty years, they’ve caught up with each other, had children, before finding out they’re really brother and sister. And these people lived under me. See, I got shown that when I was fifteen or sixteen. And I always thought to myself, “Those dirty fucking filthy bastards”. You know, “How could they do that to each other? Surely they must have known?” But they didn’t know. It only came out in those kids’ genes because the kids started getting blood disorders. Then they done a genealogy test, and they found out they were from the same mother and father. I hear lotta stories like that, and I know they’re true.

Fiona: They often go in the papers, these two people. They’re old now, but they often go in the papers to help people, like “These things can happen. Be careful who you’re speakin’ to”. My dad always taught me about earth angels and about spiritual beings and beings from the light. He always said, “Don’t ever walk pass anybody without given them a nod. You don’t have to say hello or a smile. Just give ‘em a nod. ‘Cause by nodding them’s acknowledging yourself, always. And by you acknowledging yourself through someone else, they’re gonna acknowledge you through someone else.” So I learnt a lot from just the way he spoke to me. I didn’t practice much of what he told me when I was young ‘cause he did it all. We lived in that moment. It wasn’t until he was passed over that... well, I had to go out huntin’ and gatherin’ and decide for myself then.

So, without all the stuff he’d [taught me while I was growing up], I would be lost. I’d be like a lost sheep out there... following sheeps around like no tomorrow, and scratching me head. I’d be the first one to go to white people for answers, because I’d be thinking, “Well, they’ve documented our history. Surely they’d know where we come from.” They’ve documented our history, but they’ve changed a lot of it around. So they still don’t have our stories. They only have from the time they invaded us, and that’s what they go by. They keep on about forty-thousand years... two-hundred thousand years... Well, what about when there was no time? And that is a space where you gotta create space. ‘Cause it’s a time from no time. It’s blown into a beam of light. When that beam of light exploded into this nation, what’s it exploded into? Well, we’re never gonna know, ‘cause we’re still growing from it now. When one dies, something else grows. When something grows, something else dies.
Vincent: So ... This was your dad’s traditional country, wasn’t it?

Fiona: Yes. He was born on the banks of the Clyde River in Batemans Bay. My dad was not registered. He was given a tribal name. And when he got into his football, what stopped him from travelling overseas [initially] was he wasn’t registered. So they made up a name, and they gave him the name of Richard Stewart. But he’s known as Roy Stewart.

Vincent: So even the name ‘Stewart’ came out of nowhere?

Fiona: Yeah. See, he couldn’t get a passport to travel ‘cause he didn’t have a birth certificate. That’s where it all started from. So straight away all our mob’s gone around saying, “Okay, well, they’re just prejudiced and wouldn’t let him leave the country.” And that’s basically what it boiled down to, too. ‘Cause if he was as good as they said he was, and if he was as well known as he was known to be, why didn’t they pick all these things up beforehand?

Vincent: Yeah. If he had been a white guy, they would have made that process so quick.

Fiona: Yeah. Well, it was only the night before ... my Nan, she was clever, she read my Dad’s tea cup. And all she said was, “You’re not going on your trip tomorrow. ‘Cause there’s something that’s stopping you going.” But he didn’t want to listen or believe. The next morning, Mick Cronin came and said to him, “The money’s been stolen and you can’t go.” Now, that story is a well-known story in Gerringong because a lot of our families from outta town tried to come in and say, “Aw,” you know, “the Cronins did this and this, and this is what happened, and all these white people done this.” Now, if we weren’t educated, and if we didn’t grow up with these people in our community, we’d be like all the outsiders too. Yes, it is Cronin’s fault, it is these people’s fault, it is so and so’s fault. But livin’ with the people and watching ‘em grow having it hard like us, we are loved by these people. They have watched us grow. They still sit beside us today, hopin’ and prayin’ that we will achieve our dreams. Whether they’re givin’ it to us now because, yes, my father’s come in many years ago and made an input, or whether they’re doing it just because they like us as people, or whether they’re doing it because, yeah, my Nan was right, and half these people are black but can’t get up and say, “Yes, I am Aboriginal descent”. If they state that, they’re out of the job. And I know that, hands down. They still deny their righteousness to their wellbeing, because they’re trying to help other people out there in the community, such as us.

A great example was the Noble family. My Nan done many a trade with them. She used to make the shell work. Harbour bridges and stuff. She traded all her arts and crafts to these people just so we could have a bit of sugar, a bit of flour. I was actually left in [Mr Noble’s] will. Well, I’d never had much to do with the family ’cause they’re very well off people. They own a lot of the land in Gerringong, and they were one of the first families to settle in Gerringong. I only knew them to give them a wave and respect them. I didn’t know they had any ties with my family until three years ago when Mr Noble died. And I asked, “Why was I left in the will?” And it simply was, when Nan done that last trade [with them], I just happened to be around at that time, and they took the story down. Now, because I was there as a little girl, I was entitled to having that [piece] once they passed over. [But I didn’t know] I was gonna be in the will or anything. I’d lived all this life from here, just thinking of ‘em as [acquaintances] ... and they already knew everything about me ... know where I was coming from, knew what my drive was, and had a lot of support from this community to get those stories up and running. Without that happening our stories would be nothing, ‘cause we live in a white community. We’d still be fighting our way through a wet paper bag like many other Aboriginal communities are, ‘cause there are Aboriginal people all fighting each other for their stories ... Where[as] the story I tell is my story ... not about community.

I was just lucky enough that someone asked my story, and when I told them, they started telling me about my miracles that had happened in my life ... the things that they had seen. And I remember those things. Growing up around a lot of people who would read cards and crystal balls ... well, to me that was scary. I didn’t like that. Like, I said to my friend, “I can do things, you know. We don’t need to use them things.” She said, “Aw, you have to use these, otherwise it doesn’t work,” and we were never allowed to do a séance. So I talked to her about all that séance stuff, and at the end of the day it was, “Okay, I don’t need cards, I don’t need a crystal ball, I just need you to give me a bit of your sweat, ‘cause I can tell your purpose of life through your DNA”. And because all that happened, the community then looked at me like I was a woman that knew what I was on about. But it wasn’t so much me knowing what I was on about, these people had been given sanctuary through spirit because I had answers for them, and I give ‘em a practice at their practice. And it was a game of mind over matter. Crystal ball readers and tea cup readers and other readers will tell you what’s going on. If you get someone in the moment of your structure or whatever you’re doing at that time, yes, you will see the miracle.

So I didn’t want to know about the big picture with what they were doing with the cards and all that. I only picked up cards when I started going to schools because I started telling the young kids about the astrology ... your birth sign. You know, you come under the birth sign ... This is why you are what you are. If you’re born in September, you’re a Virgo. And you have a look at that astrology sign, and you follow it all the way down, and that is your purpose because that’s your beam of light you’re structured [by], that’s your birthright. And when people don’t understand that, they don’t understand their realm of life. They always will sit in the vibration, not in the rhythm of life. That’s what crystal ball and card readers do ... We’re in a rhythm. And it’s like, okay, people know what’s going on, but they’ll go it confirmed off someone else. Is that so necessary? Yes, it is for people who are not sure. But going to get that confirmed, that could put you in the rat house, that could put you in a spin that you’re not even knowing’s around the corner. So we’ve been taught through this: be humble, and always go back in and get your third eye open and look within. There are your answers.
Your secret of your life is in your heart. And you will hear the whispers of your heart if you're humble and quiet enough. If you're not quiet, if you're loud all the time, then you can't hear anything. But if you put yourself in practice and sit under the law ... the quiet law ... for a week, and just hear yourself ... hear your hairs moving ... you can almost hear the breeze in your hair, you can hear the whispers in your ears, you can start feeling spirit. But if you get yourself in a state everyday where it's like you're on that clock ... like, you know when you leave me you've gotta go do all these other things, and then get up tomorrow and do it all again ... Well, practice this: once you leave me, go and cleanse yourself, get all the dust off ya, put yourself in the light, and then for the next week ... you'll find yourself at the end of that week but you won't hardly remember that week because it was done so humbly and in divine time where you haven't wasted any energy but gained a lot of wisdom and knowledge from what you've been through and what you've sat with. But if you get up in the morning and go, “Oh, I wanna track this one done, or this one or that one, I gotta do this and I gotta do that ...”, you'll find you're forever chasing someone's story, you're forever chasing them. (Here, Fiona is referring to an earlier conversation of ours where I mentioned the trouble I was having tracking potential interviewees down for my research.) So you change that energy and reverse back ... “People from the land that want to be noticed, send them to me. Bring 'em into my light.” And you'll have more customers than enough, and you'll have proper stories from proper people. D’you see? It’s the way that you connect, and you’re thinking that one thought.

That’s why my dad, he always used to say, “Be careful of Mr Thought. ‘Cause he’ll get you thinking, and thinking gets you existing.” Which it does. Because you have one thought, then you start thinking about it, and then before you know it you’re speaking it out, you’re speaking it into the air and bang! it’s activated. D’you see? You could be interviewing me today on something you want to know about on your journey, because that’s what you do. But for me and you, something else is gonna come from this, because without having a connection to the big circle, nothing moves on or grows. And this was just another step in another direction for me. I know that. And it was probably a week before you come along ... I knew that you were gonna come, I knew a lot of things what was gonna happen, but I didn’t focus on it. I didn’t get fixed on it, because I had all these other things that I had to deal with before your time was appropriate. For you to grow on what you want ... that’s the divine time that we had to come into.

See, the other day (referring to our first meeting, which was cut short) I could have come out the door, sat you under the tree outta the hot, and had a good ol’ yarn to you about whatever, “Yeah, get it right ... Whenever ... Next time ... See ya later” ... You would have been fascinated ... “Aw, she’s a top chick. I wish I could have sat with her more.” They all say that. But you get me on the right time, in divine time, and you’ll be like the fruit from the tree of life, and you’ll be ripe to pick one day. But until you’re ripeening up you’ve got to be fed all the right things. And that’s basically what you’re doing in this job ... You’re getting fed. And you will get picked and chosen one day to go out and put yourself on the line. But you will walk your line ‘cause you’ve already gathered up all the things you need for that line. That’s why when people come up against me with stuff like this, I just rattle and say, because I know it’s not me telling ‘em, because I’m so connected to the realms of life, and they’re coming and listening to life force, that’s all they were gonna get, is what’s in that life at that moment.

Vincent: Can you tell me a bit about what you do at the schools? Was your dad going out to schools [in the same way]?

Fiona: My dad got into the public schools and he would take the kids on excursions. Often he’d take them down to Boat Harbour and he’d call the seals in. The kids at the schools had to see how black fellas worked on the land, so my dad did a lot of tricks of the trade just to show the young kids “this is what really happens”. He’d go down and he’d call what he wanted from out of the sea. Now, as young kids we was fascinated. Now that we’re older we know they’re only gonna come in at a feed time. But in those times we were so fascinated, like ... wow! It’s a little bit like those turtles at Coomaditchie. They all come in [at a particular] time to lay their eggs, and you see millions and billions of ‘em. If someone hasn’t got commonsense ... How much money do you think I would have made off people that just haven’t seen that? What if I said to them, “You know what, this is what’s going to happen ... You’re gonna get all these turtles [at my command]?”. It happens all the time, but people who aren’t aware of that will find it so fascinating and see me as a miracle person. But later on down the line they’ll soon find out that, “That was happening for years. And, you know, we went there with that lady, and we didn’t really have to ... But lucky we did, ‘cause we wouldn’t have got to see it.” You know what I mean? My dad had to work in a lot of ways like that otherwise it’d be too spooky, too scary, too spiritual for these young kids to understand. My nan give ‘em her story, my dad showed his story, so I’ve come through and I talk straight out about spirit. We’re in the process of that. But without people meeting me half way, it’s not gonna be there, because we need to walk the line.

Vincent: So do you think there is a change happening in the generations? Do you think school kids are more open to [Aboriginal culture]?

Fiona: Yeah. I think changes are gonna come quicker and rapidly now, ‘cause over the last few years a lot of white skinned people have come in and they’ve just taken things for granted, like overreachings with submissions that we’ve put in to gain money for themselves ... putting in their pocket. Not in the community’s pocket, and not for the future that’s coming. Within my world I’ve done this and got that and I’ve given people information. I’ve got them up running in their businesses, and because they’ve collected up their businesses and their workers, they’ve over-rit things without permission. So those people now, this year, are slowly going to be losing their businesses. They’re gonna end up with nothing, because they had those few years to gain spirit’s trust, and for spirit to gain their trust, but what these people have done is think that one could see what they were doing, and they’ve gone out and done it. They’ll be done this year for fraud, because they’ve actually over-rit other people’s submissions.
Like, someone might have put in a submission for two-hundred dollars, but a white person will come along and look at that submission, and they’ll go, “Oh no, I’ve got a better idea. If we tap in for ten-grand we can do this, this, this, this and this,” and they’ve done that, and Council has allowed that money to go into a white pocket after it’s been a black organisation that black people are supposed to fund. So, this is where we have a lot of the fights. Okay, we’re being funded from a black organisation, but we let a white person come in and over-rat that submission, and they’ve gotten more money. Where’s all that thousands of dollars gone that they’ve been given? I do submissions all the time. I tap in for funding. And many-a-time I’ve had teachers and people that work in public come to me and say, “Aww, I sorta changed it”. And I’ve gone right off my head at ‘em. I’ve straight out cursed it... “You won’t get it, you won’t receive it, and you’ll lose your business and everything you’ve put in your life over the last few years to gain that. You’ve just lost the lot. Why? ’Cause you denied me as a person, you denied my spirit in human form. You come to me and ask me to help you, and I’ve done that. But you snuck off with someone else and got the stakes higher. What’s gonna happen now that you’re utilising black money? You’ll be done for fraud when they catch up with you.”

When you put your submission out and state what you’re using it for, you need to use that money for what you’ve said, otherwise when they go to the audits and find out that, “Well, hang on. I put in a submission for two-thousand, but you’ve put it in for seven thousand, and you got it”; now, they’re gonna look at me, and the first thing they’re gonna say to me is, “Well, Fiona, what did you do with your two grand?” “Well, this is what I did with my two-grand, but I needed four extra grand to finish it. So I’m still waiting for that.” But they’re gonna say, “But no, Fiona, we added the extra money onto there for you.” “Well, hello, I never signed that.” They’ve signed that, and they’ve gained that and they’ve utilised that. So then we get together and we go to these people, and they freely state, “Yeah, we did that. We used the money. We did this and that. And you should be proud of us.”

“Well, we’re not proud of ya. You just ripped yourself off and you’ve basically disrespected yourself in your own righteousness. ’Cause you lied by getting that funding in, and putting all these other workers off and putting all your new workers on. When these people are in the middle of a project, they needed to finish that to gain their certificates. But because you’ve tapped into money for something else, there’s no money there to teach them.” So at the end of the day, that’s where all the government comes back together, and they chop it all down. And this is where, this year ... and I’ve told a lot of people ... this year, a lot of people are going to lose their businesses, what they’ve gained for many years, simply because they did that one wrong thing. See, when you sign anything, you make sure you know what you’re signing.

‘Cause even with this, here [referring to the information sheets about my research, which Fiona needed to read and sign prior to any interview being conducted], I knew I didn’t have to read that, because I know I’m in the light, and I’m in alignment with myself. I know the journey I’m on. That’s a waste of time for me to sit there and read that. ‘Cause then I’m gonna spend time trying to think how I’m gonna answer your questions. That’s gonna take maybe two or three hours out of my time. I know what you’re up to, and I know what you want, so ... I pray for that time to come into divine time, so I speak freely. What you want to hear is from the real deal. Fortunately, you came to someone who works with spirit a lot. I’m not scared of spirit, I’m open to their messages. I know that if I’m not, I don’t get healed. So that’s why I like to work in divine timing, and I can put someone on hold for who knows how long. Someone could come to me, and I’d be like, “I got to go”.

Vincent: You know the project will get done, but in the right way, the right time.

Fiona: Yeah. It’s exactly what’s happening with me at the moment. I met a New Zealander two and a half years ago. For the last two years [they’ve] been rock solid on wanting to know about their mountain. So I gives him a reading. Their government comes back together, and they chop it all down. And this is where, this year ... and I’ve told a lot of people ... this year, a lot of people are going to lose their businesses, what they’ve gained for many years, simply because they did that one wrong thing. See, when you sign anything, you make sure you know what you’re signing.

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Well, that night his sister-in-law died, and he got taken out of the country before the three days was up. And I asked him to jump on my band-wagon whilst I’m doing what I’m doing, so that when I go to New Zealand the ball starts rolling. ‘Cause what he needed to do was come and talk about the miracle that happened within his life a few months ago, right? But what he’s done, he went back to his country and he researched this place. He’s lost a few of his family since that’s happened, but he’s also been knowledge and very connected to those grounds over there. But for him to achieve what he needs to achieve, he needs to come lay the cards down on the table and say that this is what really happened. He’s gone over to the waterfall, he discovered some of the things that he always knew as a kid but wasn’t really sure of, and he’s had me to confirm them for him. So he’s gone for it, he’s found it.

Now they’re ready to take me to climb that mountain so I can direct them on where everything is. Now, I could go tomorrow on the plane, and walk ‘em up the mountain and show them, but I would be sitting in a life I’ve always sat in, and it’s a life of just this life. So what I’m doing is, before I head that way could be at the end of this month, before the [end of the month], I don’t know ... I’ll have, not just my stuff that I’ve done, all my murals and stuff, that people know me for, but all my stuff on the internet, and now the stuff you’re doing. So I believe, in my heart, you was one of the things that held me back over the last six months. Not knowing you were coming to me within yourself, not knowing I was gonna sit here, but I know this ...
For me to get what I’ve been asking for ... ‘cause I can get it documented, but it’s gonna be here, there and everywhere ... What I needed for someone to do was to just do a straight down-the-line footage of me, and put it out there, and that’s what I’m about. Rather than me get over there and do all the ceremonies, do all the healings, do all the talking and stories, and in the meantime get caught up with friends and people, ‘cause that’s a journey I can’t be into. If I’m going on a spiritual journey, it’s structured straight for spirit. It’s not structured to go there and meet people to be, you know, affectionate, patting them on the back for things they thought they couldn’t achieve. It’s straight down the line.

Vincent: Well, like I told you before, I’m happy for you to use this material.
I wanted to discuss the murals again now that I’ve had a chance to photograph and look at them in detail, because in between our recordings yesterday you told me a lot of relevant stuff. This (referring to a photograph) is the ‘Survive’ mural, and these two figures on the beach are pulling out worms from the sand? And that’s one of them there (referring to a close-up of the bloodworm depicted in the mural’s border).

Fiona: Yeah, they’re bloodworms. I asked the council to give me four toilet blocks and the bus sheds, because in those locations I believe we should promote what we traditionally ate from those places, and the activities we did in those specific areas. The toilet blocks by the beach show the seafood ... and the bus sheds were to promote bush tucker, what we ate out of the hills and the mountains, such as possums, kangaroos.

Fiona: And the ‘Survive’ mural is by an estuary ... a creek that runs into the sea.

Fiona: Yeah, it’s a creek. And what we’ve depicted is ... We were mad on the bloodworms. We used to go there and get the fish out of that creek [by using the bloodworms as bait]. That’s one of the sea serpents (referring to another photograph of the mural), we call him Gurangatch. He was a gigantic land lizard that came down and made all the blowholes and underwater caves in Kiama. So Gurangatch is a sea spirit. That there is a canoe (pointing to another detail of the mural) that my dad and his family used in that creek ...

Vincent: Are they spear fishing?

Fiona: Yeah. And they made a rock trap to catch the fish on the low tide. So when the high tide comes in, all the fish get caught in there. At low tide they’d go [and catch the trapped fish with] whatever types of bags they had.

Fiona: That’s actually a men’s site. But white people and black people [made it]. It was actually my grandfather who put that in with my father and a couple of my father’s white friends ... not realising it was going to be something [of heritage] one day. But it’s still there today. So, yeah, [in the mural] we’ve got bloodworms, black fish, flatheads. We got crabs up that end too. There they are (pointing to a photograph of the mural). So that’s the mural at the north end [of Werri beach]. And, basically, it tells the story of tribal law and the traditional rock traps that are still there. We’ve done one at the [south] end, called ‘Respect’ ... to show respect for all the food we got from that area [of the beach]. That, especially, was a big call to the fisheries to respect all things seen and unseen. We just went there randomly on a nice day, matched up the colours with the sky ...

Vincent: That’s right, you said it was made on ‘then and there’ decisions ...

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Fiona: Yeah. It was like, “Okay, they’ve given [the toilet block] to us, so let’s start today”.

Fiona: And how did you decide who was going to be involved? Because I’ve noticed there are a couple of different [signatures] on each mural. How did you arrive at who was going to do what?

Fiona: I done all this through dream. It was all part of the dream. Everything depicted is what I’ve seen as a young girl, but I didn’t know [how the dream] was going to [be realised]. When my father passed on ... the council told me about all the stuff he’d done. I was really inspired by the fact that he’d done a lot of cultural things that weren’t allowed to be talked about. As I got older I was able to know and talk about these things, and [this project] was my chance to pull the jack ... And they’re like, “Oh yeah, we’ll do this, this, and this ...” And I said, “No. I sorta have this dream.” And they laughed at me at first, and said, “That’s not gonna happen, cuz ...”

Vincent: What type of things did they think would stand in your way?

Fiona: “That’s not gonna happen, cuz ...” And they laughed at me at first, and said, “That’s not gonna happen, cuz ...”

Vincent: No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.
Fiona: White government that doesn’t carry our law ... That no one was going to chuck money into the project because they wouldn’t understand where we were coming from ... And me not being an artist, or in a job concerned with my culture. They thought it would be hard for me to get the funding. I was a bit thrown by that, but I knew they were right in one way. We can’t even get our flag flown in Gerringong, let alone have a mural in our community, because our community is a very prejudiced community. But at the same time ... I wouldn’t say it’s balanced, but they’re nice people. If you can present something to them, they’re gonna like ya. But if you present them with something that they feel is going to take something off them, they’re not going to like you. They've given me the toilet blocks to do my art, but when it comes to saving the land, and stopping them from digging [in places] that my stories are from, they’re not listening.

Vincent: Sounds pretty unbalanced to me.

Fiona: Yeah. They’ve allowed me to tell my stories, but I need the land they’re digging up to walk my talk. I’ve put these things in the public eye. Where do I go now to get [traditional food] to show people if I’m not allowed in the water?

Vincent: While both murals show traditional gathering of seafood, they are also personal recollections. I mean, that’s you and your nan (pointing to a detail of the ‘Respect’ mural) by the fire.

Fiona: Yeah. When I tell people my stories, people ask me, “What do those taste like? Where do you get them from?” But if I wasn’t working with National Parks, the Water board, the fisheries, and the councils, I wouldn’t be able to access these grounds. So when someone comes to me and says, “Fiona, can you give us a little taste of these things ...”

Vincent: You have to take them to the fish ‘n’ chip shop. (laughs)

Fiona: Well, that’s it. I mean, is the government going to pay me to take them to the fish ‘n’ chip shop to buy them these things, or are they going to let me show them traditionally through my business? So there’s a catch all the way around my job.

Vincent: Look, this is still quite new to me ... so I’ll probably sound really naive ... but is it actually illegal for you to go down onto the rocks in front of your artwork and get a lobster out of the water?

Fiona: Yep. It is now. It wasn’t before I done the paintings. So this is why I say government’s stopping me at all roads. They’ve listened to my Dreamtime stories and they’ve promoted me in the public eye in all the newspapers. I’ve got a business up and running ... which is the Gerringong Dreaming, and I’ve got all my stuff for that ... But where do I go from here? I can tell it to them, but are they ever going to believe that we did eat those foods? Unless I can go out into that water, and get it out of the water to show these people that we did eat them, there’s only half the story. When it comes to the law ... that’s when I talk about these things here (referring to a message stick on the table in front of us) ... the stick, and what it does, and what it’s about. This here (pointing to a detail of the ‘Respect’ mural) is my father standing and fishing on the rocks. Now, years ago, you could do that. But if you get caught standing around like that these days, you’re fined ... straight up.

Vincent: Even fishing with a line?

Fiona: Yeah. ‘Cause you’re only allowed to take so much. So if he’s got a family of six, and he’s only allowed to take two, well, then, what happens to the other four?

Vincent: One of the things you told me yesterday was that it is only now, when you look back, that you realise your Nan was teaching you ... That she’d take you all down to the beach, but she’d take each of you aside, by the fire, and ...

Fiona: Yeah. It was a little bit like stories of a night time ... like when the Maoris sing their lullabies to their kids. Every night, right up ‘til my Nan died ... and, I mean, we had kids of our own by then ... we would fight and kick the guts out of each other just to sleep next to her or to get into bed with her, ‘cuase she would always be telling us stories. At the time, we thought they were stories just to put us to sleep. But when I look back, she was actually telling us Dreamtime stories. We didn’t understand. We just thought they were fascinating stories about the land lizards and the birds and all the other animals and all the spiritual stuff she’d talk about, not realising they were real. And it was only when I started putting these things back out in public that I realised. When I drew that (referring to the depiction of her Nan and herself) I was just drawing me and my Nan. But when I started doing it, it was like ‘Bang!’ ... I then saw what she was doing with us. And within an instant [her spirit] was happy as. It had finally been pulled off ... “All that talking I’d done is going to get talked about still, and it will never go away”. That was law. She was telling us law. And even with [something like] this (referring to the message stick), she would draw in the sand. And I figured that’s what that must be for. Do you know what I mean? There are a lot of little things that are coming together. It’s like a puzzle. So what she told us then is going to be promoted through my stories for generations.

Vincent: Oh, and that’s the other thing ... You can’t light fires on the beach [anymore], you told me.

Fiona: Yeah, that’s the other thing.

Vincent: Not only can’t you catch the food, but you can’t cook it.
Fiona: That’s right. The Government’s gone, “Fiona, you can’t do that!”, not realising I carry the four elements. I can make wind, I can make rain ... I can do a lot of things. But what do I do when I’ve given them away to people? What do they do with them? Do they just hear my stories? Do they document them? Are they fascinated in me? Are they gonna take me all the way and have me eat properly, and put in the public eye properly. Or are they gonna class me as a prophet, or some magic woman that can read cards, or whatever? ‘Cause at the end of the day I’m none of that. I’m just part of the land that needs to be healed. Which is why healing the land is healing me.

Vincent: So, essentially, it’s all well and good to have positive articles like this (referring to Fiona’s folder of newspaper cuttings) written about you, but at the same time it’s only one step.

Fiona: Yeah. It’s like one step forward and five steps back, you could say. One step forward, they listen to my stories. Five steps back was feeding me positives but giving me negatives. They fed me the positive word that they would give me funding ... but what now?

Vincent: Because you wanted two more murals on the bus shelters, right?

Fiona: The bus shelters in the main street [of Gerringong]. I was going to paint ... you know, how we made our bread ... Bush tucker.

Fiona: Yeah. I was going to have the old warriors with kanganoo, echidnas ... skinning them, and sitting around, and just showing you different scenes like that. That was our food. Of course, all the food now is in the shop, you know? I would have shown people what is was like then. I mean, you can walk to the shop now, you can buy your breads and meats. But before, it was going out to find yourself a bit of cane to get your sugar, or a wild bees’ nest to get a bit of honey. Those were our little days out. For lollies, we used to go out and get the gum off the tree ... it was like chewing gum. And the eucalyptus leaves, and all the other plants, they’ve all got their uses ... either to eat, or filter your body with. They give you your sugar, your oils, your iron, your vitamins. And because over time Government and councils have come in and sprayed parcels of land to protect their introduced plants, it’s put algae into the system. The land and the water has now been infected for many many years. You may not get something that was sprayed itself, but it’s still likely to be poisoned.

Vincent: It’s in the food chain.

Fiona: That’s right. It’s in the dirt. They’ve poisoned us, slowly but surely. They haven’t realised [the magnitude of] what they’ve done, because White Man, in his wisdom, has just come in cleared the land ... to provide for us, to give us all the things that were supposedly so hard for us to go and get, and by not realising that by having those hard hoofed animals on the land, it’s ruined the land itself.

Vincent: It was just that ignorant belief that you could simply transport agricultural practice, suited to one part of the world, to another. But of course it was totally different outcome.

Fiona: That’s right. And it’s like the Council being worried about losing a couple of thousand dollars over my murals. And I had to say to them, “I’m priceless. A couple of thousand dollars might be a lot to you, but to me it’s nothing. Because if you don’t want to supply the paints, I will personally go out and get ochre from my mountain, and I will come down and draw it on there. And if it gets destroyed, then so be it. It cost nothing.” Then they started asking me about my visions and my dreams, and asked me to do a prediction. So I wasn’t getting any funding until I proved to them that I had a little bit of ... well, they called it magic, or whatever ... I just call it common sense of the land. You know, if the land’s gonna meet my needs, I gotta meet its needs.

Vincent: Didn’t the fact that you were the daughter of a very well respected local Aboriginal man mean anything?

Fiona: It did, but I think they just wanted more stories. How I got to bring my stuff about was ... I was gonna shed seeds. I work with the police, and I work with a lot of the governments, councils, Water board ... I’ve represented National Parks and Wildlife ... I’ve done a lot of stuff in my time ... and really, I wasn’t getting [recognised] for that. I was just this free spirit going out there helping people. It was when I actually wanted something ... everything changed. They were like, “Hang on a minute”. And I said, “No, you hang on a minute. You heard my grandmother’s stories, you heard her mother’s stories, you heard my father’s stories. This is my story now. And then in another couple of years my kids are going to tell their story. So how ignorant are you towards us as Aboriginal people? You know, you’ve heard it off a full-blood tribe that spoke language.” ‘Cause my grandmother’s father ... my great-grandfather ... he was the last tribe that lived in Gerroa. His midden ground was the last midden ground there, where my grandmother and their grandfather’s people would have eaten. On my mother’s side ... it was her mother that was conceived at Gerroa and went to La Perouse. So both my parents, their parents had been in Gerringong way before they came to Gerringong. And even with the courts ... We had the courts come down to Cleary Brothers, because we were trying to stop them from utilising the land ...
Fiona: They were clearing all the land. We got ‘em off that land, but they moved up the road a little bit, and they’ve recreated themselves again. But about fifteen years ago, when I [began to get involved], I said to them, “My next agenda is to stop you from moving forward on the land”. Well, then they put in a ten year plan. They wanted a golf course, then they wanted a evening centre ... and they wanted all this at the crossroads there. We created a little group called the GEPS, the Gerroa Environmental Protection Society ... but came under another umbrella. And we protested against Sartor over the land at Gerroa, to get them to understand. They asked me to tell them the stories, so I told them my story. And they asked me about my Dad, so I told them about him. Then they asked me about my Nan, so I told them about her. That’s how we created this new group – we’ve had to document all these things that we’ve seen in our life. So for ten years I done that. And then after ten years they said, “Nah, look, we’ve lost the case”. Now, that’s where I jacked up with the community. I was gonna do a siege, because I felt like they used and abused my stories, my knowledge, my upbringing, my self-esteem, my life, my living. It was like, “Okay, I’ve just told them all my life story over the last ten years, and I’ve got nowhere.” So I went to the Judge and I told him all this stuff. He says, “Are you sure you’ve been writing to me for ten years?” And I said, “Yeah”. So I got my group – the GEPS group in Gerroa – to photocopy all the stuff out of their hard drive for the judge. And then we rang him. We had him on the line as we faxed it through, ‘cause all my letters that were getting sent to different parties weren’t getting to him. They were getting shredded before they got to him. So my stuff got faxed through to him while he was on the line, and he made a decision there and then. He said, “Look, can you meet me tomorrow at ten o’clock on that land?” And I said, “Yes. I need you to walk the land with me, so I can show you what I’ve seen”. And he done that. He come done, and we beat them. Cleary Brothers were told to get off. And they lied, and they done this, and they done all these things to us, you know, to our community. It was horrible ...

Vincent: Just for the benefit of the tape, can you specify that piece of land by name?

Fiona: Umm ... it’s the Gerroa road. As you’re coming onto Shoalhaven Heads Road from Gerringong, there’s another road that comes from Berry, and it goes out to the water. It’s the crossroads there. It’s Cleary Brothers property. They actually bought the property, ‘cause it [used to be] Toolijooa Road. So they bought the property, and they wanted to start a sand mine out there. Then they wanted it to be a gold course, then a healing centre. They were trying to recreate the land. They were closing off our boundaries. They were closing the creeks off and creating their own. That’s gonna confuse future generations [in regard to] all the stories we’ve told them about our tribal boundary lines. When they go to check them in another ten or twenty years, they’re gonna think, “Well, where are they?” And that’s what I’ve discovered with Cleary Brothers ... The stuff I played with as a kid ... it’s gone. It’s been covered over and demolished. The only way I won was because we had photos of when we played there. So I could say [with certainty] that that was a creek. It’s now a dry bed creek because they’ve closed off [the water source]. But without showing the judge that [photographic evidence], they would have won.

Vincent: So someone was screening his mail.

Fiona: Yeah, someone wasn’t letting it go through to him. But we got it all through [in the end], he came down, and he knew what I was saying.

Vincent: Can you remember his name?

Fiona: Ah, no. But if you want to chase up on any of that court stuff, get in touch with Warren Holder. He’s the guy that created that new group. He’s in Gerringong.

Vincent: You have to forgive me. As soon as you get south of Figtree, I’m not as familiar with local affairs.

Fiona: If you’ve got a couple of days, I could take you and show you these places, so that you can document it yourself ...

Vincent: I’d love to. That would be great.

Fiona: ... and talk to other people involved. Because these white people can tell you how they’ve tried to help me with my stories, my business, and the documents I sent to the Judge. I mean, Cleary Brothers tried to run these guys off the road ... they’ve tried to do a numerous amount of things to them. And the only way of beating them was for everyone to sit still and keep putting those submissions in.

Vincent: So this business is essentially a recording of what you know about the Aboriginal culture of this area?

Fiona: Yeah. They come and ask me a few things, and I told ‘em. I didn’t take much notice at first. They first asked me why I didn’t I swim in Gerroa, and I said, “Cause there’s a big eel out there”, you know. And they said, “No”. And I said, “There fucking is! There’s a big Gurangatch. He’s out there.” They said, “How do you know that?” I said, “Cause from a little girl I felt him in the water. I know he’s in the water.” And two days after my father died, I got in a boat and went up the creek, and I felt him again. He was under the boat. I could hear it and see it. My partner and my cousin, they were in another boat each, and I had one of my kids with me. All of a sudden it was like I was on a sand bank. I wasn’t going forward and I wasn’t going back, but I was getting pulled down. I said to my cousin, “Hey, stop! Help me! Something’s got me.” Instantly, they turned the boats around and came back to where I was and grabbed my boat. And it was like a magnet. They could not move me off that spot. I
knew what it was. I could see everything in my mind, and I just prayed to the light. ‘Cause I thought maybe I shouldn’t have gone up there. But I didn’t know that my father had taken my boys up that creek the day before he died. And then they told me about my dad. They said, “Pop took us up there, Mum.” The day before he died he took my kids up there, and he took ‘em into this little place. And my kids said, “Mum, big gigantic animals are in there ... like big bellies. Huge animals.” So we were curious. You know, “Take me and show me” ... not realising what my Dad had done was show my kids a lot of that stuff the day before he died. At the time of showing ‘em, my son, the littlest one, he cut his foot. It must have been about from here to there (indicating how large the wound was). And my Dad brought him back with it wrapped up. My dad said to him, “Don’t unwrap that. Leave it on for a couple of days, and see how it goes.” So I did that ... well, I was going to do that. But the next morning I woke up, my Dad had passed away. And when I unwrapped my son’s foot, to take him with me [to see the family], the wrapping was full of grass. Black medicine. And I’m like freakin’ out, ‘cause it was a deep, deep cut. I wrapped his foot back up, and I rang my sisters [for their advice]. They said, “Nah, get it out of there. We don’t know what he’s done.” So I done that, and went to the funeral and everything. It was a week later when a lady walks up to me and says, “Fiona, can I have a look at your little boy’s foot?” I said, “How did you know about that?” She said, “I was at Gerroa the other week when your father had the kids out there, and when your little boy cut his foot.” She said, “I had a medical kit, but your Dad told me we wouldn’t use it. He went into the bush, and got some medicine from the bush, and wrapped him up.” And this lady’s a white lady. She said, “Anytime you need me to give someone that story, I will”.

Vincent: And his foot was fine?

Fiona: When I went to show her, there was not even a scar there. I don’t know what he put in there. Even today, I still don’t know.

Vincent: Well, he obviously knew what he was doing.

Fiona: Yeah. But Dootch and all them, they learnt a lot from my dad. Because it was my father and his mother [who had knowledge]. His mother was a very, very clever lady. Dootch’s mum was switched on to a lot of this stuff. So we learnt a lot from her, ‘cause she was the lady. When our Nans and our elder people died, it was Dootch’s mum that [taught us a lot]. Now there’s not a lot of ladies out there that will actually sit down with you and have a laugh and a joke and tell knowledge to you. Most of them are like, “No, I can’t tell you that, girl.” ‘Cause they look at us like we’re not ready. I mean, if I was to say to someone, “Look, I know about tribal law”, but they didn’t know me, they’re gonna be looking at me like, “But she’s only a young girl, how does she know about those things?” But because I’ve kept it, I can’t get rid of it. It’s not going to go away. It’s there forever. It’s because they’re restricted by an older situation. To me, they’ve lost their old ways. They have to understand that the young people need to be taught about the old ways that are left, otherwise there’ll be no understanding at all.

Vincent: So there’s a bit of tension then, between the older folk and people like yourself who want to know the old ways before they’re lost?

Fiona: Yeah. I just want to confirm a lot of the spiritual stuff, because me being very connected to the elements of the earth, there’s a lot of spiritual things in that realm. It wasn’t as much making arts and crafts and learning about the invasion. It was beyond that. It was time when there was no time, you know, creation. I still can see from when we were light. That’s where our star signs come into it, ‘cause there was thirteen beings that got left. And I’ve got that story. When the time of the astrology star signs came, because there was a couple of beings left, that’s where we’ve been created from, those beings from the time of no time. Do you know what I mean? That’s what got created first. Then there was nothing. Then from that creation, that’s where all the gods came, and they put all the other things out. That’s what I can see.

Vincent: Look, I’m not going to pretend I totally understand what you’re saying when it comes to stuff like that, but I respect that that’s what you believe. I really don’t know anything about Astrology, apart from knowing my own star sign, and that’s all.

Fiona: What is your sign? Are you Virgo?

Vincent: Sagittarius.

Fiona: Sagittarius ... You’re a Kookaburra.

Vincent: Kookaburra, am I?

Fiona: In times before we were human ... our animal astrology ... Well, me being Virgo. I was Echidna.

(We then spend about ten minutes talking about astrology and other subjects not directly related to my questions.)
Vincent: Do you see any koalas around here? ‘Cause up our way, we don’t see anything.

Fiona: There’s koalas out at Gerroa.

Vincent: Are they infected with that horrible disease ...? Aren’t a lot of the koalas along the coast suffering from some sort of cancer on their nose?

Fiona: Well, you know what I discovered with the National Parks and Wildlife? What they were doing was wiring up the trees that koalas were using. So we went out there with WIRES and undid all the wires ...

Vincent: They were wiring up the trees?

Fiona: Yeah, with barbed wire ... so the koalas couldn’t make their way back up into the trees.

Vincent: Why?

Fiona: ‘Cause Cleary Brothers were trying to claim that all that land had no natural significance. So they were saying, “There’s no animals out here, there’s nothing here”. What I done was sneak into the bush and take all these photos, so I could say, “Yes there is, here they are”. Cleary Brothers said that they did this and they did that ... that they put a watch out. But they didn’t do jack-s**t. They [were claiming that] there was no new growth there. They were saying that some of those trees had been there year for two hundred years ... for years and years and years. Well, okay, if they’ve been there for years and years and years, they should be a little bit bigger than what they are now. When we got the archaeologist and scientists in to do tests, they said straight up that some of these trees were only six months old. So that’s how we beat them again, ‘cause they just kept lying. And with my knowledge I wanted to test whether these statements were right or wrong. And through that journey I became very good friends with them, not enemies, because I showed them something. Like, “Don’t think you can just do this to black people, because we’re knowledged, and we will go all the way to show you what you’re destroying, because once you destroy that, you’re destroying yourself.”

Vincent: From everything you’ve just told me, it sounds to me like there are victories, but the sheer energy and emotional struggle that you always have to go through to [fight] them. I know you get some support from the white community as well, but even so ... the emotional pain and time that it takes for those few victories is totally unjust.

Fiona: It is. Let me put it like this ... if I didn’t have the white community behind me, I wouldn’t have made it. Because no black fella had the means of doing what the white community was able to do at the time. Our people, because we’re always right about these things, we have a tendency to forget how to speak with white people on their level. Most of the time what you’ll hear is, “Those white cunts, they’re on our land, they’re ripping everything up”. But me, being brought up in a white community, I was taught to negotiate, you know, “Hey, let’s try to do it this way, because you’re not going to make any profits when the land dies off eventually. Me, being Aboriginal, I just want to show you how to keep regenerating the land. I don’t want to take the land from ya, I just want to show you how to utilise it properly so that it grows, and thereby our community grows. Because without that happening, we’re all in limbo.” [When] any white man, or any Aboriginal, is not aware of what they’re touching, our earth becomes unbalanced. And it’s not just us in human form, it’s the animals, it’s the sky, it’s the elements of the earth, that give us balance, because it’s a weight put on the earth.

Vincent: I think the reality is that when you guys were invaded you’re population was quite small really.

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: And you fellas had that under control because you knew that the land would only support a certain number. The way you went about hunting and gathering ... you didn’t take too much from one spot, and you moved on, because you knew the land had its limitations.

Fiona: Yep.

Vincent: I think the population we have now ... what, twenty two million? ... and in the last few years we’ve had some politicians saying we need a larger population ... It’s not gonna work.

Fiona: It doesn’t. If you have a look at it, the larger the population, the more we have problems with our health. We’re not getting the air that we should be getting, and we’re not breathing it in properly. We’re not able to connect to our soil which makes us tool as Aboriginal people of the land. Even with the water ... Because they’ve infected the land, that’s infected the water ... So, our system, ‘cause we’re made up of water, we’re infected just by drinking out of that tap. And if scientists really want to heal the land and look at it properly, then take all this stuff out of it. And even though young Aboriginal women are more prone to go out and get themselves pregnant at thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen, they’ll go and have an abortion because they’re afraid of getting in trouble, or it was a mistake, or something’s happened. So we don’t benefit. Every other nationality benefits from the
Government’s money bar us. Because, for one, we don’t get paid for havin’ our children. DOCS come in and take our kids as soon as we have ‘em.

Vincent: What? Even now?

Fiona: Even now. Even now.

Vincent: How is that still happening? How can they get away with that?

Fiona: Well, just supposing my kids have kids. They’ll pull through, because they’ve come from a good background. But see, if my sons were in trouble with the Police, and had a record ... if they have children with someone who has a record as well, well, then they’re classed as unfit mothers and fathers. So as soon as they deliver that child, DOCS are there before they even have a chance to see the kid, simply because they have a record. That still happens today. We still have our people’s kids getting taken from birth today because they’re classed as unstable parents. Now those new parents usually have come from a drug and alcohol home. So the government sees the kids as being in danger even from the grandparents. We don’t get a second chance. And this is why a lot of them go on about the Bible. It says in the Bible we shall not kill, we shall not steal, and all these things, but we are in the practice of doing that. That’s the reality of our life at the moment. We’re doing all the things in the Bible that it states not to do. And it’s the same with Government. They’re stating one thing, and doing another. They’re putting money out there for children’s health and well-being, but if black people have a child they have it taken away. So the Stolen Generation doesn’t go away.

Vincent: You were telling me a bit about the women’s shell work you did when you were younger. It’s pretty iconic of the south coast. You don’t make that yourself?

Fiona: I haven’t done it as a trade, but I can do it. That’s something we were shown as children. I don’t even know why we used to do it. I think it was just a relaxation [activity] for my grandmother ... a meditation thing. Then she started trading with people around the community, and we used to go and collect the shells with her. We learnt everything with her. When she passed on, we didn’t even realise that shellwork was an art, until someone in at La Perouse said, you know, they were the first family to do this and that. Well, if they had evidence of trade from those years they might have been able to tell her story, but they didn’t trade. See, my Nan might not have been the first one to do arts and crafts with shells, but she was the first one who traded. So that makes her significant.

Vincent: And that was something her mother taught her?

Fiona: Yeah. Her mother would have taught her, and her mother before her ... it kept going on and on and on. Years ago we didn’t have any toys. So we would always wait for someone to finish a bottle of drink so we could get the bottle and make a little doll up. We’d wrap it in a tea towel or piece of bark, whatever we could get, just so we could have our baby. Or the old sunshine tins ... we used to collect all the different sized tins, and fill ‘em up with rocks and dirt and join ‘em all together, and we used to call ‘em big caterpillars. We’d have our cars and our little doovie-wackers, or whatever we called ‘em at that time. Shakers ... we’d get sticks and put all the bottle tops on them. Any little buckle that came off a belt or something, we’d get and make it into a hand [for our dolls]. We made all that sort of stuff because they were there at the time.

Vincent: Resourceful.

Fiona: Everything was something we could make something from. And now you can’t make nothing from anything because it’s not [appreciated]. You know what I mean? The only thing getting looked at is arts and crafts, and to do that you need to go into a business. Whereas [I’m more in synch with] Kelli [Ryan]’s drive ... Just go and pick anyone up, get ‘em in there, and say, “Hey, this is what we’re gonna do. Do you want to be a part of it?” Most of the people at that [Boolarng Nangamai] store had no idea about arts and crafts, but put ‘em in a workshop and they start producing works like this within a matter of weeks. They’ve got it built in them. They just needed someone to turn the light on and say, “Hey, you can do this”.

Vincent: It’s also about the growth in appreciation for these things. People started saying, “Hey, that’s actually really good, I like that.”

Fiona: And that’s why I’ve got a lot of time for people like that, because they’ve given people a go. They’ve recognised people’s potential. And that’s basically where I’ve come into fruition with my community. They’ve given me a go. I’ve gained from just one person saying, “Hey, I believe in what you say.”

Vincent: So who were the actual artists [who worked] on these murals?

Fiona: Denise Freeman and Dean Walker worked on the one at the north end, and Richard Campbell and Michael Brown worked on the south end.

Vincent: So once you got the funding, you rang them up and ...?
Fiona: I just rang them up and said, “Hey, you wanna get paid for a couple of hours work?” And they said, “Yeah”. They didn’t realise [the full extent of the project]. But what I done with my business, I got them to sign a contract, and the contract basically stated, “Okay, you can work under these hours, and you get paid this much money.” The contract wasn’t stating that we’d keep them on for ongoing work.

Vincent: But do you think we’ll see the bus shelters done?

Fiona: I think we will.

Vincent: Even if you have to go and get ochre from the bush, yourself?

Fiona: Well, I don’t think it will come to that. I just know it will work out, because I’m positive in my outlook. This here (pulling out a photocopy of a letter from her folder) was what they shredded. I had a dream the night I put it in, my stomach was turning. That’s why the next morning I rang the Judge to see if he’d got it, and he hadn’t.

Vincent: (Reading the title of the letter) “Objections to the proposed extensions of the Gerroa sand quarry”. 2006.

Fiona: And that (handing me another letter) was just a confirmation that he ended up researching what I was telling him, and asking me to show him what they should have been showing him in the first place.

Vincent: So are these articles a bit like the Prime Minister’s apology, a step in the right direction, but there’s got to be more substance behind reconciliation?

Fiona: Yeah. I mean, I’ve got all these papers. But what’s happens now? But anyway, (going back to the subject of the murals) I put the artists on a contract for a good few couple of days. The only thing they owned was the paint they pulled in. You gotta be very watchful of who you get into your work, because Richard Campbell said to me, “You know, Cuz, when you make money off them murals ...”

Vincent: He has to have a cut of it?

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: But those murals don’t make money, do they? How can you make money out of those murals?

Fiona: Well, because I run a business ... If people come over and take photos ... They could make a postcard. My idea was to make up fridge magnets of the works, photo frames, postcards, cups and saucers ...

Vincent: Oh, that’s actually a really good idea. (laughs) I’d buy a mug of one of those.

Fiona: Well, the newsagents have already done that.

Vincent: What about the third mural you took me to yesterday? The one at the museum. That was for a different project, wasn’t it?

Fiona: No, no. That was for the same thing. It’s [illustrating] our community [when] white settlement started ... and how we traded with them. As you can see (referring to a photo of the mural), there’s the old farmers coming in with their stuff.

Vincent: And is that the same stream going into the ocean that is depicted in the ‘Survive’ mural?

Fiona: Yep.

Vincent: And did you say this (referring to a detail of the mural) is a picture of your Dad ... the guy with the spear?

Fiona: Yep.

Vincent: Was it taken from a photo, or ...?

Fiona: That’s a real shot, actually. It was taken exactly where the mural is. I think my Mum has that picture. But (referring to other details of the murals) why we did these types of pictures ... They all came off here ...

(On her kitchen table, Fiona aligns three or four aerial shots of the Gerrinong/Gerroa coastline. She points out the shapes of a duck and a woman’s face that are clearly visible where Werri creek meets the sea.)
Fiona: So we line it all up like that. That’s the little beach at Gerroa, where you come down from the golf course ... there’s a little beach there. This is where you come around Boat Harbour. This is all Boat Harbour ... and then you start to come out to Gerroa. But I had to show them. And they asked us why we thought we were the Black Duck. I had to tell them about our totems. But when we got these pictures, if you have a look at the land, it’s shaped into a duck. You see?

Vincent: Oh, yeah. The north head of Werri beach comes around into a very distinct duck’s head.

Fiona: But what I was told was that this is a women’s business place (pointing to a specific location) and this is men’s business up here (points to a separate location). And look at this. Is that a lady’s head? See her nose and her mouth?

Vincent: That’s amazing.

Fiona: Now, we have a significant story about her as well. And this is where the porpoises come in. They’re not dolphins, they’re porpoises. And they tell the story about that place. So that’s what I’m researching at the moment. That’s my next story.

Vincent: Using that as an example, where do you seek that information from? You’ve told me that it’s sometimes hard to get knowledge from your elders, whether it’s because they no longer have it or they feel you’re not ready for it.

Fiona: I think that’s why I’ve been given that stick (referring to the stick on her kitchen table that she believes is a message stick). Because I went to that place with that stick and held it, and asked the spirit of the land there all about that place. [In those cases,] what I would do is document that information down, and then go and find off different people ... confirmation [of that information], just through verbal yarns. Then I’d go to the archives, ‘cause these things are documented somewhere, it’s just a matter of finding them. Before I spend money and go into those places ... utilising Government’s things ... I’d rather sit in my own skin first and do it. ‘Cause if I’m part of these things, I should be freely given the answers ... to move in my stride without competing with people. Because the minute you come up against another person in the Government, it’s negative all the way.

Vincent: But I suppose it is about walking that land again and observing the things that your ancestors observed. I mean, I know things have changed there ... just the fact that there are houses there now ... but in many ways it’s still the same place. So is it about that [kind of] intuition? A spiritual observance?

Fiona: Yeah. I feel a lot for that place, so I want to know what I’m feeling. I want to know what we gotta do when we get to that place. Are there places there that still contain our prayers? Are we addressing the land properly? Only the land talks to me about this stuff. It’s alright for the councils to revegetate certain areas and make it look pretty ... I mean, it’s all well and good to do that. But don’t ever let looks deceive you. That place is special.

Vincent: We’ve been talking about it in a round-about kind of way anyway, but do you feel the Aboriginal community is consulted enough about proposed developments ...?

Fiona: Never. We’ve never been consulted properly.

Vincent: Even with all the guidelines they supposedly have ...?

Fiona: They don’t consult us. They go ahead with their plans, and then when we fight for the land, that’s when they consult us. But their story is always, “Oh sorry, we didn’t know who to go to”. It’s like, “Yes, you do! We’ve been a well-known Aboriginal family in this community for years. You know that my Nan worked on these committees. You know my Dad worked in the council.” My Dad got ATSIC up and running. He was an ATSIC commissioner and councillor. And all that proof is here (referring to the folder of documents). My dad wasn’t a no-one, he was a someone. See, he retired off the council, and then got into ATSIC, and helped shape a lot of the Government’s current Aboriginal policies. So, even though he had all these important roles in the community, he still doesn’t get credit for it. He just gets remembered for being a famous footballer, a legend in football. If people only knew his stories of the land, and how much he was on the land! I mean, my Dad used to spear fish. I mean, he did using a fishing line sometimes, but mostly he would use a spear. And if he was still alive today he would still be using spears.

Vincent: So did your Dad speak language?

Fiona: Yep. My Dad was born under tribal law. And because he was born on the land, his name Yunamynay (?), which means ‘calm water’. But his birth was not officially registered at that time. See, to travel like the white man, you needed a birth certificate. If he hadn’t eventually got that birth certificate, he would have been the one to initiate [Aboriginal men] and keep his law. He would have been a nobody to the Government. But not thinking right ... If I had that opportunity, I would never have got registered, ‘cause I didn’t want to be anything to the Government.

Vincent: One of the other things we spoke about yesterday, in between recording ... you took me to the skate park outside the Gerringong Bowling Club. For the benefit of this interview now, can you tell me about that whole saga again ... about the burial ground.
Fiona: Well, where the Gerringong Bowling Club is, that used to be the old ceremonial grounds. They used to do a lot of corroborees and sacred stuff there. When my children got to about five, I thought, “I’ll go to the schools and I’ll get reconciliation, and all this other stuff, up and running”, which I did. Then when [my kids] got to about ten, I decided to go to the community and say, “Hey, let’s get a skate park for these kids, or let’s get something in our community for the children.” So the whole community decided, “Yes, we’ll do that”. Well, it took years of that coming about, because every time we wanted to put one in, there was a Koori site there ... either a burial, or something else significant, or some sort of story [related to it]. So the only thing to do was get in touch with Aboriginal people and find out the truth about these sites. So I got out into my community and I was talking to different people. See, we’re in a remote area, and we don’t get any [real services]. We don’t have medical down here, we don’t have doctors ... it’s like we’re right in the middle of no man’s land. ‘Cause Nowra’s 044 and Wollongong’s 042 ...  

Vincent: You’re not urban, but you’re not remote ...  

Fiona: Yeah. We’re stuck in a no zone area. So they then asked me, what sort of stuff do you want? And I said, we’ve done reconciliation, we’re now in contact with the council, so let’s get some funding to get these kids in touch with each other. When my kids was going away on trips with the Police Boys clubs or Aboriginal services, I noticed over the years that none of their white friends would go ‘cause there was never any money available for them. So I tapped in for [funding for both] white and black. Because if we’re gonna change racist attitudes ... White kids are less likely to be racist to their Aboriginal friends if they’ve experienced their culture with them. So a lot of stuff that’s done in Gerringong is done from the [Aboriginal] kids’ friends and that. Now, when I look at my children, they shine in the community, with a lot of their white friends. There’s no prejudice there now. It’s like everyone’s happy as Larry, everyone knows each other. There’s none of this “that’s a black issue” or “that’s just a white issue”. It’s either you’re a ‘wog-origine’, or a ‘black-origine’ ... they’ve got all these nick names now. So I think I’ve got rid of the barrier. They can’t [claim ignorance anymore]. White kids can’t say they don’t know how to weave [traditionally], ‘cause they did a workshop and weaved with them. They can’t say they didn’t know about Aboriginal paints and the contexts of the paintings, because they did it with us. So it’s up to them now to teach their kids ... and not only their kids, but their parents too.

Vincent: I just wanted you to clarify the situation. ‘Cause I was a bit confused yesterday when you said, “This was a burial site, and we’ve put a skate park here”!

Fiona: Oh ... The community weren’t going to allow it, ‘cause the old people said, “Yes, there is a burial site there”. And it was really quite strange, because for a few months I kept going to my cousin’s house, just hanging out there. And when I had the dream, I couldn’t wait to get to him the next day. I said, “Cuz, I had a dream about you”. And he said, “What was your dream?” I said, “Did you ever, like, bury anyone? Or did you ever kill anyone? ‘Cause I dreamt you buried someone.” And he goes, “No, I never killed nobody!” I said, “Well, Cuz, I think you might kill someone.” I was really worried, ‘cause in this dream all I could see was him burying these bones. But in the dream, it was like it was his father, not him. It was like a little person. And I said, “Well, Cuz, I saw you burying bones and that”. And he said, “Did you, Cuz?” And he was really really excited. He goes, “I did bury bones, but I was only little when I did that.” Then I just got even more excited, and I asked him all this stuff. I said, “Where?” He goes, “Down there at Gerringong.” And it’s like, “You what? You didn’t??” And when he told me exactly where he buried ‘em, it’s like, “Do you know what, Cuz? I’m on the track trying to find out about them bones, and you’re telling me you [buried] them?” He said, “Yeah, why?” I said, “Do you think we’d be able to move them?” At first he said no. And then I told him my reasons why. And he still said no. Then we went to Dootch, and Dootch said, “No, you can’t move ‘em”. Then I had the argument with Dootch, and said, “Well, Dootch, how come [we] got white people on the land that’s moving us all about anywhere anytime they like, but me, as a black person, who has come to you with respect and dignity to ask if we can move the bones somewhere else with a plaque so people know they’re there, and then our kids can have a [skate park] right there at that site?” Well, with that, he was all for it, under the condition that we did get a plaque. We still haven’t received the plaque. So that’s why I’ve put the other two toilet blocks and the bus shelters on hold. ‘Cause what they’ve done is, “Yes, get Fiona out there to communicate with the community”, but they don’t always fulfill their end of the bargain. I mean, the plaques should be on the beaches by now, to protect our midden ground, and a plaque should be on the burial ground. Until that’s done, I can’t move on with my works, ‘cause there’s no protection. You know what I mean? The only thing that’s protecting them at the moment is the spirits. They asked me to do it, I did it, and they’ve said they will protect that. So anyone who tries to go there to destroy it, they will actually be destroyed because of the [spiritual protection] that’s gone over them.

Vincent: Middens, I think, are a strange thing, because in a way they don’t transcend that cultural barrier. Even racist people can appreciate why rock art is special, and to a certain extent ... a burial is a burial. But with middens, I think a lot of people go, “Well, it’s just a bunch of shells. That’s not important.” Is that the attitude you witnessed when you’ve tried to protect middens?

Fiona: Well, they ask what’s so significant about it, like, “What is it?” Years and years and years ago when the tribes would have a feast, they’d chuck all their rubbish in one pile. As time went on, that pile got higher and higher and higher, but it also disintegrated into the ground to rejuvenate the earth. Now, if you have a look, mainly on banks, from here to there, there will be all those shells. That’s how you tell where the tribes were. That’s how you tell how long people have been there, and how many generations of people. So, see where I showed you out at Gerroa ... Ever since I can remember, I still get my kids to go and put their shells in this one particular place every time they have a feed. That’s simply to show the government that when I’m dead and gone, my great-great-grandkids will still be doing what I did with my grandmother and that. That’s my grandmother’s, there. That’s the last burial, the last midden ground. So that’s the establishment to claim that area. But there’s a
catch now. If they don’t eat [those sea foods] and participate in that [practice], they’ve got no claim over that. See what I mean?

Vincent: Yeah. I hadn’t thought of that.

Fiona: It’s like, how can you claim something from your ancestors that you weren’t involved with?

Vincent: Well, once again, if white people had done it, it would be preserved. But because it’s Aboriginal ... But I heard another interesting thing about the middens, and it’s something so simple. You know that show, Gardening Australia?

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: Every now and then they’ve got this Koori fella on, and he talks about the traditional use of native plants. But in one show he talked about middens. And he said one of their purposes was also to show each group of visitors to the site what was last eaten there. So they’d know what not take and what could be taken from that environment. You know what I mean?

Fiona: Yeah. They used to eat turtles at south end [of Werri Beach]. You don’t see turtles there now. The long neck turtles. So that’s another part of the story. These animals that are so important to us, a lot of them have moved on ['cause of the change to the environment]. We don’t eat off the land anymore because there’s no kangaroos, there’s no possums, no ducks ... none of the things to eat that were pure from the land. At Christmas time, my Aunty had kangaroo in the oven. I didn’t know it was kangaroo. She got me to pull it out and have a taste of it. And it was so nice! And I was like, “How did you get it like that?” And she wouldn’t tell me. And it wasn’t until she served it up to everyone that she said to me, “Don’t tell everyone, but that’s kangaroo there.” It had been caught by the guy I was telling you about earlier, Steven Henry, the guy who done the traditional burials. His father, Uncle ‘Dickie’ Henry, he was one of the first Aboriginals to do the burials. And he got very sick from the land because he was fighting the Government all the time, and he come across a lot of bones ...

Vincent: Sorry, what do you mean “the first Aboriginal to do burials”? You mean the first to re-start the tradition?

Fiona: Yeah. That’s where Dootch picked it up, because Dootch worked with him. And so did his children. So his children and Dootch are still here to tell those stories. And that’s what Dootch does now. He’s actually getting our bodies that were taken overseas, and bringing them back and burying them here, so our land becomes balanced again. ‘Cause so many of our people have not been laid to rest in our country. He’s tracing all that up, to get them buried back in our country.

Vincent: Hmm. I know there’s a big hunt for Pemulwuy’s remains.

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: Some of those big museums, where those bodies were taken, have huge storerooms and basements ... just tunnels and tunnels of things that were brought from all over the Empire. I’ve heard people from those museums say, “We don’t know eighty percent of what’s down there”. I’d like to think that these days people know that it was wrong and would give the remains back ... but I think the main problem will be finding and identifying them.

(We take a short break.)

Vincent: You were just telling me about King Mickey.

Fiona: I got onto researching him because when I got the aerial shots of Gerroa Creek, the spirit that forms into a human face looked much like King Mickey Johnson. So I was sorta on this drive of, “I know where he’s buried, I know where he is”. And then we found out he’s buried in Kiama. But then I looked at the photo of him again, and I thought, “Gee that looks so much like him in that creek”. And I had photos of my father, and I thought, “Far out, he looks so much like my dad. And then ... I don’t know whether it was a rumour or a story ... that we were related to him. Then I got told that he was the last famous footballer before my father came around. So King Mickey Johnson actually gave his football to my father. The football, then, was made up out of kangaroo’s bladder.

Vincent: Well, they reckon you fellas invented [football]. ‘Cause there’s those very first paintings – that were done when the Europeans came – of the black fellas playing a game ... I mean, [the ball] wasn’t leather, it was something different ... but it looked like football.

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: And surfing, as well. Although I think there’s a bit of a competition [for that claim] between the Hawaiians and the Aborigines, ‘cause I think they both say, “Nah, nah, we were the first ones to surf”. (laughs)
Fiona: I think they used to make the boards up out of the old trees ... the wood.

Vincent: What’s your understanding of the role women had as fishermen? Because I’ve heard that ... even though men did a lot of fishing, obviously ... fishing was seen as a special women’s role here on the south coast. Do you know anything about that?

Fiona: We done a lot of fishing, yeah, ‘cause it was like ...

Vincent: I mean pre-European. I’ve heard that women’s little fingers were removed as a sort of magic charm to help them fish better.

Fiona: I don’t know about that.

Vincent: No?

Fiona: That would be right, if you heard that from an elder Koori, yeah. But no, I don’t know about that. But one of our great things was fishing, yeah. We fished a lot. And that’s why I think our females [should still be allowed to] go into the water and get mussels and oysters and seashells and all that.

Vincent: And did you see any of that traditional weaving when you were growing up?

Fiona: Yeah, but I didn’t know [its significance]. They used to make the old fishing nets. My dad used to make fishing nets. He did all of that then. But I didn’t know what they were doing. I just thought it was natural. So I saw a lot of that ... weaving and making bags to go to the shops. We were doing things like that too ... to carry our little oysters, and stuff. They made really significant things from our old ways.

Vincent: ‘Cause I read this article about the artist, Yvonne Koolmatrie. She does weaving like that, and it’s in a lot of galleries around Australia. But the story goes that ... in the place where she learnt it from, down in the Kooring, that practice had nearly died out. It was really only one or two elder women who were still practising it. And they knew that when they passed on there’d be no one left to do it. So they actually said, “Come on, you mob. We wanna show you this before we go.” And it went from something that had almost died out down there, and from what I gather, a lot of the south coast as well ... like, even if you saw it as a child but you stopped practising it, that could have easily gone. You know what I mean?

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: But [Yvonne Koolmatrie] took it from something that had almost disappeared and now it’s totally revitalised. You see her stuff in museums all around Australia. And she goes from real traditional stuff to aeroplanes ... She’ll weave aeroplanes with that traditional weaving.

Fiona: Wow.

Vincent: It’s pretty amazing stuff.

Fiona: See, if they said to me, “Come and do some weaving”, I’d be like, “I wouldn’t know how to make one of them”. But I can make a bag. (laughs) So a lot of our tradition has gone, because we have stopped practising it. And we can now only [relearn] it through TAFE or school, because we’re not allowed to go and collect our stuff to make our tools, and to eat, and survive on the land. So we’re learning our ways, but in a white way. We’re learning this stuff (referring to the traditionally woven fish piece, made popular by TAFE courses) instead of traditional stuff. Do you know what I mean? And it confuses us, at the end of the day, because ... okay, we’re doing weaving, traditional weaving, and then they’re marked as assignments instead of being used. Well, that’s not traditional.

Vincent: I don’t think anyone has claimed those fish pieces are traditional ...

Fiona: Oh, I know, but those are the sort of things you learn in an art class. What I’ve seen is them going off to make traditional bags, you get marked, and then you go on to the next thing and the next thing. This is where, I think, we need to draw the line with a lot of our arts and crafts. Painting those murals on the walls, that’s not traditional. It’s a part of our tradition, but it’s not traditional art. It’s using our traditional dreams, but not our traditional artefacts. So, this where a lot of the students, when they get to year 11 and 12, come to me, and they’ll often say, “Oh, we made this really traditional thing today”, and it’s like, “No, that’s not traditional”. And others, who haven’t had the opportunity to come to me, they will send those things through with their assignments, and they’ll get flunked on them all. And then they’ll have a gripe at their teacher, “Hey, I spent twelve months doing that assignment, and I got nothing out of it”. But you did get something out of it, and it’s learning the traditional ways of weaving. This is the traditional way. When you get to year 11 and 12, if you don’t take on your Aboriginal Studies, you don’t get your year 11/12 certificate.
Fiona: Yeah. And the only reason she done that is because her father was a very good friend of my Dad. He was fascinated in my Dad’s life.

Vincent: He was the camera man, was he?

Fiona: Yeah. And because he was such a good friend of my Dad’s, he knew my dad was on his way out. So he got his daughter... she was actually the first one ever to video someone like that and bring it into the schools in 1996. And they did that because... he was a bit switched on, my father... and he told a lot of people that this is my year of going away now. Whether we believed it or not... In 1995 I met up with a man, and I fell pregnant with triplets, and I moved, and I was travelling around. And in that time of me being pregnant I got bit by a white tip spider. I’ve never liked spiders. They took me to hospital. They took two of the babies that was already poisoned, and I carried the other one right up until I was due, and then I lost him. And ‘cause we lost my Nan a month prior to me losing my child, I said to Dad, “This is really strange, you know. We’ve lost Nan, and now we’ve lost a baby”. And I wanted to know if there was any black magic, or magic, or any curses, put over the family. I lost my partner. So in that year of 1996, it was like my Dad gave me all the stories. He taped himself, and then he karked it. And the only reason she done that is because her father was a very good friend of my Dad. He was fascinated in my Dad’s life.
by now, ‘cause we’ve moved around so many friggin’ houses, we wouldn’t have taken that seriously, the DVD he give us, ‘cause it would have just been a movie he always had [around].

Vincent: Maybe there were things he felt he couldn’t tell you at an earlier age.

Fiona: Well, I think he could have told us a lot ... which he did. All that stuff on the DVD, he’d told us in his time, but not straight down the line like that. It was always, “Hey, you’re not allowed to do that”. Even when that Big Brother show came out, he says, “That’s the Big Brother. He’s up atop them clouds, and he watched everything we do down here.” I got fascinated in them stories, and I asked him about the animals and the land. One day he just got smart, and he said, you know, “Don’t be stupid. Whatever’s on the land is in the water.” And I’m trying to figure it out, you know, “You don’t get ants in water!” You know, I was one of those kids that questioned everything. He said, “Yes you do. You see that horse running around that paddock? You get seahorses in the water. See the snakes on the land? There’s sea snakes as well.” And he done all this, and it really made sense to me. So I understood a lot of what he was saying only because I got to ask that question, where[as] people can’t ask him questions about that paddock, ‘cause he’s not here. Do you know what I mean? We just have to listen to what he said, and feel it in our hearts, and know that it was there in that time. But where is that time? It’s in that space where there was no space. You know what I mean? So it’s in a moment of the realm of life.

Vincent: In the DVD, there was one question she asked your father ... and I couldn’t make it out, what she said. He’d just being talking about traditional marriage laws or regulations. She asked him something about women. I think she asked whether women could choose who they married, to which he said ‘no’. But I’m not quite sure.

Fiona: No. It’s not even, the men and the women. It’s the elders in the tribe [who control those things]. See, when they had their children ... because we ate properly and were in balance ... they already knew what child was going to be given to what man to keep his camp up and running, and have leaders of that camp, ‘cause they were true to themselves. One man could have many wives. But I don’t think a law man could have children.

Vincent: A law man?

Fiona: That’s my next question for Dootch when I run into him. I gotta ask him whether law men were allowed to have children.

Vincent: You mean the medicine men? The kuradji?

Fiona: What men couldn’t have children?

Vincent: I haven’t heard that any man couldn’t have kids. But that doesn’t mean anything – it just means I don’t know.

Fiona: I just thought a law man can’t have kids, because he’s got so much commitment to the tribe.

Vincent: If he was allowed to have a wife, there’d definitely be no law stopping him from having kids. How could you prevent that?

Fiona: Well, my thinking is along two lines ... He wouldn’t be able to have a wife ‘cause he’s so committed to all the tribe. But then again, if he’s allowed to have a wife ... and so many wives ... wouldn’t that be his tribe? Because he’s created children from all those wives. That would be his tribe. You know what I mean?

Vincent: Oh, I know what you mean, but you’re asking the wrong person! (laughs)

Fiona: I have a lot of questions about those types of things.

Vincent: I think it was Les Bursill who told me that even though men could have many wives, in this area they really only had maybe a maximum of two. You wouldn’t get a guy with, say, six wives, because the land wouldn’t handle a large population.

Fiona: It’s just that I came across something, and I thought I was getting lured somewhere. I was a bit fascinated with somebody, and I questioned it. I said to this person, “What’s really happening with you?” And he said “I’m a person who can’t commit to a lot of things.” I think he was out looking for more than one wife ... to collect ... to bring back a time when there wasn’t time.

Vincent: Well, maybe that’s why Islam is the largest growing religion amongst Aboriginal people, apparently. Did you hear that?

Fiona: No. What [do you mean]?

Vincent: You said maybe this guy was trying to go back to a time when Aboriginal men could have more than one wife. And you know that show, Living Black? They had a story, about six months ago, about how Islam is the largest growing religion amongst Aboriginal Australians. Percentage-wise there’s more Aboriginal converts to Islam than there is to Christianity or whatever. And in traditional Islam you can have multiple wives ...
Fiona: They’re sort of keeping a bit of our customs and traditions. [Muslims] have theirs, whereas ours has died off. Wow. I’ve got this real thing about Muslims only in the last few months. I can’t shut up about them. They’re in my head, twenty-four seven.

Vincent: What is it about Muslims you don’t like?

Fiona: It’s not that I don’t like them ... It’s just that they’re around my energy. I don’t know why.

(We take a short break.)

Vincent: You were just telling me about some regeneration projects ... showing farmers the right way to look after their land. Are they listening, even if slowly?

Fiona: Well, all the different parties were fighting. We had the council come up against the Water board, the Water board came up against National Parks, National Parks came up against State Greens and environmentalists ... and it went on and on. So me, as an Aboriginal person, contacted all the groups, and I asked them did any of them have any idea about Aboriginal history, Aboriginal culture. Well, they knew that Aboriginal people had lived there, and they knew that they were natives, and they knew that the government came in and gave them blankets and all of this stuff to keep ‘em warm and sheltered, but [they] didn’t know nothing about their ties to the land. After Cleary Brothers told me what they wanted, I said to them, “Well, you can have that. But let me, as an Aboriginal woman, show you how to regenerate the ground. ‘Cause if you’re gonna dig soil up from here, and take that over to there, let me tell you right now, that’s not gonna grow there.” So then we was trying to help Cleary Brothers by stating to them, “Don’t keep earth moving, and don’t keep replanting the trees. Because what you’re doing is changing the structure of the boundaries.” They were trying to cover our creeks in ... which they have ... And using bulldozers to make other creeks. So we had to do and show ‘em that, “This is what youse have done. We know that youse have changed it because we used to live and play here.” So the council, State Greens, and the environmentalists ... we just wanted to let the Cleary Brothers know that, “What youse have done is you’ve been destructive to yourselves. The only way you’re gonna get proper water now is if you get it by solar power.” But because they’d moved the earth so much, the structure where the houses were was starting to fall down, and a lot of their creation was going to waste. It wasn’t thriving. They were creating it, and within two or three weeks it was dying off. So then we got on to showing them how to regenerate the grounds properly. We went to the council ... We asked the council for all native trees ... all the fruit trees [were to be] native trees ... to put on that land, to help them establish back the oils. ‘Cause I believe if that dirt’s dry then that’s a dry area, it’s gonna be dry all the time. Until you put your oils back in there nothing’s gonna thrive. All the animals that used to eat from there are not gonna come back because there’s no taste for that area. Their taste has gone as well, because they’ve been moved out of there.

Vincent: So you weren’t saying to these people, “You can’t have this land”, if they already owned it ... You were saying, “Look after it properly”.

Fiona: Yeah. I’ve been given, in my time, lots of land. But why should I be given the land? This is what we said to Cleary Brothers. They own the land. They bought it and did all this stuff with it, and as a family. We’re not gonna come along now and say, “You can’t have that”, because in all honesty they’ve worked hard and made a life for themselves. So who are we, as Aboriginal people, to come through and go, “You can’t have that now, that’s mine,” when it’s already damaged and destroyed? So our best bet is to be a part of them ... ‘cause they’re already a part of us ... to meet these people, and say, “Hey, listen. You know, you’ve bought this land, but over there was a sacred place for healing. Over here is where you get the ochre. You can’t ochre like that anywhere else. This is where the trees were where the koalas bred. They bred twenty-four-seven.” So without us going in and talking to Cleary Brothers about the land they’d bought, they were destroying themselves. Now, I’ve dealt with them for a long time. We said to them only last year ... because they agreed on something that we asked, and then they reneged on it ... so I said in front of the Judge, “Well, if he tells me that, and we don’t receive that, he will die.” And there was probably about fifty people there, and this lady that wasn’t quite on my journey at that time, she said, “Oh my God. How could she say that? That shouldn’t be said.” I looked straight at her, and I said, “That is given to be said, and I did just say it, and he will die if he lies ... if he doesn’t follow through with what he said.” I said to her, “Lady, we’re not talking about signing documents. We’re talking about life. He’s tampered with the spirit of the heart that lies within this land here. He’s provoked that spirit. So now he’s telling spirit he’s gonna do the right thing. It doesn’t matter what we hear, it’s what he speaks out onto this land. So whatever happens now, the land will deal with him.” They started getting rotten water, all these things happened, and the man died. That’s why they’re chasing me story again, because they said, “Look, I actually saw that, and it happened.” Well, like I say to everybody, “Don’t speak out what you don’t want to happen.” ‘Cause you’re speaking into the air. The air is an earth element. An earth element is a water element. A water element is a wind element. A wind element is a fire element. And within black people’s bodies, we carry those elements. This is why if we don’t get taught to speak properly, we could be cursing people without even knowing it. And by doing that, we’re cursing ourselves, because we’ve not been tamed. We haven’t listened to our ancestral beings when they’ve told us to hush up, be quiet, be humble. If we’re quiet and humble, we don’t get hurt.

Vincent: So, in your opinion, the loss of language is pretty devastating?

Fiona: For humans, yeah; for spirit, no. ‘Cause if you’re connected up to land and spirit, you can communicate with wind, fire, water and earth.
Vincent: Do you think we’ll ever hear the language again? I know there’s a lot of work being done in language revival.

Fiona: We’re trying to get it back into the schools this year. It’s another reason why I want to go to New Zealand, because they have schools over where they teach their [traditional Maori] language. If I can go over and see how they put that into action, we should be able use that package over here. Because government, at the moment, is trading with New Zealand.

Vincent: Well, there’s a big language revival going on where Uncle Vic comes from ... one of the guys I interviewed. He’s from the New South Wales - Queensland border. They’re teaching the language in schools. So it’s happening in Australia. It’s not happening here, but it’s happening.

Fiona: It is. And it’s only a matter of someone with knowledge getting the package, bringing it back, and giving it to someone that can speak language.

Vincent: Will you tell me about the art in your lounge room? And before I go I might take a few pictures, if that’s alright?

Fiona: Yeah.

Vincent: Well, let’s start with this one. You pulled it out of your wardrobe.

Fiona: This one was my father’s southern division photo. In them days they didn’t have frames. So my Nan put it on cardboard, and got some star shells, and shelled around the border to make a frame. This one (referring to a batik) ... When my Dad passed away, my mum decided to do a TAFE course, ‘cause we wanted to keep her [occupied]. She done that and thought it was no good and didn’t like it because it wasn’t neat. But what she didn’t understand was it was a wax Thai dye. So what they done ... they tied it up in all different directions and dyed it with hot oil, and it turns out like that. But she was going to throw it away, so I grabbed it and interpreted the story [depicted on the cloth]. It sorta shows our Dreamtime story ... The six circles represent her children, the two kangaroos represent her and my father, the fire represents life-giving, and the butterfly is my mother’s mother ... ‘cause my mother’s mother was clever. And these ones (referring to two decorated parring shields and a wooden canvas with two portraits on it) was my mother’s brother’s. This here was cut down from the old ...

Vincent: They’re parring shields, aren’t they?

Fiona: Yeah. And they were cut down from the coral trees ...

Vincent: Oh, okay.

Fiona: ... down at the Gerringong train station. That (referring to the wooden canvas) came out of an old farm cupboard. It was a drawer. But they (referring to the parring shields again) are actually done in proper ochre. Yeah. And these over here (referring to two collaged landscapes) was my father’s sister’s, Lily Kelly. And what she’s done is used paperbark. She lives on a farm, and she just collected a few things one day, and presented that to me.

Vincent: And you were telling me, before, about an interpretation (of the piece with two human silhouettes) ... Is that your interpretation, or your aunt’s? They’re lookin’ out to sea, and ...

Fiona: That’s hers. And all these materials are from Urunga. They’re not from down here. And that there is really important ... just to let people know that the artwork that comes in and out of communities isn’t always picked up from those places.

Vincent: What’s the actual story, again? These two people are sitting there, looking out to sea ...

Fiona: That’s her and my father, and ... what she told me was ... they’re looking at the invasion. They were watching the invasion. And that one there (referring to the other collaged landscape, which has shellwork on the frame) are the two black ducks.

Vincent: It’s really nice. I’d like to meet your aunty.

Fiona: Yeah. She’s very wise.

Vincent: And the frame?

Fiona: The frame was just an old photo frame that was being thrown out, so she decided to wipe it down and shell it ... not realising it’s an old antique frame, I think! (laughs)

Vincent: Oh really? Oh well. It probably looks better now anyway. (laughs)
Fiona: These here (referring to some woven pieces) was from Kelly [Ryan’s] workshop in Gerringong. Kelly runs a TAFE studio for Koorie ... young and old ... that wanna go down and get knowledged on artefacts and Aboriginal art. She’s really in touch with a lot of the youth ‘cause she runs a TAFE class. And they share stories. And because she’s a young person at heart ... well, she’s young anyway ... but they all love her, because she’s vibrant and happy. She’s on a journey. Some people, when they get to Kelly, don’t get what they expect, because you hear some stories about that place ...

Vincent: Yeah. She’s always enthusiastic.

Fiona: Yeah. She’s fun-loving. And if she can be happy-go-lucky with us, everything falls into place. That there (referring to a boomerang) was a boomerang used many, many years ago. It’s one of my old uncles’, I’m not sure which one. But they did use that.

Vincent: Did they do the [designs on it]?

Fiona: Yeah. They carved it in.

Vincent: Did they do the [designs on it]?

Fiona: No. They carved it in. Then they got charcoal, and rubbed the charcoal on it.

Vincent: Okay. I know the Timbereys do that traditional burning technique. But that’s carved?

Fiona: Yeah. Same as with the [designs on the] parring shields ... they’re not burnt in.

Vincent: Okay. Well, thanks very much. Can I take photos of these?

Fiona: Yeah.
**A1.108: Interview with Tess Allas (11.05.11)**

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

Amendments to this transcript were made by the interviewee.

*As a freelance curator and then as a cultural advisor for Wollongong City Council, Tess Allas played a pivotal role in bringing south coast Aboriginal art into the public consciousness in the 1990s. She has researched and written extensively about contemporary Aboriginal art in urban and regional areas, and currently lectures at COFA. Tess is of Wiradjuri descent.***

This interview took place at Tess’s COFA office.

Vincent: If you can just tell me a bit about yourself, where you were born and raised ...

Tess: Okay. I was born in Wollongong, at Wollongong Hospital. I was raised in Wollongong, and did my university at Wollongong, in Creative Arts. And then moved to Sydney in 1999 when my car got written off. It was in an accident, and I was working at Casula Powerhouse ... so it was really difficult to get to Casula from Wollongong by public transport. So I moved to Sydney in 1999, and have been here ever since.

Vincent: So did you always work with Aboriginal art from your time in Creative Arts onwards?

Tess: No. I did Theatre as my major, and worked at Theatre South in my first year out. I was there for a couple of years, and it was heaps fun. It was about ‘92 I started looking at visual arts for a career as ... I just got interested in what was going on and what was not going on. That’s when I started working at TAFE, and then worked at the World’s Indigenous Peoples’ Conference in 1993, and put on exhibitions around town ... Just little things, and ... yeah, that’s basically where I started.

Vincent: So when you say you put on exhibitions, do you mean as a curator ...?

Tess: Arr, yeah ... to use that term loosely, yes, a curator ... more like a Coordinator.

Vincent: Well, one of my questions was: has the role of the curator changed over the years?

Tess: For me, definitely. They were calling me a curator then, but when I look back I think ‘coordinator’. ‘Cause I had no rationale, no theory behind what I was doing or the exhibitions I was putting on. I was just basically just showcasing what was there. We were doing a lot of catch-up work in Wollongong in the early ‘90s.

Vincent: So this was Aboriginal and non-...?

Tess: No, just Aboriginal art. Non-Aboriginal art had a very well-established system already.

Vincent: It seems to me that Pallingjang was a major turning point ... but when do you think South Coast Aboriginal art was first ‘seen’?

Tess: Oh, it’s always been seen, but it depends whether you pay attention or not. But when it was first put into the ‘white cube’, so to speak ... the gallery ...

Vincent: The gallery, yeah ... I suppose that’s what I mean.

Tess: Yeah. It was before Pallingjang. I did an exhibition called Unjustified in 1995 at Project Contemporary Art Space. It was the second exhibition they ever had there, and it was like a survey of what was out there. I just wanted to find who was out there, who was doing what, and what they were doing in terms of visual arts. So I put together a proposal to ... oh, who was it then? ... Lisa Havilah and Glenn Barkley who owned Project Contemporary Art Space ... that was their baby. And they accepted the proposal. I found funding and I put it on. At the same time as the opening night of my exhibition, Wollongong Art Gallery had a regional galleries conference. This conference travelled around from gallery to gallery, from region to region. That particular year Wollongong Gallery were the hosts. So they all came ... all the people and gallery directors, and whoever was at that conference, came to that Project show which was called Unjustified. Out of that, Wollongong Art Gallery purchased a whole heap of work. It was like they’d brought their shopping trolley. It wasn’t as cut and dry as, ‘Oh, here’s the art. Now we know where it is. Let’s buy it.’ Unjustified was in response to not being able to get access to Wollongong Art Gallery with the kind of work I wanted to show. There was a lot of bad feelings between what I was doing ... or between me and what was happening at the [Wollongong City] Gallery. So we put it on at Project, and they couldn’t believe what they saw. They came and bought a whole heap of work ... maybe about ten pieces, I can’t remember now ... but up to about ten pieces for their permanent collection.

Vincent: So had you approached Wollongong City Gallery, beforehand ...

Tess: Yes.
Vincent: ... to try and do something like that?
Tess: Yes.
Vincent: And they said, “Not enough interest”? “Not interested”?
Tess: I was actually told, “There is no such thing as South Coast Aboriginal art”.
Vincent: Right ... okay. So who did you find for that first exhibition, Unjustified?
Tess: Kevin Butler; Vic Chapman; Milton Budge – who was passing through town at the time; um ... the Timbery family; um ... Rodney Weatherall; Leanne Morris; the Coomaditchie ladies; um ... aww ... there was a CDEP [Community Development Employment Programme] and some of their work; Val (then Law, now) West. Yeah ... that was about it, I think.
Vincent: So, apart from the Wollongong Gallery staff ...
Tess: It wasn’t the staff per se.
Vincent: But apart from those people, what was the reception like from the public?
Tess: It was amazing. Even the [Wollongong City] Gallery was amazed by what we put on. They hadn’t seen it before. [An exhibition like that] had never happened before, to the best of my knowledge. So everyone was knocked out by it. The Gallery went and bought a whole heap of work; and as I said before, it’s now in their permanent collection. Kevin Butler’s work, Assimilation, then became the poster for the Human Rights National Enquiry into the Forced Removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children ... they took that image for their poster, which is fantastic. It was great for Kevin. And it was so nice to see work of local people on the walls of a local gallery. It was really good to finally see that.
Vincent: I wanted to ask you about Kevin Butler ... Because I’ve been asking people what they feel characterises south coast art. Now, I know in some ways that’s a really silly question, because you can’t just sum up such a large and differing community and culture in a few words. But out of all the artists, Kevin Butler’s seems to be the most political. When I started to learn about Aboriginal art, and we’d hear about all the big names in contemporary Aboriginal art from the eastern seaboard ... you know, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee, Fiona Foley ... they’re very political and sometimes very angry works. South coast art, apart from Kevin Butler, seems quite ... not apolitical, because the very reemphasising of your identity is a political act, which is what is in the art. But there is a quietness to the south coast art. Do you find that?
Tess: Yeah. But I don’t think Kevin Butler’s work is political, except for that one year. In that one or two year period, his work was responding to contemporary political events, and to what had happened to him. But since then, I don’t think his work’s very political at all. I think it’s all very dreamy and pretty and ... you know, good for the kids’ murals at school. I would never ever put Kevin Butler in the same basket as Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell and Fiona Fiona Foley, or Gordon Hookey. No way. He doesn’t have that kind of academy behind him. He used to. It was great. I loved his political work. But yes, it’s all more Dreaming stories dominated, or environmental dominated imagery that the south coast artists do. So, “This is my beach; this is where I was born; these are the trees in my area;”. Or Dreaming stories ... like Ben Brown with his cockatoo stories of Nowra. And he used to do cultural memory stories – he’s now passed – and family memory stories, which was probably more political than what Kevin is doing now.
Vincent: Okay. ‘Cause that’s what I would say [characterises south coast art] ... I mean, you’ve mentioned the environment and Dreamtime stories ... But also it’s about memory and, in a way, there’s some nostalgia there as well.
Tess: Yeah.
Vincent: For me, if you were going to attempt to try and sum it up, that, I suppose, is how I would do it.
Tess: Yeah.
Vincent: Do you have a theory as to why, despite the horrendous things that have happened on the south coast, there isn’t more anger in the artwork?
Tess: Well, it is there ... And this is not just a south coast question ...
Vincent: No, of course not.
Tess: ... Yeah ... I’ve seen it all over the country. I think those who go to art school and do art history and look at their working relationship to Australian history and art history are far more edgier and have more of a considered approach to what they want to talk about, and it’s more holistic. Those who haven’t gone to art school ... sometimes they don’t even know their own history. They know they’re Aboriginal, they know that this is what a painting can look like, they’re commissioned by councils and schools and all sorts of people to do those pretty murals things about Dreaming histories and ‘long, long time ago’ histories, but nothing about contemporary stuff or the hidden histories like the kind Fiona Foley tries to expose.
Vincent: Well, I’ve recently been reading a lot of articles about public art. To be honest, most of them are American. There seems to be more written there about public art and the impact it can have – not only as the object itself but [the impact it can have] if it’s actually community engaged. Do you think what could have been quite an edgy format, in regards to public art in Wollongong, has lost [that potential] …?

Tess: I don’t think there’s any public art in Wollongong that’s edgy.

Vincent: No?

Tess: I can’t think of any.

Vincent: What I’m arguing in my thesis is that the act, irrespective of what these public artworks are about, injects an Aboriginal presence back into a landscape where that presence has been denied for so many years.

Tess: And therefore that’s an act of politics, definitely.

Vincent: But perhaps, as you’ve said, whether it’s the council or a school commissioning these artworks, perhaps they’ve got into a rut with the nice dreamy ...  

Tess: Yeah. And I think in the days we were doing the [Gurangatzy] fountain, and the Yaroma mosaic out at Figtree, it was an awful lot of catch-up. But I don’t think Wollongong has caught up yet with what’s going on in the rest of the contemporary art world – in public art. There’s amazing things going on wherever you see people like Fiona Foley being commissioned. I don’t know if you’ve been down to Redfern Park to see her work there, or up at Bundaberg, to see her work up there, where she talks about blackbirding[37]. All sorts of amazing things. I don’t think Wollongong has caught up yet, or grown up enough yet, maybe ... I’m not sure. They had to do a lot of catch-up to say there is an Aboriginal presence there, there always has been an Aboriginal presence there, and we’ll put those Dreaming stories into public art to prove it. That’s great, that’s fantastic, there’s Yaroma at Figtree and the Gurangatzy Fountain – fantastic ... Now what?

Vincent: You feel they need to go further?

Tess: I think so. If you go and have a look at the work of Fiona Foley and what she’s been doing ... it’s amazing, it’s incredibly edgy, and it exposes an uncomfortable history that the powers that be don’t want exposed. Once it is exposed, it’s there, you can’t take it away. So it’s an educational tool as well as an object of beauty.

Vincent: ‘Cause sometimes I get the impression that – and once again, it’s hard to sum up who you’re talking about, whether you’re talking about the art community, and who is the art community? And how much of the non-art community sees art, and all that – but the impression I get sometimes is that it’s so great that over the last thirty, forty years, Aboriginal art has such an impact, to see Aboriginal culture finally. But sometimes I get the impression that people who are still disdainful of Aboriginal culture are like, “Okay, you’ve got your voice. We’ve heard your voice, it’s in the gallery.” And that’s where they sort-of want it to end. They want to acknowledge that the culture is there, but they don’t want ...

Tess: Yeah. As long as it’s that nice pretty dot-dot stuff. And when you talk about the last thirty or forty years you’re talking about an art movement from a particular area. You’re not talking about what’s happened in Tasmania or Perth. You’re talking about what happened in Papunya, really, because that’s the international image we have as a nation, not just as a community of Aboriginal artists, but as a nation. That’s it. And of course now the Top End stuff with the barks and the poles, and all those sorts of objects ... they’re identified as Australian, and they’re identified as Aboriginal. But that’s just another tiny, tiny area. It’s not the be-all and the end-all.

Vincent: Your mother’s Barbara Nicholson, isn’t she?

Tess: Yeah.

Vincent: I remember I was talking with her about ... I got really obsessed with local rock art last year, and I went to see a lot of sites. And the fact that we have more art here, apparently, than in Kakadu ... she was saying that that’s an indication that people are still unwilling to accept this area as Aboriginal land, and that Aboriginal culture is [seen as] something from up North. The Aboriginal culture and the visual imagery there – whether it’s the rock art or the bark paintings – is celebrated as iconic of Australia. But here, it’s not.

Tess: Yeah, well, the rock art mob, the dot-dot painters, cross hatching bark painters ... they’re all from the far, far away people. They’re the exotic ‘other’. You don’t have to look at them, you don’t have to live next door to them. You can go visit them and they can tell you amazing stories about their Country, and it’s fantastic. And then you can put that back in the Northern Territory box, get back on your plane and come home ...

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[37] Tess: It’s a term used to describe the act of taking Islander men and women to work in the sugar industry in northern Queensland in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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Vincent: To Sydney, which is full of ...

Tess: Rock art! It’s right in front of you. The other thing is ... I don’t think a lot of people know that there is amazing rock art out there ... Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. And the people who own the land, like the Water Board, don’t want them to know, as far as I’m concerned. They have it locked up.

Vincent: Yeah. Their reasoning, I think, is “if you don’t tell anyone about it, it’s protected”.

Tess: That’s true. But why can’t people know about it? Look at what Kakadu has generated: billions of dollars coming all the time from all around the world. Just go and look at it. Imagine that. You’d be able to shut down the [Wollongong] Steel Works, wouldn’t you? (laughs)

Vincent: (laughs) I don’t think they want to do that.

Tess: I just don’t think that argument holds up. I mean, they’re protecting it from the people who are culturally charged with the responsibility to protect it. So who the hell do they think they are?

Vincent: I didn’t know about any of it until I started this project, which is probably why I became so obsessed with it, because it’s on my doorstep, and I had never been told about it.

Tess: It’s embarrassing, not knowing about it. And Aboriginal people who don’t know about their own heritage – it’s embarrassing for them. And they’d be ashamed, I’m sure, if they found out about it and didn’t know anything about it. It’s embarrassing. And people like the Water Board, or whoever owns the land ... ethically, I just don’t think they have the right to keep it from the people who have the right to protect it themselves, in whatever form they want to take. I think it’d be amazing to have it exposed, and have people come through and look at it.

Vincent: Well, the whole “if you don’t know about, it’s protected” argument, is erroneous anyway, ‘cause quite isolated sites get vandalised. So [it would be better to] educate people about it in the hope they’d appreciate it more.

Tess: Yeah. You get vandalism everywhere. When it’s an attack on something like a rock carving ... definitely that vandalism has its anchor in racism. But you can deal with it. You can deal with it. The Aboriginal people down at Mungo ... they know where Mungo man and Mungo woman and now Mungo baby’s buried. They just haven’t told anybody. Nobody knows where they are apart from that small community, and they protect that burial site very well. It’s good. It’s a good thing. Why can’t they? I don’t want to go and see a burial site. They don’t want people to come and see a burial site. But the rock art up along that [Illawarra] escarpment, there ... imagine if we were allowed to see it, and how proud we’d be as a community of people.

Vincent: Definitely. I mean, as a non-Aboriginal person I’d be proud. And I keep telling people I think that’s why I’ve become so interested in south coast culture because I feel really cheated that I wasn’t taught about this stuff.

Tess: Yeah. Well, I teach a class in contemporary Aboriginal art, and every single one of my students feels robbed. ‘Cause every single art piece that we look at has a history, a denied story that we weren’t told, whether it’s political or whatever. And then we unpack it and expose it, and they all say, “Man, why didn’t I learn this in highschool? I even took a class in Aboriginal Studies in high school.” So there’s a lot to undo.

Vincent: Going back to Wollongong ...

Tess: Yep.

Vincent: When did you get employed by Wollongong Council?

Tess: Hmm ... ’95, I think ... late ’94? After I came back from Canada.

Vincent: And what was your role, essentially?

Tess: Aboriginal Cultural Development Officer. It means ... ‘find funding and do stuff’, which is what I did.

Vincent: So were they quite liberal with what they expected?

Tess: We had no idea what the role would be. That’s the kind of job I like – inventing as I go along.

Vincent: And so when you were in that role, what did we see?

Tess: Public art?

Vincent: Yeah. The Yaroma?

Tess: The Guranguty [Water Place] and the Yaroma [mosaic], yeah.
Vincent: And were you involved in any of the Pallingjang exhibitions?

Tess: The first Pallingjang.

Vincent: And what was the reception like for those two public works?

Tess: Yeah, great. I just wish Wollongong Council would look after them. ‘Cause the Yaroma one, I went and saw about a year ago, and I was incredibly distressed. They just need to do weeding, basically, and sweep up the bottles and broken glass.

Vincent: I went to see it around the same time as you, actually, and I was disappointed. But I was pleasantly surprised that the artwork itself hasn’t been vandalised. Someone’s actually drawn a circumcision line on the Yaroma, but apart from that, despite all the bottles lying around, none of the actual mosaic was smashed. But there’s been some other public art done recently ... like the one up at Mount Keira ...

Tess: Oh, the Alison Page one, yeah.

Vincent: Yeah. That’s quite interesting. It’s very different to all the other public art in Wollongong.

Tess: Well, she’s art school trained as well.

Vincent: I actually tutor in Art History and Theory at Wollongong Uni, and one of the ladies in my class decided to look at the Coomaditchie artists for a project. And down at Belmore Basin there’s at least three art works that are either totally authored by the Coomaditchie artists or co-authored by them. And when she had the pictures up [on the screen, during her talk], the students were like, “We’ve been there heaps of times and we’ve never really noticed those works”.

Tess: Yeah. It’s like the mosaics by Lorraine and Narelle down at Shellharbour Pool. They’re beautiful, they’re pretty, they’re tactile ... you have to touch them if you see them, if you notice them. But they are definitely wallpaper.

Vincent: Hmm ... okay. So tell me a bit about the Storylines project and how that began.

Tess: Well, Vivian Johnson put in for an ARC grant to map historically – and what’s happening now – this side of the frontier ... Well, we’ve called the application ‘This Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Art in Settled Australia’, and it was below the Rowley Line. Charles Rowley drew this line across [the map of] Australia. He named all the land above the line, ‘Colonial’, and ‘Settled’ on the southern side of the line. That’s how he defined two Aboriginal people. And so we know very well about above the Rowley Line – Aboriginal artists and art centres, and, you know ... you just talked about it. But we don’t know what’s going on here. So we did biographies. We married it up with the Design and Art Australia Online [DAAO] website, and wrote biographies of every artist that we came across. We published them on the online dictionary and then drew the stats out of that – like, what was happening.

Vincent: It must have been a huge undertaking.

Tess: It was. It was massive. But there’s no way it’s anywhere near finished, although the project’s finished. But what we found [south of the Rowley Line] was ... if you are art school trained – an individual artist working on your own – you’ve got a really good chance of being a collected artist and an artist in demand. If you’re non-art school trained and working in your traditional medium, doing traditional stuff – like all the ladies along the Murray River, with their weaving and carving – you’ve got Buckley’s [chance] of having anyone pay attention to you, seriously. The absolute reverse is true for Aboriginal artists north of the Rowley line. If you have no art school training and you’re doing your Dreaming stories in a medium that’s accepted as domestic and pretty, you’ll get an Amazon’s worth of books written about you.

Vincent: Obviously, I believe you, but I find that strange what you said about the ladies along the Murray River, especially with the high profile that weavers such as ... (struggles to think of name)

Tess: See, she hasn’t got that high a profile, has she? Yvonne Koolmatrie. But what has she done since the Venice Biennale that anyone has seriously paid attention to? That was in 1997.

Vincent: I still keep hearing her name all the time.

Tess: Yeah, but she’s one artist. They’ll let one through. There’s always an exception to the rule. Always they’ll let one through. How many Aboriginal artists from the central desert are hanging in the Art Gallery of New South Wales? And how many weavers from the east coast of Australia are hanging in the Art Gallery of New South Wales? The exception to the rule of the art school trained people from the east coast is Richard Bell. He’s not art school trained.
Vincent: Yeah. I know that a group of artists from the south coast went up to the Art Gallery of New South Wales – it was probably about a year ago, now – and they were really disappointed that they just weren’t represented there at all.

Tess: Which exhibition was that? “Art + Soul”?

Vincent: I can’t remember. I think they just went to see what was on the walls at the time, and what was in the storerooms.

Tess: Yeah, no, south coast art is ... gee, I’m trying to think what is from the south coast that is now in the collection ... I don’t think anything, quite frankly. But I think artists need to lift their game. Just because they’re Aboriginal, and just because they pick up a paintbrush, doesn’t mean to say they’re good. There’s a lot of really bad Aboriginal art out there. I’m the expert on it, I can tell you where it all is. But at the same time, I don’t think there’s been any exploration of what’s going on out there – not very much coming from ‘the big house’. But the Art Gallery of New South Wales is there to display and promote excellence. And once an Aboriginal artist – from anywhere – clicks into that, and wants to still be part of that collection, then they should investigate. There is of course excellent artists, but are they producing excellent work? I don’t know. I’m not an apologist for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, by any stretch. I have many, many problems with them. But if I was to pick an artist from the south coast who should be in the Gallery, right now, I don’t know who I’d choose.

Vincent: So aesthetics are still important?

Tess: Of course. And also: What have you got to say? Maybe some of the Boolang Nangamai artists, now, could be in the collection. Their work is becoming incredibly interesting.

Vincent: I’ve never actually met her, and I think I’ve only ever seen one of her works ‘in the flesh’ ... but I really like Georgina Parsons’ work. She’s from the far south coast.

Tess: I haven’t met her, either. I’m not familiar with her work, not really. I think I might have seen one or two in Pallingjang.

Vincent: Well, I also wanted to ask you about TAFE. I mean, you’ve talked about tertiary institutions, in the sense that you said artists from ‘settled’ Australia that have an arts background are more likely to do well. A lot of the south coast artists I’ve met didn’t finish school but have gone on to do TAFE. Do you think – learning Aboriginal art as Aboriginal people – there’s a danger of the culture being institutionalised?

Tess: Oh, I don’t call that actual culture, at TAFE ... not what I’ve seen. My biggest beef is TAFE and what they’re teaching. I don’t think they’re teaching them anything of real artistic value that can be used successfully in the art world. When I say ‘art school trained artists’, I always think ‘university’, even though TAFE should be where a lot of people end up, because; if you drop out of high school, TAFE is easier to get into ... That’s where art history and theory, as well as how to mix paints and things [should be taught]. I know artists who have gone through TAFE and still come out not knowing how to mix paints. So, what are they teaching them? They’re just opening a book of Clifford Possum, and saying, “Look at that. That’s Aborigine art. On you go.” That’s not all TAFE's - I know some are making a concerted effort to change. But overly, because of my travels, that’s what I’ve noticed. To me, that’s institutionalised racism – letting them off, not challenging them, not showing them their place in art history, not showing them their place in Aboriginal art history, not doing anything. It’s lazy teaching, and it’s racist.

Vincent: I just always thought it was ... funny – for lack of a better word – that Aboriginal people were going to TAFE to do learn how to paint ‘Aboriginal’ art.

Tess: You see, the good thing about places like that is that it’s a gathering of Aboriginal people. And someone will say, “No, no, no, we never did it like this. We did it like that ... my grandmother once taught me.” If you’re not going to a place once a week to learn whatever the teacher’s telling you, you’re not going to hear what Aunty on the other side of the room has to offer. So it’s more than a non-Aboriginal teacher teaching them about Aboriginal art – because, I mean, they’re not ... and they can be. There’s so much to draw from out there now.

Vincent: Well, I know that’s how all the Boolang Nangamai members met – at TAFE.

Tess: Yeah, through Kelli [Ryan].

Vincent: And they’ve all got such diverse styles.

Tess: Well, they’re doing really well. Good on them. They’re – again – an exception to the rule.

Vincent: In your research with the Storylines project did you find that people didn’t consider themselves artists and thought it strange you wanted to talk to them about their work?

Tess: Yeah. They were, “Oh, no, I’m not like that.” – that was more the elderly ones – “No, I’m not an artist. I’m just looking after my grandkids, and putting work in shows every couple of months.”

Vincent: There’s not that encouragement for them out there, is there?
Tess: Ah, within their community they’re known as artists. People in the community are the ones that alerted me to them. So if they’re being put in local shows, and that’s all they want to do, they’ve fulfilled their goal. Good on them.

Vincent: Okay, cool. I think we’ve discussed pretty much everything I wanted to touch on, except ... I didn’t ask you one of the most basic questions I’ve asked most interviewees: do you identify with a specific language group or Country?

Tess: Aww ... not really.

Vincent: I know your mother identifies as Wodi Wodi.

Tess: We’re Wiradjuri heritage ... but it’s not where she was born and raised. All that diaspora ... those forced removals ...

Vincent: I’ve found the whole language group thing quite a controversial issue amongst different people ...

Tess: It can be. Especially in places where, historically, there’s been a lot of transient activity ... and people get lost along the way. It’s really quite difficult. What I did when I asked the question, and when we put it up on the dictionary, where they were from or what their language group was – some were so adamant it was spelt a particular way, and the next one was saying, “Well, no, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about ... it’s spelt this way,” – so what we did, we put it up as the artist wrote it, and then we put a note of every other known spelling of that language group. And I even had a friendly argument between two artists who are friends, who are like kangaroo cousins – it was Gordon Hookey and Vernon Ah Kee – on how you spell Waanji ... the language group, Waanji. One says it’s definitely ‘Waani’ and the other declares it to be ‘Waanyi’. And they’re both adamant that they’re right. And they’re both in the artists group proppaNOW, and they both have heritage [connected] to Waanji/Waanyi Country.

Vincent: But how can there be a proper way of spelling it, if it was [traditionally] an oral culture?

Tess: Good question.

Vincent: I was talking to a lady at La Perouse who was adamant that ‘Dharawal’ was a recent construction – that previously there was no such language, and people didn’t identify as it. At some stage I thought I might have to have some sort of note at the beginning [of my thesis] ...

Tess: Yeah, you will ...

Vincent: ... saying I appreciate everyone’s opinion, but that there are a lot of differing views on these issues.

Tess: All along the coast, you know ... with the moving in and out of people, and the shuffling around ... and then that time – I suppose, a hundred years ago ‘til about thirty/fifty years ago – when it was shameful to be Aboriginal, and you’d try to hide your children from the fact that they had Aboriginal heritage ... all the important information got lost. So, people now claim – like my mother – where they were born and raised [as their heritage], rather than the bloodline. And all that denied heritage that my mother’s generation grew up with ... there’s an awful lot of lost information.

Vincent: Do you find that people can be ostracised because of that ...?

Tess: Good question.

Vincent: I was talking to a lady at La Perouse who was adamant that ‘Dharawal’ was a recent construction – that previously there was no such language, and people didn’t identify as it. At some stage I thought I might have to have some sort of note at the beginning [of my thesis] ...

Tess: Yeah, will ...

Vincent: ... saying I appreciate everyone’s opinion, but that there are a lot of differing views on these issues.

Tess: All along the coast, you know ... with the moving in and out of people, and the shuffling around ... and then that time – I suppose, a hundred years ago ‘til about thirty/fifty years ago – when it was shameful to be Aboriginal, and you’d try to hide your children from the fact that they had Aboriginal heritage ... all the important information got lost. So, people now claim – like my mother – where they were born and raised [as their heritage], rather than the bloodline. And all that denied heritage that my mother’s generation grew up with ... there’s an awful lot of lost information.

Vincent: Do you find that people can be ostracised because of that ...?

Tess: Yes.

Vincent: ... amongst Aboriginal people who think, “I know where the bloodlines are, and you’re not part of that”? 

Tess: Yeah, definitely. Definitely ... unless you say you’re stolen. If you’re stolen, that’s okay. That’s the cool one. Everyone knows about it because of the Enquiry. But if you just say [you’re heritage was] denied ... “Yeah, well, fuck off then”.

Vincent: The whole ‘sins of the father’ thing ...

Tess: Yeah ... human nature.

Vincent: And you lecture at COFA now?

Tess: Yeah.

Vincent: How long have you been at COFA?

Tess: Since I started the Storylines project in 2006.

Vincent: Do you lecture about that research, or all different things?

Tess: Well, it’s all anchored into each other, I suppose ... my knowledge of what’s out there. The core that I teach talks about contemporary art from around the mid-70s to what’s happening today. So, I talk about Ron Hurley, Lin Onus, Robert Campbell
Jnr, Trevor Nickolls. So, I start with those artists, and then we go through what happened at Boomalli; major, historically important exhibitions around the country, you know ... kinda like movements [in themselves]; and then I talk about different artists ... I start going into the artists who I think have got something to say, like – this year we had a class on Fiona Foley; last week it was Gordon Hookey; we’ve had Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee come and talk ... 

Vincent: Did they scare the students? (laughs)

Tess: Ah, well, Vernon scared some by being very softly spoken. He’ll say something very softly, but it has [real resonance]. When Richard says it, he’ll just call it, and call them all ‘motherfuckers’.

Vincent: (laughs) His character proceeds him.

Tess: Well, I didn’t know Richard was going to be coming to see the students until the night before. He rang me and said could I pick him up from the airport. So then I come into class the next day and say, “Richard Bell’s just outside, waiting to come in”, and they all went (gasps) “Arrgh!” (Tess laughs) And I said, “Look, please ask him questions, because he’s not as scary as you think he is. He is prepared to have a debate, and if you’re right he’ll change his opinion. He’s always open for that.” So they started asking questions, and it was really good. But you have to do the groundwork. Vernon shocked them because he was quiet, you know ... softly spoken, almost sweet in his nature, but then he’d say exactly the same things Richard was saying, and you could almost see [the students] physically reeling away. And Fiona – a different beast again – but she was more prepared, academically. Richard and Vernon, they just come in and talk; Fiona has things prepared.

Vincent: Yeah. Okay ... was there anything you’d like to bring up that we haven’t already discussed?

Tess: I can’t remember ... I had other things I wanted to tell you ... But maybe this is just the beginning of a conversation ...

Vincent: Sure. Oh, actually ... corrective histories. There was a bit of a to-do at the Wollongong Art Gallery recently ...

Tess: Arr ... Paul Ryan.

Vincent: Yeah. What’s your opinion about all that?

Tess: He can paint what he friggin’ well likes. I’m not a fan of Paul Ryan ... never have been, never will be. But I don’t care. Why can’t he paint it? With history ... he can paint whatever he likes. Aboriginal history from the point of contact ... there’s two histories. Why can’t a non-Aboriginal person talk about it as well?

Vincent: For all the faults there might have been with the exhibition ... he was trying to say that real injustices had been done against Aboriginal people. So ...

Tess: Yeah.

Vincent: ... I found it strange that people kicked up a stink about it.

Tess: People kick up a stink when they know nothing about the subject. Their arguments were baseless. And I also listened to the BBC interview that went to air in London – I’ve listened to it in full-length because I’ve got a contact at ABC who let me listen to it – and there was a lot of homophobia, definite homophobia, wrapped up in that hysteria. I think that’s what the foundation of that was, and it made me sick to my stomach. And I thought – we shouldn’t even be giving them any air time at all, and the Gallery should just tell them to piss off, ‘cause they’re hysterical, homophobic idiots, who know nothing about art, art history, and history, and the rights of an artist.

Vincent: And from what I hear, I think [the Gallery] went to great lengths to contact people in the Aboriginal community, and get their opinion, or permission – or whatever you want to call it – before [that exhibition] opened ... and they really got no interest. It was only when all the pictures went up, and they opened the doors, that people started complaining ...

Tess: Yeah, and I think it’s based in homophobia more than anything else. Everybody has the right to paint whatever they bloody well like. If you’re a non-Aboriginal Australian in this country, and you’re an artist, and you want to talk about contact time, you have every right to. Why can’t you? It’s shared history. It’s ... yeah ... a storm in a tea cup.

Vincent: Okay, I was just wondering whether [you feel] corrective histories are the reserve of ... minorities.

Tess: No. I think, like Fiona Foley – she has this theory, and it’s the same as mine – that it’s a shared history. Everybody has the right to discuss it. And why would it always have to be the onus of the Aboriginal artist to raise the issue? One of my ex-students is writing a paper on the Palm Island death and riot, and the artistic response. And the only artistic response that we can find is Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell, and Vernon Ah Kee. And I keep telling her, “The question you have to ask in your essay is – why aren’t non-Aboriginal artists discussing this?” It happened in our time, and nobody’s upset enough to write about it or do anything about it unless they’re Aboriginal. Why is that so? Why is it only the Aboriginal artist [who is responding], whether it’s historical or contemporary issues? It took two people in the watch house that day to create that event – one of them was non-Aboriginal. It makes no sense to me.
A1.I09: First interview with Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas (23.06.11)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewees.

As cultural ambassadors, contemporary artists, community advocates, and environmental activists, it would be difficult to overestimate the contribution Jerrinjah-Yuin sisters, Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas, have made to the south coast’s cultural landscape. Since beginning painting almost twenty five years ago, Lorraine and Narelle’s art has been central to the emergence of a uniquely local visual language – they are the authors or co-authors of twenty four percent (24%) of all public art surveyed in the course of this research. Their establishment of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation (CUAC) in 1993 marked a foray into contemporary land management and bush regeneration that has stabilised the health of Coomaditchie Lagoon – constantly threatened by the urban and industrial surroundings of Port Kembla – and has galvanised wider community concern for other local places of environmental and cultural importance.

Though I met Narelle for the first time in November 2009, Lorraine’s continuing poor health and hospitalisation meant a meeting – let alone an interview – with both women was never guaranteed. I am eternally grateful then for the time they were able to spare me. Huge thanks must also go to Sue Leppan, CUAC secretary, for her ongoing encouragement and guidance.

This first interview took place at Kemblawarra Community Hall near Coomaditchie Lagoon. Lorraine and Narelle were in the process of painting several large murals/panels when I sat down to speak with them.

Vincent: Can you tell me a bit about your upbringings, and whether you felt they were typical of Aboriginal people of your generation?

Lorraine: Our upbringings were pretty typical of Aboriginal people at the time because a lot of them used to do seasonal work. A lot of them never had employment at that time, so seasonal work was one of the main employments. They followed a lot of the seasonal work, especially all the coastal Koories. So, with my parents, and especially in their younger days, too, we worked all around Bega, Nowra, Bodulla. We were doing the beans and peas, turnips, whatever was available at that time of year. They did a lot of seasonal work until they could get employment. They had a bit of employment when they were younger ... Mum was in Sydney, in some of the factories and that, there, and when they got married, basically it was seasonal work until Dad could get a job.

Vincent: In that book, “Aboriginal Women’s Heritage: Wollongong”, you said it was a hard life, but at the same time you had a happy upbringing.

Lorraine: It was, yeah. It was very hard. I mean, growing up in Nowra in the winter time, we were picking peas when we weren’t at school or when we were on holidays. We’d be picking peas in the winter, so you’d be going out into paddocks with frost [in the] early hours of morning, freezin’ and pickin’. And then the paddocks are wet ‘cause of the way peas lie, so all your clothes are wet. By nine o’clock Dad would make a fire to dry us off and warm our hands and that, especially if you were working out on Pig [Burrga] Island, which is the island they’re talking about selling down at Nowra at this moment. The Kennedys are selling it ... we used to work with the Kennedys. And sometimes you got to pick in the old cornfields, so you’d pick the dry corn. All that dead corn you might see, we had to work in there. We had to husk it and throw it into a big circle. We’d work around the circle, and lay all the old corn bags down and throw all the corn into it until we got a heap of it. Then we’d have to stack it in the bags. You’d be working in dry cornfields that had spiders, snakes, whatever. It was very hard. In summer time, on the Christmas holidays, we’d always finish school a week early, and we’d go down the coast to pick on the farms down there. Our parents knew a lot of the farmers in Eurobudulla Valley, where a lot of the seasonal crops were growing. They also knew a lot of the farmers that lived around Moruya. So, on our holidays we’d meet all the kids down there that worked with their parents or lived on the farms all year round. And they’d stay there til the bean season come on in the summer time. You’d be picking them til early-late march, picking beans down the coast. But we lived near the mountains, so we had big rivers, and we used to swim a lot. When the days were too hot, you’d be out in the fog in the morning time, pickin’ in the fog. You could barely see each other in the fog in the paddocks. But you’d get up early, make your fire, have your breakfast, go to the paddock and pick. Come eleven o’clock, because a lot of the paddocks were built on the river banks ... like, a lot of the crops, the soil was sandy ... Come eleven o’clock it would be that hot that it would be burning your knees and your feet, even through the sandshoes you wore. So we’d knock off and go sit by the river for a while, and go swimming. Mum and Dad would sit, boiling billys, waiting for it to cool down. Or, if we were close to the huts, we’d go back to the huts til the afternoon. Then we’d go back out in the afternoon time and pick til late. But it was good because [while there was] no TV or nothing down there on the holidays, all the kids would sit around talking to one another, telling stories, listening to the old fellas around the campfires.

Vincent: I think it was the first time I met you, Lorraine, you were saying that kids these days don’t have some of the good things you had while you were growing up.
Lorraine: That’s what I’m saying. It was hard, but we didn’t have everything handed to us on a silver platter. We had to occupy ourselves, create our own fun and enjoyment. Plus, I think we learnt a lot more. Not just from a computer, but actually out there doing it, you know. You’d be adventurous, ‘cause there’d be plenty to do. Now, a lot of kids are stuck to computers or whatever else. I think it was better in those times.

Vincent: Are there things you feel have changed for the better in regard to your kids and grandkids? Do you think prejudice has decreased?

Lorraine: It decreased for a while, but I think it’s rearing it head again.

Vincent: Yeah?

Lorraine: I do. Yep, I really do. I mean, we cop a lot of shit of a night, people going past shouting out the most dirtiest names possible ...

Vincent: What, even now?

Lorraine: Oh, yeah, even now.

Narelle: Only the other night.

Lorraine: [Prejudice] never stopped. It only happened again the other night. You know, we’re “black dogs”, “thieves”, “dirty Abos”, you name it. Every couple of weeks, that happens. So there’s still a lot [of prejudice]. We’ve got a young nephew that went down to Bega not long ago, and an old fella said to him, “We used to hang bastards like you, and if I had my way we’d still be doing it.” That comes from an old man, only a couple of months ago. You know, I was born in Bega. So there’s still a lot of people that haven’t grown up.

Narelle: Or there’s [still] a lot of people with old ways.

Lorraine: Yes. A lot of people been brought up by old ways.

Vincent: I don’t know what to say about that ... I don’t understand what makes someone say those types of things. I mean, part of it must be upbringing, but ...

Narelle: Upbringing and small mindedness.

Lorraine: I mean, no matter how clean the mission might have looked from out front, we’re still “dirty Abos”, you know. It’s still there. A lot of our kids have got a lot of good mates here. My older boys ... When my kids went to school, they had a really good relationship with the kids in high school, and all around this area, even with the adults. It was good. But now my grandkids are going to school, they’re having a harder time than what my kids did. In other words it died for a while but now it’s coming back. The name-calling, it’s still there.

Vincent: Do you have any theories as to why [the prejudice has] come back?

Lorraine: I don’t know. I wouldn’t have a clue.

Vincent: Is it local politics, or is it a wider, nation situation?

Lorraine: I think it’s the wider community, and because people think we get so much [financial support from the government]. I think a lot of the myths are still creating [trouble]. The things people think we get, it’s amazing. Like, when I was doing my associate diploma in welfare and youth work, we had an open question afternoon after one of our presentations. And they asked was it true that we got our housing commission houses in seven days, and do we get government cars, and you know, that we get lawn mowers and everything given to us. I said, “That’s a joke.” I said, “Our kids get AbStudy the way your kids get AusStudy. And I had to wait seven or eight years before I could get a house in a housing commission.” And anything about a car, I said, “If I had a car given to me by the government I wouldn’t be catching a bus everyday with a lot of school kids every morning.” “They’re the stupid things that create a lot of hate towards Aboriginal people, because when they see it on TV they think we’re getting everything, and we’re not. We’re battling like everyone else. We’re working to get our money, no matter what sort of work it is. It’s no different to being a designer and getting your dollars for designing. Narelle and I have taken on a couple of jobs just to make ends meet, and we work here on Saturdays and Sundays, to get all these done (referring to the panels in front of her), to make sure they’re finished on time. That takes a lot of our time, but a lot of people don’t know that. They think we’re just given [money] and that we’re bludging off the welfare system, taking all their hard-earned money. So I think that causes a lot of racism, which is a pity, because people should explore things more, and learn things more, and go delving into things more, before they just take notice of other people who show racism to the Aboriginal race. It’s a pity that they think we get everything, because we don’t.
Vincent: Well, these are issues that I’m sure we’ll discuss again, but I’d like to move onto the art now. When did you and Narelle start making art?

Lorraine: [It all started with] a lady by the name of Sue Edmonds. She was known as the ‘Iron Lady’ around here. But Sue was also a part time TAFE teacher, and she was working on a book called “Noogaleek”. They come to [our] home and interviewed my Mum, ‘cause Mum was ---- ---- their life, she’d grown up round the old fella\(s\)?). So they interviewed my Mum, and that’s where Sue came in. After she went home, she said, “I just had to come back there, ‘cause I can feel the power of that house. I just had to come back and see you people.” So she starting thinking, “What can I do to break the ice again with them?” So she come out with paintbrushes and stuff like that, and all us women went out in the yard with her. She said, “Come on, let’s paint the fences,” and stuff like that. So we started painting our wooden fences. She broke the ice like that. And then we met her in another [capacity]. See, we’d both met Sue down in Nowra when we were doing the women’s program at TAFE. Sue come down there singing all women’s things, you know, so, she was a bit of a character. She wrote her own songs and sang ‘em. It was all women’s issues. And that’s why we knew her when she came [to interview Mum]. We knew that she’d taught us once [at TAFE when] she came for a visit one day. And when she ended coming back [to our place], we started painting the fences ...

Vincent: When you say ‘painting the fences’, you mean designs?

Lorraine: Yeah, kangaroos and ... We were doing Aboriginal art all over the fences. That was the first time we decided to, you know, paint. I mean, we used to draw when we were at school, but that was years ago. So Sue got us into painting. Then, when the Principal over here [at Port Kembla High school\(\ldots\)] seen the artwork, he said he had a spare wall over there. He said, “When youse are finished doing this, come over and do a mural at the school.” And he was the first Principal that broke the ice with the Aboriginal community here, ‘cause like I said, it was a big no-go area for a lot of people. A lot of people didn’t like [mixing with us], a lot of people were afraid of it. So we went and did a mural on the wall over there, and from that one mural it just blew out of proportion. We had people coming and asking us to do murals everywhere ... ----(\?), Kiama, Moruya, places like that. We’ve been as far as Moruya High school, doing artwork down there. But yeah, it just kept going from there. It was non-stop after that, once it hit the news, ‘cause they put it on TV and all, and in the newspapers. Then we got the job at the Youth Centre when it first became the youth centre. And the ----(\?) came rushing in, [saying] “Nobody paints [with these colours!] We don’t use these colours in public artwork!” And I said, “Oh well, bad luck. You’ll have to get used to it, ‘cause this is our colouring”.

Vincent: And you mainly work as a team, don’t you?

Lorraine: Yeah, we work as a team.

Vincent: Can you describe that process for me?

Lorraine: Well, Narelle will do all the backgrounds because she’s got more stamina than me at the moment. I’ll draw up the designs ... The book over there, Viola. (Lorraine’s granddaughter fetches the sketchbook from a nearby table. Lorraine flicks through the pages, showing me the designs). So, I’ll draw designs I thought up in my head, or I’ll slap up some chalk or texta designs from my art books. If I’m fussy about it I’ll try to put a colour scheme together. It might change as I draw, but Narelle and I will start painting it together. She might come along and do the first coat, and I’ll do the second coat. I’ll draw all this on (referring to the still visible chalk outlines of the designs on the panels in front of us), and go to Narelle, “This colour, that colour”. It might be drawn like that (showing me the original design of the work in question from her sketch book), but it will turn out [slightly] different. You might see bits and pieces of [the original design], but it will come out different. Like, the next one we’re gonna do is based on [this one] (showing me another sketch) ... so I’ll take it home and I’ll ----(\?) with ‘em, and I might put a colour scheme to it. Everything we do, we do it in the book [first], or we’ll think about it. Narelle will go, “What colour do you want this or that?” And I’ll say, “Well, you should do that green, and I want that yellow, and I want that there ...” So, Narelle will start doing all the coats. Then I’ll come along with Narelle and help, but she’s flat out with the coats. I’ll do the drawing, and I might start drawing on that one again (pointing to another nearby panel) while she’s still working on this one. Then we’ll sit down and do the dot work together. But the fine line work, I finish up, because I’ve got steady hands. I do any fine line work. I do around the edges, tidy it all up. Or any x-ray art on them, I’ll do with a fine brush. And that’s how it’s done. So the work’s done between me and my sister. It used to be three ... with my baby sister, Donna. That’s how it started off, with the three of us.

Vincent: Did you fall into that system pretty quickly?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: ‘Cause the demand for your work increased so quickly. When you look at the list of your works that Sue [Leppan] gave me, you get a couple of commissions in 1993, a couple in 1994 ... and then it’s like an avalanche!

Lorraine: Yeah, it just blew out of proportion for us.
Vincent: Is that satisfying for you, to know people are wanting to see your designs?

Lorraine: It is. It is, because we put a lot of work into it.

Narelle: And it’s passing down our knowledge and our culture.

Lorraine: Viola sold a piece the other day. She sold some artwork of her own, (turning to her granddaughter) didn’t ya? And we tell the kids to tell a story with it. All the little bits you see there (referring to some of the small canvases on the walls), they’re the kids’ art. And they’ve sold a couple of pieces, which gives them a boost. But it also keeps our artwork going, because if we don’t [keep it going], it will die out.

Narelle: [It’s] the knowledge of our symbols and signs and our culture.

Lorraine: You know, [the kids have] gotta realise that they’re east coast people. We’re not desert art people. We paint what we identify with, with what we grew up with. We was all ---- ---- ----(?) beach when we was growing up, as well as in the rivers.

Vincent: You were talking before about your kids and grandkids and how there’s big distractions these days, such as TV and computers. Do you think making art and having art around actually makes it easier to pass those stories on to them?

Lorraine: It does. As the kids get older they’ll learn to tell those stories through their art work. You know, we have TV at home, but I’ll be sitting at the table doing this [painting], and the kids will ---- ---- ----(?) where they’ll come and do art with me. I’ll give ’em a piece of paper and they’ll do an art work. Those little bits and pieces help continue the art work, and it’s continuing our east coast culture. People have gotta realise we’re not living out there in the desert, we’re here. Our people got the full brunt of [James] Cook. But it gives us pride, because we’re still hanging on to what we’ve got left, no matter what. We’re still hanging on to what we’ve got left.

Narelle: You gotta remember, we’re still learning, too, about our culture, Vince. It was taken away, it was hushed up. So we’re still learning, ourselves. We’re still learning. And we’re learning to teach our kids what we learn. And it’s handed down that way.

Vincent: Kelli Ryan has a really good saying, that “This is where the colonial bomb went off”...

Lorraine: (laughs) Yeah, that’s true.

Vincent: ... it was just so sudden and so harsh ...

Lorraine: That’s a good saying by Kells.

Vincent: So, as east coast people – and this is really for the benefit of the tape, ’cause on one level it’s so silly to ask you what is in your art, it’s sitting here all around us – but what are your subjects?

Lorraine: Well, we like doing the Dreaming stories. And in a lot of [cases], when we do art for hospitals or [similar commissions], someone says “We want you to depict the people, we want to you to depict this place ...”

Narelle: “… with your history”.

Lorraine: “… with plenty of trees and flowers, like before white man came”.

Narelle: They want the version of before concrete.

Lorraine: Yeah, so we’ll come back and think of an idea that the story tells. Like this one here (referring to the canvas in front of her and specific elements of its design) ... This is the symbol of the GP super clinic [found] on their pamphlets. [The clinic’s] just getting built now at Shell Cove. It’s not finished yet. So, we’ve got that [symbol], but it’s a place where people meet, no matter what direction they come from. So this here is the draft ... this is the colour of black, white ... whatever colour people. It’ll have all different coloured hand [stencils] on it, because the GP super clinic is used by everybody, not just one colour. So this here (referring to another symbol) is the connection between them. But you’re also building on special areas. The area the [GP super clinic is in] was ... well, it’s a place where certain things went on there. It’s within our history. Some of it wasn’t nice, but it’s still a special place for Aboriginal people. And up here (referring to another area of the design), like that one over there, even though they’re not the same art, this here is the part where the Dreaming stories of the area are, just in white, and it connects each of the panels.

Narelle: They connect all the pieces.
Lorraine: Yeah. These are all our special places. We’ve got waterholes, we’ve got midden areas ... everything is connected in that area where you got your GP super clinic. It was a campsite, it was a meeting place, it was a special area. So we’ve got it all connected through [those white Dreaming designs]. But also now as a super clinic, many people, many cultures, will be using it. This will be depicted by all your hand prints, all the coloured hands. It’s like when we did the work over there on big tiles at the Dapto Ribbonwood Centre. A Chinese boy come up to Narelle and pointed to the red hand and said, “Is that my people there?”

Narelle: It was a little yellow hand ...

Lorraine: Oh, a little yellow hand.

Narelle: Yeah, and he said, “What does that represent?” And I said, “All the different coloured and different cultured people”. And he goes, “So that hand could be my hand?” And I said, “Yeah, it could be your hand. That’s for your culture. That’s for people of your background.”

Lorraine: And that was a little boy!

Narelle: And he was ... I forget now, but he had a disability. But yeah, he recognised that was him, straight away.

Vincent: Last year, in particular, I just became obsessed with the rock art. One thing that no one can tell me is what the hand stencils mean. You use a lot of hand stencils in your work, and I was gonna ask you what [they signify to you].

Narelle: They represent the people.

Lorraine: To me, it’s ownership. Yeah, it’s ownership, to us. That’s why we [use] ‘em. It’s our culture, our tradition.

Narelle: It’s our mark.

Lorraine: Doesn’t matter where it is in Australia, the hand prints are ---- ---- ---- ----(?). No matter that we’re all different nations of Aboriginal people in one nation, it’s everywhere. It’s like a stamp of ownership to me. That’s why it’s important. And the white [clay] in Aboriginal culture ... It’s very symbolic to have white hand prints. In certain places there were certain people who were only allowed to do that, nobody else. But I like doing [hand prints] because ... we’ve lost a lot of our culture, it’s been taken away from us. But to me, we cling onto it through our art. And I love dot work ... I don’t care what [people say]. To me, it shows the colours I want to show. A lot of people say the dot work isn’t from this area, but I love the dot work. You look at [work done by] the traditional [desert] people ... A lot of those colours weren’t [used traditionally] in those areas, but they’re using them now. It’s becoming a part of life, today ...

Narelle: For us contemporaries.

Lorraine: ... yeah, for contemporary art. And who’s to say we didn’t traditionally do dot art in this area? Can anybody prove that?

Vincent: Yeah, I didn’t understand that [restriction] either. When I started to get to know the Boolarng Nangamai group, I asked them that question: Well, why can’t you use dots? You know, [if you can] use all these different colours which, traditionally, you didn’t have ... [why not use dots, also?]

Narelle: You’ve got the option of colours now. [In the old days] you only had the option of what you could make from your surroundings.

Vincent: And culture doesn’t stay the same, anyway. Culture evolves. So even if it was the case that your people, here on the east coast, didn’t use dots, well ... right here, right now, as an east coast woman, if that’s how you express your culture ...

Lorraine: Yeah, I love it.

Narelle: There’s different ways of depicting the colour of the ocean, the colour of the sky ... Dots is just one of many.

Lorraine: The thing is, also, when we work in the schools, we want [to produce] work that will attract the kids. And all those colours are in nature ...

Narelle: It doesn’t matter what you make it from, these colours are out there.

Lorraine: And it’s us.

Narelle: And if you’ve got these colours at your [fingertips] ... there you go.
Lorraine: The colour is us, you know. It’s us. We had a really good childhood. We had terrific parents ... A1 parents. (Lorraine addresses Narelle) What were we told when we first started painting?

Narelle: “Fish ain’t that colour in the ocean!”

Lorraine: And that was hot pink. And there is hot pink fish. There’s canary colour fish. Colour is us. I’ve always had colour. And my life’s been a happy life. Our father was a worker that had to work ...

Narelle: He was a workaholic.

Lorraine: ... he’d ---- ---- ----(?) for work. Or he’d end up working in the paper mill. He worked on the Avon Dam ... he’d stay in the caravan park and Mum would come up in the steam train to see him. So Dad always worked. He always worked, but he always put time [aside for] his kids. So, on the weekends ... like when they were putting the new roads in out at Jervis Bay ... he’d take us out to Green Patch. We’d sit there all day, Mum and us kids, and wait for Dad to finish in the afternoon. Weekends was Mum and the kids time. So we had a good childhood, and I think that comes out in our colours. ‘Cause our parents were A1 parents, ---- ---- ----(?) being stolen. We weren’t brought up in a violent [environment], and we were sheltered from that. When I did see it [eventually], I was in sixth grade ... Violence with parents, fighting and drinking. Our mother and father didn’t do that. So it was very hard thing to see at that age.

Vincent: You say in ... I think it’s the article I mentioned earlier ... that you used to go somewhere and have lunch with kids who were stolen generation, but at the time you didn’t know that. How aware were you of those things happening?

Lorraine: We weren’t really aware of it at all, because our parents kept it away from us. Our grandmother used to hide our parents. When the welfare would come, she’d have a billygoat with a little cart, and she’d put the kids on it and she’d start walking so they couldn’t find her and her kids. Our grandmother was born at Wallaga Lake. But [child removal] was something [our parents] kept away from us all the time. And yet we were brought up near the Inasmuch Children’s Home at Falls Creek, on the other side of Nowra. Then Mum and Dad got a housing commission house in Bomaderry, ‘cause it was close to the paper mill, for Dad. We moved in there. Our grandmother owned an eighty acre property at Falls Creek. And then we moved off there, and we moved to Bomaderry when mum and dad got a four bedroom house.

Vincent: I’m not being racist, but that sounds highly unusual for the time – an Aboriginal woman owning a large piece of land.

Lorraine: It’s because our grandmother was a slave. The bloke who bought her ended up marrying her. And he was a big carpenter ... Narelle: The house is still standing down there today.

Lorraine: And he built the Terara School on Terara Road in Nowra. So, yeah, that’s why she had [the property]. So she was very lucky, wasn’t she?

Vincent: Yeah. You’ve probably been asked this question a million times, but tell me the significance of the Coomaditchie area.

Lorraine: Well, we come here when ----(?) was here, when he was still a little fella. He was ---- ---- Kempsey(?) down here. His father’s mob used to live over in the sand hills. Well, a lot of the Browns are right down the coast, actually, ‘cause his mob runs into(?) our mob, as well. But he used to live in the sand hills when they lived in the tin shack on the side of the lagoon, over here. We came here in the ‘70s. Me and Narelle, we’ve been here since the ‘70s. But I was about seventeen then. And we’ve just lived off Coomaditchie [ever since].

Vincent: But also in regard to Aboriginal [heritage] in general, what’s the significance of Coomaditchie?

Lorraine: Well, they used to live on Hill 60, but they took ‘em off there. The Wodi Wodi tribe used to fish over there. They were all fishermen, you know, and that was one of their main areas. I think they they took ‘em off [during] the [Second World] War ...

Vincent: When they built that [bunker]?

Lorraine: Yeah, but they had a gold course there, too. It used to be the golf course.

Vincent: On Hill 60?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: God.
Lorraine: Yep. But they took [the Aboriginal people] off and moved ‘em over to the sand hills, and they lived from [where] the surf club [currently is], right down to here. And there used to be another big swamp over the back, where they got it all filled in over there. It used to be a really big water area, a big swamp area. But [the area is] very significant to the Aboriginal people, as well as this [hall] here, because it’s [where] the fight [for people's] rights [began, locally], when the miners and wharfies …

Narelle: This hall that we're sitting in now.

Lorraine: … with Uncle Fred Moore, and Auntie Mary Davis, Uncle Bobby Davis, Auntie Dolly Henry … They were the people that all fought from here.

Vincent: That’s the [Aboriginal] Advancement League?

Narelle: The Advancement League, yeah.

Vincent: What year was that formed in?

Lorraine: Oh, geez ... That was … I think it was in the ‘60s, before they got the right to vote.

Narelle: Yeah, they had to fight for it.

Lorraine: It all joins up, if you look at it. It all joins up, where all the nations of Aboriginal people came together, even from the outback, to fight for that. They were all Advancement Leagues, they were all Aboriginal Advancement Leagues. They all joined one another. They used to travel down the coast down there, and meet with people down there, and that’s when they started forming them.

(Narelle has to leave at this stage.)

Narelle: If you’re not here when I got back, Vincent, I'll see you another time.

Vincent: Yeah, thanks, Narelle. Thanks very much. (To Lorraine) And [the area is] ecologically significant as well. I’ve read it’s the breeding place for the [Green and Gold] Bell frog.

Lorraine: Yep, Green and Gold Bell frog. It’s also a perched lagoon. The only other one like it is down there at Cave Beach in the Jervis Bay area. But I think it was very significant to the Aboriginal people because it’s where they were before they got any rights to have a house, you know. So that’s the starting point, I think for, this whole area, no matter how they look at it. Hill 60 and Coomaditchie are the starting points in this area, and this little hall. From here on this is where they fought to get their rights, and found the courage to stand up to people, Government people.

Vincent: I heard somewhere that because of the relations with the unions, because there was a lot of Aboriginal people working at the steel works …

Lorraine: Yeah, and on the wharfs ...

Vincent: Yeah. Someone said things weren’t as bad here, the treatment of Aboriginal people [in comparison to other areas].

Lorraine: Well, to me … My husband suffered a lot of racism. He got it [as] a child, which he didn’t like, ‘cause he came from a nation of Aboriginal people where there was thousands, you know. Living at Burnt Bridge in Kempsey, you had that many families up there with that many kids. For him to move down here and be the only Aboriginal boy in a school of white people, he suffered severely. And he talks about that today. His mother stood up to the welfare when they tried to come and take the kids. She stood up to them. I reckon in any other place she might have been put in jail. So they had a few run-ins. But I think things were good because they had a good relationship with the wharfies, and ----(?) the miners. And they were like the protection barrier for the Aboriginal people, too. Because I reckon if they stood up without them, I reckon they would have been -----(?) . They stood up, but they had people to run with them, white people to run with them, to show that there are people that stand up for Aboriginal rights, and they can see the wrong in the [mis]treatment of [Aborigines].

Vincent: I’m not trying to make out it was some sort of paradise, I just heard people saying Aboriginal people weren’t expected to sit down the front of the cinema in Wollongong, or …

Lorraine: Oh, yeah, Sonny suffered that. Oh, yeah.

Vincent: Oh, I shouldn’t have mentioned it, [then], ’cause I can’t remember where I heard it.
Lorraine: Oh, yeah, he can tell you that. ‘Cause he had to sit in certain seats ---- (?). Same as in Nowra. They used to have ‘B’s on the back of the seats for ‘Blacks’, for Aboriginal people, and that’s the only area you were allowed to sit. Those initials were still on the seats when I was a kid.

Vincent: They actually wrote it on there?

Lorraine: M-hum. ‘B’. They put a ‘B’ there. That meant ‘Black’. That’s the only place you were allowed to sit. And some of the ----(?), you sat where you could get things thrown at ya, you know, from the people behind ya.

(There’s a large pause. I don’t know how to respond.)

Vincent: You and Narelle have been involved with the rejuvenation of the lagoon for almost twenty years now. How did it kick off?

Lorraine: Well, it kicked off with another friend of Sue Edmonds, Tina Bay(?) We wanted [to do] a course, so we started [an off-] campus course in here (referring to Kemblawarra Community Hall). We wanted to do bush regeneration. I don’t know how we got around to bush regeneration, but we wanted to do it. So we asked Tina if we could clear over there [at the lagoon], to do hands-on work. It used to be a shortcut for a lot of the local people. Not just our people, [but] school kids ... But it was pretty dangerous. It was only a little narrow track, not even wider than this (referring to the panel in front of her), and it was thick, very thick with bitou [bush] and lantana and ----(?). To me, it was dangerous for kids to be even walking over there, because you couldn’t see anybody. So out of that course we ended up [cleaning] over there. Then Tina said, “Well, let’s see if we can create some work out of it. We’ll do so many days work, and a day of study, so that we’re actually doing our studies while we work.” So we created ten positions. We went out chasing funding, and we had to match it with ----(?) stuff. And so, we got enough funding to employ ten people off the reserve. That’s when we started working on the trail. We cleared it. And the only thing you could go through it at the time was with machetes, ‘cause it was too thick with bitou and lantana. Like, we found trees in there you didn’t even know was growing, it was that bad. And we had to climb up through the branches and cut all the lantana and bitou off. You would never have known there was a Port Jackson fig growing in there. It was so old, a very old, old tree. Sonny remembers it there when he was a kid, when he used to live in the sand hills. And it was so big. So we went and cleared it all out, and then we planted that much [native] plants and trees, and mulched that much ... We stripped the whole hill back, virtually, except for the little centre bit where there was only a few little ----(?) trees there, like the banksia and a couple of eucalypts. So we stripped it all back, put all the [native] plants in, we mulched it all, we even ran a water line through it. We ran the water line from the toilet block here, right across the oval, right through the sand, and we did it with just a tiny hand machine. It was so hard, even for the boys. And [to make the trail] we used to cement. Every morning we’d unbox the stuff we had boxed for the cement, build it up again, bring the truck in, put the wet cement down, and then wait til it dried the next morning, then take it off; build it again ... So, in six months we built that trail. In six months these (referring to the 1993 panels originally displayed outside the Wollongong City Gallery) were painted at the same time. So through the days we were crawling around on our kneecaps, laying cement, and we had to design the cement while it was wet – the Aboriginal designs that are on there – and then we’d have to clear(?) off to make it look like a footpath and ----(?). Then, in the afternoon, we’d have to come home, do our washing, or cook a bit of tea, and we’d all go downstairs in me garage, like, the artists, and we’d have to sit down and do these here panels. Now, we had eighteen of them, and they had to be finished in six months. The track was finished in six months, and also the mural that’s over there, too (referring to the mural by the lagoon, not far from the totem poles). It was finished the same time. So we did all that work in six months.

Vincent: Do you think you’ll get around to re-painting [the footpath]?

Lorraine: We’re going to re-paint it, yeah. And we’re going to try and re-vamp the ... ‘cause Michael ----(?) is working with us now, from [Wollongong] Council, Him and Sharralyn [Robinson] from the [Illawarra Local Aboriginal] Land Council got together and they’ve put in for enough funding, again, to help us cut all the trees back to stop people from dumping over there all the time. ‘Cause people are just dumping their rubbish.


Lorraine: No. I think it just come out of something they had over there. But it was like ... oh, geez all the different, pretty colours in it was amazing! But I think they found it was something from one of the drums dumped there. I don’t know what it was, now. I can’t remember, it was so far back. But then we had some builders come ... It had to be builders, ‘cause [the load] was too big ... They just dumped all their stuff there that had asbestos right through it.

Vincent: Asbestos!!

Lorraine: Yeah, and that was only not long ago. We had to get that taken away. Sharralyn had to actually employ people that handle it [professionally] to come in and take it away. But that’s the type of stuff they’re dumping over there, right next to the houses.

Vincent: So, when you got into the bush regen, in comparison to now, what state was the actual lagoon in? Like, was there a chance of the bell frog disappearing? Was the lagoon polluted ‘cause of all the industry here [in Port Kembla]?
Lorraine: Well, the lagoon has got three main pipes that run into it off the streets.

Vincent: Off the streets?!

Lorraine: Yeah. There are three storm water pipes that run into that lagoon. We just finished some water testing yesterday, and it’s not drinkable. And the turbidity ... oh, I don’t know what it was, now ... but we did all the testing in one of our other classes that we’re doing here. But the life in it’s pretty good. We got little shrimp and everything in there, they’re still surviving. But we’ve lost a lot of the reeds that used to be in there, where the water hens and [other birds] used to have a safe area. The lagoon used to be thick with reeds. It’s all gone because someone decided to put their carp in there. We’ve got carp like that (Lorraine holds her hands out, demonstrating their size) in that lagoon. We’d love to get ‘em out ... People have been fishing them out, but I think they’ll be in there forever.

Vincent: I read that you organised a carp cull [day] ...

Lorraine: Yeah, we had a couple. We had Steve Starling(?!) down. We had a couple of fishing competitions. We had one with him, and then we had another one a year or two later. Then we worked with Tony Mislovitch(?!) from [Wollongong] Council, and they put in funding to get ---- ----(?) to try and catch the fish. They went in there a couple of times with the ---- ----(?) to get the fish.

Vincent: But they’re still in there, the carp?

Lorraine: Yep.

Vincent: They breed like crazy.

Lorraine: Yeah, they do. Now that the Murray River’s really big and it’s flooded, I hope it’s flooded them out to the ocean.

Vincent: (laughs) I doubt it. You’ve mentioned these large panels, here (referring to the 1993 panels). I guess, in a way they were some of the first Aboriginal art put in public view in Wollongong.

Lorraine: I don’t know. Can’t remember.

Vincent: 1993. It was for the Indigenous World ...

Lorraine: Yeah, Indigenous People’s World Conference.

Lorraine: I was talking with Tess Allas last month ... I did an interview with her. The Pallingjang exhibitions have been really important, but she said that in ’95 she put on an exhibition called Unjustified, down here. She said that, really, it was the first time south coast art had been – what she called – put into the white cube, the gallery. As far as you know, is that the case? Had there been any exhibitions before ’95?

Lorraine: I wouldn’t know, because I wasn’t into the art world then. To me ... no, I’d never seen it. I’d never seen [Aboriginal art] hanging outside the [Wollongong City] Gallery [like our panels were]. The main art that’s in there is mainly desert art, it was. What we did in ’93, we went in for an interview with Peter O’Neal. We come out of there, me and Narelle and Sue ... Sue Edmonds, the one that started us [off on painting] ... ’Cause, see, we never went out of our community, we never ever went out of our community. Be lucky for us to go to school events. So Sue started taking us into those communities. We had to have her with us [otherwise] we wouldn’t do it. Now, when we did the World’s Indigenous People’s Conference, when we were asked to paint them panels, we went in to see [Peter O’Neil]. When we come out we got the impression that – and Sue, too, and Sue’s not Koori – we all said to one another, “He doesn’t think we can do it,” because there’s no traditional Aboriginal people here. So, we got the impression he didn’t think we could do the art. But the day that we were working over the back [of the lagoon], and the [Wollongong City Gallery] got the [finished] panels, we had to be in there for them to put ‘em up. We got all the photographs of that, you know what I mean, because Peter kept a photographic history of what we done. And we said, “Oh, do we have to come, Tina? Can’t you just hang ‘em up?” And they said, “No, they want you in there so youse can tell us where you want this one or that one,” you know. But they hung them up, and when they hung ‘em up there was just like this big [moment] ... It hit everyone in the face, because the colour of some of ‘em ... They’d never seen it [before]. They said in public art they’d never got that kind of colour. People never expected that kind of colouring [in public art]. So, we had all this traffic just slowing down, and Tina goes, “Oh, look at ‘em all slowing down here! They can’t believe the art.” And we were all grubby ‘cause we’d been doing mulching that day, so we were in our work boots and clothes and everything. But, I mean, to see the reaction on some people’s faces ... But his! Because he stood there and he just looked at them out the front, like he couldn’t believe it. And that gave us total satisfaction.

Vincent: So, you got a good response.
Lorraine: We got a really good response, yeah. And Col Markham gave us a really good wrap, ‘cause when we had the opening day, he said, “I come down here the other day, and I was wondering why there was this big traffic jam here, and all of a sudden I drove by and outside the art gallery was this big mass of colour, and I knew why everyone was stopping. It was just fantastic to see it.” It was a really proud moment [for us], but I don’t think we really realised what we’d done [at the time]. It was just a piece of art work that, you know ... “You challenged me, so I’ll do it.”

Vincent: So there wasn’t a sense that it was the beginning of something?

Lorraine: No. We were just proud of what we done.

Vincent: ‘Cause in a way it really was [the beginning of something].

Lorraine: It was, yeah. That’s true. We didn’t realise what doors it could open for us. It was like, “We’ll show you we can do it.”

Vincent: People remember them ...

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: ... because, with all the different people I’ve spoken to [in the course of my research], they remember those panels.

Lorraine: Yeah. We’ve still got them all. It’s just that we’ve got some up [on display], and some put away. But yeah, we never realised just what we’d done. We knew we had to finish ‘em, and finish ‘em on a certain time, and that we could do it, even though it was our first time. We’d never done it before. That’s why it was a good thing.

Vincent: So, when you had this meeting with Peter O’Neal, [did he suggest] a theme? Or did he give you carte blanche, “just do whatever you want”?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: When I think of south coast [Aboriginal] art, things that come to mind are ... the shell work, from La Per ... I mean, I suppose some people don’t consider that the south coast ...

Lorraine: Oh, we do.

Vincent: ... but as so many people keep telling me, [these geographies are more] about the relations between families along the coast.

Lorraine: It is, because whether it’s in La Per, the same families are found right down the coast. And we know all the Timberys. So all their family’s [are] all the way down here, down to Nowra way.

Vincent: So if someone was to say to me, “south coast art”, I’d think ‘shell work’, and, nowadays, some of the traditional [coiled] weaving. But ... I’m trying to get a picture of how common it was to see Aboriginal art from this area [before the ‘90s]. Did you see it? Did you make?

Lorraine: No. No. Like, we’ve seen all the stone grooves ... all the grooves where the axes were [traditionally] sharpened; we’ve had tucker from the bush, because we could run all over [my grandmother’s] property and eat whatever; and our parents used to speak the lingo, and our grandparents; and we used to do the burning of our property, all that stuff. But we never thought about doing the art. Because, you know, then, coming out of school, being young and having a family ...

Vincent: Well, I suppose when you look back at that traditional culture, art was very much functional, in the sense that it was part of ceremonies, and people taught through sand drawings ...

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: ... and as you and Narelle said, you know, with so much [culture] lost, I suppose the art was just one of those things that didn’t have a function anymore.

Lorraine: Yeah. They even stopped talking our language. They never spoke it as much. As they got older they didn’t speak much at all. But then when my mother was very sick in hospital – we only lost Mum this year – when my mum was sick in hospital, that’s when my Auntie spoke some words to her in Aboriginal language, and Mum understood it straight away, you know. But it’s very rarely [that] we [hear] it.
Vincent: I had someone say to me once, a white fella, “Why didn’t they keep their language? They mustn’t care about their culture.” And I said to him, “If someone comes up to you and says, ‘If I catch youse speaking your language, I’m gonna take your kids away from you’,” you stop speaking your language!

Lorraine: Yeah. Or they take you away from the family. That’s why a lot of the [local Aboriginal population] are related [over long distances], ‘cause some of them were even taken away from ---- ----(?) to Wallaga Lake. They were all intermingled. [Traditionally] they had a certain system that they were allowed to marry into. They weren’t allowed to marry just anyone. They had rules and regulations that our people had to live by. And by [white people] coming in and interfering, they broke all the laws of our people, and they intermingled our people. So, you know, I got people up there [in Kempsey?] related to me, whereas Sonny’s people down here are related to me too. There are my people up there that he knows about, but I knew all his father’s sisters. They lived down here next to my mum’s sisters, down Moruya. When my mum’s sister and that moved down Moruya, we knew them before I even knew him. You know, it’s things like that. Nobody knew that. And yet I’ve never seen him before I met him.

Vincent: I know there’s been a lot of research into, and a lot of high hopes for, language revival. Do you think we’ll ever hear Dharawal being spoken [again] in this area?

Lorraine: Well, Dootch and all them are starting to talk it. You know, Dootch Kennedy and ----(?). They do the welcome in the language now, and he knows a lot of the words. And we see it in books now, which is good. But we’ve got to use it, and you’ve gotta say it to the kids. That’s the only way it’s gonna come back. And the way Dootch talks out there, you know, him and a few of the boys out there, the men, they talk the language. They’re picking it up so it becomes a regular thing. So, I think the rest of us have gotta do it if we want it to come back. Like, we try to tell the kids some of the words for, like, snakes and birds or, you know, for bread and stuff like that, the words that we learnt [as kids], so the kids know at least what some of their generation is talking about when they hear that language. But I think it should be brought back on a regular basis, I really do, ‘cause up the north coast they speak a lot of it very fluently. And the north coast have started their books lately(?) for us. Up there they speak it very, very well.

Vincent: Uncle Vic was showing me ...

Lorraine: Oh, Uncle Vic talks it. Oh, he’s beautiful.

Vincent: He’s someone else I’ve spoken to, and he showed me all these books from where he’s from ...

Lorraine: All the lingo.

Vincent: Yeah.

Lorraine: Uncle Vic ... I could sit and listen to him all day, ‘cause I love the language. He still retains his language. And we’re jealous of him, because I wish we could speak it as fluently here, because it’s beautiful to hear him talk in it, and he talks like the old fellas, you know. He talks like the old fellas. You can [tell] it comes from those times, and it’s really beautiful to hear it. It’s a different feeling altogether when you got the old fellas talking in their lingo. I just wish we could have more of it here. He’s lucky, ‘cause they’ve got books on it.

Vincent: Well, I think people are really getting into it. They’re doing a lot of research.

Lorraine: Yeah, they are. They’re bringing it back.

Vincent: But I suppose it’s just one of those things that ...

Lorraine: You gotta keep working on, yep.

Vincent: So, growing up, you heard language?

Lorraine: Yeah. Our grandmother and mother use to speak the language. But like I said, as we got older, and none of that seasonal [work] was there anymore ... I think we started losing it then, you know. ‘Cause then they weren’t out there in the paddocks talkin’ and yamin’ and goin’ on and havin’ a laugh. It just wasn’t so common no more. I think we should learn more off our aunts before anything happens to them, you know. ‘Cause it was good to hear my auntie say those words to my mum before she passed away.

Vincent: In a way, it’s a bit like ... I mean, we’re talking about language and art ... You know the weaver, Yvonne Koolmatrie?

Lorraine: No.
Vincent: She’s from the Koorong. There’s a lot of her stuff in [state galleries] ...

Lorraine: Probably I know her, then.

Vincent: You would have heard of her. But she wasn’t taught weaving growing up. It was these two, or maybe one, older lady, she knew it was her time to go soon, so one day she said, “Come on, you girls”, and she held a workshop. She was one of the only people who still had that knowledge. And if she hadn’t [passed it on] ...!

Lorraine: Well, that’s just like Phyllis ... Phyllis Stewart ... down here with Kelly [Ryan]. Now, you’d never think Phyllis would go that way. We’ve all known each other since we were young, and you’d never think Phyllis would be the one to carry on the weaving from her younger days. When we were going to Wollongong TAFE, that’s what we wanted. We wanted ceramics or basket weaving to be brought back in to show us the traditional stuff. But Narelle and I had been there for a couple of years and it never happened. So, when they all went to TAFE, and Kell had them in there, they were lucky, [because] they got the ceramics and the weaving. And they were there for a few years. That’s why they’re still with Kelly, ‘cause it’s the same class that went through all those years. So, it’s good to see Phyllis do that. Now she’s going to Canada, and her and Steve.

Vincent: Yeah, I think Tess [Allas] was telling me ...

Lorraine: Yeah, they’re going to Canada, and that’s beautiful, because her weaving’s fantastic. Phyllis’s weaving is absolutely beautiful. We did that with her (pointing to a woven fish on display in the hall), see the fish? We sat down and we did that. I’d like to have a few more [weaving] workshops because it would be good if the young ones could pick it up. Because, you know, young boy Craig, he does hats and everything, and that’s fantastic. Do you see his hats?

Vincent: No.

Lorraine: Oh, he just sits down, no matter where he is, sitting in the park, sitting on the grass, havin’ a drink with the boys, and he makes his hats, and they’re all woven out of weeds. Beautiful, eh?

Vincent: I made a little [woven piece, not long ago]. But I’d known the Boolarng mob for a couple of years by the time I actually sat down and did it with them. And I thought, “This is really great. I should have done this when I first met youse.”

Lorraine: Well, that’s what I’m saying. They’re our cousins, you know. We’re all the same mob from down that way. And to see Phyllis ... I can’t get over Phyllis. ‘Cause Phyllis ... she’s had a hard life, mate, she has. She’s had a hard life, Phyllis. Too see her and Steve now up and runnin’ and not drinkin’, and they’ve got a ute ... oh, it’s fantastic. That’s the goodness in it. I think that’s the goodness that the culture’s brought back, too. It’s given them pride.

Vincent: So, do you think a place like Boolarng is a good thing?

Lorraine: A place like Boolarng’s good, because that little crew has stayed together ever since they were in TAFE. They stuck together when they come out. Kelli got knocked a lot, but Kelli’s good for ‘em.

Vincent: Yeah, I’ve heard some Aboriginal people knock the place ...

Lorraine: What for?

Vincent: Oh, they didn’t go about things in the way some people thought they should have ...

Lorraine: Well, we got knocked too. But I do what I do, and I think it’s good for my culture. If it breaks down a few of the barriers that’s between Aboriginal people and other people, then it’s good. And Kell’s [thinking] is like ours, that it brings understanding through art and culture, through weaving. It breaks down barriers. That’s got to be a good thing. It can’t be not a good thing. It is a good thing. People go there to learn basketry, and now she’s going to Canada, taking our culture to the traditional people over there. That’s a good thing, and I’m very proud of her. It’s fantastic.

Vincent: Engaging with the community seems to be a strong part of the philosophy behind this place. I know you hold a lot of workshops here, and you’ve done public art. You’ve done some [public] art where it’s just you and Narelle – that in itself makes you’re culture visible – but then you’ve also got [public art] projects where it’s been a collaboration [with non-Aboriginal people] ...

Lorraine: Yep. And we’ve worked in preschools, worked with little kids. We’ve taken, like, pebbles, and stuff like that, and just drew images in wet sand for ‘em, with pebbles or black marbles, and they loved it! And [we drew] on the old stepping stones they had there, you know, things like that. The kids just loved it. And they did the artwork. We tidied their artwork up, but it’s still their artwork. The kids love it. And because they did it with us, [comparing] what they perceived as Aboriginal art [to] what they did [with us], that’s breaking down barriers. And to actually go to people at their work [as well]. They say, “Oh, Lorraine,
we need something ---- ----(?)." Well, when we take the [finished] artwork to them, they go, “Excellent,” because when we explain the story to them, all the symbols, they say, “That’s what we want”. Like I said, it’s breaking down barriers, this here little place, with all our art and all our courses. When we brought people out here, different people, like, girls’ club groups, TAFEs, universities, people like that, it’s helped break down a lot of barriers. But a lot of people don’t understand that. And sometimes I can be a bit straight out because, I mean, things happen, you get people looking at it in a different perspective, “If you were me, how would you look at that?” Like, right up to the papers, when you get front page about something. Things like being the best, and things like that. A lot of Aboriginal people don’t like that. It might be good in one way because it’s ----(?), but then it’s caused a lot of a hell of trouble too for our people. It’s made us look like we were dirty, you know, and that our people were doing bad things all the time and we’re the only ones who did it. That’s what it looked like when you were reading it in the papers. And I thought, ‘There’s plenty of communities around [where those things happen]! There’s businessmen that have done that! But have they made the front page? Have they taken ‘em in to register them people? And took their kids or stopped their pay? Or put ‘em out of their jobs?’

Vincent: When I first heard about [the Intervention], and when you saw that footage on the news ... Lorraine: Yeah, the Army!

Vincent: ... I mean, it was the Howard years, but I’m like, “We’ve gone back”. I thought, “Any little progress we may have made, he’s just sent us back thirty, forty years.”

Lorraine: Well, did they send the army in for the big paedophile ring they just broke down? Noooooo!

Vincent: It just seemed like such an overkill.

Lorraine: Yeah! I’m thinking, “Oh, my goodness, what have we done? We’re in Afghanistan!”

Vincent: And what I found surprising was how split people are [about it] in the Aboriginal community, because you do get some black fellas who think [the Intervention] is a good thing.

Lorraine: Mmm, some do. It’s good that it’s broken down the grog [consumption] and petrol sniffing. But it’s not [good] in another way.

Vincent: But they’ve had ‘dry’ areas before ...

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: You just make [the place in question] a dry area.

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: You don’t need to bring in the Army.

Lorraine: Oh, come on. I’m thinking, “How can you do that,” you know, “and put them on show again?” And statistically speakin’ Aboriginal people, you know, we’re the ones that eat the most takeaway [food], statistically speaking. Every time I go past Macca’s I go, “Oh, look at all the blackfellas in there!” That’s our joke, you know. I go, “Oh, look at all the black fellas in Kentucky [Fried Chicken]!” (laughs) But we’re supposed to be the biggest junk food eaters, we’re the biggest drinkers. Well, take a look at the news at how many people are out on them streets doing things every weekend or killing somebody through alcohol and everything else. Have a look at that for a change, instead of using my community as scapegoat for every other community. Because it’s not just my community that those things happen in, it happens in all communities.

Vincent: I’m not defending it at all, but I suppose that apart from it being racist ... because the Aboriginal population isn’t large, really, in comparison to the non-Aboriginal population in this country, I suppose when something bad does happen in a small community, the issue seems bigger.

Lorraine: Do they go out and count how many white people drink out there on the streets? Do they show ‘em on TV?

Vincent: Wollongong’s one of the worst places for [street violence].

Lorraine: Yeah, but do they show all the violence that happens? It’s always ‘spot the black fella’. Out of all the nations, it’s always the black fellas ...

Vincent: So, do you think over the twenty years that you’ve been doing this, and you’ve had this philosophy of engaging and breaking down barriers, do you think it’s worked?
Lorraine: Well, it’s worked in this little community, for us. I think the more people learn about [our culture], the better, instead of listening to [bigotry] ... “Go and find out about it for yourself instead of judging people,” you know. It’s like that show they’ve got on TV now ... the one where she goes to live in the African community ...

Vincent: Oh, yeah ... “Go Back To Where You Came From”?

Lorraine: Yeah, it’s like that. Learn about it before you judge it. That’s what they gotta do with Aboriginal communities as well. And no matter what they say, it hasn’t been that long since our traditional way of life was broken, but a lot of them still can’t grasp that. They still can’t grasp that.

Vincent: Going to preschools, for a lot of kids that would their first introduction to Aboriginal culture, really.

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: I mean, even someone like Kev Butler, he’s gone into a lot of schools as well. I imagine in a lot of cases it’s [the students’] first introduction to Aboriginal culture. And maybe, if more and more people do what you do here, it’ll be a generational thing ...

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: What I mean is ... that old fella down at Bega [that you mentioned earlier], it’s unlikely that one of these kids will be saying that sort of stuff when they're older. Well, you’d like to think that, anyway.

Lorraine: Yeah. Shouldn’t be long now, I hope. It should be okay if the kids learn early, then it will break down the prejudices early. And I hope that it will, ‘cause there’s a lot of our kids that have got a lot of good mates that aren’t Koories, you know, and they’re not necessarily ‘white’ Australians either. They’ve got [friends] from all different backgrounds. Now, my son used to come back from Port Kembla High, and he could speak Macedonian or Yugoslav quite well, believe me, better than his own language! (laughs) But yeah, he gets around ‘cause he learns from his mates. He could understand those fellas when they were talking’, ‘cause he could actually speak the language. And I thought it was a good thing. I thought Port Kembla High was one of the best high schools in the area because of that, because of the multicultural kids in there and the way they got on. Oh, it was shameful that it got put up as a senior college. I think it should have been Warrawong High that got put up as the senior college. But yeah, it was a good school. It really was. The kids were great in it, they had all different cultures, and they were really mixing well. And I thought, “That’s good to see”. And they’re best mates with the Yugoslavs, Macedonians, Italians, and they all had a really good life here growing up.

Vincent: So, still in regard to schools, have you been involved in [introducing] Aboriginal perspectives to the curriculum? It’s still pretty recent, isn’t it?

Lorraine: Yeah, still pretty recent.

Vincent: But how important do you think it is? And is it effective? I read an old article by Kevin Butler written in the early ’90s. He wrote that Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum are necessary but you’ve got to do it properly. Then, when I was speaking to Fiona Stewart, she said it’s only just recently that’s it’s being done properly.

Lorraine: Yeah. Look, I think they’re starting to get a bit more serious about it now because people are pushing for it to be. Like I said, the Black history was a hidden history in this country. And like a lot of [people have] said, learn about your own history before you preach to ours. And that’s true, because Australia hid the black history and what they done [to Aboriginal people]. It’s taken this long to really start waking up to ourselves, and start putting it into the [schools]. It should be put into the textbooks. You ask people like Michael Organ, what he said when he went to school, like, back in the schooldays when they taught that Aboriginal people were dirty people. That was a very sad thing. So, come on, change it, put the truth in.

Vincent: Look, even when I was at school ... I mean, I’ve been out of high school ten years now. But I wasn’t taught taught anything about it. It wasn’t mentioned. Actually, we did learn much ‘white’ Australian history, either. We learnt about our involvement in the World Wars, and a bit about [Captain] Cook.


Vincent: Nothing else. Definitely no mention of black people.

Lorraine: There was some taxi drivers my husband was good mates with ... They were Yugoslav or Italian ... and they were like, “No way, son. Cook was here before youse!” And Sonny was like, “Yeah, whatever. My people owned this country. Cook came thousands of years later.”
Vincent: From what I’ve seen of what you do, and what Kev Butler does, I think even in comparison to ten years ago, when I was at school, there seems to be more opportunities for young people to be introduced to Aboriginal culture...

Lorraine: Yep, there is.

Vincent: ... but maybe you feel like it’s just the tip of the iceberg?

Lorraine: To me, it’s still just the tip of the iceberg. But like I said, if you keep pumping it there, and keep going, and chuffing along ... we’ll get there. People will learn. When I went to TAFE, there was a forty year old woman who said to me, “Lorraine, I’m ashamed to say this, but I never knew youse owned this land ‘til so many years ago.” She said, “And I’m a forty year old woman!” That was back in the early ’90s. So, that just shows ya.

Vincent: Well, I don’t think I ever heard a welcome to country until I went to university.

Lorraine: Mmm, I know. That’s only a recent thing. And now Victoria’s trying to wipe it out. (Responding to my stunned expression) Yeeeeaaaah. I was told they tried to wipe it out, but they’re fighting them. They tried to do it here, but they couldn’t.

Vincent: What’s the pretext they’re using [to justify that]?

Lorraine: I don’t know, but somebody told me about it, and I said, “You’re kidding!” And they said, “No, they’re trying to wipe it out”. And I said, “But why is that?” Why is that? It’s not harming anybody. It’s acknowledging the people that traditionally lived there. I just don’t understand why they’ve gotta fight that, even. I thought, “Gee, whiz.” And what they’re talking about now, you know, with the big mines making millions, it’s not actually going into the community, it’s only going into jobs. Land is so important. [Traditional owners] might get a few million out of [its sale], but how much does the mining company get out of it? Billions.

Vincent: Yeah.

Lorraine: Billions. And it destroys the whole land. When they leave there, there’s nothing but barren-ness. It’s a joke when they say you’re still on the land(?). You’re not getting a good deal off ‘em.

Vincent: I went and stayed in Yirrkala for a month, two years ago. When you go out of their community ... You drive about ten minutes to get to the nearest ‘white’ town. In between, it’s just a barren landscape we’re they’ve mined and mined and mined ...

Lorraine: Yep. They wreck everything. Yep, that’s what’s gonna happen with the next lot of ----(?).

Vincent: Well, look, I’ve actually got a lot more questions I’d like to ask you, but I’ve actually gotta head off now. So, we’ll leave the rest for another time?

Lorraine: Yeah, okay, then.

Vincent: Thank you so much for sharing all that with me.

Lorraine: Okay. No worries.

Vincent: (Referring to the large panels in progress) So, when have you gotta get these done by?

Lorraine: Well, we were [initially] told we had six weeks. But when we went out there for them to show us where they wanna hang them, and to see the size of the wall they’ll be on, they told us, “Oh, no, you’ve only got four weeks to do ‘em.” They wanted all three of them finished in three weeks. And Sue [Leppan] goes, “I beg your pardon. Maybe you’ll get one finished [in that time].” And Sue goes [to me], “I want you to do more dots, Lorraine. More dots. They’re not paying youse enough for this one!” Because of the size of ‘em, you know. But Narelle and I said, “Never mind. We might get two out of three finished for ‘em [by that time].” So, hopefully they’ll be happy with ‘em. It’s for their waiting room. They’ve got this nice big wall there, and another big maroon wall over there. And we just got feedback today from Shellharbour hospital. We were on a time limit to get [some murals for them] finished for mid-April. They only picked them up last week. Last week! And Narelle and I worked all weekends, every afternoon after work, and our days off. We got ‘em all finished, and they never picked ‘em up til a month or so later.

Vincent: Were they doing renovations, or something?

Lorraine: For the new renal unit, out there. At the back there’s a morgue, and that’s where they wanted it. And today, Sue just got word back there’s been ---- ----(?) They haven’t even told us if they like the murals or not. We’re thinkin’, “---- ---- ---- ---- to put that to us(?)” But Sue just got word today that they loved the paintings and they want us out there to make sure they hang
them in the right place. But it’s a good thing that they’re pleased with the art, ‘cause it makes our art worthwhile, doesn’t it? ‘Cause we’re gonna write the stories for them. We’re gonna laminate them and send them out to them so they can put them on whatever they like, plaques or ...

Vincent: And it’s about visibility as well. Particularly with the public work you’ve done, and Kev, it puts an Aboriginal presence back where it’s been denied for so long.

Lorraine: Yeah, well, see the local town fountain in [the mall] that we done? Gurungaty. That’s a natural spring. It’s a natural spring. It was a waterhole for Aboriginal people. It’s a natural spring. It’s not town water.

Vincent: Wow. I didn’t know that.

Lorraine: Yes. We did that with Nick Brash. We did the Gurungaty Dreaming story, because Gurungaty and the Rainbow Serpent had a duel, and they created the waterways up on the escarpment. So, that’s why we did that. And that’s what the big fish [designs] are in the bottom, and the serpent. Because Gurungaty, the big fish, got away from the Rainbow Serpent.

Vincent: Yeah. I remember Fiona Stewart telling me that story. She calls him Gurungatch.

Lorraine: Yeah. We call him Gurungaty.

Vincent: She said he made all the underwater caverns as well.

Lorraine: Yeah, ‘cause the Rainbow Serpent was chasing him. They were having a duel.

Vincent: Thank you so much. Hopefully I’ll get to talk to you again.

Lorraine: Yeah, when Narelle’s back.
A1.I10: Interview with Howard Jones and Warren Holder (20.01.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

Amendments to this transcript were made by the interviewees.

Warren and Howard are members of the Gerroa Environmental Protection Society (GEPS). The society was formed to challenge the deforestation and sandmining of ecologically sensitive areas at Seven Mile Beach by Cleary Bros (Bombo) Pty Ltd.

This interview took place at Warren Holder’s home at Gerroa. Prior to the interview, Howard and Warren had shown me a number of aerial photographs charting the consistent degradation of the Cleary Bros. property. They then took me to see what we could of the site from the public roads at its south/south west borders.

Vincent: Thanks very much for showing me the Cleary Bros. site from the road and telling me a bit about the history of the place. But tell me a bit about the history of GEPS itself. How did it start?

Howard: GEPS started in the late eighties when Cleary Bros. cleared an area of littoral rainforest and swamp forest known as Baileys Island. About fifty hectares were cleared, which enraged a number of local residents. So about a dozen people got together and formed the Gerroa Environmental Protection Society, and lobbied Council to do something about the clearing. That's how we started about 1987/88.

Vincent: And it's just gone from there?

Howard: Yes. The Society became quite political – got involved in the political processes. We make submissions on various environmental issues, particularly related to other mines in the area, the local LEP, Climate Change, Illawarra Strategy, etcetera. We have run a number of Environmental fairs, and we've been involved in three major land and environmental court battles to try and protect the vegetation at Seven Mile Beach.

Vincent: What's been your general impression of the attitudes of the Council and other Government departments in regard to the sandmine?

Howard: Well, [Kiama] Council has worked very hard to protect the area. The Council actually identified all the vegetation around Seven Mile Beach that was outside the National Park as an area of high conservation value in their LEP – that's their 1994 LEP. They did scientific studies on the vegetation of great significance, which is often referred to as Lot 22/23, and put a special scientific zoning on that. Council joined with GEPS in the first court case [against] Cleary Bros. over the proposed sand mine on the land they cleared on Baileys Island. So I'd have to say we've had a good working relationship with Kiama Council. We've found them to be listening, and to be supportive – it's a fairly 'green' council. We've had a terrible relationship with the Department of Planning. Department of Planning generally seems to have a 'business as usual' approach, especially when it comes to the sandmining. We've lobbied the Department not to identify areas of significant vegetation as a sand resource in the Illawarra Regional Strategy – including endangered ecological communities – and areas where there are significant Aboriginal sites – registered sites. And although they did reduce the sand resource area in the Strategy, they still left areas of important environmental significance as an identified sand resource in the Strategy. So they've embedded future conflicts in their overall planning. Also, the Department of Planning – really, the last state government – developed an LEP template which Kiama Council had to follow. This new LEP eliminated the earlier areas of high conservation value that were so important, and it replaced them with a less strong instrument. So I'd have to say that though Kiama Council resisted a bit, the imposition of this new template means that the levels of protection on this significant vegetation has been lowered. Also, we took the Department of Planning to court in 2008 – successfully – over their Part 3A approval. It was really the Minister's approval, but we had actually had quite a lot of meetings with the Department of Planning, and we discussed compromises with them to try and get better outcomes for the environment.

Vincent: The Minister at this time was Sartor?

Howard: Sartor. We found Sartor intransigent. We found the Department of Planning just not able to listen. They wouldn't even listen to the compromises we put up [for consideration]. So we ended up going to court. And the court put up a compromise which went a long way towards the compromise we were originally proposing. So we could have saved all that money and time and effort if they'd been people that just sat down and listened. But they weren't. We're possibly looking at going back to court because the Department of Planning has not adhered to the 'conditions of consent', in our opinion. They've supported what we call premature clearing of an important habitat corridor, which the court findings actually set out to protect until an offset corridor was functional. So we feel that the Department of Planning has not been really interested in at least reflecting the spirit of the court case. These things are open to interpretation, but we find the Department of Planning very unhelpful, not able to listen to the community, actually obstructive. We don't find them even-handed when it comes to looking at mining versus the environment, and also versus the heritage values of the site.

Vincent: What type of support have you got from the community? Has there been a big show of support?

Howard: Yes, yes.
Vincent: Because you were telling me only half an hour a go, Howard, that quite often [most] communities don't know about the heritage or ecological values of [their areas], which obviously doesn't help when you're trying to drum up support.

Howard: Yes, I think the primary issue, not only with the community, but with the Department of Planning, is that they don't understand the values of this area. I mean, everyone thinks their area is unique, but the fact of the matter is – as one local National Parks officer said – the whole [Seven Mile Beach] area is an endangered ecological community, and it's got high values because it actually contains the largest area of coastal freshwater wetlands in the state – constituting forty percent of that kind. It's actually more than forty percent, but officially forty percent. And associated with that is a combination of very rare vegetation communities that only survive in that sort of site. So it's a very rare ecosystem. And we'd have to say the broader community doesn't understand those complex issues – the habitat values associated with those issues. That's largely because a large amount of that highly sensitive vegetation is on private land – it's actually mostly on Cleary Bros. land, and it's out of sight. [The community is] not invited onto that land. So the only way you can really see it or comprehend it is from the air – an aerial view. Cleary Bros. have very large visual barriers along the road so that no one can see the damage that's being done. So in that sense, the community and certainly the Department of Planning, don't have a full understanding of those values. But the community is definitely supportive, and they've got a great sense of ownership of their natural area. They understand the visual impacts. They understand they don't want trees cut down. And Gerroa – this a small community – yet the local community association donated eight-thousand dollars towards our court costs. That's not easy for a small community to do. So I'd say they're very supportive, and they care about their environment.

Vincent: And what about the Aboriginal community, specifically? What part have they played?

Howard: Well, the Aboriginal community – it's very interesting the role they've played. In our first court case, which was in the early nineties, the Jerrinja community joined with Kiama Council and GEPs. We went to court opposing the sandmining on Bailey's Island. The Jerrinja people presented their own case before the court. They presented the issues from the point of view of Aboriginal history and heritage, while we presented the point of view of the environmental side of things. Council supported both. And we learnt a lot from the local Aboriginal people in that case, because there were elders that had had grown up living in the contentious area. There was one elder who could actually describe her childhood, and could refer to important ceremonial and burial sites – probably knowledge that is lost now, I would say. But she would refer to them in general terms, and she wouldn't give specific information in the court. Also, in our more recent court case, Fiona Stewart and a lot of the local Aboriginals ... they have a very high regard for this environment, they have a strong sense of ownership. They are very supportive and have been very supportive of the actions we've taken not only because they care about the natural values but they've got a high regard for their own history. They've found it difficult to articulate that history because in our last court case our finances didn't enable us to hire the experts to put an argument related to Aboriginal heritage. They tried to [put their case forward], but did it informally [and during] a site visit. As it wasn't an identified issue [in the court], the court had no regard for the issues they raised. So they walked across the site with the judge and said, you know, there's a midden here, there's a site here, there's a corroboree ground there – they talked about the things they knew about. But the court – the way it was structured, because it wasn't a formal issue – had no regard for anything they said. And while we were concerned about particularly two Aboriginal sites which were registered sites, which we knew were going to be destroyed – well, we thought they were both going to be destroyed, we still believe they are to be destroyed – one of those registered sites mysteriously seemed to change in its position on the map. Either the original position was wrong or somehow it moved out of the mine site, and of course we couldn't investigate those issues because it takes a lot of money and expertise to do that. So I guess those issues weren't regarded by the court. In fact, other than in the site visit, they were never mentioned. So I'd say the local Aboriginal peoples views were completely ignored.

Vincent: Which is very disheartening – it doesn't matter what issue it is, doesn't matter what group it is, if you don't have huge amounts of money for legal costs you are essentially unable to challenge certain things.

Howard: Yes, well, it's worse than that. The community is absolutely powerless because … I mean, for us to raise our court case [money] … the value of our court case might be a hundred and twenty-thousand dollars, and we have to find maybe thirty-thousand dollars of that. A lot of [the cost] is done by pro bono through Environmental Defenders (EDO). So we get a lot of support, but still we’ve got to find thirty-thousand dollars. And of course while we want to make Aboriginal heritage one of the issues, well, that's going to cost us an extra twenty thousand dollars. We don't have that money. But I think what really speaks about the powerlessness of the community is when, in one of its conditions of consent – 2.2 or 22, I can't remember – the court states an important habitat corridor couldn't be cleared for mining until a new offset corridor was functioning, and yet within twelve months of the decision that corridor was being cleared. In our opinion that was in contravention of the court decision. We met with our local member, in fact two local members – both Labor and Liberal – because the Government changed hands during that process, and we had very unsatisfactory outcomes from those meetings. The Department of Planning, in our opinion, was just not diligent in upholding the court conditions. We've since, through the Environmental Defenders, sought documents that they used to underpin their decision to allow the approval of this corridor, and the Department of Planning is refusing to give us those documents. So I would say there's obstruction, but also there's an absolute powerlessness when a community raise the money, goes to court, gets the court to set conditions, then we feel the conditions aren't being monitored and adhered to. We feel the Department of Planning is definitely part of the problem. Though I understand everything can be 'interpreted', it's interpreted according to cultural attitudes and view points, and we feel the cultural attitude and view point of the Department of Planning was that we were just a nuisance – a bunch of residents that were getting in the way of their sensible decisions to extract a sand resource. That is our feeling.
Warren: And when a group such as ours – one with quite educated people – has gone through this process before, and we feel frustrated [by the results], imagine how an Aboriginal group would feel when they just don't understand that process – that they spoke to the judge, and the judge [seemed to be] listening, but that just all goes to the ether because it's not part of the [official] process. I'm sure they would believe that they've been heard. Well, they weren't.

Howard: That's right, yeah. In fact they thought they'd done their job. They felt that by presenting their viewpoint that that was [all] they needed to do.

Vincent: What other things do you feel aren't being done properly?

Howard: The overriding issues for us are always are your basic policies and planning instruments. If you've got good policies and planning instruments in place then community can use those processes. Our main planning instrument – our LEP – has been watered down in its capacity to protect. The Illawarra Regional Strategy – which is an even larger instrument that sits above that – it's been designed in such a way that the value of the sand on these endangered ecological communities and forests is in conflict with the values of these forests. And so then it's up to the miners and the community to sort that out through whatever process they go through. And in those processes the mining company is wealthy, and the community is poor, relatively. Inevitably they end in a compromise, and the compromise, in our point of view, usually ends up with more of that endangered ecological community being destroyed. So we feel that, particularly in recent years, that the overarching policy framework has actually deteriorated [in its ability] to support committees and [community] members like us in trying to protect their community. That was the case with the Labor party's Part 3A legislation where they could override everything. Now, that's in the process of changing, and it could change to some extent to the better, but we've yet to see the detail in the new policies of the new [state] government. I'm sure they will still manage to limit the power communities have got, because often the bureaucracies have got the view that the communities are a bit of a problem rather than the whole point and purpose of it.

Vincent: So what are some of the successes you feel [GEPS] have had? You mentioned that, though small, a significant part of the endangered area was incorporated into the [Seven Mile Beach] National Park.

Howard: Yes, the successes we've had are … I mean, we've been to court three times. Two were actually full-blown Land and Environment Court cases. Both cases you could say were successful because our Society, and those that joined with us, had their appeal upheld. So you could call that a win. And in one case we managed to get one area rehabilitated. In the last case we managed to get larger offsets. So in terms of those battles there are small wins but large losses. But also [with] our lobbying of councillors we've been very successful. Council has seriously listened to us, taken on board the concerns we've raised, and developed policies. And our lobbying and Council's policies did lead to a SEPP 26 area of littoral forest being incorporated into the National Park – a small portion. So there are small victories along the way, but the fact of the matter is that in the time that we've been fighting the clearing of the forests at Seven Mile Beach there's been eighty hectares of forest removed. So it's still essentially a loss. Another victory we had was that one large area that had been cleared at Bailey's Island came into public ownership when Sydney Water bought it to put in a sewerage treatment works. It's a very sensitive site where you shouldn't have a sewerage treatment works, but when that happened we got the opportunity to re-vegetate about a third of that site, and try to bring it back to what it originally was. So that was an opportunity and a great success, we thought, because we planted twenty thousand trees and they're all doing well.

Vincent: What community engagement has Cleary Bros. partaken in? Have they initiated any community consultation?

Howard: Well, I'd need a whole book on this. Under Part 3A – legislation that's gone now – the community consultation was the responsibility of the developer. It's an absurd situation. They were given the responsibility to organise and manage their own community consultation. There wasn't any independent process. And we felt it was an abysmal community consultation. For this sandmine extension – the one I've just mentioned, the one we had a court case over – they put a colour brochure in the letterboxes of all the residents here. It had a [photograph of a] cleared field with one tree standing in it, and it identified that as the site that was going to have the sandmine extension, and yet that was only half [of] the site. The other half was fully vegetated with endangered ecological communities. They didn't even refer to that. We think that community consultation has been unprofessional, and it hasn't been informative. And I've never [heard] them refer to Aboriginal culture and heritage in a community consultation. And you (speaking to Warren) might refer to that incident with Fiona [Stewart], at that meeting up here at the Association …

Warren: Yeah. Fiona and her partner, Robert, were there at the consultation meeting, and they raised quite a few Aboriginal heritage issues that they wanted to talk [about] with Scott Ovens, the guy in charge of the community consultation. He agreed that he would contact them and speak to them about those issues, but to my knowledge that never happened. So it was a lost opportunity for the Aboriginals to get their message across.

Howard: And as part of the conditions of consent a Community Liaison Committee was formed to monitor what's going on in the sandmine. We have a representative on that committee, but we've been very unhappy with the way that consultative committee has been managed, and we still don't feel that we get listened to or are informed appropriately.
Warren: While Cleary Bros. teamed up with the Department of Planning in our court challenge, the court battle was really Department of Planning vs. Gerroa Environmental Protection Society. At the end of the process it was left to the Department of Planning to make sure Cleary Bros. upheld what Chief Judge Preston imposed on their licence to mine the site. In summing up the judge called it a win for GEPS, but if all of the conditions are not met then one could wonder if it really was a win for GEPS or the environment.

Vincent: You mentioned that the area is a very significant coastal freshwater environment.

Howard: Yes, Seven Mile Beach is a very large beach, and it's got drainage systems at either end – the Shoalhaven and Crooked River. Between those drainage systems are huge wetlands – Coomonderry swamp and Foy's swamp. Coomonderry swamp is partly developed but a large part of it sits within the [Seven Mile Beach] National Park. Foy's swamp is on Cleary Bros. land, and that's been drained and cleared …

Vincent: And that's probably the most visible part of their land from the road, isn't it?

Howard: Yes. And these wetlands … well, Coomonderry swamp alone constitutes over forty percent of that ecosystem type in the state, so it's significant. Foy's swamp – even though it's been degraded to a large extent – still functions in terms that it recharges groundwater. So it still has some wetland functions. It is probably a third to half the size of Coomonderry swamp, but of course whatever happens on that swamp has a big impact on Crooked River, the Gerroa [ecological] community, fish stocks, and whatever else. From time to time we have fish kills. We understand the most recent one – the one we had just last year – relates to acid sulphate soils and acid sulphate contamination, although the reports have yet to come out. And while no one can say exactly where it's coming from, the only thing at the top of that catchment is this drained wetland where the drainage canals aren't being dug out. So there's every chance that that would be the source of the contamination, and it's probably the source of the ongoing contaminations we've had of the river. But I'm getting sidetracked … The important thing about those wetlands is that they support particular vegetation types which rely on that kind of environment. That ecosystem type is rare, those forests are rare. They're all endangered ecological communities, like swamp oak/swamp mahogany forests, Bangalay sand forests freshwater wetlands and littoral rainforest – all endangered, all listed, all recognised. And unfortunately, to a large extent, a very large part of those endangered ecosystems happens to lie on Cleary Bros. land – privately owned, and not in the National Park. So the vegetation is of great significance, and surely more valuable than sand.

Vincent: In regard to fauna … I was asking you before about the koalas. In my discussions with Fiona Stewart, she's adamant that there still is a koala population there, but you say that 'officially' there isn't.

Howard: No, I wouldn't quite say that. I'd say that they were definitely identified as being there in the 1980s by Norm Robinson in his studies for his PhD at Wollongong University. Unfortunately Norm has died, and I'm not sure where those documents are. But I do know that he did those studies, and that [koalas] were identified. There was a fire in 1982 that could have had an impact on the lingering population that was there. I have to say I trust Fiona and the Aboriginal community. If they say they're there, I wouldn't disagree with them, because they're quite aware of that bushland. They walk through it, they've got a lot of knowledge of it, so I wouldn't discount what they say. And there has been another independent [sighting]. At one of the community consultation meetings some people stood up and said they'd found a dead koala along the road. Of course that wasn't investigated in the community consultation. I think it's SEPP 40 or 44 [that relates to] Koala habitat – is a very strong bit of legislation. So if it was identified as a koala habitat – particularly the swamp mahogany and the Bangalay forests, which are koala habitat – then that would be an impediment [to the mining]. But none of that [reported] information has really been resolved. Other than that sighting of a dead koala, and Fiona's assertions, there is no other evidence.

Vincent: So it really would have helped if there had been koalas there.

Howard: Oh, yes. First of all, Seven Mile Beach is an island of vegetation, and there've plenty of studies that show that habitats in islands of vegetation are the most vulnerable because they're not connected [to larger undeveloped areas]. When species are wiped out they're not replaced. So your whole management of islands of vegetation have to be different to broader connected [areas of] vegetation. That was one of the main issues in our court case – that the sandmine fragmented the vegetation, that it made islands within islands. That was accepted by the judge as an issue. But the whole issue of how you manage the fragility and vulnerability of the vegetation and animals in those islands is an important question to address and, really, it hasn't been addressed. Kiama councillors started to identify a habitat corridor that could be linked up, and I think the Illawarra Regional Strategy did respond to our request to look at habitat corridors – I think they did identify a nominal habitat corridor area that could be developed in the Illawarra Regional Strategy. So there are responses to those issues, but not enough real understanding of them.

Vincent: So where to from now?

Howard: Well, the biggest issue is that this sandmine is marching towards a very sensitive bushland area which was completely protected under the old Kiama Council LEP. This area had a special scientific zoning on it. Council contracted a study by Dr Ros Muston on this land and she identified its high environmental values. This bit of land consisting of swamp forest – an endangered ecological community – sits right in front of the march of this mine. And as I said before, the Illawarra Regional Strategy identifies that as a sand resource, so we see future battles to continue to stop the destruction of the habitat.
Vincent: How many people make up GEPS?

Howard: There's a broader [group of] community members … maybe twenty.

Warren: When we have a battle on the numbers sky rocket, and then it's left more to a core group.

Vincent: Like any type of party, really … doesn't matter what the issue is.

Howard: Yeah. There's a core group of about five. But all you need is a core group of five. A core group of five people that are active, from my experience, can do anything.
A1.III: Interview with Michael Keighery (25.01.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

Michael Keighery is a multi-media artist and creative arts lecturer who recently moved to the Illawarra from Sydney. Through several public art commissions he has established strong working relationships and friendships with local Aboriginal spokespeople and artists.

This interview took place at Michael’s house in Wombarra. Having discussed an array of topics for almost an hour, Michael suggested I just start recording our conversation. For this reason, an obvious lead-in to the interview did not occur.

Throughout the interview we refer to some photographs I had taken previously of Michael’s local public works: “Points of View” at Collin’s Rock (Woonona), which he produced in consultation with Roy ‘Dootch’ Kennedy from the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE), and “Sirens of Woolunguh” (Belmore Basin), a collaboration with Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas from Coomaditchie.

Michael: That question about focussing on public art, I reckon, is interesting because of the layer of subsets of questions underneath it. Firstly, why are [local] public artworks so very nice and lacking in hard-edge content? The next question that you could touch on, which I think is a really interesting question, is [why] so many of the Koories down here are super-fucking pissed off that they're regarded as not being true Aboriginal artists because they're here and not out in the desert where the 'real' – in inverted commas – Aboriginal art comes from. There's an interesting set of questions there. Also, then, this whole question about dots, you know ... What is this about dots? To give you an example, I taught last year at Gymea TAFE, I taught a group of Aboriginal women. This was an extension course run by the Aboriginal unit at Gymea TAFE, and the primary purpose was empowering, socialising … it wasn't the usual TAFE skills and development [course]. So I went in there and got people to start telling tales and stories about their backgrounds, and we translated them into clay. But one of the things that kept on striking me was that a number of them kept on saying to me, “Do you want me to dot it up?” And in fact, one time, there was a non-Koorie – a full time student there at TAFE – who was using dots and a hand print. [He had] put his hand thick in clay, and he put [his print] on a platter, and I think he might have had some upset? cut marks around it. I mean, that's a fairly kind of gestural piece of work which, when I looked up at it, I thought, “That's a gestural piece of work”. But one of the Koorie students got quite upset. It provided a very interesting conversation about who owns dots.

Vincent: So she wasn't upset about the hand print …

Michael: No.

Vincent: … just the dots?

Michael: She got upset about the dots. But it was the whole combination. I got up and said, “Yeah, you could interpret that as Aboriginal”. At the same time, over the road at Hazelhurst, there was an exhibition of Arthur McIntyre's works. He was an Australian painter, mainly a graphic guy, who died some time ago, but got quite prominent in the eighties. At that time he was doing a lot of work where he was blowing-up half-toned images from newspapers. Of course the half-tones are all made up of dots. And so I said, “Come on. Let's go and have a look at this work and talk about dots” – you know, there's a lot more to it than a simplistic answer about Aborigines owning this or that. There's contexts and tension, etcetera. So I think that is another interesting question – the whole dot debate – to hang underneath [your main thesis question]. And if I were you, I'd be looking at, as a subset, the archaeological stuff, to investigate how 'authentic' the dot stuff is.

Vincent: Well, when I've asked artists down this way about their thoughts on the whole dot issue, I've had quite mixed reactions. I've had people like Lorraine [Brown] say, “Well, I can do what I want”, and she's not the only one. On the other side you get artists who say, “Oh, yes, we've got to be careful 'cause some people kick up a stink, because dots aren't form this area”. But it was Lorraine [Brown] who said, “Who says dots aren't from this area?” If we consider that a lot of those ‘authentic’ Aboriginal paintings – taking the stereotypical aerial desert [composition, as an example] – they're an evolved version of the sand drawings that people would do. They weren't meant to be kept – they were created to disseminate information. We know that they did them here as well. And from what I understand, the whole Papunya [Tula group] – as an example of the bright colours and the dots [aesthetic] – were very inspired by Pointillism. The main reason the art here isn't considered authentic or traditional is that [the Aboriginal people] are seen as having been influenced too much by Western culture. That's all it is. And if we're going to be honest, it's also a racist thing – they're seen as not being authentic Aboriginals. So I don't think it has too much to do with the art itself.

Michael: Except in that the art is so nice, um …

Vincent: But a lot of the Papunya stuff is very nice. It's beautiful work.

Michael: Oh, absolutely.
Vincent: I just worry that people think it's beautiful because they see [with] a modernist sensibility that I don't think the artists are actually thinking about when they produce those works.

Michael: Maybe the art advisors are.

Vincent: Oh, I'm sure they are. You can disagree with me – hit back, if you like.

Michael: Oh, don't worry, I will, but I don't have any great disagreements with [what you've said]. I do think the western desert stuff is a good, interesting, viable, construct. But it's still a construct. And it's good for a whole range of reasons to do with empowerment, expression, and bringing Aboriginal culture to the fore, etcetera. But it's still a construct. The whole notion of it being 'real' is bullshit. It's worthwhile. But the word 'real' doesn't have any real meaning. The same with the whole question of dots down here doesn't have any real meaning. I mean, dots, as part of pointillism or part of Arthur McIntyre's thing, Lichtenstein and pop art – it's kind of all over the place. But I think to get into some of that, still looking at the public art, is probably a good way to corral what you have to do, which is finish this fucking doctorate. And also, I mean time is a real problem. But it was Kelli [Ryan] that said we should really have a discussion, or a debate or forum about dots. And I would have thought that someone like Louise [Brand] would have been interested in that. That would provide you with so much material. But I still think that's a subset of looking at the public art that's happening down here. 'Cause you're right, there is a lot of public art that is Koorie inspired. But I would also be looking at public art in terms, not just of the artwork in public places, but public art in terms of work that illustrates those political, or educational, or health orientated stuff as well. I think I'd bring that in as well, because that's really where the political edge starts to happen. And to get onto this (refers to a photograph of the 'Sirens of Woolyungah') one of the things that really interested me … I mean, I'm not interested in doing any artwork that is just pretty. I'm interested in doing artwork that has a visual relationship to the space, but also that people can engage with. And so I was very intrigued to see whether Lorraine and Narelle … when we put the submission in for this job I didn't know Lorraine and Narelle. It was Sue Leppan, I think, that mentioned the possibility. And I thought, hey, fuck, this is interesting, because I knew the story of Oolaboolawoo, the West Wind, and the creation of the Five Islands. I also, with my background, knew all the stuff about Ulysses and the sirens. And it seemed interesting that they both had mermaids or sirens attached to them. But we needed to find a visual language that would sit well together, and certainly to provide something that would enable people to come into it on a number of different levels. I don't want to do work also that is didactic, and part of that didactic is the over-political works. I just don't believe I own the public space as the people round here [do]. Did you see the work I did down at Woonona? The people down there … It's their space. It's my space too because I've ---- ---- ---- (?) live in the area, but it's primarily their space. So I don't feel I have the right to make a strident didactic statement. The work I did down at Collin's Rock, which is work I did by myself, I think has subtle messages about sustainability, about reconciliation, without being didactic. In fact, with a hook that will draw people into it. The work hasn't been damaged or vandalised, and Sandon Point and Dootch Kennedy is [represented] down there, and one of his paintings is in there. And I was still able to deal with this notion of Captain Cook – you know, white man celebrating Captain Cook coming. Well, what the fuck does that mean? So I think that's kind of the philosophy I take to these kinds of jobs. There's another one which you might not have seen down at Port Kembla, which is the 'Two Kings' park. [Officially it's] King George V Park, but the Coolamonditchie women really wanted [the artwork] to be about King Mickey.

Vincent: Is that another collaboration with Lorraine and Narelle?

Michael: No. In fact that's a collaboration with the Bushcare people down there and a mens group in Port Kembla, which is a very interesting social project happening down there. But the thing about King Mickey … You know the story of King Mickey of the Illawarra?

Vincent: Arr, I know of King Mickey, but what's the story?

Michael: Let's move inside and I'll show you King Mickey.

(From his balcony overlooking Lawrence Hargrave Drive and the Pacific Ocean, Michael shows me into his house and draws my attention to a large reproduction of the famous photograph of King Mickey taken during a corroboree in the late nineteenth century.)

Michael: You know this photograph?

Vincent: Yeah.

Michael: And of course it's a staged photograph …

Vincent: And I find it really interesting that they don't know exactly what year it was [taken]. They're pretty sure it was at a specific event, but they're the not absolutely sure. But it's one of the best photographs of nineteenth century Aboriginal culture [from this area].

Michael: Yeah, it's great.
Vincent: And one of the only photographs, that I know of, of Aboriginal body paint from this area. How 'authentic' it is …

Michael: Is another matter.

Vincent: Yeah.

Michael: When I first heard about King Mickey I was amazed because the photographs just of him through the ages – through his ages – are just extraordinary. A hugely powerful-looking man with great presence, very very handsome … but also given one of these breast plates. Me, with my liberal, white background, would normally believe this as so tokenistic, imperial, and all of those associations, that, “Hey, you know ... I don't know that I really want to touch this [public art project].” But what really struck me was how proud of King Mickey the Koorie I've met down here are because he was a great spokesman for his community and he did a lot of public good. But he's also a man that came from Kempsey, He wasn't Wodi Wodi. And when you talk to the descendants of the Hill 60 mob, they cannot stand the Wodi Wodi. They didn't mind me coming and talking to them, but the fact that I was going to mention King Mickey – that was appalling, because he was a 'blow in', like the Wodi Wodi – they maintain – were blow ins, and, for a political agenda, were claiming their authenticity to this land here. Now, I brought this up with Lorraine [Brown], you know, “What's happening here ...?”

Vincent: That was brave of you.

Michael: Oh, look, we very quickly got to the stage … I mean, I wouldn't work, I couldn't work with anyone collaboratively unless we said “I'm free to speak”. And when that happens, it's great. Because you get to the level where okay, we're going in to have a meeting … you can play the poor indigenous card, I'll play the wafty artist role … it's that kind of natural discussion?)

Anyway, Reuben Brown was the name of the guy … He and his wife – he's got his wife's name – are really down on the Wodi Wodi. They've got a lot of information that they won't publish because they fear people will rip it off and use it as their own. And in fact it was the tension between the descendants of the Hill 60 mob and the Wodi Wodi that I found really fascinating. And with the job at Port Kembla, that was the hardest one for me to deal with, because I'm not there as any kind of reconciler, I'm there as a public artist doing work that will enhance a landscape, a project that the community have set up, and that will provide some informative stuff that the community can relate to. So it's got the same kind of elements [as the 'Sirens of Woolyungah'] – photographs and tiles, etcetera. But in talking to Lorraine, she was saying, “Look, they can go on about that, but if we, as Aboriginal people, are divided, we're going to lose. Far better for us to be united. Koories, or Wodi Wodis, or whatever, but united we stand. If you dissipate the energy ... So I found that a fascinating dimension, as well.

Vincent: That's interesting, because one of the people I want to interview – and I'm pretty sure I will get to interview him, 'cause I'm pretty good friends with him – when I'm talking to him and mentioning the people I already have interviewed, he wants to know what they've said. And I said, “Well, I can't tell you that. It's part of the Human Ethics [conduct] that I can't talk [in detail] about other people's interviews. And why would you want to know what they've said anyway?” “Oh, we have to have a united front”.

Michael: That's interesting.

Vincent: Yeah, and it's not realistic. You were talking about Reuben [Brown] ... He's the only person I've approached [for an interview] that has knocked me back flat out.

Michael: Really?

Vincent: Yep. I was telling you about Dootch [Roy Kennedy] – he was very nice, and he gave me very good reasons for why he wasn't prepared to talk to me. He said everything he has to say is already in the public domain. But Reuben Brown said, “Look, I'm sick of white people taking our words and misrepresenting them.” Which I totally appreciate. But yeah, there are these tensions.

Michael: And the tensions are stronger [internally] than they are to an outsider like me coming in. I found that to do [the] Captain Cook [public work at Collin's Rock], which I knew was going to be contentious, and it was commissioned by Rotary, you know, which is pretty white-bred … I said to them, you know, “I have to talk to the [Illawarra Local Aboriginal] Land Council to find a way to deal with this.” And what actually surprised me was that the Rotary people understood. They were cool with that …

Vincent: Incorporating an Indigenous perspective?

Michael: Yeah, quite cool about it. In fact they might have even suggested that at the beginning … but I think I kind of pressed it at the time – that it didn't mean just saying it, it meant actually having people like Dootch involved. And Dootch was quite involved.

Vincent: Well, the day I took those photographs [of Collin's Rock] was a community fundraiser for a new generator at the [Aboriginal] tent embassy, and Dootch took a group of us along the cycle track, and we stopped there and he spoke about it.

Michael: Oh, okay. He would have spoken favourably, I imagine, about the work?
Vincent: Oh, absolutely. I mean, he didn't speak just about the work. He spoke about the significance of the site.

Michael: Well, what I did also find ... And I've lived all my life in Newtown. That's my background. This is all new. We moved down here about three years ago. So my question was ... I didn't know Wollongong, don't know how Rotary and Wollongong people are going to handle the kind of notion of dealing in a real way with Indigenous people and issues. And the second thing I didn't know was how the Indigenous people would handle me feeling the need to both acknowledge and discuss European history in light of its impact on Indigenous culture. And what just absolutely blew me away was that every time I spoke to an Indigenous person the response was really favourable. It was almost like the fact that I had sought permission was sufficient for them, because I didn't go in with a necessarily preconceived idea. So that was kind of interesting. But back to you with questions.

Vincent: Well, you've touched on a number of things I wanted to talk with you about. I essentially wanted to know the genesis of both these works ['Sirens of Wollyunguh' and 'Captain Cook'] – I'm sorry I haven't seen the King George one ...

Michael: That's okay. I can send you images, if you want.

Vincent: Yeah, that'd be great. Well, I've made a point of trying to visit as many public works as possible, in the same way that I've tried to see as many rock art sites as possible, as well. But yeah, I wanted to know the genesis … this one [referring to the work at Collin's Rock] was before the Belmore Basin one, wasn't it?

Michael: Yes.

Vincent: So Rotary approached you?

Michael: No. Rotary approached [Wollongong] Council …

Vincent: So you really would have only just arrived in the Illawarra?

Michael: Pretty much. Now … I've got to remember how I actually got the gig … um … I'm a gregarious person. And in fact Rotary wanted to do the job. Rotary wanted to have a site that was beautified and graffiti-proof. And they wanted to have a ceramic mural that ran around the whole wall there, right. —— (?) mosaic. Sue Bessell from Council contacted me and said, “Look, I think you're the right person for it.” I don't know how Sue got to know me, but I already knew her. She said, “Look, this sounds like it's up your alley. It's a very small amount of money …” So, she put me in contact with the Rotary people. I said, “Look, there are a couple of issues we've got to be quite frank about.” A lot of it was the Indigenous issue. And they were kind of thinking about a timeline. The second thing was with the budget. I said, “You know, your budget, which started out at about ten or twelve grand, —— —— —— (?) pissy amount of money. I said, “Your money's not going to stretch to a mural. Let me come up with some ideas …” Oh, and the third thing I said was, “If you try to do anything on such a magnificent size that competes with the view, it's going to look dicky.” You've got the constrained sort-of architecturally strong building in that bather's [pool], you've got a magnificent view which people want to see. To try and do something that says, “I'm fucking art!” …

Vincent: Might detract from the view?

Michael: Exactly. It would be nuts. Nuts. And what actually interests me is that … I mean, every few months I'll take someone down there to have a look at it, or drive by myself and just decide to have a look at it, and there's always someone reading the information. —— —— —— —— (?) that people aren't reading it. Anyway, I came back to [Rotary] and said, “Look, to me Captain Cook is a great navigator, but to me he was also the start of European …” —— —— —— (?) I didn't say the word 'invasion'; but —— —— colonization. A good as well as a negative impact,” as we all know. No problems. “What I'd like to do is take this —— (?) Dalrymple [Nathaniel Dance (?)] portrait of Captain Cook and render it in different ways, posterise it so it's kind of suggestive in very different ways – you can look at Cook, and then to make it up with all the images of local people that I took or that the school kids took. And so I got in touch with Bulli High or Woonona High – one of the [local] high schools – and one of the art teachers was really interested, so she got the kids to take photographs.

Vincent: So all the little photographs were taken specifically for the job?

Michael: Yeah, yeah. That's part of the ownership. And that's where people are saying, “Oh, that's me,” or “That's so and so”, you know. That's to do with ownership as well. And that enables me to, on these surfaces here (pointing to a photograph of the work's reproductions of “Women and Children, Coledale Beach” [1929] by Adelaide Perry, and “Sea at Thirroul” [c.1935] by Grace Cossington Smith), to have some interesting pieces (?) …

Vincent: They're both such beautiful works.

Michael: Beautiful works, yeah. And of course they're from the [Wollongong City] Gallery down here. So it promotes the Gallery, and they're beautiful images, and … (looking through other photos of the final work) Aidan Ridgeway's statement, here, when he was Aboriginal Senator … You know Aiden Ridgeway, I assume.
Vincent: Arr, I'm showing my ignorance, but no.

Michael: Aidan Ridgeway was … I think he was a Green senator … in the early nineties, in the Federal Parliament. But anyway, he was a quite charismatic character, and this (referring to the quote), I think, was part of his maiden speech. But it talks about the Aboriginality in us all and our relationship to the land. Cook, right beside what this project is about, and the official portrait of Cook, enabled me to use the Eugene Von Guerard quotation there, which talks about, even in his time, just how beautiful the place was, but how it was quickly being deforested. And, you know, on one hand, deforestation was part of what brought wealth to the area, but also had a negative impact on the environment. So really what I wanted to do was to get people to just kind of weigh up these issues. Well, Sandon Point was a no-brainer, but I was able to put down [photographs of] Dootch Kennedy and his grand kid, and, you know, how community mindfulness is the only way to stop the over-development of the area.

Vincent: I found it very hard to get a long shot of the work because, first of all, there were a lot of people there that day, but also just the dimensions …

Michael: If you want images, by the way, I'm more than happy to put together a thumb drive of images. But that was basically it. I really wanted to touch on this issue of sustainability – and (pointing to the old photographs of saw milling) that's related here – but I also really wanted to touch on the Aboriginal history, which I guess I've done through this (referring to the photographs of Dootch Kennedy and Sandon Point included in the final work) …

Vincent: But it's interesting that when you approach the work all you do see is the Captain Cook image …

Michael: Yeah.

Vincent: … and it's only when you get closer you see all the smaller photographs that make up those images. And it's only when you get closer you see the informative parts. I have to admit that when I was walking up to it [for the first time], I thought, “Oh God … Cook?!”

Michael: That's good.

Vincent: But once you get closer to it you see all the different levels.

Michael: Yeah. And that's the device, as an artist, I will use quite a lot – of sucking people in with an expectation, and then turn it around. But also, don't forget, this is a commission where they wanted to commemorate the spot where Cook first tried to land. And so starting with Captain Cook was a really – I mean, I'm very happy with it – but it had a logic in that that's what the buyer wanted. And I like work that's got a sense of irony about it. And that's the kind of reaction you had, and other people have a reaction of, “Oh, gee, that's Captain Cook,” and then kind of go in and read other levels. I don't care what approach people take so long as they get to the various levels.

Vincent: Oh, I don't think they couldn't. If they do actually go up to look at it, like I said, you approach it with this preconception, I guess, because of the image of Cook – everyone knows those images of Cook – but once you get up to it you can't not start looking at the other images.

Michael: Yep. And people do. And for me that's the mark of a successful artwork. In terms of contemporary art practice – I mean, to talk about me in my position, and, you know, what is meant by contemporary art – this doesn't figure on the radar. But for me this is real. This is really what public art, I think, should be about – engagement, etcetera, etcetera.

Vincent: Well, I've done a lot of reading about concepts of public art. Some of the strongest stuff was written in the early nineties …

Michael: Who would you be thinking of?

Vincent: A couple of compendiums, mainly of North American literature … um, which is really the only part of my research which has drawn on literature from outside Australia. Compendiums by Susan Lacy and …

Michael: Oh, yes.

Vincent: … but she talks about what she calls 'new genre' public art. You know, public art was firstly a memorial or a focus of worship; then in the twentieth century it became the singular vision of an artist, and often the public would be like, “Our taxes paid for that?!”; but now public art should not only be made by the community in that area but also address the issues of that area.

Michael: Right. I only buy that up to a point.
Vincent: It's been a while since I read it. It's stuff I need to go back and read again before I start writing [seriously] about it. But that's what I took from it.

Michael: That was very much the kind of philosophy behind the community arts movement of the eighties and nineties which has kind of receded. The philosophy obviously strikes a chord with me 'cause that's the way I work. But it doesn't stop me from understanding that people can make more considered work (referring to the Collin's Rock work) that suits the location and that people will engage with. If you think about Amish Kapoor's big donut stainless steel thing in Chicago – you'd recognise it if you saw a photograph – it was very much the artist's statement and is very fucking beautiful, and the reflections and distortions that the highly polished stainless steel throws up, people love it.

Vincent: Oh, the local example is the Bert Flugelman sculptures. They're beautiful, and they're totally his. I'm not sure [Lacy's] saying there isn't a place for that [kind of work], but I'm not going to say anything more about it 'cause I really do need to go back and read [that compendium].

Michael: It doesn't matter. Suffice it to say the approach I prefer to take with my work is this kind of approach, though I don't have any problem with the individual artwork that simply responds to a brief, drawn up by whoever, if it's good. There's a lot of crap, as well, but there you go.

Vincent: So it was in the process, obviously, of researching the Collin's Rock work that you met Dootch and started to learn about the local area?

Michael: Correct.

Vincent: Was there anything that surprised you about the Illawarra [in relation to its] Aboriginal culture?

Michael: Um, I was surprised … I mean, I've been very involved in the arts. I've been Chair of NAVA (referring to the Crafts Council of Australia), Chair of Viscopy (referring to the Collin's Rock work), I've been on so many arts boards that I've obviously worked with, and come up against, a lot of Aboriginal issues. But I'm used very much to an urban context like you were talking about. So mates might be, say, Bronwyn Bancroft, who you may know. Now, if I'm in the city and I want some advice … If I want to deal with an issue, I would refer to her, and say, “Tell me about this person. Should I do this, should I do that?” You know, I'm out there getting advice. Now, what surprised me when I came down here was – 'cause I know I'll get my head fucking bitten off if I don't a) consult, and b) if I back the wrong horse. So I was surprised by the lack of politicisation – exactly what you were talking about. I don't mean in the sense of Dootch Kennedy. I felt the strong political dimension down here, but not in the cultural arena, not the art arena – which is what I was used to in Sydney. That surprised me. The obvious was just how easy and enjoyable it was to talk to these people, whereas in Sydney I might find people a bit more prickly …

Vincent: Oh, okay.

Michael: … and I don't mind saying that.

Vincent: Can you elaborate on that?

Michael: Okay, um … These Aboriginal heads here (referring to several kitsch ceramic pieces on the kitchen table) … if I was in Sydney and I wanted to do something with them in terms of an artwork … I mean, I guess my interest in them now …

Vincent: Sorry, before you go on … Did you design and make those?

Michael: Oh, no, no, no. They're sixties. But I've got a lot of them. I find them really interesting, mainly from a – I could say – ethnographic/political point of view. Now, if I wanted to do something with them – if I was in Sydney, and wanted to do an art work centred around them – I would go and check it out with someone like Brenda Croft. That's what I've done in the past. I'd tell her what I wanted to do, and she might say, “I don't think you should go there”. And I'd say, “Okay, fine.” And I guess there was a lot more defensiveness in Sydney. Whereas I think I could more easily, down here, say to people, “Look at the stuff here …” and I've shown this stuff to, say, Lorraine [Brown] and Narelle [Thomas] … they've been in my studio, and I've got a heap of it down there. I didn't have the same expectation that there would be defences as there were in Sydney, if that makes sense. So that was interesting for me … the ability to poke fun at yourself. And the Aboriginal issue was very enlightening for me, down here, while Sydney's too politicised for me to see that side of things. And the other thing, down here, that I had never realised – with being involved with urban activist Koories – was just how appalling the employment and economic situation is down here. Boy, how hard does it get out west? That was [my impression just from] walking around Port Kembla.

Vincent: Well, not even specifically in regard to Aboriginal people, I remember reading somewhere that Wollongong has the largest unemployment in the whole of the country … If I'm remembering correctly.

Michael: Yeah, no, that sounds right.
Vincent: We were talking earlier about how the 'Sirens of Woolyungu' came about. You'd met Lorraine and Narelle in the process of researching Collin’s Rock …?

Michael: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's how it came about. And Sue Leppan suggested, instead of putting in separate proposals, we put in a joint one. I liked the idea of putting in a joint one, because I like working collaboratively, but I also liked Lorraine and Narelle. And we agreed upon the work methodology which would be a) true collaboration – it's not “I make something and you dot it” – b) we could be completely honest, put out any idea, and anyone could shoot it down, and c) that I'd do the project managing on it.

Vincent: How much of their work had you seen?

Michael: Um, I would have seen their work around the studio down at Coomaditchie [Kemblawarra Community Hall], and I would have seen the ['Blue Dreaming'] work down on the side of Levendi. I don't know if I'd seen anymore or not … but enough to know there was enough talent there that things would be fine and “Let's give it a whirl.”

Vincent: And so, in the joint expression of interest, what ideas did you present to Council?

Michael: [It was quite] a sketchy actualisation, but a clear conceptual framework for the way we would work, that we'd divide up the time with 'this is research and trying out, in a collaborative sense', how these two sets of mythologies and imagery would work together. And I think at the time I was really interested to see whether, between the three of us, we could come up with a new kind of format, if you like, for imagery that crosses between a Eurocentric and a traditional Aboriginal [viewpoint]. So it basically meant that around these stainless steel frames (referring to a detail of the final work illustrated in the photographs we're looking through), I don't know how closely you can notice it, but there were laser engravings done of drawings done by some of the kids at Coomaditchie. But I'd also intervened and run those drawings through a few different [computer] programs, so they'd started to take on a very different aesthetic. The same with the drawings of the sirens. And we did that a few times, you know, played, with their permission, and an understanding of what I was going to do. I'd take some of their drawings or paintings, or sections of those works, and run them through filters in [Adobe] Photoshop, and fuck around through a number or programs – it might be that we'd created a new background with this black and white image on top – but some of those things started to look really interesting, and I thought, “This has the potential to develop quite nicely”. And I think funding costs, funding problems at Coomaditchie, the time and pressures for all of us, never really enabled us to develop that any further. But I think there's a very very interesting possibility it could happen. I'm quite indulgent with the robotic side of making things, and I love the interplay between the digital and the analogue, so I'd still love to do a bit more playing. But we have to have the where-with-all to do that play, I think.

Vincent: Yeah, I was reading an article about some of the processes you use. Did you know from the start that you'd actually include historical photographs and artworks?

Michael: Yes, we did. We knew that we would have pictures, and it would be a little bit like the room of a house where you've got your photographs around, but there would be a dominant feature of the escarpment and the water. And I think we probably knew at that stage that there would be two interpretations of the sirens, the Ulysses and the Oolaboolawoo story … art, Mimosa is the daughter of Oolaboolawoo. Apart from that we didn't know much more … It took us all into some interesting [territory] … Have you seen the YouTube video?

Vincent: Wow, okay. I didn't know there was one, which is strange 'cause I've surprisingly found quite a few videos of the Coooomie mob [on YouTube]. But no …

Michael: Okay, if you put my name into YouTube, or 'Lorraine Brown', or 'Sirens of Woolyungu', you'll come up with a ten-minute [video] that Council did. And I think that will give you a pretty good insight into the working mechanisms – the way we worked together – and will probably give you a feel for the ease with which we worked. Of course the engineer – who wanted another proposal to get up and running over this one – did worry that we wouldn't have it finished by the end of the financial year, because this is a Council objective – that you have to sign off on projects before the end of the financial year. So by the 31st of June [2009] this had to be finished. So it was a pretty short time frame for a reasonably complex and largish job. I said to the engineer, “Mate, on the 31st of June at 4 o’clock, we'll be having champagne and launching it.” And we were there.

Vincent: Oh, yeah. When I did my interview with Lorraine and Narelle, they were working away on these large panels as we were talking … trying to finish off on a project. Did Council ever … and I'd like to know this about Collin’s Rock, also … Did Council ever put limitations on what you included [in these works]? Did they say, “We don't want this …”?

Michael: No.
Vincent: Okay. Because Belmore Basin – being such a family-orientated spot – I just wondered whether they had stipulated 'nothing political'.

Michael: No. And I think there is a political dimension in the work …

Vincent: Absolutely, but I meant the type of overt politicism we were discussing earlier …

Michael: Yeah. No, the person that would have decided that would have pretty much been me – that's my way of working. Lorraine and Narelle are not in your face. I would [normally] be trying to push it to an edge … I guess I tend to know where that edge is. In the past I've done public artworks where I've put up proposals, ideas, imagery, that I think is pretty funny and interesting, but said to the town planner, “Look, it's your call,” and the town planner has said, “No, I don't think so,” and I've said, “Look, that's fine,” I'm not fazed by that. So I think I've got a pretty good idea of where the edge and limits are … sometimes!

Vincent: The other thing I wanted to mention – I don't know if you want to comment on it – I find this very small harbour area interesting because there's quite a few public art works [there].

Michael: Bloody/My (?) oath.

Vincent: You've got the 'Sirens', you've got [work by] Col Henry across the road, you've got the 'Storylines' [by Boolarm Nangamai] across the road as well, and, as you mentioned before, you've got Lorraine Brown's 'Blue Dreaming' mural [outside Levendi], and even if you wanted to include – I'm pretty sure it was Coomaditchie ladies, yet again – the little electrical box [in the park], which has been painted with Aboriginal motifs, as well …

Michael: And you've also got the recent one, which is the bench up on Flagstaff Hill, which you probably haven't seen …

Vincent: No, I haven't.

Michael: … and in fact Lorraine, Narelle and I put in a proposal for it … but we were off our game. Lorraine was sick, we didn't have sufficient time to really talk it through, and I wasn't at my best [either]. It was a job we should have got – it would have tied in really nicely with [the ‘Sirens’ mosaic]. I'm not displeased with what went in there. In fact I went to the launch of it 'cause I like the people that did it … but we would have done a better job.

Vincent: Even if they were sketchy, what were some of the ideas [you had for it]?

Michael: Arr, look, it was to do with use of the ocean, the waterways leading down to it … so it had a lot of fishing stuff in it. But the thing with it is that it's almost the shape of a serpent. The central feature down the end was a combination of the Aboriginal kind-of lozenges signifying meeting spots, camp fires. And in the middle, before these(?), was a sphere-ised(?) aerial view of the harbour. The ---- ----(?) would have been this big, and it would have been a star. But as I said, we blew it.

Vincent: Well, I'll have to go and have a look at what has been done there.

Michael: Yeah, yeah.

Vincent: What I was really amazed at was the sketch of [how] the harbour was going to look, from the eighteen hundreds[, I think it was] … The Harbour looked a lot larger. Either it's changed so much over the ages, or I'm not remembering the [reproduction of those plans] properly …

Michael: It's deceptive down there. You look at the harbour and you think, “God, it's tiny,” but it's so God damn deceptive. I'm very used to the water and the difference between a water view of the land and a land view of the water. I used to do lots and lots of kayaking around Sydney, and so your whole kind of view, the scale of things, is so different from the water. So [that large sketch] is kind of an aerial/actual view of the train tracks and the like [at Belmore Basin in the nineteenth century] … It's a beauty. Over on the side here there was another photograph of a plan where they were proposing that they punch a hole from Belmore Basin into what was Tom Thumb Lagoon …

Vincent: That must be the one I'm thinking of …

Michael: That's what they were proposing to do, and they raised public subscription for it, but it all fell over when Mt. Kembla started to roll and Port Kembla started to play a larger role in the local economy] …

Vincent: So it's one of the smaller [reproductions] I was thinking of. It really surprised me. I thought, “Gee, that would have been such an engineering feat …”

Michael: It would have been.
Vincent: … not to mention environmentally disastrous!

Michael: Yeah, absolutely. I'll tell you what was interesting ... These tiles here (referring to the tiles that illustrate the serpent in the artwork) were made in Italy. They come from a [larger] tile this big (demonstrates with his hands), this long, by about that, and they're red background, gold and yellow on top, and all we did was we broke them. And I knew when I saw them, first of all, that the girls would just go ape over them, you know, because [the tiles are] so dotty, so Indigenous(?). So the only thing we did was we put these black spots a little bit further on. But there was no discussion of 'this is not Aboriginal', because it looks Aboriginal. They accepted that, “Hey, this is perfect: they're beautiful and colourful. They've got an Aboriginal feel and look to them.”

Vincent: I don't know how much you've seen of the Aboriginal engravings around Sydney. If you can only ever go to one, go to this one in the National Park … it must have been an incredibly sacred site: it's got an absolutely huge serpent, at least four dancing men at the bottom of the serpent – I mean, they're all eroding, it's an absolute tragedy – and where the serpent's head is there's an outline of a kangaroo superimposed over it. But all along the body of the serpent there are holes or dots just like that serpent in [your work].

Michael: Oh, okay. Which National park?

Vincent: This one (pointing north) – the Royal National Park.

Michael: Oh, okay.

Vincent: So, it's on Dharawal land. It's Dharawal. But I just thought those similarities were interesting.

Michael: Right. I'm much more familiar with the northern suburbs of Sydney – Westhead and all of that.

Vincent: Well, there's lots in the National Park that, in my opinion, are just as equally spectacular. But they're disappearing – eroding. It's a real shame. What did Lorraine and Narelle tell you about the serpent you were depicting in that work? I mean, it's something I'll ask them about when I hopefully get to interview them a second time … 'Cause there's the story of a great snake or lizard called Gurungatch, and he's responsible for the shaping of the coast. I was just wondering if they said that was him. (Michael shakes his head, unsure.) Their fountain at the bottom of the mall – that's [a depiction of] Gurungatch.

Michael: Oh, okay. I did a project in the mall the year after ['Sirens of Wollyunguh'], I think it was, where I set up … I don't know if, when you walked up the stairs here, you noticed the weird creatures? Have a look on your way down. I just made these muck-around things in the studio, and they're an amalgam of bulldog, Buddha, and other things … I made them, and then for Viva La Gong I put them into the watercourse [in the mall] – not where the girls have their work, but on the other side [of Kembla street] – and I called them Bunyips. And of course, bunyips are both European and Aboriginal – a mythical creature who feeds on women, in particular, who stray at night and get too close to the water. And of course, that water course is an old Aboriginal water site – an important site. And I was very interested that very few people these days know anything about bunyips … Do bunyips ring a bell with you?

Vincent: Yes, but when I've specifically tried to find out what they were, I've heard very mixed …

Michael: Interpretations?

Vincent: Yeah. I've heard what I think is the more authentic version – some sort of creature that takes women when they're too close to a waterhole. The other, which I think is very much stemming from the early days of contact, when cattle escaped, and Aborigines would come across bulls and cows into the bush, and they had absolutely no idea what the hell they were … Because when I've asked people what a bunyip looks like, they've said, "Very much like a bull." (laughs) So I think it's very much stemming from [those early encounters] …

Michael: I've never heard that. That's very interesting. I think I favour the interpretation I've heard, because so many legends serve a social education of kids … you know, you're not meant to go walking around at night near water. You know, the Bogey man will get you. But as we know, this is a way of modifying your behaviour for your own safety.

Vincent: Okay, well, is there anything you'd like to add [before we wind up the interview]?

Michael: No, except to say that, if you want, you're more than welcome to follow up. If you email me a reminder I'll send you images of the Bunyip project and also of the Two Kings park.

Vincent: That would be great. I'll try to visit that one anyway, but the reality is that photographs taken at the time that any of these types of works were unveiled are a lot nicer than those in later years. Some of the ones I've visited, they look a bit worse for wear.
The only one I actually think gained something from not being looked after was the one up on Mt. Keira … The Alison Page one …

Michael: Oh, yes, yes.

Vincent: Photographs I've seen from when it was unveiled … there was no grass around it. It was too clean. When I photographed it, probably about a year ago now, the grass added a dimension of mysteriousness to it … those structures emerging from the long grass.

Michael: Right. Actually, going back to one of your first questions, which was how I got the gig at Collin's Rock … it had something to do, I'm sure, with Council knowing I could put images onto ceramic tiles that would be water-proof, weather-proof, vandal-proof. That would have appealed to Sue Bessell, to say, “Hey, this is a good sort-of ----(?)”. But at that stage I never knew that I could actually do this kind of composite image of Cook with all those little images.

Vincent: Yeah, just a technical question … I've seen that technique used quite a lot, but it still amazes me how you get those [smaller] pictures in the right area to create the larger picture …

Michael: Yeah. I could give you a long answer which would be bullshit, or say that the program I use is a Russian software program. You build up a library of images, you have your main image, and the algorithms will substitute the blues here with the blues there, and then you can change them around, you can pull one lot forward, one lot back, and so on. So in one sense it's very simple, but there are a lot of subtleties [to consider]. And I didn't know whether that would work … Actually, I'm now confused: I don't know whether I done, prior to Collin's Rock, any outdoor tiles with photographic images. I think I said at the time that I'd done it in studio work and that I'm sure we could do it [for the outdoors]. I think I said I was ninety-five percent sure that it work, yeah. And I work in Melbourne with people who do the printing and firing on it …

Vincent: So, even with the laser work used on those silver frames, you do a lot of the technical work?

Michael: Oh, yeah. I knew what I wanted, and worked with a mob down in Unanderra. But I supplied them with the right sort-of format and drawings, all sized and all that. One of the things that really interests me is with each job you do you push [boundaries] …

Vincent: And explore new territory.

Michael: Yeah, which is why you don't make much money.

Vincent: (laughs) I'm sure that's not your prime concern if you're willing to jobs like Collin's Rock.

Michael: Oh, mate, I've still got a mortgage, so it's pretty important to take what comes along. (laughs)
A1.I12: Interview with Djon Mundine OAM (21.02.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

Bundjalung man, Djon Mundine, needs little introduction. A prolific writer, curator, and artist, Djon has worked with communities throughout Australia, producing and facilitating some of the most important contemporary art of recent decades. I particularly wanted to meet with him to discuss a public art work he has designed but which remains in its planning stage.

“The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy”, if ever realised, will showcase traditional Sydney rock art motifs cut into the sandstone wall opposite the Sydney Opera House. The work’s massive scale will ensure it becomes a piece of theatre in its own right, and will be one of the few public works commemorating the area’s original inhabitants.

Unfortunately, as Djon was pressed for time, we had to conduct this interview in the cafeteria of the Australian Museum, Sydney. It was a particularly poor environment for recording audio. Djon’s voice was drowned out by the reverberating noise produced by other diners and visitors to the museum. I have transcribed as much of the interview as possible, but there remain many parts I simply could not decipher.

Vincent: To give you a run-down of my PhD thesis … I'm researching Aboriginal art of the NSW south coast, particularly that associated with traditional Dharawal country. I'm looking at the art as a prime factor in the construction of social or cultural landscapes, so in particular I've been looking at a lot of the pre-colonial visual culture … a lot of the Aboriginal rock art sites. But also, in the contemporary sphere, I've been looking at a lot of the public art in Wollongong – there's a huge amount of public Aboriginal public art down that way by Kevin Butler, and Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas from Coomaditchie, amongst others. So, yeah … Aboriginal art contributing to the construction of social landscapes. And I was reading about your proposed public art work for just outside the Opera House with great interest because it combines two of the primary areas of my research … you've taken those traditional [engraved] shapes and made it into a contemporary artwork in the public sphere.

Djon: So what did you think about the other public art? There's the [Gurangaty] Fountain … What's the other public art?

Vincent: In Wollongong? There's a lot of murals, a lot of mosaics …

Djon: Oh, yeah, on the outside of the [Wollongong City] Gallery …

Vincent: I should have brought a map, actually … I actually plotted a map where they all are. A lot around Lake Illawarra, in particular, in the Port Kembla-Shellharbour area, particularly by Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas. Kevin Butler's works tend to be school-orientated, they're generally collaborations with school kids, so they're obviously found on a lot of school premises, and they're generally more towards the northern suburbs of the Illawarra.

Djon: And is Kevin Butler Dharawal? Is he from Dharawal country?

Vincent: He's from the central coast … Nambucca.

Djon: Ah, Nambucca. So he's Gumbaynggir, possibly?

Vincent: Yeah, that sounds familiar. I've interviewed Kevin … I've interviewed Lorraine and Narelle …

Djon: Where do Lorraine and Narelle come from?

Vincent: Ah, I don't know what specific language group they associate with, but they talk about their childhoods in Nowra. So, depending on where in Nowra they specify … Nowra falls into either Dharawal or the Yuin-Dhurga languages. And people from that area tend to associate with a number of language groups.

Djon: A lot of people now go back to … their Adam and Eve – sort of like the Year Zero – is a Pol Pot type-thing, where the mission is the defining time, rather than where they're from. So people say, “Oh, I'm from Nowra mission,” or, “I'm from Cowra,” or whatever. But that doesn't really define where they come from.

Vincent: I've tended not to probe too much because I find it's a sensitive issue.

Djon: To some degree it is, but under Native Title it's another thing. And the whole thing is surrounded by controversy … Controversy amongst Aboriginal people, and it's an embarrassment to some white people. So they won't start to talk about it. It's an embarrassment to Aboriginal people too, but it's an embarrassment to certain power aspirants. This whole thing at the moment of people grasping for control of the Sydney region … You get a whole lot of people arguing over it. So this thing
they ran last Sydney Festival, where they started this program called “I am Eora” … Any mature Aboriginal person in Sydney, like over the age of about six, would know how politically incorrect and how dumb it is to say “I am Eora”, because there are lots of people who live here but no one – I’d say ninety-nine percent those people – are not from here. They come from Dubbo, or Nowra, or Cowra, or Moree, or whatever. So this thing about going around saying “I am Eora” - which is the broader Sydney district – led people to stay away from the project. Quite a few people weren't involved in that project. It was embarrassing as a theatre piece – the actual final theatre piece – the exhibition, et cetera, was embarrassing. Gary Foley, who comes from Nambucca, and is Gumbaynggir, he was supposed to be part of that, but he refused to be part of it. He said none of those people involved in it were around then [in the 70s]. I mean, he doesn't come from Sydney either, but these people weren't even here in the 70s, and they were supposed to be talking about the beginning of Aboriginal political movement, Aboriginal theatre, and whatever. None of those people were there. So he stayed away from it. And he furiously departed his performance piece that he'd done at the Opera House, which is where it ended up. And he made some statement … One of the things he says is – it's a kind of Freudian statement – “I am Gumbaynggir because I am not Eora.” And the premise of Native Title as the law ----(?), therefore you have to say where you’re from – and I don’t mean, “I happen to live in Dubbo,” or “I’ve lived in Narrabeen,” or somewhere …

Vincent:  It's where your bloodline is from.

Djon:  Yes, it's where you actually spiritually come from. So that's one thing. It's a very hotly contested issue. A lot of people are running around saying 'Welcome to Country', “Oh, we respect the land-owning people,” etcetera. But it's a very token respect, and then they're making interpretations of art that aren't from that place. That's essentially what it's about. Now, Bennelong and Pemulwuy, also … Bennelong came from the North Shore, he didn't come from here. The locals call it Bennelong Point, but that's -->(?), history, which is where I want to put this artwork of the actual rock engraving. I interpreted the figure – it comes from the North Shore, over at Manly, which is where he came from – as Bennelong. But the Pemulwuy figure … who comes from the Georges River, from down that way, between Parramatta and the Georges River, somewhere ---- ---- ----(?), La Perouse, that way. And they claim him, although everyone claims him now. So that figure is actually a contemporary rock engraving done by a member of the Summs family in the '50s from La Perouse.

Vincent:  Wow, okay …

Djon:  That's why I took that figure from there.

Vincent:  That's interesting. I thought there hadn't been any engravings done since the early 1800s.

Djon:  I don't really know ---- ---- ----(?), do, the circumstances of that rock engraving, but I’ve interpreted it as Pemulwuy.

Vincent:  Well, I was wondering about your choice of figures because, as I said, I did look at a lot of the sites around here. The ones I haven't been able to see in person, you know, I've tried to get photos of. You know … I've studied them. And I did recognise those figures as not coming from Dharawal country. And a lot of the articles I've read about [the proposed work] speak of “a gift from the Dharawal people to the Gadigal people”.

Djon:  That's right. That's what someone does when they do this. Historically Aboriginal art was created in a ritual sense. You would do one part of it, and the other people would do the other part of it. Some people might sing, and other people would dance, and they’d make artworks – sculptural spaces, performance spaces – to dance around. Originally I was based at Campbelltown when I started that. I found it very difficult to work with them, ’cause most non-Aboriginal people in Sydney couldn't care less about what Aboriginal people ---- ---- ---- (?). They find it hard to accept the history of this area. You can have any number of Captain Cook statues or other stupid things like neon signs, or whatever. People who done that only recognise ----(?), or have experience with Aboriginal art in that context. So you find a lot of people actually say that, you know, “This is about my Dreaming,” but [they] have no reference and no experience of the performative nature of that and how it's supposed to be experienced by others. So, anyway, I was working at the MCA, and the idea actually started then. And I approached people well before I went to Campbelltown. And someone described it as … I’ve just been to Melbourne Indigenous Arts Festival. It's the first one. They gave the whole of Federation Square over to that for free. The City of Melbourne Council did, anyway. And you could see everything for free. They had an amazing play called 'Coranderrk' which, for some reason, I don’t know why, but everyone was in tears by the end of that play …

Vincent:  You didn't like it?

Djon:  No, it was great. It moved everyone. They were in tears by the end of it. And I said to someone, “What happened?” I was watching this thing, it was just simple dialogue, and yet by the end of it everyone was in tears. It was really moving. They launched a huge public art event down on the river just next to Federation Square, which would be bigger than this whole room here, this space here (indicating the Australian Museum’s cafe, lobby, and gift shop, combined). And there was a performance there that closed the festival, it about the Bunjil spirit associated with the Yarra and William Barak, and so on. So this performance took place there. And I said to someone, “Why the fuck can't Sydney do [something like] this?” It was so well done [that] it's laughable what you see here with their fucking dumb, money-grubbing [attitudes]. Between Sydney and Melbourne there's no comparison. It was really well done, it was very thoughtful, it was free – provided by the City of
Melbourne Council. All of those things. And [the person I asked] said two things: one was that the difference between Sydney and Melbourne was that there was a great history of philanthropy in Melbourne to do with the arts. Like, you know, the Meyer family, in the '50s or '60s, spent twenty million dollars building a stadium, a performance space, and they gave it to the city. I couldn't even believe that happening in Sydney. Can you imagine someone giving a free concert hall to the city of Sydney? Kerry Packer, Russel Crowe, or somebody like that? There's none of that. The other thing is, that somebody said — and this is the truth of the matter, most probably — everyone here thinks, “What can I score out of it? What political mileage can I get out of it? What photo opportunities can I get out of it?” Therefore, you really don't get things happening here. It's ludicrous what happens. They put on a lot of razzamatazz, and spend lots of money, but it usually has no depth to it. You can say, “Oh, wow, I just saw this theatre piece, and it was one of the most beautiful theatre pieces.” Obviously somebody from overseas should take this piece — — —- (?) something that's not going to be quoted overseas, something that won't be quoted in the history of theatre, that kind of thing — and I'm not being — —- (?) mania, but I just think it's the crazy way that everyone's contesting this space here now. It's not that it doesn't happen in Melbourne — there are contestents among people there, but it just seems here people will fuck each other [over on principle] : “Well, I can't let them get it because — —- — —- — —- — —- — —- (?)”. It's like that joke about the NSW Labor Party. They lost this [last] election really hugely. And they were at this restaurant, getting pissed, going, “We won! We won!” And someone said, “I thought you lost.” And they said, “No, we kept the bastards out.” And this person says, “You didn't win. You didn't keep the Liberals out.” “No, we're talking about the Left-wing!” And that's the vision here. There's no fucking vision. It's about how to cruel somebody else. “If I can fuck you off, that's all that matters.” No regard for proprieties or whatever. Anyway, I'll stop there because it's so cynical. So beyond all that … I worked at the MCA, and when I was there it was the time that they knocked down the building where 'the toaster' is now, and you could see across to the Botanic Gardens. I had already seen this history of a landscape and gardens, vegetation, etcetera, and I could see the escarpment line of that cliff-face very clearly. And that's when I thought this is what should happen … a number of projects that should happen in Sydney, right in its heart, to define or leave a mark of Aboriginality, an Aboriginal presence here. Okay? So of course I tried to start doing that. The first exhibition I did at the MCA was … we had to put on a contemporary art exhibition. I worked with Fiona Foley, who's really from Fraser Island ---- ---- (?). She was doing a residency at ---- ---- ---- (?) . We had an offer: would we like to go to Cuba to do the Cuban Biennale. So, because it was in the middle of Sydney, because it was on the site where the first Europeans came and waved the flag, we had a mountain of ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) sacred site – Aboriginal sacred site. We then searched for something that was ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) it was basically a contemporary Aboriginal art exhibition [with works] from across Australia. So we had Gordon Bennett, Destiny Deacon, those sorts of people in that. We also had images of Tommy McCrae from Victoria, and to break up the stereotype of Aboriginal art as just being bark or dot paintings. So we came up with ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) “Tyerabarbourwayou”, which means, “I shall never become a white man”. And it's supposed to be ---- ---- ---- (?) people. It turns out of course that it's quoted in a book like that. There's a novel called “Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior”, and they use that quote. But the quote actually comes from the diaries of Dawes, as in Dawes Point, where the [Sydney] Harbour Bridge is. He lived with a teenage girl, an Aboriginal woman called Patyegarang. And one day she was having a bath, and he said something like, “Scrub hard enough and you'll scrub the black off.” And she told him to get fucked, basically, saying, “Tyerabarbourwayou” – “I'll never become a white man.” So that's the quote we named the exhibition after. So, trying to find ways in which to keep this presence in there. There was a man called David Foster, an Aboriginal man who is Gumbaynggir. He's now moved back to Nambucca, or from near there. But he worked in the Museum of Sydney when it opened. And so through his efforts they were able to put The Edge of the Trees up, that installation by Fiona Foley, as an Aboriginal presence there. And I was trying to kick off the other thing. Now, I ran a course in prison last year, in Goulburn Prison. One of the prisoners said to me, “You know, the worst enemy of an Aboriginal man is another Aboriginal man …”

Vincent: I've been told that.

Djon: Well, that's what happens. So I've been beating my head against a brick wall with that work at the Opera House. The Opera House has Aboriginal people on its board. Not once were they ever in contact with me. I've been to see the Director, I've seen their staff … They've said verbally that they're in love with the project … because it's a bit of a distance from the Opera House, it's safe, there's no problem in that sense, ---- ---- ---- (?) others there. So they dodged trying to actually send me something on paper. They keep saying, “Do you have permission from the Aboriginal Land Council?” So twenty years ago I got letters from the Metropolitan Land Council, from the Darug Land Council, from the La Perouse Land Council, from Boonan, and from a number of other Aboriginal organisations, who support the project. It's been discussed ad infinitum over the last twenty years. So, now, the Botanic Gardens, who are also very much in favour of the plans, sent letters saying, “Yes, we like this” - because the actual wall space legally belongs to the Botanic Gardens. It doesn't belong to the Opera House. So they were very much in favour, saying, “We want art”. They now have an Aboriginal liaison officer, but he's not really pushing it either. They have a number of other Aboriginal art projects in the Gardens, done by other people, but they're not particularly pushing [my project]. I went to people to ask for money … “Well, we'd like to, but we can't really put that much money into a thing like that.” Lots of people have said, “Oh, well, that's a lot of money, you know.” But for a public artwork it's not a lot of money at all. A couple of hundred thousand dollars is not a lot of money. If I put up a bronze of Captain Cook, that would be a couple of hundred thousand dollars. But it this case, “it's too much money”.

Vincent: You think it's because it is an Aboriginal artwork?

Djon: Yeah. I think the imagination is, “How would you get permission to put that up there?” We've got letters from the Historic Houses Trust saying they like it, we've got letters from an Aboriginal committee to do with heritage, just last year, who said, “Oh, yeah, yeah, we support it.” I had a meeting with them, and then morning tea. To a person every one of them came up to
me at that morning tea and said, “Look, this should have happened years ago. This is just crazy.” Well, give me the fucking money! You know, or sign a letter. So there’s a committee that works for the Sydney Council … I’ve been to them. They support it. You could have heard a pin drop when I talked about it to them, and some of them were almost in tears. But they wanted ---- ----(?). So then they sent letters to Clover Moore and people in that bureaucracy. Again, quarter of a million dollars ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) fucking launch of their policy, or whatever, would be fifty thousand dollars. Now, the quarter of a million dollars I'm asking for ... a large slice of that goes towards the opening event – a good photo opportunity for anyone, it's in a bit of real estate that's unbelievable, it's a very public place, and the thing that I want is: I want it to be in a very public place. There is another work by a couple of Aboriginal artists – Judy Watson and Brenda Croft – they're about as big as these two tables [we're sitting at], and they're part of the pavement.

Vincent: Where is that, exactly?

Djon: One's on the pavement going around the Botanic Gardens, right near the water. The other one's actually up near the Tank Stream, where it's hidden away(?). Of course, in the great Australian tradition, there's a pub called the Tank Stream Bar, where you can go and get pissed, basically, and think about high art or anything else, even though the stream might be a sacred site – don't worry about that! So that's where you can ----(?), get pissed, ---- ---- ----(?). As they say, if you can't eat it or fuck it, well ---- ---- ---- ----(?) in Australian history and traditional culture. And that continues. So the people ---- ---- ----(?) are very smart, and they named this thing 'Barangaroo' after Bennelong's wife. So you've got Dawes Point followed by another Point over there. Part of their brief was that they include Aboriginal culture and [consult with] Aboriginal people. Now, the money they're making out of that project at Barangaroo Point ...

Vincent: Is that where Paul Keating wants to build those high-rise apartments?

Djon: Yeah, he's involved. They want to make an artificial island in the harbour. Now, the precedent that sets means that you can make more artificial islands anywhere – you can fill the fucking harbour in. So long as you can make money out of it, well, why not?

Vincent: I suppose that's one way to combat the lack of land in the CBD.

Djon: Someone else said they should put a wall across the headlands and drain it. I mean, why have a beautiful harbour? So that's what they're naming that [new area]. They're supposed to build an Aboriginal museum – a 'keeping place'. They are struggling with that whole thing about putting Aboriginal people back into the history and back into the landscape. It's really queer, because in America – the United States, that is – the most money-hungry, bunch of money-grubbing arse-holes in the history of the world, capitalists who'd sell their grandmother if they could make money out of her, there are lots of cities named after native American people, there are states named after native American people, there are sites, places, roads all named after native American people. Here, people seem determined to rub it right out. Bennelong Point was actually called McKenzie's Point for quite awhile. Then Clover Moore and the Opera House came and they reverted back to Bennelong Point. However, I keep getting away from my main point. So I had all that paper work together by the time I left Sydney … between '88 and the early '90s I had all that material together, but no one would actually fund it. The Sydney Council had a plan for public artwork then. Their policy was to make public artwork that fitted into the landscape – the city landscape, that is, not the natural landscape. So, “Oh, well, city landscape, you have Captain Cook ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) put up new ones. Anything Aboriginal, though, is virtually hidden. That's why you get the Brenda Croft piece being only so big, and it's on the pavement where you'll hardly see it. The Judy Watson piece is very much like that too. They supported it, but they didn't know what to do, because what it means is you have to actually do something, not fuck around but actually do something. That's why the Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence piece, The Edge of the Trees, is a miracle – a real miracle. So, I had this idea about the rock engravings. I spent a couple of thousand dollars [doing research] ... I bought a rare book, the [W.D.] Campbell book, which is called [Aboriginal Rock Carvings of Port Jackson and Broken Bay], which was a survey that came out in the 1890s. Then I went away again [for work] – I went to Canberra, I think ... I ended up in Brisbane, Japan, and then I came up here. So, when I went to Campbelltown … You work with ambitious people, there are people who want to score out of it. So they put me in touch with an architect ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) illustrations, got a quote from a [stone] mason to do it, got plans developed to do it, and then we couldn't get any further because no one would cough up the actual money to do it. The Sydney Council loved it – they wouldn't do it. The NSW Aboriginal Land Council – their funds run to a couple of billion dollars – but no, they “can't support cultural things”. So ---- ----(?) Council to have that attitude, where do you put the right pressure where black property's involved ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) they don't try and do anything Aboriginal, they just try and do property deals with developers.

Vincent: That's what I've been hearing about the Gundungurra Land Council …

Djon: That's right. And the La Perouse Land Council …

Vincent: So everyone's saying 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' permission-wise, but no one's putting money into it?

Djon: It's the Australian tall poppy syndrome - “Oh, I could be blamed for that.”
Vincent: Well, it's interesting that you mentioned the Campbell book, because as soon as I saw the concept artwork I thought, “Wow, that will be really powerful” - a real powerful presence, like you said. But I thought there'll be a real inherent irony to the work in the sense that you've taken this traditional style and put it in a public place when the originals have been systematically destroyed through urban expansion, and really, though they're theoretically protected by the National Parks, or whatever, nothing's really being done to save the ones that are still out there in the bush – ‘cause they're all totally eroding.

Djon: There's lot in the Dharawal, there. The Bennelong one is over at Allambie Heights. The local people who live there are very proud, but the engravings have been almost obliterated by trail bike riders riding up and down there. It's like, “Oh, yeah, this is a sacred place. I can bungee jump off the top of St. Peter's Basilica. I'd like to put a rope across ---- ---- (?) and walk across.”

Vincent: Apparently there's one on a footpath somewhere. They didn't cement it over, but it's there in the footpath …

Djon: There's the one at Bondi …

Vincent: The ones they re-grooved really badly?

Djon: … down by the beach. But the thing is the Land Council has never seen it as part of their life or belief. They don't see it as part of their life practice or a community practice, and that's because their history only goes back to the missions: “I was at Cowra mission, I'm from the mission at Moree, my history goes back there.” Anything beyond that, well … that's where it ends. ---- ---- (?) stupid ---- ---- ---- (?) we don't expect you ---- ---- (?) and paint yourself up with ochre ---- ---- ---- (?) but be aware of the history that you come from. You know, do I expect every Greek I know to walk around wearing a pleated skirt and pom-poms on their bloody slippers? You don't have to be that to be Greek. And there are philosophical and other ideas … the kind of life, ideas about life that you want to espouse. And there's nothing wrong with that. Why you would keep on wanting to be a major fucking property developer … In the case of the Gundangurra people, it's just ridiculous. The thought that we could make money! Ohhh! And people keep giving me figures. People keep chucking figures at me. If you haven't worked it out by the time you're an adult, or by the time you're over thirty, forty, if you haven't worked out that money doesn't mean anything …

It has absolutely no meaning. That thing of Barangaroo, it might be a brainwave – to certain property developers in Sydney that was a brainwave – Sydney Harbour has all these peninsulas, right, usually with factories and warehouses. So the idea is, “If we can do them all up, we can make a killing out of that!” They're going to have one hundred thousand people living on Barangaroo ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) Twenty-five thousand units on that property, and they're selling those units for a million dollars each. That's twenty-five billion dollars that they're going to make out of it. Now that's why they're fighting, bribing the Government, threatening people by sending a couple of boys around to beat the shit out of them. They will kill for that money. And a bunch of Abos getting in the way … “Well, if we have to have an Abo name, well, yeah, let's give it an Abo name. We'll dress it up, right? Let's create a gallery to please everyone.” In fact we've set a precedent by building an artificial island in the harbour, which means the guy that wanted to buy the shoreline of Rosebay – he wanted to buy all the shoreline in Sydney … you know why? To put in marinas along the whole of the shoreline. And you can rent them, you see, to really wealthy people for their yachts. Not me, or you, or whoever, but fucking multimillionaires from Hong Kong to park their yacht. There's been a really big battle with the population of Rosebay Bellevue Hill, but that's where he started. He's tried to hammer that, because that council allowed him to own that land. Now, under most ---- ---- ---- (?) in the world you can own a coastline beyond the watermark. You can't own that, no one owns it, it's public property. You might own the land on it, but you don't own down into the water. And that goes back to [the principle that] if you're in the water somewhere and you've got to get out 'cause your boat's sinking or something, there's no chance you'll be trespassing. Or the Government might need access for the public good or something. That's the law he's trying to change with the NSW Government – he changed international law that's been around since the time of fucking Hercules so that he can own that shoreline and build wall-to-wall marinas so he can make fucking money. So, you think of twenty-five billion dollars, right. I can't even think of a billion dollars. What would I do with a billion dollars? In your whole life you could not spend a billion dollars.

Vincent: Well, you could invest that billion and make more billions of dollars.

Djon: But why?

Vincent: I know, I totally agree with you.

Djon: That's what I'm saying. By the time you're thirty money is completely irrelevant.

Vincent: I mean, the example from where I'm from is the Southern Coalfields above the Illawarra escarpment, where you've got the Woronora Plateau. Really sensitive ecosystems, full of Aboriginal heritage, full of rock art, but they're mining the fuck out of it. Large short-term profits, and the damage they're doing to those major river systems in there – which Wollongong and some of Sydney need for their water supply – is irreversible. So I totally agree with you. I just don't understand how people can do that type of stuff.

Djon: But the point of all that ramble is: just trying to put an artwork in that place, it has made people so gun-shy. They back away from it – why would you want to start? They like it, they like the idea, but … The whole of Paris is full of these boulevards and roundabouts. Each of those roundabouts has a name, named after a person – usually [commemorated] with a bronze statue or
something. But the whole city is rich with all this artwork – even though it may be historically bad artwork in that sense. And they say that Paris is the city of light, one of the cultural capitals of the world. And it's a city where you can walk anywhere. But you've got art everywhere, you've got museums everywhere. So even to begin to think that way in Sydney, it's like you're talking to ---(?) or a Martian.

**Vincent:** Well, I was reading an article – probably a year ago now – about Sydney Council trying to get more public art up around the place. But it all seemed very ephemeral – like community art that was up for a week or month, or something, and then it's taken down.

**Djon:** Yeah, “We'll get them to paint a mural somewhere … ” --- ---- ---- ---- (?) Art that takes place … that thing they're doing now – I could be wrong – that thing in Newtown, the most famous mural there that stands out, called 'I have a dream', it's a Martin Luther King mural, 'cause nobody would let anyone go near it. And, you know, there's a program of public art with murals and these other people ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) demonstrated ---- ---- ---- (?)? When you drive along Kings Street you see this big mural – it's a black wall with Martin Luther King's face looking at the earth, saying, you know, “I have a dream.” Have you seen that one?

**Vincent:** I'm familiar with it, yeah.

**Djon:** And there's another one at an African restaurant that seems to have been there for years. It's a big map of Africa, a pre-colonial map of Africa with all the different nations – not like Zulu or all those colonial titles. It's a really provocative work. And with these figures that I'm talking about, the Bennelong and Pemulwuy, they would be about the size of that work. Perhaps a bit bigger

**Vincent:** Oh, okay. Oh, wow.

**Djon:** Yeah. They're about six metres tall. And Bennelong … the image I took, I've reconstructed it a bit – it's of a dancing man. And I picked a whale shark because – [the original is] almost obliterated now – but Bennelong's name means a kind of big fish. That's how I got the idea of the fish. But there is a big figure over there [at Allambie Heights] with a big whale shark next to it. The figure's actually smaller than the whale shark, so I thought I'd make them roughly the same size. And the other image is of a man crouching with his spear – he's hunting a kangaroo. So they'd be longer than the figures on the wall of that African restaurant, and I'll show you … (Djon then begins searching for a file on his laptop)

**Vincent:** I mean, I imagined it being big, but I didn't imagine it being quite that big. Yeah, it's pretty … awesome.

**Djon:** I liked what you said about the work in an article … you were quoted as saying “A song without words, a dance without music” …

**Djon:** Yeah …

**Vincent:** Can you expand on that?

**Djon:** Something about the conversation between black people and white people …? A song without words.

**Vincent:** I think you were talking about the loss of [traditional] language, [in the article] …

**Djon:** Yeah. Well, it was Mendelssohn or Mozart that wrote these pieces of music and they're called 'songs without words'. Song without words … it's more about the evocation of culture. Everyone thinks that Aboriginal art is fixed: the idea of these [contemporary] rock engravings is to take it away from [just] being bark paintings or dot paintings, and all that. So it's an update – a whole new concept of Aboriginal art. So we thought we'd spend ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) because we thought the dots as being ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) made it as a joke ---- ---- (?) the dots ---- ---- (?)? It's a very small town: there would have been about ten houses when I went there ----(?). Very small ---- (?) planes only came about once a week, ---- ---- ---- (?) dance and culture. It's a really rich place, an amazing place to be. And the dance that I saw ---- ---- ---- (?) ceremony where the people dance without music, and of course there are songs without words. And that's how the music was made ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) the people can dance, and make up the dance, without music, and they do these dances almost to prove they can ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?). Now, you could get any amount of money to go and do things, but you wouldn't ---- ---- funding (?) ---- ---- ---- Aboriginal ---- (?)? I'll show you the concept image …

(Djon then shows me an extensive concept image of the proposed work on his laptop. It provides a much clearer idea of the work's size and context than the small jpeg I'd previously seen.)
Vincent: Oh, wow. Yeah. See, the only image I had [of the proposed work] was a really low-res picture I found on the internet. That would be spectacular.

Djon: So as you come around from the quay – from where they've got the boats – you've got the 'the toaster' here, and then you've got the Opera House this way. You think that will work? I need to put a bit more life into these (referring to the main human figures), I think they're not quite ----(?), there's not enough motion(? there. Does that make sense?

Vincent: Is the kangaroo [inspired by] a real engraving as well?

Djon: Yes, it's a real engraving … I think it's actually a ----(?) one too.

Vincent: Are they the ones from La Per, or …?

Djon: This one's from La Perouse ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) Pemulwuy nearby. But I want to make them a bit more tense, so I might lift this leg a bit, or something to make them a bit more alive. I don't know how to make ----(?) come alive. The kangaroo's certainly alive …

Vincent: Well, the reason I asked is because most of the kangaroo engravings I've seen: they're often in motion. That's probably one of the few I've seen where they're standing like that. That's interesting. But, yeah … wow. See, I'm not that familiar with that area. From the photo I had I thought we were talking about a wall about this big (indicating the half-way point on the concept image displayed on the laptop). Now I'm starting to understand why people – even though they're initially in favour of the idea – might go, “Hmm, I'm not sure I want to commit to this.”

Djon: No. It has to be that big. Normally they'd be on a horizontal rock-face. Now, two things about them: one is that everyone becomes an artist and has an opinion – “You should make them in neon” – you know. ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) or throw a rock at it, or a beer bottle.

Vincent: I actually think that because they are so large, and the fact that that's where they begin (indicating the lowest point of the engraved figures), it would actually be quite hard to vandalise them. Unless you get a creative abseiler …

Djon: **Oh, I think, in fact ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) scribble on his dick, or rub his dick. That's fine – if women go and rub his dick, well, that's fine. In some places in the world that's what they do to become pregnant – they rub the dick of some sacred statue or something. But ---- ---- (?) has got me thinking … There is a figure like that that actually has dreadlocks as well …**

Vincent: Yeah. I actually just went to a site on the Sunday just gone … to Uloola Falls in the [Royal] National Park. And there's a spirit figure – you know, some people say he's Baiame, other's say he's something else – he's actually quite a stout little figure, but he's got the hair standing up on end, or it might be lightning like a Wandjina.

Djon: But you think it would work? (referring to the proposed public work)

Vincent: Oh, I think it would be awesome. I think it's really spectacular. But like I said, one of the things I thought straight away was the inherent irony that people will go to see Aboriginal engravings [on display], when in fact they're everywhere, except that they're not being looked after or paid attention to.

Djon: Well, people may start paying more attention [once this work is complete].

Vincent: Yeah, hopefully.

Djon: You know I did ---- ----(?) two hundred memorial poles, and suddenly every school – for about five years – every school I went to had poles.

Vincent: That's another form of [Aboriginal] public art down my way. There are totem poles out at Coomaditchie …

Djon: Yeah. They do carved trees too.

Vincent: Oh, no, I'm talking about contemporary stuff. Lots of murals, lots of mosaics, and for a little while people started doing totem poles.

Djon: Well, ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) twenty five carved trees from New South Wales ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) and we're trying to get them placed next year into the National Gallery – next to the art Gallery.

Vincent: Sorry, are these contemporary carvings?
Djon: Yeah. --- --- --- ---(?) trying to get them into the National Gallery --- --- --- ---(?) But again you've got people umming and arr-ing. In the end it's my fucking artwork. Either you believe in the artwork or you don't. You guys keep buying the art. Stop blaming the artists and be the fucking Director of the Gallery. Be the Director and look after it, you know.

Vincent: Yeah, I think the power of [The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy] is that – even though it's very large – it's fairly simple … you know, they're called 'simple figurative'. No, I think it'll be very powerful, and hopefully it might get people asking questions: Are they traditional forms? Are there other engravings around?

Djon: I called it 'The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy', and the irony is that last year an historian found a song that was written in 1793, in England, by Bennelong, and was recorded on paper by the King's musician.

Vincent: Wow.

Djon: So last year, two Aboriginal men from Sydney, they played that song a number of times at openings and the like. So, that song exists.

(Djon then spends some time showing me the technical plans on his laptop.)

Djon: One of the criticisms [of the proposed work] was that it was all males. One woman said, “All I see is big penises”. And I said, “Well, don't tell me your sexual desires. That's fine.” So I'm trying to work on another thing called “Patagorang”. It's on Dawes Point – to do with that girl that lived with Dawes, who said “I shall never become a white man”. So I'm trying to do another piece called “Patagorang” …

Vincent: So, is that a response to the woman who said [there's a lack of female imagery]?

Djon: No, I was thinking along those lines [anyway]. When I used that title for the exhibition, I was already thinking along those lines. So I've been playing around with “Patagorang” as the dance of a young Aboriginal woman. And around on the other side … I've been looking at different rock art pieces. There are a number of sketches of women. Now, there's one figure out at Potts Point (showing me the sketches), but it's obviously an older woman – you can tell. --- --- --- ---(?) more like --- ---(?) She's either leaping or dancing. This figure will be --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---(?) young Aboriginal woman. So when you go around Sydney's water track, Patagorang will be here. (Djon shows me a diagram)

Vincent: So, it'll be another engraving on a wall?

Djon: Yeah.

Vincent: Is just the one figure you're thinking of?

Djon: Yeah. The idea is to try get one to happen in my lifetime! I've got a couple of other people now who are going to --- --- --- --- --- --- ---(?) actually going to happen. You've got that many other people thinking they could do it now – everyone's like, “Oh, I could do that! That shouldn't cost that much money! --- --- ---(?)” And I say, “No, you can't fucking rush it.” Once you make that line, you can't go, “Oh, I'll rub that out now.” It doesn't work that way. Does that make sense?

Vincent: Yeah.Well, I totally identify with that idea of creating an Aboriginal presence, because as soon as I really started paying attention to just how much public art in Wollongong there is by Aboriginal artists – whether you think it's great art or not is largely irrelevant – but it is that sense of creating an Aboriginal presence in a landscape – largely an industrial landscape, despite all the nature that surrounds you in the Illawarra – an Aboriginal presence that has essentially been denied for the last two hundred years.

Djon: Yes, it's a funny thing --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---(?) Aboriginal history --- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---(?) …

Vincent: Well, that idea of cultural or social landscapes … I mentioned the Woronora Plateau before, where they're doing all the mining: in a way, that's an invisible social landscape because you're not allowed in there unless you're working for the mines or the National Parks [& Wildlife Service]. People are totally unaware of the history of that place, or the wealth of heritage sites that are there. Even a lot of the local Aboriginal people are pretty much unaware of it. It seems to me the only time that local Aboriginal people get to see any of it is when it's under threat of being developed and they need an Aboriginal signature on a piece of paper somewhere …

Djon: Yeah, that's right.

Vincent: A lot of them don't even go that far. A lot of them don't even have a token Aboriginal presence [as part of the consultation process].
Djon: But anyway, that’s the scale of the ---- storyboards ----(?).)
Vincent: Just to clarify something – because I read in an article that this work had been ten years in the planning – but from what you’re saying …
Djon: It’s been twenty.
Vincent: Twenty, yeah. And you mentioned the Fiona Foley work, The Edge of the Trees, as well … so the ideas for these artworks are contemporaneous of each other?
Djon: Yeah, the early ‘90s. We were both working at the MCA. That’s one of the ----(?)
Vincent: And what was the genesis of the work you did with Fiona – I’m not sure how to pronounce it – “Ngaraka”?
Djon: Oh, “Ngaraka” …
Vincent: Yeah. How did that come about?
Djon: Well, that’s more my idea – I’m not being [egotistical], Fiona will tell you this. What happened was … I was talking to her about an art project that I was doing about the return of human remains, and how no one talks about it that much. I wanted to make an artwork about it. I had had the idea for quite some time. And she was offered the opportunity to make an artwork for the Olympic year. A woman put this proposal forward called Shrine for the New Millenium. And Fiona’s mother had passed away, and she said, “I don’t want to do anything for a while.” So she told this mob that Djon’s got a really good idea, and that’s what happened. So then they came in and spoke to me, and I sent it to them. Fiona had the idea of using the kangaroo bones to make this midden of bones … and there’s another public artwork I’m trying to do which is about middens. [But “Ngaraka”] was a good idea, they had the money to make it happen, and it happened like that. Yeah, we were ----(?) major ----(?)—(?)
Vincent: Had you backed it all up?
Djon: No. I carry the computer with me everywhere. I never leave it anywhere. I went to a funeral, and I left it in my hotel room. Somebody broke into the hotel room and stole it. I’m very suspicious, cynical and paranoid about why they did it. I just find it's funny that it happened in the same year … that it happened that way. It's strange. (Turns back to the laptop) Here are the storyboards ----(?) down the bottom somewhere. It says, “The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy: To live and enjoy life one must be strong and confident in your own identity, beliefs, ideas, hopes, and dreams; to know and honour where you come from; give ----(?) forbears your Country – that’s ‘country’ in an Aboriginal sense – ----(?) of modern society and be part of it without being seduced by the materialism, confusion and hedonism, and to maintain a harmony with this world and the natural environment as you would with your own family and your ---- self(?)” So that’s the song. And someone might actually write that ---- short ----(?)
Vincent: The book you were referring to earlier, about Pemulwuy – is that the one written in the late ‘80s?
Djon: Eric Wilmot, yes.
Vincent: Someone lent me a copy but I never got around to reading it.
Djon: So I’ve said, “The Song of Bennelong and Pemulwuy is a short rolling chant of men, or kangaroos, of fish, and ancestors. There could be, can be, a song without words, a dance without music. To Aboriginals of any character(?) these are but minor irritations and not restrictions on a lived, active social life – a life of ideas, people, inventiveness and enjoyment.”
Vincent: In regard to an area such as this where, as you said, there are people from different places … different language groups, and there’s obviously differing views as to who has the authority over what … What role do you think actual rock art sites, and other heritage sites, can play in regard to contemporary identity?
Djon: Well, if you’re going to have Land Councils and institutions they should be organising a re-working of those rock engravings. Rock engravings didn’t survive [without maintenance]. They’re a thousand years old … or fifteen hundred-something years old. Or within five thousand. They were re-grooved as part of that ritual context. So, the Land Councils should do that. They should fund that, and that will provide a cultural life, it will provide a place for people to meet, and then that’s your political action ----(?) talking to lawyers and property developers.
Vincent: I was reading about Paul Tacon, the archaeologist, and all the Wollemi [National Park] rock art that’s been discovered over the last fifteen-twenty years. They’ve actually organised camping trips where they take young Aboriginal people out there for a
week or something, just to absorb the rock art, you know. And I think that's really important. Once again going back to my study area – the Illawarra – nothing like that is happening. There's such a wealth of heritage there and very few people know about it. And I think it's a really lost opportunity for people to [connect to that] …

Djon: ---- ---- ----(?) think ---- ----(?) Aboriginal. Being Aboriginal is/as(?) being something. That's to say, I'm an Aboriginal man, therefore I don't do anything: I eat a lot of barbecues and get pissed. People ---- ---- ---- ----(?) experience on litigation. And that was like ----(?) that day - "Well, alright, what do we want to do?" Because you don't leave the things that provide a platform, then discuss what you want to do. No one ---- ----(?) subscribe ---- ---- ---- ----(?) experience to anyone ----(?) to do ---- ---- ----(?) that's just daft. But to provide a meeting place where people can talk about beliefs ----(?) to them. At least it will achieve ----(?) like re-grooving the rocks, and you could have a particular event that year. The Greeks have an Easter church performance, you know, like a ritual performance. So it's a way of meeting and talking about things. They could easily do [something] like that now, provided that they meet and are picked up, or whatever, get out, instead of sitting around waiting for the next ---- ---- ----(?), actually get out and do something.

Vincent: I'm glad you think that, because I'm absolutely fascinated with these sites, but I know some people still think they're very culturally sensitive, and that perhaps people shouldn't visit them …

Djon: Oh, well, that all goes back to the mission days – “White fellas told us not to go there,” and all that. But every Aboriginal adult ---- ----(?) … Even in Northern NSW they actually go and talk(?) ---- ---- ----(?) people. And I said, “You're all Aboriginal adults. You can make decisions about these things. You've seen every con job, every lying politician arsehole that's tried to con you, every other person in your life has tried to con you … You must know something. Be on the front foot.” And I did get involved in that – to be on the front foot, the active stage of it. “Alright, I'm Aboriginal. What does that mean? We don't really need to strip off and dance. We can do other things to do with that.” I mean, at this stage, my whole life was to achieve putting things out into the landscape so that they'd provide a discussion. That's what I did with the Aboriginal memorial. It's funny, when I went back to Ramingining – in the '90s I was there – I said to someone, “I'll never be allowed to do that again.” And he said, “Why do you think that?” I said, “---- ----(?) allow me to do it again. Because circumstances and other things won't allow me to do that again. And people have got my number now.” So people will go, “Oh, we've got his number. We don't want him. He'll do something very political. Or he's going to ask for a commitment. That's not what we want. We just want an artwork. Do a dance performance ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?)”. But see, that's permanent (referring to the proposed public work). And that [stupid idea] with the neon sign – you can actually turn the switch off.

Vincent: Was the Bicentennial memorial [originally] designed for an indoor or outside setting?

Djon: No, no, inside. ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?). I talked to all those people ---- ----(?). It's really curious that the National Gallery does not have a book on it. So part of the negotiation this year is to get a book published, a major book ---- ---- ----(?) "handsome book" … whatever that means. Fuck me, you don't want an ugly one. Should sell it ---- ---- ----(?) like you would ---- ? There have been major books on Drysdale and ----(?), why don't you do something on this? It's just crazy.

Vincent: Well, despite that lack of support … the work gets seen. Every time I'm at the Gallery there are people walking through [the totem poles] and looking at them in detail. It's still a very powerful work. And I think it's one that a lot of people see. Whether they approach it in the way you intended … I mean, once you make an artwork and give it to the public, it's out of your control.

Djon: Yeah, that's right. You can't tell people how to enjoy themselves.

Vincent: One of the other texts I wanted to ask you about was actually something I read during my Honours thesis, and I really liked it. It was dealing with the idea of the Australian landscape as a garden. About Indigenous people you wrote, “We are the garden landscape”. I really liked that idea. You know Bill Gammage has come out with that new book, “The Largest Estate on Earth” …?

Djon: Yeah, yeah.

Vincent: Discussing how Europeans were unable to see the already thoroughly mapped landscape that was full of meaning …

Djon: Yeah.

Vincent: I thought ['the garden landscape'] was a very nice metaphor.

Djon: Yeah, basically here in Sydney people don't see things in terms of a garden, or form, or land-form … people almost become a spaceship ----(?). Doesn't matter where in the landscape you are, they flatten it … put up a huge shopping centre, something totally foreign, and something totally energy draining.

Vincent: But it's good that people are finally writing about the Australian landscape as a place that was very thoroughly mapped and made, formed over thousands of years through fire-stick farming. And then, of course, the art … that sense of place-making, and the creative urge …
Djon: At one stage I thought the future of art would be performance more than anything else … Once we put these [engraved figures] in there [next to the Opera House], that will be the most important production there. That’s how I see it. But there are ---- ---- -- ----(?) other things … There are that many statues ---- ----(?) whatever, and that means war memorials … that’s just stupid, the war memorials, and there’s no … that’s why I made that memorial, because we don’t have any memorials for Aboriginal people, because black people ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) my grandparents were survivors of the Appin massacre ---- ---- ---- ----(?) those terms. I wrote an article because … these people who are great grandchildren of a woman killed by Jimmy Governor – ‘Jimmy Blacksmith’. So I wrote this essay, and it was really difficult for a while, and I thought the way around it was … I quite often do things in a social context. I write about art but in a socio-political, historical context. So when I write about Aboriginal art, I generally write – “Oh, this is what Russell Drysdale was doing then,” so it puts the Aboriginal art on the same par as that kind of art: “This may be very important Australian art, but this is very important too …” ----(?) operating around an idea or representation or expression. So that’s what I did: “Look, this is his birthday. What happened on his birthday? Or his birth year?” So, around the time he was born, it was the time of Cuthbert’s last stand, ----(?) Australians ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) was late 1800s when Cuthbert died … 1873, or something like that. So it wasn’t like 1600 or something, it’s almost in living memory. And I said, what they did was make a lot of play about Jimmy’s ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) women ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?), or she did anyway. So I said, “Well, look, he was born at about the time of Cuthbert’s Last Stand, and there was two principles involved here. One is about people gathering for ceremonies – religious ceremonies or just observing protocol. In Australia people would always freak out: “Arrgh! They’re getting ready a war party!” And they’d usually shoot the shit out of them before they actually got going ---- ----(?). It may have been a very important thing where people were singing and dancing. There were hundreds of people, and they fired these canons at them because they were planning a war party! It may have been a religious performance or a veneration, like at Christmas time or Easter – going to St. Paul’s Cathedral. ---- ----(?) people make a loud noise! They must be planning a war party! They’re gonna come out an kill us, so we’ll blow the shit out of them. And that’s what he did. Cuthbert had a huge group of ----(?) and other people joined together ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) and they actually did those rituals. And he’d split his horses up because those ---- ----(?) Indians, for want of a better word, so he split his horses up. And ---- ----(?) it’s really stupid. But what he intended to do is this – and he’d done it often before, he’d done it at a number of times before. He had these men here go and attack these men at the camp, and the idea of that was to draw all the men away. So then he’d ride in and shoot the shit out of all the women and children. And he did that before, or at least he captured them and held them to ransom. Right? Separate the men from the women, children and older people. Only trouble was, because of the numbers involved, it was like stepping out in front of a runaway freight train. ‘Cause this group here they were completely over run by the native Americans, there was so many of them, driven back, you know, had to retreat – “Charge! Oh … retreat, retreat!” And the same with Cuthbert. When he attacked them there was still that men left behind [with the women and children], they outnumbered him ten to one or something. They just ran over him. He lost everyone in a couple of hours. So, he deserved what he got. He had no qualms about shooting women, children and old people. So this is a very curious moral argument ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) Jimmy Governor. The thing I then argued about was … I’m assumed you ---- ---- ---- ----(?)

Vincent: I'm thinking I might have read it. What's the title?

Djon: It's called "The ----(?) of Jimmy Governor". ---- ----(?) playful ---- ----(?) It was a play that was put on last year in Sydney about how people would come together for rituals and this group would talk to that group, and they'd take part in it, they'd perform part of it, and others would perform other parts of it. People would dance it, and people would sing. Sort of like a tradition of what we did. And the idea was to affirm your relationship and responsibility to each other. That's what you were doing. That's what those ceremonies were about.

Vincent: And I didn't think of that when I first started looking at these sites. There was a six part series called “How Art Made [the World]”, or something like that, and he [Dr. Nigel Spivey] talks about rock art in one of the episodes. He goes up to Oenpell ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) version of it. (laughs)

Djon: Well, that's what this will be too. There's a performance element to it … I've thought quite a bit about how I want to be different ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) There's something a bit more profound and special there. That's why it's called a song without words, a dance without music ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) redefine Aboriginal ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) Western dances ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- ----(?) of it. (laughs)

Vincent: I got the reference. (laughs) So when we're talking about the cultures here on the east coast that were so decimated by that colonial process, you obviously believe that creation – or recreation – is necessary?

Djon: Yes, it has to be. I may not be the first person [with that philosophy], but I'm trying at least to start it … start something where they may only be a small group of people who sing or dance, or do anything like that, but everyone comes there and they sit down and they meet each other. That's the idea of it.

Vincent: Well, I asked because when I've been doing my research or writing I often come to a fork in the road: I can either say revitalisation or recreation …
Djon: It's a reinterpretation of old ideas. A contemporary context. You may not be living like that anymore, but you think, “What does it mean now?” That's what happens in Western Europe[an culture] each time a Judge makes a decision. We can either break with precedent because of the interpretation now, or we can make a new interpretation of [a] crime or [a] law. That's what happens in all those High Court cases. The judgement ------- context. It's a radical idea, and certain people were raving about Ned Kelly: “Who is Ned Kelly?” All that -------. “Who was Captain Cook?” ------- of Captain Cook? ------- or whatever. Those things periodically go around and around. Anyway, we should stop there now.

Vincent: You want to catch your breath?

Djon: No, I just don't want to say things casually.

Vincent: The other thing I wanted to ask about was the impetus for Blak2Blak … I went to the third one a couple of years ago. I just wanted to know your thoughts behind that …

Djon: Who was speaking?

Vincent: Um … Tess Allas, Gary Foley, Gary Lee – it was after he’d had a stroke. How's he going?

Djon: He's recovered quite well, but he's still in a wheelchair. The impetus was to have a space where Aboriginal people could come and talk without needing to justify what they did. I might have said this … There’s a long term friend of mine who knew Aboriginal people, and so on, and I said, “I want to run a forum where no non-Aboriginal person can speak.” And you know what she said? She said: “But what will you talk about?”

Vincent: She's a long-term friend of yours? (laughs)

Djon: And she's worked with Aboriginal people for a long time.

Vincent: Well … was it a serious question?

Djon: Yeah. She was stunned. “But what will you talk about?”

Vincent: Hmm, okay. Sounds very strange.

Djon: And she said, “Well, if you talk about colonialism or post-colonialism, that will be bad -------.” That was one thing [she said]. There were two reactions, that was one. The other was, in that context, everyone from Arnhem Land or the Desert, in that forum, would be at a disadvantage, “and that's really bad.”

Vincent: What, because they're not represented by white people?

Djon: Well, they can't speak English well enough, they may not know the political context … And I thought - this is just ridiculous. What, when they speak at a conference full of white anthropologists, they're not at a disadvantage? They understand the anthropological theories, methodologies … theories about methodologies?

Vincent: I remember at the beginning of the conference – I'm pretty sure it was you – you got up and said: “We're very happy to have white people here, but please shut the fuck up.” (laughs)

Djon: (laughs) Yeah, that was me. I used to say that – “You're not allowed to speak.” At each of those conferences I'd say that …

Vincent: I tell you what, it was interesting because … Despite considering myself very liberal-minded and open to Aboriginal voices, I did find that very confronting. It was a very interesting experience to be on the other side [of the fence]. I recommend white people go just for that reason.

Djon: To listen or to shut up or to talk?

Vincent: To be in a space where non-white people tell them, “You can be here, but don't you think about talking to us.”

Djon: Yeah, that's right. At one stage the Land Councils were having a discussion with a group of Aboriginal people about copyright law, and this gallery owner was telling us how to suck eggs. And we said, “Listen, you can speak about it, but you can’t -------?” She said, “We can have this discussion without you people here.” You know, “If we decide something, we'll tell the lawyers and -------?” And they’ll make it law. We don't need you here.” She was very affronted, and was puffing herself up with importance. So I just said, “Well, look, we don't need you here.” You know, “You don't need to be here.” Aboriginal people talked about art for ages amongst ourselves, and we didn't need anyone white to tell us whether that's a good argument or not.
And I think I said that to the arts people there [at the Blak2Blak conferences], “Don't speak. Do not even ask questions.” And one woman said, “Oh, but this is a very important question.” And I said, “If it’s not being asked by an Aboriginal person, we don't think it's very important. End of fucking story.” Right? “It might seem very important to you, but it's not important to any Aboriginal person here."

**Vincent:** Did you think about not actually allowing white people to attend?

**Djon:** Ah, no. I said, “You can be there.” I did make the comparison, “Look, I could hold a feminist conference where no man was allowed to speak. That would be totally acceptable.” So why do all these white women feel they need to speak [at a Blak2Blak conference], or control it? So the reasoning behind it is: a) we must decide because we're responsible, we wear the fucking responsibility, it's our lives we're fucking up. ---- ---- ----(?), and we're fucking up other Aboriginal ---- ---- ----(?). As I say to people when I curate, “Don't tell me how to curate or hang the show. I'll make my own fuck-ups. If it's a fuck-up, and I'm attacked for it, I'll know why I did it, okay? If you start interfering, you're putting me in the firing line and I can't defend myself.” If someone says, “Why did you do that?” I can't say, “It really wasn't my idea,” because everyone else is just going to say, “Yeah, but you're the curator.” “It's my name on it,” you know, “it's not your name on it.” You can't come in and say, “Oh, I'll just fit this in here, and I'll do this, I'll do that.”

**Vincent:** Are you intending on having any more [of those conferences]? Obviously, if you've had three, you've found them successful ...

**Djon:** There's been four, I think. They’ve should/sort(?) of got better, and they started to be ---- ----(?). They’re ---- ---- ---- ----(?) allow people to show their practice. I wanted people – like Tess, and others – to be more critical. People were very loathed to be critical, very loathed to say what they think. That would be the same as with white people, but why Aboriginal people are very loathed to say why they think that works or not ... They would in the pub, but they wouldn't get up and say it [at the conference]. So I was trying to get it to the stage where, “Look, you've all been here. You've been in the trade for fucking that long, you've been a public Aboriginal person for that long … You're amongst like people. Say what you fucking think.” Some people did. Fiona Foley – she was at that one in Melbourne, she was on the panel with Richard Bell and someone else – she was talking about a number of art cooperatives, and she said proppaNOW were a really male-orientated group, just a bunch of blokes sitting around measuring the size of their dicks, that's all they were.

**Vincent:** She said that?

**Djon:** Yep. In public. And Richard [Bell] and Vernon [Ah Kee] were there. You know what their response was? Not a fucking thing. And that's what I mean. They could have said, “Well, no it isn't. We have women in our group,” or, “If that's the case, how can we change it?” Just something, …

**Vincent:** I remember, very distinctly, Gary Foley. When he spoke, I remember him being very critical about a lot of things. After that, I remember Tess speaking, but I can't really remember [what she said]. But in my interview with her she didn't hold back, she was very critical about certain things.

**Djon:** Well, with Blak2Blak I tried to create a space where people could say what they thought. And also, people forget, we ---- ---- ---- ----(?) artists who weren't quite as ----(?) and well known, they would get to meet the superstar people. That was the idea. To make ---- ---- ---- ----(?) tall poppy, you make them realise that we are your enemies, we don't like ---- ---- ---- ----(?) up yourself, and they could learn a bit more about them. We used to invite Hetty Perkins and Brenda L. Croft, we used to invite other people to come, but they never ever came. They were too scared that they'd all be ---- ---- ----(?). I've been in a really weird position because people were attacked ---- ---- ---- ----(?) handle whatever happened. I believe I can handle that, because then you get a discussion going. And that was the problem. I was trying to work out a different format. And trying to publish was another thing.

**Vincent:** I remember looking for ages, after that conference, for transcripts and audio online …

**Djon:** They [Campbelltown Art Centre] have never got into a real way of publishing anything. ---- ----(?) next week ---- ----(?). They publish all these catalogues – I've still got a trailer load of them – that you couldn't give away as fire wood. But they wouldn't even publish that ----(?). I was trying to find a transcriber ... I don't think that full-time, I'm doing lots of other things. But it was up to me to find a transcriber, it was up to me to do this, it was up to me to do that. And I was just getting really getting jacked off with all of that …

**Vincent:** It's a huge amount of work.

**Djon:** Yeah. And I've already prepared the bloody thing. I left/led(?) the discussion ---- ----(?). The other reason for saying that ----(?) is to say ----(?) here ---- ----(?) say what we feel ---- ----(?) shut the fuck up. Just to make it very blatant and clear too, “You can't talk.” Don't you think by saying “shut the fuck up” they'd get that point? People don't listen. “Oh, that doesn't apply to me. I'm a friend of the Aboriginal people. I know Aboriginal people.”
Vincent: I just thought it was interesting because, like I said, for someone who considers himself very liberal-minded, I was actually very shocked about how I felt when you said that. It was an experience to have the shoe on the other foot.

Djon: Well, I think that's what that 'blue eyes/brown eyes' [tries to achieve]. And a lot of white people I know – friends of mine – are very critical of that woman [Jane Elliott]. There was one [occasion] where she had these Native Americans in this room, and she's running this workshop … And she's charges a lot of money for her time. I don't know why she takes that on. It raises questions about how you take that on, what gives you the right to do that, all those questions … But she was saying to this white guy, “Did I tell you to speak? Just shut up. I didn't tell you to speak, you dumb idiot.” And he eventually got the shits. He got up and said, “I'm not taking this anymore. I'm leaving. This is a waste of my time.” And she said, “Don't go. Stay.” And he said, “No,” and stormed out. And it was a really interesting reaction. Because you think maybe she's pushed it too far, right? But she looks at the Native American guy, and says, “How old are you?” And he says, “Oh, fifty years old.” So she turns to the [other] white people, and says, “He's copped that for fifty years. And this guy can't stand it for five minutes. He had to leave.” There was a younger woman like that too, she stormed out after a much longer argument with [Jane Elliott]. And as she stormed out, [Elliott] said, “See how she stormed out of here? She can make that decision. 'I want to leave this situation'. Well, other people don't have that choice.” You can't just decide to storm out. It really drove that point home that not stereotyping people, and having respect for people, is what counts. So even ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) not generally like that, I like a bit of discussion. The thing was to say, “This is what I've done. And all my life ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) published and did exhibitions and all that sort of stuff, okay.” What happens? In most of the exhibitions or conferences I've been to, that's what happens. I have to sit there and listen to someone else define what I am. Okay? I said, “Look ---- (?) attend this conference ---- ---- (?) white person ---- (?) comes in, tells you what's going on: “This is what happens” or “This is how it should be”, treating us like kids. “Women are like this” or “Women don't deserve this” or “they do need this”. You'd be laughed out of the place, or torn to shreds, physically. They'd throw things at you. But it's totally acceptable for a white anthropologist to tell you about Aboriginal art. “But we've studied it. We've got doctorates.”

Vincent: I recently read an article of yours … about a similar situation with some young white guy.

Djon: Oh, that was Steve Munroe. He came with me on a trip to Arnhem Land. And he kept saying to people, “Is it sacred? Is it sacred?” ---- ---- (?) Aboriginal curator, so he's never been there before, he's never met these people before, he didn't know whether I knew those people ---- ---- (?) well, I hadn't told him ---- ---- (?) this person or that person ---- ---- (?) 'cause you don't ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) give you a PhD every time we meet somebody. We were there to check things with artists. Anyway, these older artists, I actually had been there before, I had met them before, [but] I'd never met them socially. I'd never been to this place in that [context] before. Where I'd met them was at a ceremony taking place with thousands of people just outside of town once before. I'd travelled from Ramingining, which is about three hundred miles away, and was with a group of people going to that ceremony. That's where I'd met them – inside this ground that was a restricted men's ground. So the whole time I was there, I was in that men's ground. Okay? That's how I'd met those men. So they knew who I was, and I knew sort of vaguely who they were. ---- ---- (?) those ceremonies ---- ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) So anyway, we got there, and we were supposed to show them paintings, and if they could tell us anything about these paintings. Some of them were supposedly by particular men, some of them weren't. So, as we were coming up ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) he virtually pushed me out of the way, and “Is this sacred? Is this sacred?” And these people would go, “Yeah, yeah, it's sacred.”

Vincent: The iconography?

Djon: The painting, yeah. And the men would say, “Yeah, it's sacred.” And it went on for a while like that. Everyone he'd meet - “Is it sacred?” “Yes, it's sacred – It's a totem.” And eventually I said to him, “It's not about whether it's sacred. This is all a sacred landscape. It's all sacred. Who cares whether we can show this painting publicly.” [All he cared about was whether we could] put it on the fucking wall. So what I said then was, “Well, why are you so concerned? Why do you want to be an authority? You've never been here before, you've never been to a ceremony, you've never done anything, you've never written about anything, you haven't studied [this culture].” And he said, “Oh, we have to guard the institution. We have to make sure the MCA doesn't get into trouble.” And I said, “That's all a white institution.” And I was thinking, “You think I'm not concerned about my reputation? If this fucks up, it's my reputation! I don't care about the MCA. I've gotta come back here again. I don't want someone gunning for me the next time I come back here. I can't work with these people if they don't trust me.” ---- ---- ---- ---- (?) never learnt to just shut up. ---- ---- ---- (?) first thing you learn is when you should speak and when you should shut the fuck up. The general social principle in every society is that if you are ignorant you don't open your mouth until you learn.

Vincent: Well, one of the things I learnt very quickly when I started researching the art from down my way – I mean, this applies to Aboriginal art in general – but there isn't a sacred/secular dichotomy.

Djon: No.

Vincent: There are certainly things that may be more important than others, but there's a very blurred line between sacred and secular. So I stopped trying to interpret a lot of the sites [I visited] as being one or the other.
Djon: And there are things that people don’t feel confident/competent about in their spirituality, so people think they’re all going to die if they said anything/see this thing. Poor people would never approach the altar in a cathedral, once upon a time, fearing lightning would strike you or something.

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Djon: With this thing, I never thought … as a general principle an artist gets ten percent. I didn't want to take any money. I just wanted the thing to happen. There have been … generally from Aboriginal people, and … into that - “Oh, no, It should have happened. It should have happened.” The other one is, “Oh, actually, I'm an artist,” or, “My son's an artist,” or, “I've got a brother who's an artist,” you know, “they could be part of this if you pay them.” Or the other one, “I'm a …”, maybe you should do this: you should put me …

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Djon: Someone else said, “Why don't you just make a projection? You know, you could do a projection of a Dreamtime stories on that wall …”

Vincent: Well, you could still do that once the engravings are there.

Djon: But it wouldn't have the depth or the sculptural weight of [this idea].

Vincent: Craig Walsh did a projection, as part of his Digital Odyssey project, down at Kiama … at the Bombo Headland, which is a very special place, with stories associated with it. It was very powerful. He worked with Boolarng Nangamai, which is a group down that way … oh, of course, your cousin is one of the members.

Djon: Bonny [Foley-Brennan], yeah.

Vincent: I didn't actually see the 'performance', but the photos I saw were particularly powerful – footage of Boolarng Nangamai projected onto the Bombo Headland at night time.

Djon: That's fine, but it's there and then it's gone. It's good in a way. But I also believe change should come from us, and [that we shouldn't] rely on non-Aboriginal people.
A1.I13: Second interview with Les Bursill OAM (15.03.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

Amendments to this transcript were made by the interviewee.

Since our first interview in late 2010, I had been able to visit a number of rock art sites Les had told me about and which I had also read about in his work. Thus, though we had remained in constant contact since, this second interview was an opportunity to formerly discuss aspects of Dharawal rock art in greater detail. As with the first, this interview took place at Les’ home in Engadine, after which we drove to Maianbar in the Royal National Park where Les showed me a very significant engraving site.

Vincent: Okay, Les, I'm writing about Dharawal country as “cultural landscape” …

Les: Right, Vince …

Vincent: … so I'm looking at not only the way it was physically 'transformed' by human beings, or 'maintained', whatever word you want to use …

Les: 'Transformed' is okay.

Vincent: … not only how it was transformed, physically, but understood, conceptually.

Les: Right.

Vincent: So I've been trying to read as much as I can about the traditional use of fire here. Now, from what I understand, from what I've read, there's very little first-hand accounts by Europeans [from the time of contact] …

Les: There's a few, but not many. And I think the reason for that is that burning, here, was on a far less a scale than burning, say, in the Northern Territory, where vast [areas], thousands of acres at a time are burnt. Vince, I think we have to think about how Aboriginal people operated within the land. People moved around, but they didn't move vast distances on a daily basis, or even a weekly basis, or even a monthly basis – but they did move around. The evidence I have is that there were specific track ways that people used, and that those track ways were strictly adhered to, with very severe punishments and restrictions for people who ran off the track and into the open scrub, if you like. We now call them Song lines or Dreaming Tracks, okay, but they are actually movement tracks from country to country to country, and people would have walked in single file throughout country.

The evidence we have for [this area] is that Aboriginal people were fairly sparse on the ground: in the whole of Port Hacking, maybe a couple of hundred people, a hundred and fifty people; that those people travelled as far as Campbelltown in a cycle, which might be something resembling twelve months … although, they wouldn't say, “Oh my God, it's December – we've got to move on!” It would be that the weather has changed, or the plants and animals are becoming less abundant, and this drives people on. That usually coincides with the seasons. We know from some of the early [European] explorers that Aboriginal people had a very low impact on the land, because they so thoroughly understood their environment, the nature of plants and animals, that they were as able to predict their resources like you and I can predict them when we go to 'Woolies': we know that in Aisle 8 there's gonna be frozen veggies … Well, they had that level of understanding of their country. They knew where there would be plant foods, where there would be fish, where there would be other resources: snakes, possums, kangaroos … Whatever was available, they knew where they were, and they didn't over-harvest them. Now, [preventing] over-harvesting or over-utilisation of resources is sometimes talked about as environmental management. I think it's got more to do with the fact that they took only what they needed to take, and when it became just a bit too difficult, that was the time to move on. We know that the women complained to the men when there was less than three hundred grams of red meat available in a week, okay? That was a sort of tipping point for them.

Vincent: “Go get yourself a job!” (laughs)

Les: Yeah, “Go get yourself a job,” or “Do something useful with yourself.” We know that the men hunted more as a sport [than anything else], but very very effectively. They were able to do it quite well, but women procured most of the protein and most of the vegetable foods for the family. And that's why men had numerous wives. Down here they had as many as three wives, and those wives all acted together to feed themselves, to feed their children, and as a by-product, feed their husbands, and sometimes feed other men that came to their camps. So, people moved around in this area. Now, when I say they knew the environment, they understood that if you just let grass grow and trees flourish, that they, after a while, lose their nourishment because they become fibrous and old and stiff and hard, just like Lomandra or any [other type of] grass. I mean, you can put a horse into a grass paddock with long grass, and it will starve to death because it can't eat the long grass. It's gotta have grass of a certain length. Aboriginal people understood that. So, around here they did burn off around their camps, and they created open areas, and those open areas, when they weren't there, were attractive to the local animals because they had short grasses and they were grassy areas. We also know that the grass in this area wasn't the grass we see today – this is all imported grass. So, it would have been tufted native grass. So, it really doesn't lend itself to raging grass fires. You literally have to set fire to a dozen [tufts] before you get anything going. We also know from photographs I've seen, and from the common sense of anyone
[who is familiar with this area], that you can't run through the bush as it is today. You would die from loss of blood within about an hour. Would you agree?

Vincent: Absolutely.

Les: So, how did they do it? Well, when I go and look at the photographs I've got, from about 1860 onwards, it shows me that the [Royal] National Park, and this [Sutherland] area, was open forest and sandy soils, okay. Now, can I verify that? Yes, I can, because if I go to some of the places where there has been very little European impact, and where there has been the occasional fires, I see that they are open gum forests with sandy soils and grasses. (pointing) You've only gotta go down here to Engadine Creek, and walk down to Woronora, and you'll see that [type of] forest, because it's burnt out quite regularly, and it maintains its natural [pre-contact?] aspects. So, that's what I say: there was firing, but it wasn't the 'fire-stick farming' [practiced further north] …

Vincent: You don't agree with that term.

Les: No, 'cause 'fire-stick farming' implies a high reliance on fire, and I think reliance on fire [here] was about twenty percent, whereas other parts of the country, like in Kakadu, the plants and trees require a prolific rate of burn off. Those fires are quite big and quite intense. I mean, they don't have the intensity of the bush fires we have today, but nevertheless they're quite intense.

Vincent: Well, that was the other reason [for burning], surely, as a form of fuel reduction? I mean, I know the climate here, especially pre-contact, wouldn't lend itself to huge bush fires, but at the same time, there would have been a necessity to reduce that risk, yeah?

Les: It's called 'cleaning up country'. I've heard some old men use that term. I think that's what fire-stick farming was down here – it was 'cleaning up country'. Now, in other places, people actually burnt them off to regenerate the plant foods. Where there's a high reliance on yams and ground fruits, I think that's where [fire-stick farming] really becomes prolific. Up in the islands – New Guinea and the Torres Strait – the fire-stick farming that they use is actually to create a level of potassium in the soil so they can actually grow stuff. And we know that what used to be called sedentary villages, where they practised fire-stick farming, or 'slash and burn', that the villages move every three or four years because the soil simply becomes depleted. So the villages might have two or three years of good crops, and on the third year they'll see the yams and sweet potato are smaller than they should be, and so they move their village. They move onto another plot. So, that's what I call really intensive fire-stick farming.

Vincent: So, we don't have the same amount of ground foods here [in Dharawal country]?

Les: We have some. We have yams, and berries, and figs, and lillipillies, wombat berries and tucker berries, and geebungs … No, there's a range of foods, but it wasn't extensive. It was enough. Some of the grasses are edible – the native spinach, and things like that. I think I've identified about fifty edible plants in the area. But fire-stick farming doesn't support them. It doesn't develop them. I think the use of fire around here was to create grassy zones where animals would be attracted. That's my belief.

Vincent: One of the people I contacted recently was Michael Organ …

Les: Aha, I know Michael.

Vincent: … because I thought if anyone knows of any [early] accounts of anything even resembling fire-stick farming, particularly in the Illawarra, it would be him. And he said that he's never come across any [such account].

Les: No, and there's a strong belief that that's the case.

Vincent: Now, I know you're focussed on the Sutherland area and, in the past when I've asked, you haven't liked to speculate about things further south …

Les: Oh, I'll speculate right down to the Shoalhaven, and up to Botany Bay, and out to Penrith, but that's it, because after that it's Yuin [country] …

Vincent: Well, Michael also said that as the Illawarra has a lot of rainforest, particularly in the escarpment, the environment isn't conducive to [burning] … I mean, would there ever be a reason to burn rainforest? You wouldn't be able to, would you?

Les: I don't think so, and why would you, anyway? What are you gonna gain from it? And what do you get in rainforest? You get lots of fruit, amphibians, and you get fish. But rainforests also have noxious plants in them. I think there's a lot of arguments that rainforests are highly productive, and maybe in Queensland they are, but around here I don't see rainforests as being anything more productive than any other particular bio-zone. I think everything has its place, and there was a different food source for a different time.

Vincent: So, essentially, fire was used to clean up and create grassy areas close to camps.
Les: Yep.

Vincent: What about up on the Woronora [Plateau]? You get quite heathy areas …

Les: The evidence I have for the Woronora is that it wasn't a favourite place to camp. Maybe down around where the dam is now, where the big lake is up there – whatever it's called – there's a scout camp. Maybe there. But all the evidence I've seen, and what Lionel [Baker] has reported to me as well, is that it was a largely ceremonial. All the heights have ceremonial stuff on them. I do know that there's probably lots of kangaroo and wallaby in there, and there'd be lots of possums, and snakes, and goanna in there, so it might be a place where men would go to get red meat, but I don't think right up into that catchment area is [an optimum place to camp]. If you go over into the Holsworthy area, which is a better environment – though it's still very hilly – it's an open forest, and there is lots of evidence for camping and living in there. But I think that part at the back of Woronora is very steep, very rough, it's not a comfortable place to go.

Vincent: The sense I'm getting about the Dharawal … In the Illawarra the early colonisers called them the Five Island tribe … There seems to be some seasonal movements in the winter months where they'd move into the mountains, but they essentially lived most of the year down on the coast …

Les: Along the coast, yes. Well, when you go down to the Illawarra, the further you go down the more and more lakes you've got, and lakes are ideal places. I mean, lakes have been a focus of lacustrine societies … very very effective. So, you would have had lots of people using canoes, and the shift would be more to fishing. Lake Illawarra is a great example, and the Five Islands tribe would have used that. The women would have gone out to sea, and I know they went to the islands and got birds eggs. It's a very rich place. Very rich place.

Vincent: I think most people agree that for most of the year the Lake was occupied …

Les: But they wouldn't have stayed in the one place [by the lake] …

Vincent: Oh, no, no …

Les: They would, over the period of a month, move six or eight hundred metres. And they would move up and down the coast. Look, I actually know the Ooaree clan who lived at Gerringong. You've never heard of them, have you? Vincent: No.

Les: Well, the Ooaree was the clan that lived at Gerringong, and when I was a very little boy I had an association with some of the men down there. And they were just wizards at fishing. Rock fishing and shell fish gathering. They relied a lot on shellfish gathering: mussels, pippis … so we know that the men and women collected seafoods along the shoreline and they would have lived a fairly good life. But in the winter that's an awful place. It's cold, it's wet, it's windy.

Vincent: Well, that seems to be the time when, for a few months of the year, they'd move up to higher ground.

Les: Well, into Kangaroo Valley, and up the rivers, yeah. That's my mother's country.

Vincent: And that's when a lot of eels would be consumed.

Les: Yeah, of course. Eels and a whole range of stuff. When you get up the back of the Shoalhaven River, into that country there, it's very rich and very wet. It's not rainforest, but it's quite leafy and there are lots of big food plants there.

Vincent: I remember when I [first] went to Foxground … I'd been on a walk with the Greens to see some of the last Red Cedars in the escarpment up behind where I live in Towradgi. I think we counted ten, maximum. And then I went down to Foxground, seed-collecting with Noel Lonesborough … up in the escarpment there they are everywhere! It's just so lush and green, and there are red cedars everywhere. Amazing.

Les: Well, I can claim some rather unfortunate association with [the red cedar industry through] one of my ancestors: William 'Bullocky Bill' Field. They called him Bullocky Bill because he had a train of about eight bullocks, and he used to work out of Scarborough, and he used to drag out all the red cedar in that area.

Vincent: What year was this?

Les: 1890 to 1920, that period of time. He was the boyfriend of my great-grandmother, Philadelphia Field. She called herself Field, though they weren't married. But his name was Bill Field. Bullocky Bill. But her married name was Bell. Her maiden name was Roland – and that's the convict [connection].

Vincent: Oh, okay. Another thing … I'm glad you mentioned Song lines, 'cause Val Attenbrow says another thing which there is no historical evidence for, in this area, is Song lines …

Les: (sarcasm) Oh my God! There mustn't have been any, then.
Les: Well, it's plainly wrong. It's silly. Song lines and Dreaming tracks are the tracks that people used to move from location to location …

Vincent: And that were invested with meaning.

Les: … yes, and were invested with meaning. Is Val saying that Aboriginal people just wandered aimlessly through the bush? Is that what she's saying?

Vincent: No, she's simply stating [that there's no historical accounts of them] …

Les: Well, I'm attacking her now. And she would know that I'd attack her. I'm quite good friends with Val. Nice lady. And clever. I would say this to you: that very soon after this area was colonised by people like Gopley (?) and Connell and Holt, that the traditional Song lines and Dreaming tracks were usurped as roads. They would have first been walking tracks, and then later they would have been horse tracks, then cart tracks, then wagon tracks, and then they would have become roads. How can I verify that? (sarcasm) Gee, that's really hard. I look at a road, and once I've plotted the Aboriginal sites [nearby], guess what … Every couple of kilometres, on each side of the road, about fifty metres in[to the scrub], there's a site. And if we go down the [Sir Bertram Stevens Drive … that is the main Song line [in this area]. I can actually tell you where people came from. They came from the south coast, up along that ridge, with their Dreaming stories being told all the way along, on the Uloola track and all that area, and right out through here [around Sutherland], and then there are side branches. Now, those side branches, (sarcasm) of course they couldn't be Dreaming tracks because we now call them Bundeena Road and Maianbar Road and Warumbul Road. They must be European! That's bullshit. They were Dreaming tracks. And if you go down Warumbul Road, there are sites on both sides of the road. If you go down Maianbar Road, there on both sides of the road. You've got the e whales, you've got the caves, you've got the men. Those are Dreaming tracks. And the sites … if you plotted them, you'd probably see some sort of regularity in the distances between them. Though I'm not completely sure of that. Now, if you go along Sir Bertram Stevens Drive, there's sites all along there too. They start at Audley. There's a bloody cave at Audley, and then there's another one, and then another … hand stencils down by the bridge [at Audley], camp sites along the creek …

Vincent: And that's what makes me think – archaeological evidence aside – that Sandon Point really would be a significant site, because it's at the base of Bulli Pass, and that would have been an essential route down into the Illawarra …

Les: You mean some white man didn't just come along with a steamroller and carve it out? (sarcasm) Oh my God, that's amazing! I'm being very cynical, I know. Europeans come into our country, they usurp our tracks, turn them into roads, and then say “we don't know how the Aborigines got around”. Well, that's because you put bloody two feet of tar over our tracks, brother. That's why. Of course Bulli [Pass] is a track, and of course the road along the cliff line [Sir Lawrence Hargrave Drive] is a track. And the thing we don't see anymore is that some of the stuff going up along the coast to Thirroul, that's gone, because when I was a little boy, Thirroul and Scarborough were about two or three hundred metres bigger than they are today, because that cliff line is falling in [to the sea] all the time. In fact, it's so mobile they've had to build that sea bridge to get people up the coast.

Vincent: My dad used to work at Coalcliff colliery, and I remember on a few occasions driving out there with him on that little rickety road. And he'd tell me, “Rocks fall down. Deer fall down!”

Les: Everything falls down there. So, look, I would challenge that idea that there were no Dreaming tracks and Song lines here. And the reason that I would challenge that is because there is clear evidence that the roads we [now] have bifurcate most of the Dreaming sites. It's not just coincidence that the roads we know today in the [Sutherland] Shire, especially in the [Royal National] Park, follow previously significant routes.

Vincent: And I've been reading that even into the late 1800s [Aboriginal] people would travel from the Illawarra all the way to what they called – or maybe they still call it that – Cowpastures …

Les: Yes, Cowpastures …

Vincent: … to learn a new song.

Les: Absolutely. And what did we trade from this area? Songs. I studied under Frederick McCarthy – he was one of my supervisors in my Masters. And Frederick McCarthy talked about trade, but he never said what they traded. And in the end I challenged him. I said, “Fred, what are they trading? Are they carrying forty pounds of basal? Or are they carrying, you know, six kilos of fish wrapped in plastic with ice?” I said, “Come on, Fred, what are they trading?” And he said, “Aww, there'd be trading of stone knives, and other things that people would want.” And I said, “I don't think that's true. I think they'd be trading songs and corroborees and ceremonies.” So, I think this area of the coast was always a copyright area, where people developed new songs, and those new songs and stories were traded to the people further out. My mob lived out at Cowpastures. Bloody Bull Cave is evidence of people from this area going out to Cowpastures. And Cowpastures is named from Macarthur's cows that were found there and the bulls had been slaughtered and eaten by the locals. That's what Bull Cave's about, isn't it? I think there are two tracks going out that way. I'm not sure about the Heathcote Road, because I'm not that familiar with it. I don't think it was a track, but I think the Old Illawarra Road was …
Vincent: Is that the one that goes out to Appin?

Les: Yes. I think that was a Dreaming track. And I know that when I was in the military, and I was given the task of walking from Camden out to Heathcote, as an exercise in radio and mapping, I saw many Aboriginal sites, and many Aboriginal tracks. And I know that Eckersley, the town that was out there, is a focus for Aboriginal tracks, as well. You know about Eckersley, don't you?

Vincent: No.

Les: If you go directly out from behind Heathcote, about a kilometre up the road from Heathcote shopping centre there's an industrial area. Well, there's an old mail track behind that industrial area, and it takes you out to Eckersley. And they had a town there. That was where the centre of Sutherland was going to be, out there. Except it would have been Eckersley. But because Thomas Mitchell was such a scumbag, such a slime, and alienated so many people – he laid out the Old Illawarra Road, it connects to Eckersley through the military area, now – but as soon as someone else had a chance they developed the Princes Highway, they directed the Royal entourage down the Princes Highway, so the Princes Highway became the focus, and they by passed the Old Illawarra Road. And that's why Eckersley is a nothing, a nobody. That's why it failed, because Thomas Mitchell was a turd. (laughs) It's great stuff, isn't it? And it all connects together. But this idea that there are no Dreaming tracks … I'd argue strongly that most of the main roads and most of the main tracks in the [Royal] National Park are Dreaming tracks and Song lines, and the evidence is that they bisect numerous sites, and those sites are clearly where the men would go off and do their ceremonies on the way. And these ceremonies would be in the way of warning the spirits that they were coming into new country all the time. That's what it's about.

Vincent: I remember when I stayed up at Yirrkala, they took us out on this big day trip to their place of creation. I mean, it would have taken them weeks, originally …

Les: Of course.

Vincent: … but once we reached a certain point [on the way there], the oldest guy with us did a little ceremony. He actually got his sweat and rubbed it onto us. I suppose he was letting the spirits know …

Les: That you were coming, yeah. Ceremony is incredibly [important]. I spent a lot of time in Yirrkala, and the Tanami Desert … I'm trying to think of the name of the town, um … Yuendumu. Every time I went to someone's camp I had to go through that [type of induction]. The man I know out there is one of the local 'European Aboriginals'. He's European but he lives in the Aboriginal community. He's a Doctor of Psychology, Craig San Rocque. Wonderful guy. He would say, “I'm going to take you out to Paddy so-and-so's camp today, he owns the Milky Way Dreaming,” or, “I'm gonna take you out to Freddy Smith's, he owns the Emu Dreaming,” and, “I'm gonna take you out to Billy Riley, and he owns the black snake Dreaming.” And we would drive out there, and I'd have my pocket full of money, tobacco, tea, caps, glasses … everything. And we'd get out there and he'd say, “His camp is about a hundred yards up there, so we're gonna pull off here,” And we'd pull off here, and he'd get a couple of rocks together, a few sticks and leaves, and he'd light them and get a fire going, just a bit of a smoky fire. And then within a few minutes someone would appear out of the bush and say, “The old man says come over here and have a cuppa with him.” And that was your introduction. So, you did the ceremony, and as soon as you respected him, he invited you in. And I did that heaps of times.

Vincent: What you just said about the smoke signal reminded me … the Timberys have that belief that a lot of the fires …

Les: (shaking his head) About signals being sent up the coast when Cook and Phillip were approaching? “What's that smoke signal say? It says a bloke named Arthur Phillip is coming …”

Vincent: No, no … but do you think there was some sort of warning system?

Les: I think there's some evidence that people were able to let other people know where they were by their fires, but I don't think their society was as cohesive as that. And I do know that both Cook and Phillip say that when they got to a certain point they headed out to sea because of the uncertainty of the coast along here, and that when they came into Botany Bay – both of them – they came in from the east. They came in from well out at sea. So unless people had x-ray vision, they couldn't see them. The Timberby's make up a lot of stuff – you must have seen that?

Vincent: Well, [Cook] did try to come ashore at Bulli, I think, so they must have got quite close then.

Les: But then they headed out to sea, yeah. And maybe there was a fire lit at Bulli, I don't know. I've never heard that, actually …

Vincent: Well, I was just wondering, because what I've read about smoke signals so far was that they essentially announced: I'm here.

Les: Yeah.

Vincent: But I didn't know if you could make fire do certain things that might communicate something else.
Les: There's no evidence for that what-so-ever. Show me the evidence. Any recount from any of the old men I've heard interviewed going back, what, sixty years now ... they talk about lots of things, but they never talk about smoke signals.

Vincent: I had to ask, because reading all these accounts ...

Les: Did you get Sylvia Hallam's book, "Fire and Hearth"?

Vincent: No, not yet.

Les: It's worth looking at.

Vincent: But I've got Cook and Banks off the Illawarra, saying, "Five fires tonight," or, "More smoke tonight," "another fire" ... and I'm thinking, okay, it's either camp fires or ... It wouldn't be camp fires. There's a very strong prohibition in Aboriginal culture to light a smoky fire. A smoky fire is lit for a particular reason, to announce your presence. Okay? If you go to any Aboriginal camp [today], you'll find the camp fires are kept very low, and very dry, no smoke.

Vincent: Hmm, okay.

Les: So smoky fires are probably to announce the presence of people, and the number of smokes would announce the number of people, and that might lead to people concluding that there was something happening. I'll give you that.

Vincent: I didn't know about the absence of smoke with [normal] camp fires. I was thinking [what Banks and Cook saw were] either campfires, or -- as the Timberys say -- smoke signals, or perhaps evidence of 'cleaning up country'. Um ... going back to this idea of trade, even if we're only talking cultural things ... I mentioned to you earlier that I'm currently reading Josephine Flood's "The Moth Hunters". And one of the things she claims was an item of trade was sandstone whetting stones. You disagree with that.

Les: I don't absolutely disagree with that.

Vincent: I guess what I'm trying to ask is ... what material goods do we definitely know were traded?

Les: Well, I know that anything that was traded was loaded onto the wife's back, and carted around. Men didn't carry it ...

Vincent: Sounds to me like [the women] did everything: the ground work for the hunting and gathering, the fishing, and they did all the carrying.

Les: And child-rearing, and camp-making ...

Vincent: What did the guys do?

Les: They were doing all the really important stuff: the ceremonies. Just like today. (laughs) When I tell that story to all the old ladies, when I go and give a talk, they say, “Nothing's changed, Mr Bursill.” And it was [like that]. I mean, I grew up in a generation where my mother was a slave to my father. She did everything for him. Everything. He came home from work and, whether she'd worked all day or not, at the factory, he came home from work and sat there on the lounge chair, and she'd run around, clean the house, cook the dinner, and then I suppose at the end of the night, when he was ready for it, submitted her self to sexual manipulation. Who knows. But it's always been the case that men have dominated women. That's just the way it was. It's changing now, but very slowly. But anyway, I don't think that physical items of trade would have been physically- made goods. We know that dua knives and Kimberley points, and other very nice stones -- very small objects, they would have only weighed twenty or fifty grams -- we know they would be traded. But when we say 'trade', no one would walk into a camp and say, "I've got three dua knives. What will you give me for them?" They simply went into a camp and, during the course of their time there, someone would say, “Oh, gee, that's a lovely knife you've got there.” And they'd say, “Ah, it's nothing to me,” and give it to them. And that's how Aboriginal trade goes on. And what are you buying when you do that? You're actually buying an entree to their country. And you'd sustain that by singing the songs and teaching ceremonies, offering, presenting, procuring, or making available some items that are of interest.

Vincent: And what are those stones that are in your study?

Les: Tjuringa. They're sacred stones. That's what I mean by Tjuringa. And you'll see that they're carved with symbols ... mnemonic, you called them, and that's a great word for them. Memory joggers. And most Aboriginal art is that. They're mnemonics. They don't tell you a story in its entirety, they tell you a part of a story, and then you remember the rest. So, when you see a kangaroo drawn on a cave wall, the simplistic view used to be, “Oh, well, that's because that guy was dying to have a kangaroo steak for dinner, and he thought that if he drew a kangaroo on the wall, it would procure a kangaroo for him.” That's what we were told forty, fifty years ago, but now we realise, no, what that guy is doing is saying, "I'm gonna draw a kangaroo, and then I'm gonna call upon the great creator spirit to come, because when the kangaroos come then the rain and the grass come." Okay? So, he's using cause and affect. He's actually seeing the affect, and then ascribing the cause to the kangaroo. Of course, in reality,
kangaroos come because the grass and rain is there. But that's the mentality of what's going on in the drawings. Does that make sense?

Vincent: Yeah, absolutely. I just had these out-standing questions I wanted your opinion on. You hear different things from different sources, and you just try to weigh up what’s the more likely answer.

Les: And I know I sound big-headed and a know-it-all, and I do apologise for that …

Vincent: No, I value your opinion.

Les: … but I just ask you that when you talk to people you need to weigh up: what is their experience, what research have they done, where have they heard these things, are they compounding material that was falsely given to them and now it's being compounded by them repeating it.

Vincent: Well, one example I can give you is when I asked a local Aboriginal person about Dreaming tracks. I said essentially what you've told me: that my understanding was that a lot of what we now consider European roads were built along Dreaming tracks. And I asked this person, “Is that your understanding? For example, would Macquarie Pass be a Dreaming Track?” And they said, “Oh, no. We'd take the hardest route.” I said, “What do you mean?” They said, “Well, it was a spiritual thing. So, you wouldn't go up [what is now] Macquarie Pass, you'd take a harder way.” And I'm thinking, “That does not make any sense whatsoever.”

Les: Well, it flies in the face of everything I've ever heard about Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal culture was all about mitigating energy reserves …

Vincent: Which is why you didn't carry huge stones around with you.

Les: Exactly. I'm sure that people made stone axes and then left them at camp sites because they knew the next camp site they went to would have a stone axe that they made last year. And I know that when you get out west, out around Dubbo, women didn't carry their querns with them, their grinding stones, they left them in the camp. And that's why there are so many around, 'cause every four or five kilometres there's another grinding stone. We know that people might have carried water in a conch shell, but even that's problematic because there's prohibitions about carrying water away from a water hole. People may have carried it back to camp, fifty metres, or something like that, but not much further …

Vincent: Well, even if you have a reliable container … I've seen some traditionally-made water carriers. So long as you're not carrying it a far distance it's good, but there's no way you can go cross country, 'cause the water's gonna slop out.

Les: Of course.

(We begin discussing the engraving site we are about to visit in the Royal National Park. I had first visited the whale engravings at Maianbar in July of 2011. Unfortunately, at the time, I did not realise that the engraved figure Les refers to as 'Luma Luma' is just across the road from them. So I was keen for Les to show me the engraving we had talked so much about, but which I had only ever seen photographs of.)

Les: Your thoughts on the Luma Luma [engraving] solidified in my mind the fact that it was definitely a [depiction of] subincision, because this man was a sacred spirit figure: transcended from the whales to the people. And so it's only natural that he would be the most initiated you could be. He's wearing arm bands, and a waist band …

Vincent: But that's another thing in that Val Attenbrow says in her book [“Sydney's Aboriginal Past”] … that there's no evidence of subincision down here.

Les: Hmm … Val's very good with archaeology, but not on anthropology. I'm an anthropologist, she's an archaeologist. That's the difference.

Vincent: I could have sworn that when I read that A.W. Howitt book [“The Native Tribes of South-East Australia”], a while ago, that he mentions seeing subincision amongst the Yuin. But maybe I'm remembering incorrectly. Maybe it was just circumcision. And of course we're talking about eighty, ninety years after contact, anyway …

Les: I'm pretty sure that subincision was practised here. But you had to be very high status.

Vincent: The only other thing I thought that [Luma Luma engraving] might be depicting, if it's not subincision … I only learnt recently that marsupials have a two-headed penis …

Les: Some of them do, yeah.

Vincent: So I thought, “If that engraving isn't [depicting] subincision, maybe he's some sort of manifestation of a kangaroo …” But there are whales next to him, so that wouldn't make sense.
Les: No, it doesn't make sense.

Vincent: But I didn't know that about marsupials …

Les: It's only some marsupials. They're very primitive, you realise that?

Vincent: How can you say that? What makes one thing primitive and another thing … They're perfectly adapted to their environment, surely?

Les: Well, okay, they have been extremely conservative in their development.

Vincent: The other day Mum was watching this documentary about the kangaroos around Canberra. And they said it's really unfortunate but when a mother kangaroo gets stressed she'll chuck her joey out and run for it.

Les: And if you look into Aboriginal culture they mimic that. [People today] don't like to hear about that, but it's true. I remember reading and writing about it, and getting very badly rapt by my lecturer. He said, “Where have you got evidence for this?” And I said, “Well, Les Hyatt and Betty Meehan, they did some work with the Gidjangali and the Anbarra up in the Gulf country,” and I said, “They made veiled references.” And he said, “Veiled references could mean anything, Les.” And I said, “Yeah, but it probably means this.” The kangaroo was their great mentor, their fertility symbol.

Vincent: Well, I remember being told – perhaps it was you – that of twins, one was always [abandoned] … almost straight away.

Les: Yeah, always. I don't know that that was so prevalent on the coast, but inland it was. A woman has to carry the child and breast feed it. Why do Aboriginal women have children spaced about three and a half years apart? It's because if you are on a very close diet, which is mainly made up of protein and no fats, you're body's struggling all the time for nutrition. A woman gives birth to a child and carries it around on her hip, and breast feeds it on demand, that means that her fecundity and her physical strength are just brought down to zero, so Aboriginal women stop ovulating because they're in such stress. And so, if you had two babies, you wouldn't be able to carry the food that you'd have to go out and collect. You just can't carry them. And so quite often the second child or the sickly child would be left in camp. And when they came back, quite often, “Oh, the gods had taken them,” in the shape of a four-legged thing that barks. And that's what happened to Lindy Chamberlain.

Vincent: Yes, it was you … I remember you making that analogy.

Les: Well, doesn't it make sense?

Vincent: Yeah.

Les: And lots of fibre.

Vincent: … like I said, I'm also reading “The Moth Hunters” by Josephine Flood, which is about the bogong moth feasts up in the southern tablelands …

Les: Yes. A hundred kilojoules per moth.

Vincent: … and she says people would go up there and just gorge themselves for a month or so …

Les: Yes, to build their fat up.

Vincent: … because they are just so high in fat.

Les: That's right. They were a wonderful source. Someone told me that a dozen to fifteen bogong moths is the equivalent of a day's nutrition in the modern world, which is about a fifteen hundred calorie diet. So these guys would go up there and they'd probably eat between two or three thousand calories a day, and they would become very fat. Aboriginal people would always talk about fat. Baiame is always [depicted as] a fat guy. Why? It shows that he has got this incredible ability to maintain himself. So fatness was a sign of [superiority]. The Venus of Vestonice … all of the fertility symbols are what? They're not skinny young things with big tits but narrow hips, are they? They're all big fat women with pendulous breasts and big bums, because these people know how to survive. They are the epitome of it. And Baiame is always a fat man. Always.

Vincent: What's the likelihood of the Dharawal going to those feasts in the southern tablelands?

Les: It's too far. We're talking about the Snowy Mountains. It's a long way just for a season. Certainly some young men might make it that far, but I don't see a whole community going there. They've got a pretty good resource here so long as they manage it well. I mean, when you get up into the back of Heathcote, that is an open gum forest with sandy floors, lots of escarpments with shelters in them, a creek running the whole way to Appin, virtually … It's a marvellous place. It's like the Garden of Eden.

Vincent: So long as you know how to work it.
Les: Sure, but people did [know how to work it]. Even Europeans went out there and lived in the caves. Their art is all the way through them. Drawings of nude figures. You've seen them, haven't you?

Vincent: No.

Les: Oh, there's lots of graffiti in them. So you want to go out to see Luma Lama?

Vincent: Absolutely.
A1.II4: First interview with Debbie Callaghan and Noel Lonesborough (02.05.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewees.

Debbie Callaghan, a Kamilaroi woman from Goondiwindi (QLD), and Noel Lonesborough, a Jerrinja man from Orient Point, are two of the founding members of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio in Gerringong. I got to know them both while researching the studio as part of my BCA Honours thesis in 2008, and have maintained a friendship with them ever since.

Since opening their studio in 2005, the Boolarng mob have been at the forefront of reintroducing and reinterpreting traditional south coast crafts that had barely survived the colonisation process. The artists regularly hold workshops at the studio, as well as travelling further afield, to teach these skills to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The creation and maintenance of a bush tucker and medicine garden alongside their studio rapidly led to opportunities such as the commercial propagation of native plants and involvement with local environmental projects. Since 2009, Debbie and Noel have been involved with bush regeneration at the Little Blow Hole in Kiama and have co-authored several public art works there.

This interview was conducted at the Boolarng Nangamai studio, Gerringong.

Vincent: I last interviewed you both in 2008 when I was doing my Honours, and I know you've been doing lots of different things since then. In particular I wanted to talk about the bush regeneration down at the Little Blowhole that you've you've been involved with. And you've also been working with glass, which is new for both of you. How did you get into the glass work?

Debbie: Well, we got some money from Regional Arts, and we had the opportunity – as Directors on the [Boolarng Nangamai] Board – to do a ten week course with Shikobi(?). Glass. They [used to be] around the corner here, but they're setting up at Kiama [now].

So we started off doing a ten week course – five weeks at a time. We started off just learning how to make beads. And then we wanted to go to bigger and better things, so we started doing our moulds …

Vincent: But did you decide to work with glass because you knew [the Shikobi(?) crew], and thought, “Oh, I'll give this a go”?

Debbie: We had to report back to Regional Arts about what kind of art we were doing. And it was good to do a different medium so they could look at that and go, “Oh, right, well we might put some more funding through because they're doing something different, and making a difference.” It was all put out there for the community to come and join in. Aunty Lila did some glass work, [Clive] Bud Freeman did some work … It was all Boolarng [Nangamai], but it was open to the community. And then we had an exhibition at Hogarth Gallery. We all started out very little. I made some glass snakes, and you (turning to Noel) made some jellyfish, and we had the exhibition at Hogarth Gallery just before it closed down. Then we were offered another five week course, so the strongest stayed, and the rest didn't do it. So Noel and I and Trish – Trish is from the community, in Gerringong – she joined in, and we all started using recycled glass, which was a slump method, doing our coolamons and our bowls. And then we had to tape them up. We had to tape the glass as soon as we got the shape … run tape around it so we could carve into the glass. And where we didn't carve into it, we sand blasted, or we left natural. Then we bought some coloured glass, bullseye glass …

Noel: I done it because it was a new medium [for me]. I'd never done it before. When I started I was real scared I was gonna lose me fingers, you know, get cut or something. I mean, it is glass. Anyways, as we got into it – as Jedda [Debbie] says – we started on small stuff. Beads …

Debbie: Coiling glass …

Noel: Yeah. Little snake designs … Then we progressed into moulds. So we ended up doing the shapes we wanted. I done boomerangs, coolamon, spearheads, fishhooks …

Debbie: Axes.


Noel: So, when we started moulding, it was like shaping foam for whatever you want to make. You put it in this box and ---- ---- ---- (?) so you've got a mould. Then you clean out your mould. When it's dry, you get the glass broken up …

Vincent: So how soon were you doing the larger stuff?

Debbie: It was in the second [lot of five weeks].

Vincent: You obviously really liked the process.
Debbie: Oh, we loved it.

Noel: Once we got into it, it was unreal. We still want to do it, but we got no money.

Vincent: Was it a really natural decision to make some of those traditional artefacts in this new medium?

Debbie: Yes, because no one else had made them.

Noel: We think.

Debbie: Well, we think. I have watched Message Stick and I know there are some black fellas out there workin' with big sheets of glass. Big jobs.

Noel: Panels.

Debbie: Panels, yeah. But that's a big job.

Vincent: The only artist I can think of that's making traditional artefacts in some sort of new material is Garry Jones from the Uni[versity of Wollongong]. But he makes 'em out of plastic, and he makes them en masse. It's like a comment on mass …

Debbie: Mass production, yeah.

Vincent: That's the closest thing I can think of. I apologise that I haven't seen your [glass] work, Debs – you mentioned the digging sticks. But I saw your stuff, Noely, at the Wollongong [City] Gallery. I just thought they were amazing …

Debbie: That was [an exhibition called] “Local : Current 2011”.

Vincent: … the “Jerrinja Mens Business”. I thought the boomerang was just absolutely beautiful, and even the bullroarers … Really nice.

Debbie: Yeah, he finished all his [work]. I didn't. I haven't been able to. Because my boondies … I've got about three of them, and I've got digging sticks, but I want to use copper for the digging stick knobs …

Noel: That's gonna be hard 'cause the round length(?). It's gonna be hard to do the mould, isn't it?

Debbie: Well, I've got the glass digging stick knobs, right? And what I want to use is the wooden digging stick, so I've got to drill a hole into the top of the knob, the glass …

Noel: The handle.

Debbie: … and that's how I want to exhibit it, so you've got contemporay with traditional. So I've got to make the digging stick myself, the bottom end. And with the other one I'm using copper as a stick, so I've got a bang it out and fix it all up and then put it into the glass top …

Vincent: That's another medium altogether.

Debbie: That's another medium altogether. That's next with the glass. 'Cause I've already done one … I think it's downstairs. I'll show it to you. It [represents] freshwater, and the blue one is saltwater. So that'll be fresh and salt water together. But then the boondies are all different shapes. You've got the point …

Vincent: What's a boondie?

Debbie: A boondie is [like] a nulla nulla. A weapon.

Noel: They'd hit ya over the head with it.

Debbie: And I can do those 'cause women and men used boondies to hunt and fight with, and for ceremonies.

Vincent: I've read that men had digging sticks on occasion as well.

Noel: Of course.

Debbie: Yeah. Well, you know, they used to go out looking for yam and the witjuti, that's when they'd use the diggin' stick. But I put a glass knob on the top of mine, which makes it different, you know, unique.
Noel: And I made glass axes. S'posed to be like a stone axe, but I put a traditional head on it with bark and string. So when we finished that course, that workshop, we wanted to keep goin', 'cause we got the feel for it. We like it. So we independently put in for a grant last year …


Noel: … away from Boolarng Nangamai, [in case] we want to go independent. We just thought we'd be the only ones [from Boolarng Nangamai] who'd want to do it.

Debbie: We put in the [application for] NSW Arts Board funding under ‘Aboriginal’, um … all Aboriginal-run, um … because you've got the Top End everywhere, ---- ---- ----(2) millions. So Tony Williams … You know Tony? He works for works for whats-her-name. 'Cause we're trying to get funding from this lady. 'Cause we wanna do this medium. But Kell [Kelli Ryan] says we got some money still left from Regional Arts, so we can do some more glass work, and finish off my boondies.

Noel: We want to move on, though.

Vincent: So, anything beyond painting and weaving, Koorie artists are really dependent on who's willing to …?

Noel: Have a go. We were open to everybody …

Debbie: Yeah, we opened it all up …

Noel: We had a couple of stragglers … You know, they can't handle it …

Debbie: I thought Bud [Clive Freeman] would have done really well if he'd stuck with it, but something come up and he didn't finish [the course]. And Aunty Lila, her hands, you know, she's getting old now, and she can't [do the work]. So Trish and I and Noel are the only ones. And we entered into [the Parliament of NSW Aboriginal Prize] at the last second, a week before [the cut-off date].

Noel: Oh yeah, we'd just found out about it.

Debbie: I said, “Let's have a go! Let's have a go! Let's put the glass in.” So we put our entries in, and we got picked. So we took a couple of trips up there. You know, had a yarn with them …

Noel: See, what you do is, you gotta send photos in. When you go into the Parliament House Award …

Debbie: They weren't real good photos.

Noel: … the prize is like five grand. You had to have photographs taken, and then you had to be selected. We were selected out of a hundred [applicants].

Debbie: But the photos weren't that crash hot because it was glass. We didn't have the set up right, to take the photos here properly. Kell took 'em quickly as soon as she got back from Canada. We told her, “Aww, we wanna go in Parliament House.” And she said, “Aww, geez Jedd, we haven't got much time.” [But we] put 'em in, [and] got accepted. We were in shock. Went in as a group – Three Way Dreaming.

Noel: So it goes into Parliament House, and we got Highly Commended. We nearly won. And that's our first go at this stuff.

Debbie: Yes. And you know what, I was very upset with the Parliament House, how they set it up. Wasn't nice at all. Didn't look good. It was on a plinth …

Noel: With perspex over the top.

Debbie: And it wasn't lit.

Noel: Didn't show the colours.

Debbie: Couldn't see the colours of the glass and the grinding stone. I was a bit upset about that. We all were.

Vincent: It's a bit strange to have glass under perspex as well, because you're dealing with too many reflective surfaces.

Debbie: Well, that's the girl … the curator …

Noel: Everyone was leaning on it [to see it].

Vincent: I think that's the price of being an artist. Once you hand your art over you don't really have any control over how it's displayed.
Noel: But they were just pathetic. We could have done better than that.

Debbie: We could have done better than that, yeah. The one where Noel's ['Jerrinja Men's Business'] was set up, at the “Local : Current [2011]”, that was deadly.

Vincent: Was [your entry] the only object in the Parliament House Award?

Debbie: No, it wasn't. There was a big ceramic bowl … aww, I don't know who made that.

Noel: The one with all the dots on it?

Debbie: Yeah.

Noel: That was no good [either], the way the plinths were done. They didn't try to highlight anything that wasn't painting. Like, us with our sculpture …

Vincent: Was the grinding stone a coloured one?

Debbie: Yeah.

Noel: They were both coloured.

Debbie: They're both different. You can see through Neg's [Noel's]. [Not through] the top of it, but you can see through as you put it up on its side. You can see all the beautiful coloured glass through it. I wouldn't have set it up flat, but have it turned so light can go through it.

Noel: Actually, what we wanted was a light underneath, so you could see.

Debbie: Yeah, under the grinding stone. But they didn't do it. And don't forget the coolamon … 'cause Noely put his coolamon in. I didn't put mine in.

Vincent: Was that the one with the platypus [design]?

Noel: Nah. That's the one up at Wollongong [City Gallery].

Debbie: It had a meeting place [symbol] on it. And my bowl was on this end (indicates with her arms) (indicates with her arms). Now, we're talking about a bowl that's not completely round – and I don't like things that are perfectly shaped anyway – and I'd etched it with turtles. This is just in recycled window glass. But the grinding stone, I mean, they could have lit it. They could have sat the bowls up a different way and angled them. I mean, I was a curator up at Wollongong [City Gallery] for the Pallingjang IV [exhibition], and you gotta have an eye for that kinda thing. I'm not knocking her [the curator] …

Noel: I am.

Debbie: … I suppose she did the best job on the day … But they get paid a lot of money for being a curator.

Noel: But we got that high recommendation, so now it's touring around all the regional art centres in NSW for twelve months. That was in October last year, (to Debbie) was it?

Debbie: Yeah, until October this year. So, hopefully because we've insured the glass … We've had to put [the selling price up]. Noely's goin', “Just sell it for five hundred [dollars].” I was like, “No way.” We put two and a half [thousand] on the grinding stones …

Noel: They were solid.

Debbie: … because those grinding stone are unique.

Vincent: I think you guys are onto something, because it is such a unique idea. I reckon, to do that traditional stuff in glass. That [Parliament House work] will be on display again, and hopefully it will be displayed better.

Debbie: What we want to get out of it is a commission. Not so much for the money [in itself]. For me, it's …

Vincent: An opportunity.

Debbie: … to do that grinding stone again. It'll never be like they one they seen, but that opportunity to work with glass again. And we also met an old mate, Lenny Lucas.

Noel: Oh, yeah …
Debbie: While *Chic and Cobe* (?) was away we got onto this fellow, Lenny Lucas. He's a glass artist. He's a deadly glass artist. Mainstream.

Vincent: Is he a black fella?

Debbie: Nah, nah. Mainstream.

Noel: And guess who got us onto him? Louise Brand from Wollongong [City] Gallery. 'Cause when they had my stuff in Wollongong …

Debbie: You had to go and finish off some bullroarers and boomerangs. And that's why I finished 'cause I got one class to finish (?), we only done half a day with Lenny.

Noel: 'Cause he didn't have the right machinery, hey?

Debbie: Yes he did! He had better machinery than they [Shikobe (?) Glass] did.

Noel: Aww, mate! What about his sander? You couldn't get around it with the boomerang.

Debbie: Yeah, but he showed me, remember? He showed me some other techniques …

Noel: Nah. They [Shikobe (?) Glass] had the best [machinery].

Debbie: Anyway, he works with panels, but with paint, colour. Aww, mate – beautiful. So we've got the opportunity to go back and work with him if we get some money. Because, you know, you can't be paying people a pittance.

Vincent: How much are we talking?

Debbie: Well, three hundred dollars for the day, which was good, which was good. And we only had half a day, so Kell's only gotta pay a hundred and fifty for half a day's wok. But Lenny …

Noel: We better ring him up.

Debbie: We've gotta ring him, so I can go back over and finish, you know. If I can get some more money I'll finish my nulla nullas.

Vincent: So horizons are ever expanding with this new medium … so long as you've got the money.

Noel: We don't know where we'll go.

Debbie: If we get more money I'd like to make glass tables and that etched with driftwood … different designs underneath it, you know what I mean?

Vincent: So, can you mould something like a piece of driftwood that you found … make a mould of it, and make it into glass?

Debbie: Yeah.

Vincent: That'd be good. How do you get all the different colours in the glass? 'Cause the boomerang, for example, is relatively clear – the one I saw at Wollongong City Gallery. It's got a bit of colour, but particularly the bullroarers have got all these different blood colours. How do you achieve that? I remember you explaining it to me when I came to visit you during a class [next door at the old Shikobi (?) Glass studio], but …

Noel: What you do is you sit a terracotta pot, with a hole in the bottom, above your mould when it's in the kiln. So you've got all your broken glass, all different colours …

Vincent: Aww, that's right. Different coloured broken glass.

Noel: … and so, when you put it in the kiln, under heat it will all melt together. It swirls out the bottom of the pot through the hole, see, and then it just finds its own level in the mould. And that's what I wanted. I wanted all these mad colours through it, 'cause that's how me paintings are. And that's how I got it.

Debbie: I did that on my grinding stone, too. It come out deadly.

Noel: What do you reckon was the hardest part? Sanding, ay?

Debbie: Sand blasting's the hardest.

Noel: It's an all-day job.
Debbie: Aww, yeah, on the sand belt. A polisher. Sanding it, polishing it …

Vincent: Sounds a bit dangerous – little bits of glass going everywhere.

Noel: Nah. Well, we were really scared, ay?

Debbie: Yeah, 'cause you're thinking, “Is this glass gonna fly back in my face?” But I mean, you've got safety glasses on, and boots. And the water's running with this belt – a little bit of water trickling down …

Noel: You don't have any gloves [though].

Debbie: No. You gotta hold onto it. So you're holdin' onto it, and you're trying to sand it. And when you're sanding it you don't notice the glass coming off it 'cause it's comin' off real fine. But you gotta polish it.

Noel: You got through grades of sanding it – little less rough, little less rough, smooth. Then you end up polishing it with a cork.

Debbie: Lotta hard work but. Lotta hard work. When you're doing the moulds, you know, you're pouring your plaster and all that kind of stuff.

Noel: What about when you gotta ----(?) it on the glass? Aww. He used these metal … They call it a frit, don't they?

Debbie: Something like that.

Noel: Anyway, with this frit, you get a flat plane of glass and – say I had to do me fishhooks, do all the edges – I'd have to do it by hand on this frit. Put water on it. And it's just like abrasive stuff. It looks like a sander, but it's hard work.

Vincent: But look at the results. Beautiful.

Noel: The results are worth it. You should have seen the fishhook, ay.

Debbie: He broke one!

Noel: I tied it up with string! (laughing)

Debbie: So you couldn't notice it. That was just to have it exhibited. We put a lot of hard work into it, but we still got heaps to finish.

Vincent: The Little Blowhole. I think it was 2009 I came down to see you while you working there? And you guys are heading back there soon?

Noel: Yep, we got another job. That [first] job was … (to Debbie) how many weeks did we work there? Ten weeks, too, wasn't it?

Debbie: Mmm.

Noel: We only done one day a week [in 2009]. We had to landscape. Pull out all the weeds, and regen. That was a good job.

Vincent: How did that come about? You were working with Illawarra Landcare?

Noel: Yeah. It was Landcare, yeah. And it was the Landcare group that got onto us, ay?

Debbie: Yes.

Noel: ‘Cause we were Koorie. They wanted to have some sort of Koorie influence on it. ‘Cause they'd heard a story about the little blowhole …

Debbie: Gurungutch.

Noel: … the Gurungutch legend. And they done a mural on that [legend] up there. That was Aaron and Jodie.

Vincent: Was that [mural] there when you started work, or was it [done] as part of Boolarng's involvement?

Noel: That was the start of it, I think.

Debbie: Yeah, it was the start of it. Aaron Broad[Henry] and Jodie Stewart [painted that mural].

Noel: And we built a boomerang chair for them up there, too. That was the start of that job. But honestly I don't know how we got that job. Kelly got it through Landcare. But that was the start of it. We done the chair, and it turned out really good. Then they got money for regen, and they got us in. And now we're doing another one with them, another regen.
Vincent: You guys enjoyed it, didn't you?

Debbie: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. And [the money is] from the [NSW] Environmental Trust, [for an initiative] called Protecting our Places, and … (to Noel) which side [of the site] are we doing?

Noel: We're doing the northern side this time. We done the southern side [before]. Now they got more money to do the northern side. And we're eradicating weeds, replanting [natives] …

Debbie: And we're learning all the botanical names. We'll be planting some bush tucker [plants] throughout …

Noel: Bit of medicinal.

Debbie: … so it's gonna be used as an educational site.

Vincent: Are you going to be using plants from your nursery?

Noel: Yes, but they won't all be coming from there. But whatever we've got …

Debbie: 'Cause we were gonna plant out Warrigal Greens and all down there, weren't we? Bush tucker. And introduce that to the kids at Kiama High school …

Vincent: [Kiama High school] was the other thing I wanted to ask you about …

Debbie: And the poles are going in.

Vincent: How's that [art project] going?

Debbie: I'm gonna email Gary Olive [teacher at Kiama High school] when I get home tonight.

Vincent: Not another funding issue, is it?

Debbie: No, no, no. I'll be paid when I finish them off down there. Kell will help me put a rig up around them so I can finish painting. The kids' designs are on there, it's just I gotta add colour and maybe my little red belly black snake on the bottom – something that represents myself being down there. And I'll put something probably from Noely. But, no, the poles are still up at the high school. Steve [Russell] has done hands [prints] on it, I think, with the kids. And we're waiting for Council to put them in. Once they go in I'll finish painting 'em. And I'll make sure they're bright. I'll make sure you see them. Where the boomerang chair is there's a little bit of a drop, and I suggested [the poles] go from high to low. And [the designs] represent what we seen when we worked down there. Gundullat – that's Kookaburra …


Debbie: We seen whales, a seal …

Noel: This is all at the little blow hole.

Vincent: I remember you saying the seal came right up to the shoreline, as if he was watching you.

Debbie: Oh, yeah. He was. He was swimming around. But then, like Noely said, a young whale come in and his flipper was out, like, saying hello to me and Noely. And we looked at each other, didn't we, in amazement?

Noel: He was just splashing, playing around. He just hung out there.

Debbie: Until his mummy called him, and off he went. 'Cause he was a young juvenile. Baby.

Noel: Lot of red bellies there.

Debbie: Lot of red bellies. And the kookaburras … Karen from Landcare – she lived there [near the little blowhole], but now she's moved to Berry – she said she'd never seen a kookaburra there. But the kookaburras started comin'. And what else did we see, Neg? We saw a few things, didn't we. So [the poles] are about what we seen.

Vincent: So, had you ever heard the Gurungutch story [previously]?

Noel: Never heard it in me life. So, there you go, I learnt that. Gurungutch. We're trying to beautify the place, because they've built a viewing platform on the southern side, and they've made access easier to it, too, I think.

Debbie: And I think it also depends on figuring out what plants will grow there, and what won't. We planted banksia trees on the northern side where the freshwater spring is, and … how many survived?
Noel: They probably got pulled out.

Debbie: Probably. But we put five or six in there.

Vincent: hey need real sandy soil, don't they, the banksias?

Noel: Nah. They grow here [at the Boolarng Nangamai garden] in thick clay!

Debbie: We put in lillipillies. I don't know how they're going. I haven't been down there for a while.

Noel: Aww, the developed trees we planted have really kept on. It's really big down there now. We haven't been down there for a couple of years. Only the other day. But we hope we're gonna start on that next week.

Debbie: Yeah, next Friday. So, hopefully, with doing all this maybe people will look at [the site] in a different way.

Noel: It's got a big Aboriginal influence, that place, with the Gurungutch legend, with us there, and all the native plants. Yeah, it's brought an identity to the place.

Debbie: And getting to know local people's good, too. You know, working with local people from Landcare, around there, is good. They obviously wanted to see a difference.

Noel: Well, they must have liked what we done in the first place, to ask us back.

Vincent: And is that the only Landcare project Boolarng Nangamai has been involved with? 'Cause I know you've been supplying plants for other projects. Do you still get farmers coming around asking for plants?

Noel: Not very often now.

Vincent: I know at the beginning there was a bit of interest.

Noel: Well, they're planted out now, you see. They've done their job. But I still got a bloke comes over from Berry all the time to buy plants.

Debbie: What's that big electricity place?

Noel: Oh, yeah. We might have a job there. Tallawarra Power Station. Now, Energy Australia would have coordinated that. And they're replanting out there. They reckon they're putting in about five hundred thousand [plants]. They want a lot of gums. So, I've got a heap of gum seeds over here I'm growin'.

Vincent: You still go out [seed] collecting?

Noel: Nah. They come to me now! (laughs) Old Dickie [Richard Scarborough], he just brings in what he wants, and I [propagate them].

Debbie: And don't forget to mention Hayley? She's our horticulturalist.

Noel: See, we had to have someone that to get on this job, so we've had to put on a horticulturalist, and she's been working with us just as a supervisor. But we are the Project Officers.

Debbie: We've gotta know weed control, soil, zoning … And we've been taking photos …

Noel: We've got to document everything – what we've done everyday …

Vincent: Lotsa red tape.

Debbie: Lotsa red tape for the Government.

Noel: It is. You should have seen the hassle we had getting [this job].

Debbie: It was a hassle, but hey, Kelly ended up bearing the brunt of it. Because we didn't know how to get around all their jargon. The jargon they asked for!

Noel: Even Kell got confused.

Debbie: Yeah. But in the end this is all [in pursuit of] cultural education.

Vincent: So you've met with the kids from Kiama High school that you're doing the totem poles with?
Debbie: Yes. Steve [Russell] and I did a day down there with Year 10 from Kiama High. I think there was about seven or eight Aboriginal kids [there] on the day. So we got them to do their designs …

Vincent: Did any of them know the story?

Debbie: Gurungatch? Well, I can't tell that story. Steve didn't tell the story either.

Noel: He didn't even know it.

Debbie: It's up to whoever knows the story. It's their right to tell 'em. It's not up to us. But [the totem pole project] is not about Gurungatch. It's all about what Noel and I did [at the blow hole] and what animals we seen when we worked there. That is what their designs were to go on the poles. 'Cause Aaron and Jodie have already done Gurungatch. So the totem poles are all about what animals Noely and I seen when we worked down there. So they had to do all these drawings, take 'em back to the high school [to polish them off].

Vincent: And Bonny [Foley-Brennan] just mentioned that you guys are working on another public art work.

Noel: Yeah, we just got another gig at Berkeley with the pensioners …

Debbie: At the Community Centre.

Noel: Here we go, this is how versatile we are – we're doin' a mosaic mural. Never done one before.

Debbie: She's [the main artist] supposed to be calling in here today. I don't know her last name. Apparently she knows me.

Noel: Christie something.

Vincent: Is she the one that done that big mural down at Bomaderry [to commemorate] the children's home?

Debbie: Don't know. She's not Aboriginal.

Vincent: No, I know, but she had [Aboriginal] school kids involved with it.

Noel: (laughing) We're the kids she's got this time!
A1.I15: Interview with Pat Hall (15.05.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

Pat Hall has worked for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for over thirty years. As manager of education, information and tourism for the south coast region she has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities in the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Southern Highlands. Though now officially retired, she is still actively involved with ongoing NPWS projects.

I particularly wanted to speak with Pat about two public art works in the Shoalhaven that she had been involved with – a memorial to the Bomaderry Children’s Home at Bomaderry Regional Park and the “Southern International Airport” mosaic at the River Road picnic area, Shoalhaven Heads. Both works were produced by members of the Shoalhaven Aboriginal community and facilitated by ceramicist Leonie Barrachuff.

This interview was conducted at the Fitzroy Falls Visitors Centre.

Part I

The abrupt start to this interview needs some explanation. Prior to the interview proper, Pat was showing me some Power Point Presentations of the construction of the two public artworks in question. Pat was talking so passionately, and providing so much information, that after a few minutes I asked if I could start recording then and there. As such, the beginning of this ‘interview’ appears to be missing, and the narrative is understandably led by what was occurring ‘on screen’.

Pat: (referring to the mosaic at Bomaderry Creek Regional Park) We put to the students, “What would you like to do?” They weren’t sure. They wanted to do something that acknowledged the [Bomaderry] Children’s Home, and also the connection that the Aboriginal people from the Nowra area had with the children. A lot of them were from the children’s home – the elders [involved in the project], that is – but most of them were children of children from the children’s home.

Vincent: When did the home close?

Pat: Ooh, it was going for a long time. Didn't close until the late seventies, early eighties ...

Vincent: They were still taking kids away [from their families] to put in there [in the early eighties]?

Pat: Still taking kids then, yep. It’s now been handed to the local Aboriginal community. Some people live there. Part of the Nowra land council is there, but it’s mainly the elders that have a place there. And they meet every week. So we went to the school and said, “What would you like to do?” We had a meeting with the elders. You can see all the elders are women (referring to the screen), and that's fairly deliberate because we find that when we work with the women elders we get things done pretty quickly. The men aren't usually interested in that kind of thing, anyway. So we work with the elders. And most of these elders here are from different language groups, but they all have a connection with the mission [the children's home]. And they've all got a connection with the Dharawal nation, as well, either through mothers or fathers. And they're all in their seventies. So we had the elders there. We had a couple of people from [the NPWS] Head Office who wanted to come down and have a look – they work mainly in the Royal National Park – and then the rest were the students from Shoalhaven High school – mostly Year 12, but a couple from Year 11. We were constrained by time. The students gave up their sports afternoon on a Tuesday, so we went there every Tuesday. They voluntarily did it – gave up their sports afternoon. Went there every Tuesday for about eight or nine months. So, we started in the early part of the year, and we finished it just after their Higher School Certificate exams. So, it worked well.

Vincent: Are we talking Aboriginal students, or from ‘across the board’?

Pat: All of them – except two, I think – were Aboriginal students from Year 11 and 12. We also got in a person that was skilled in working with mosaics. So these are the students, now, (referring to the screen) designing what they wanted to do. Some of us older ones tried to steer them in another direction, but they had their minds set already what they wanted to do. They spent a lot of their own time going through it. There they are drawing it up on the board. And this is the designer who's very strong on mosaics. She was showing them how to work with mosaics. Her advice was given only on the basis that she was an expert in mosaics.

Vincent: What’s her name?
Pat: Leave it with me – I'll get back to you on that one. Back to the elders. They got all the books out. These two are teachers at Shoalhaven High school (referring to the screen) – both Aboriginal people. They went through lots and lots of books, lots and lots of discussions, lots of meetings, and finally they came to an idea of what they wanted to do. So, they got started.

Vincent: When you say books, are we talking art books…?

Pat: Mainly history books, mainly talking about the children – what happened at the children's home. Also art. These are a lot of the people that were from the children's home (referring to the screen) – they had a get together. So, it was all about the children's home, it was all about what type of art that they would use, how they would represent the Bomaderry Creek and the Children's Home and the connection. They decided they were going to do a mosaic. It's about eighteen metres long, about three and a half metres high. So we went down there and started to plot where they were going to build it (referring to the screen). We measured it out and identified where it was going to go, while they're [the students] still busy designing it back at the school every Tuesday afternoon. We also involved the kids from Boori Pre-school (referring to the screen) – these are all the pre-school Aboriginal kids. There were about twenty of them. We wanted to go through the generations, so, we had the elders, we had the fifteen-sixteen-seventy year olds, and we wanted to involve the little kids – a sort of time line of Aboriginal culture from the early days to today and the future. What we're doing here is we're putting their feet into clay (referring to the screen), and they're making little footprints with the clay. We did it for every pre-schooler, every Boori kid. 'Boori' is Aboriginal for 'child'. We did it for the students, we did it for the staff – anybody that had involvement in the project had their foot put in clay. That's our boss (referring to the screen), our regional manager – she's having her foot done. That took us a long long time. One of the little Aboriginal kids … no way could we convince him to have his footprint done in clay. The son of one of our Aboriginal rangers volunteered to fill the gaps for the kids that didn't want their feet done. So, there's a bout six of his footprints in clay!

Vincent: Why didn't he want to do it?

Pat: I don't know. He was just shy about it. But then they had to go back and put their name on it – put their name on their footprint. And they also had to scrape the back of it so it would adhere to the wall. (laughing) One of the Year 8 students … to keep the kids occupied he got them to make a snake out of the leftover clay. They were there for a long time! That's a photo of the kids (referring to the screen); that was the end of their day, and they're about to go back to school. These are just some of the students. We had a lot of Year 8 and Year 9 students there, as well, that got involved with the project on various levels. But it was basically the project of Year 11 and 12. The ---- (?) represent everything that lived in that Bomaderry Creek – things like platypus, frogs, snakes …

Vincent: There's still platypus in there, is there?

Pat: Still platypus. And what we did … the eyes themselves, which were about the size of a tea cup saucer, the messages would be in the eyes of the animals. That's how they wanted to do it. The idea was for the students to do their drawings in the discs that become the eyes. This young fellow (referring to the screen), he just kept showing up everywhere. He wasn't part of the official team, but he just kept coming to help, and he was fantastic. He did … that's a possum, no, it's a flying fox, sorry. And this represents … One of the people that were there, one of their relatives was drowned in the creek, an Aboriginal guy was swimming in the creek and drowned. So, this [specific drawing] (referring to the screen) was in memory of him. That was one of the eyes. These are the reeds. What happened, also, was that Shoalhaven [City] Council were running a local government organisation. We had the fifteen-sixteen-seventy year olds, and we wanted to involve the little kids – a sort of time line of Aboriginal culture from the early days to today and the future. What we're doing here is we're putting their feet into clay (referring to the screen), and they're making little footprints with the clay. We did it for every pre-schooler, every Boori kid. 'Boori' is Aboriginal for 'child'. We did it for the students, we did it for the staff – anybody that had involvement in the project had their foot put in clay. That's our boss (referring to the screen), our regional manager – she's having her foot done. That took us a long long time. One of the little Aboriginal kids … no way could we convince him to have his footprint done in clay. The son of one of our Aboriginal rangers volunteered to fill the gaps for the kids that didn't want their feet done. So, there's a bout six of his footprints in clay!

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Vincent: Down my way, at Bellambi … the Surf [Life Saving] Club just gets continually graffitied. There's a lot of Aboriginal youth living around there. So, they got in Kevin Butler, with the idea that they would create these large murals and stick them on the surf club walls – the idea being that if the kids are the ones that create what's [on the walls] they'll be less inclined to graffiti it. And for quite a while it worked – there was no graffiti. Even when it eventually was graffitied – and the graffiti was extensive – it was all in the spaces around the works, [with] hardly any on the actual artwork.

Pat: Yeah. Fascinating, isn't it.

Vincent: I suspect if this eventually gets graffitied (referring to the Bomaderry Creek mosaic), it won't be anyone connected with the work.
Pat: No. There's a little bit of graffiti on the back of the wall, just a tiny bit, but there's been nothing at all on [the front], which, to us, is amazing. We thought it would get badly done over. In fact, the first time it happened with the eye, with the word sorry, we thought, “Oh, my God. Day One and we've already got this.” It really enraged a lot of the locals. And we straight away fixed it up, and nothing's happened since. It's pretty amazing. We're very very happy about it.

Vincent: No, when everything was put on there, was it complete? Or was paint added after that?

Pat: No, no, it was all painted before it was put on there. Yeah, it was all done, and it just went straight up on the wall. They put a protective coating over it, and anti-graffiti stuff – which [means] you can wipe graffiti off – But this person actually gauged it. The students pretty much accepted that it was gonna get vandalised, but they hoped it wouldn't. But that didn't sway their choice of medium. That's just what they wanted. So, you can see some of the drawings (referring to the screen) – this is the flying fox. That indicates the sort of food that they would eat. So, you're getting more into the middle of the snake, here, where we're looking at more contemporary art. Whereas back further it was original art and colours, we're now getting away from the traditional colours and going into more contemporary art, which is what the students wanted to do. They wanted to bring it into the twenty-first century. This is going back now to the original art work, with canoes on the river …

Vincent: So are these [small pictures] all done by the young guy you were telling me about?

Pat: No. He did the animals. This is them sitting around a camp fire (referring to the screen). This is all back in the original art. And there we go forward, there, getting up towards the head of the snake, looking at the future. This is a quote that was taken from the children's home, somewhere (referring to the screen) – it was written on the walls.

Vincent: You mean a plaque, or something? Was it the Home's motto?

Pat: No, someone had just written it on one of the walls in the Children's Home, in one of the buildings. And the students wanted to use it. Bomaderry Creek was also a place where they took the children from the home down there for recreation. About once a month they'd take 'em down there. So, it was a place the kids went to recreate. But prior to that there was an Aboriginal community actually living down there. And they used to – I don't know if you'd remember, you're too young – but in the days of illegal gambling places, where people would usually go to somebody's backyard and put a bet on a horse, they'd have someone standing down the end of the lane watching for the police. In Sydney they called them 'cockatoo'. Well, the Aboriginal people also had 'cockatoos' sitting up in the trees watching the big black cars come in to take the kids. And they'd yell, and they'd go scattering in all directions. So, this was part of that – the 'cockatoo'. And that's a glossy black cockatoo which is called a 'nowra'. Nowra is the Aboriginal name for cockatoo.

Vincent: Really? I didn't know that.

Pat: Yeah, it's where the name Nowra comes from. This was just colouring the cement-stuff they'd used (referring to the screen). Now, what also was supposed to happen here was, because we ran out of money and the kids finished school, we were to put something in here telling the story [of the project]. I'm retired now, so I don't have a lot to do with it, but I still have this dream, this hope that I'll go down to talk to them at Nowra and we can get some sort of plaque there. 'Cause we can't assume that people are gonna look at that and get the story automatically. But we haven't worked out how to do it. We didn't want it to become commercial. We wanted it just to be very natural.
The river here. So, this was low. That was just one car. It was all colour.

Pat: Thousands and thousands of birds migrate … They stop there. They come in from as far north as Alaska, from Russia, China, down the bird way pathways into the New South Wales coast. And Shoalhaven Heads gets a large portion of those, as does Lake Bombo(?), and then further south as well. So, I said to the boss, “We’ve got to try and fix this up, and give it the value it’s entitled to. Otherwise we’re just gonna have this vandalism running rampart.” And also, it’s a place where everybody, for years, took their dogs. It was the number one dog walking place. And that was impacting hugely on the birds. It wasn’t so much that the dogs were killing the birds, it was a case that the dogs were barking, the birds would lift off the nest, the ravens and the sea eagles would come in and take the eggs, and we lost a whole generation of birds.

Vincent: Are dogs actually allowed there?

Pat: Well, dogs were allowed in a specific part, but it wasn’t very clear [where]. You had this multitude of signs. Anybody walking there wouldn’t even look at the signs, ‘cause they were just bombarded with them. And a lot had been vandalised, also. So, the problem we had in Shoalhaven Heads was the birds weren’t protected, dogs were running rampart, people were riding their horses through there, as well, and people we walking through to the rare bird area. We had to some how or other stop it from happening. But I’m a great believer in – if you take something away, you gotta give something back. Can’t come in as a big bully boy and say, “You can’t do that anymore,” ‘cause that’s going to aggravate people. You gotta say, “Well, would you mind if we did it this way?” So, for nine months I had meetings with the dog people, the surf club, the motorbike people, the horse people, and the bird people, and I was just hitting up against blank walls all the time. The biggest problem was the dog people – “We’ve been walking our dog here for years, why should we stop now?” So there’s the signs there (referring to the screen) and then when I went back the next day, that had been burnt down, and this sign here had been graffitied, as had the others. The place looked terrible. It was very unloved. You can see the dogs (referring to the screen). That was just one car load of dogs. Anything up to thirty to forty dogs a day would walk through there when the tide’s out. This sign here, there’s a track there. And what they used to do, because the dogs would rather swim in here than in the surf – there’s a big surf along here – they just used to walk along [the riverbank] where all the birds are. There’s no birds here (referring to the screen), there’s no birds there, but they were all around here [where the dogs would be walked by their owners].

Vincent: And when was this project? Before or after the Bomaderry Creek mosaic?

Pat: Before the one at Bomaderry. Just before. One flowed into the other. So, what I wanted to do was to create zones. Create a bird zone, a dog zone, a horse zone, and get rid of the bikes anyway – they shouldn’t be there, they were highly illegal. So I had to go to the surf club and explain to them, “If you want to ride your bikes, ride ‘em up there, don’t come down here.” We had Comerong Island Nature Reserve, managed by [the National] Parks [and Wildlife Service] at one end, Seven Mile Beach managed by Parks the other end, the bit in the middle was [owned by Shoalhaven City] Council. It wasn’t even our land. Where the birds were coming, it wasn’t our land. So we had to negotiate with Council as well. Rather than going to Council and saying, “Can I do this? Can you give me some money?” we put together an interpretive plan, a design plan, and a landscape plan. And we went to Council – “This is our plan, this is what it’s gonna look like, this is how much it’s gonna cost.” Without even drawing breath they gave us sixty thousand dollars on the spot. So we got sixty thousand dollars from them, we got twenty-five thousand dollars from the Threatened Species Unit at [NPWS] Head Office – which gave us round about eighty-five thousand dollars [in total]. And we thought, “We’re going to be able to do it with this.” This is the design plan (referring to the screen). So, you can see this is the river here. So, this was low-growth plants, to stop people from walking down here onto the river[bank] and get them to go along the pathway. Plantings along here. We couldn’t pull the toilet block down ’cause it wasn’t ours, it was Council’s, and it was the least of our worries at that stage. But we put a lot of plantings around the toilet. We had [planned to have] telegraph poles in the water as roosting sites for the pelicans. We noticed that the pelicans were on the lampposts. So we wanted them to come up onto the roosting sites. We had them all teed up to put in but we ran out of money. So, that’s yet to be done. And a viewing platform here. And this one here (referring to the mosaic artwork) was going to be a mosaic map of the world showing the flight path of the birds coming in. But the students, the Aboriginal people, didn’t want that. They wanted a little more of an Aboriginal connection, because Coolangatta [Mountain], or Cullunghutti, is just here …

Pat: … they wanted to focus on Cullunghutti and the importance of it to the Aboriginal community. So, that then became an Aboriginal mosaic. That’s the plan we took to Council. We costed it, and that’s when they gave us sixty thousand dollars, and we got twenty-five or twenty-six from [the NPWS] Head office. This is the zoning (referring to the screen). It was all colour coded. The khaki colour is the bird area, red was for dogs, the horses [were …?]. We had meeting after meeting, and finally all were agreed. The last meeting I had with the dog people … I was heading home and they rang me. They said, “Oh, we got a group [of people] down here who haven’t come to your other meetings. So, we’d like you to talk to them.” It was a Sunday morning, but I thought, “Yeah, okay.” When I turned the corner, there were over a hundred people there with their dogs, and just me!
Vincent: A lynch mob!

Pat: I looked, and I thought, “I could reverse back – they won't have seen me. Or, I could bite the bullet and go [over to them].” So I bit the bullet, and it was one of the worst meetings I've ever been to. But at the end of the day, the ones that were the loudest went home early. They gave up. They'd just come down to stir. But we finally got a breakthrough. And we find nowadays that the dog people are actually policing it. We don't have to go down there at all now. They're policing it, and if somebody comes down with their dog and goes into the wrong area, they're right onto it. So they've all taken these responsibilities [seriously], and it's all been very very successful. And we got these signs done that [indicate], “Birds that way”, “Horse that way” (referring to the screen) … So if there's any confusion about what track you're supposed to go on, there's a sign saying where to go. They were placed all along the lake and around the beach. In the first month we would have lost all of those at least four or five times. We had plenty just to replace them straight away the next day. Finally we won the battle. And then we asked the students, “What do you want to call it?” We better give it a name so it has some significance.” And that's when they called it the Southern International Airport. ‘Cause the birds are coming in, they're staying, and then they're going. So, everything was to represent an airport – like a parenting room, security, Very Important Birds … that sort of stuff. That's what the signs represent. And at the same time they're giving a message about those particular birds. There's one bird, the Gotwit, that flies in from Alaska, non-stop all the way to Australia. It doesn't stop.

Vincent: I really didn't know they came that far.

Pat: And I was in Alaska, February this year, and they were there waiting for them to come back. ‘Cause they would head back about March. It's about twelve-thousand kilometres. A lot of them stop at Japan. But Japan is developing out into the ocean where the bird sanctuaries are, the pathways … Australia and Japan, and a lot of other countries, have signed a treaty protecting those wetlands … but in the meantime a lot of them have been lost. But, you know, we're all working … We're saving them. Because if you lose them once they get here and breed, you've lost a whole year, and in some cases a whole generation. So, it's very important. We also did a whole lot of planting. The Aboriginal Boori kids came over and did all the plantings, but Rural Lands Protection Board were supposed to have baited for rabbits the week before and they forgot to do it, and we lost our plants in the first couple of days. But we went back and planted again.

Vincent: So who was actually involved in [designing and making of] the mosaic?

Pat: We're getting to that. We went up onto Cullunghutti Mountain … we went around and asked the Aboriginal people, “How do you want to interpret the mountain?” And they said, “Well, if we tell stories, we're gonna forget somebody, and there's too many people. So, let's just do a typographic image of the mountain.” And there (referring to the screen) they've got “Coolangatta Mountain holds special significance for the Aboriginal people of the south coast”. It's only recently that they've changed the name back to Cullunghutti.

Vincent: Yeah, 'cause until you started saying it I'd never heard that [word] before.

Pat: So they need to replace that [wording on that plaque] with 'Cullunghutti'.

Vincent: Perhaps you've heard differently, but my understanding is that [Cullunghutti] was traditionally Jerrinjah land, and that they were [forcibly] moved out to Orient Point by Alexander Berry.

Pat: Yep, that's exactly right. In fact, three of the elders involved in the [Bomaderry Creek] mosaic, and also this one, were moved out of Coolangatta. But they came into Nowra. They decided that they would live in Nowra, not out at Orient Point. This is Deirdre [Martin] (referring to the screen), and that's Vicki. And these were the local Landcare group – they were also doing some planting. So, we had everyone involved. And then we also had the Shoalhaven Heads Primary school involved. This is where the mosaic lady came on board – teaching them how to make the birds with mosaics. Most of the birds that come into Shoalhaven Heads were [represented in that medium] by these kids, and painted. Then they did that back wall.

Vincent: I thought it was fantastic how they used hand prints as the feathers of the birds.

Pat: Yeah. The Aboriginal kids from Shoalhaven Heads did the wall, and [those from] Shoalhaven High School did the mosaic.

Vincent: Now I get it. It's a runway!

Pat: Yeah, exactly! So, Shoalhaven High School's Year 8 and 9 students did the [bird] mosaic. And Year 11 and 12 did the snake [mosaic at Bomaderry Creek, later on].

Vincent: It's great. But you need a sign there explaining the design.

Pat: Yeah. You can see the elders (referring to the screen) – these are the hands of the elders, Auntie Lena(?), Auntie Barb, Auntie Dot – all the auntsie put their hands in clay, and they became the wings of the birds …
Vincent: Yeah, it's great. I really like it.

Pat: And in one of those mosaics, in one of the birds, there's a little thing underneath that says 'David'. David was a severely disabled young man that came down every day in a wheel chair with his carer, and we used to talk to him and consult with him about it. So, we put his name into the mosaic. The Aboriginal kids wanted to do that. And there's some of the team (referring to the screen) – these are all the aunts. Quite a few of them have since died. Auntie Barbara has since died … um, where's Auntie Jean …? Auntie … um, (struggles to remember name) she's since died. He's a Wiradjuri boy (referring to the screen), he works for us. There's Rod Wellington up the back, he's one of the Aboriginal staff.

Vincent: So, there was lots of Aboriginal people involved.

Pat: Oh, ninety percent. The non-Aboriginal people were me and Valda … oh, and our boss from Canberra. The rest are all Aboriginal people. He's the sites manager from Queanbeyan (referring to the screen) …

Vincent: So, when the kids were putting the mosaic together, were you telling them about the significance of the birds?

Pat: Oh, they were in it right from the beginning – the importance of the birds. It was a bit of a balancing act. We wanted to involve the Aboriginal community because of Coolangatta Mountain and everything, but we also wanted to highlight the area as a very important bird sanctuary. So there was a crossover between the two messages we were getting across. And again, no vandalism. Not once. And yet you'd go down there [beforehand] and there'd be smashed bottles and burnt signs. But we did a lot of work. The only thing we didn't get done was the [roosting] poles. We had the poles given to us from the pole people – the Electricity Authority donated them to us – but we didn't have the money to get them into the ground. And we couldn't get the bird viewing platform. The main reason for that was, even though Council gave us sixty thousand, they used forty thousand of it for the car park.

Vincent: Hmm. Tarmac costs money, I guess.

Pat: Yes. So, they had to do the car park with that [money]. That was okay, 'cause we wanted to have some sort of formal parking. We wanted the place to look really really good so we could eliminate all this vandalism. And then we handed it back to the community. We had a big opening [day], and we said, “There it is. It's yours now.”

Vincent: Well, I was down there not even a month ago, and I didn't notice any [vandalism].

Pat: No. Well, we don't maintain it in terms of the grass and the planting, because it's Council land. But we keep our eyes on the site.

Vincent: The amount of people I had to speak to on the phone to get to you! Because I contacted Shoalhaven City Council … They didn't know who had [organised] it …

Pat: That'd be right.

Vincent: They knew it wasn't theirs, but they didn't know who'd [organised] it … I was being passed on to so many different people. Oh, well.

Pat: We didn't have a lot to do with Council once they gave us the money. We kept reporting back to them, but really they didn't really want to know about it.

Part II

The second part of this interview took place in the staff office of the Fitzroy Falls Visitors Centre.

Pat: Funding for the snake mural … There was a little bit of regional funding under the 'Caring for Country' program … I'm pretty sure that was about it. And it was around nine thousand dollars.

Vincent: And was it a natural decision after you'd done the bird mosaic down at Shoalhaven Heads? Was it a natural decision to do something for the Bomaderry creek site? How did that come about?

Pat: I think how it all came about was it was the hundredth anniversary of the children's home, and it seemed like it had never been acknowledged. It was one of those things, it was a scar on the area, but it had never been dealt with or treated in any way … acknowledging the Aboriginal people and the history of that home. So I think that's what prompted it. And because we'd done the one at Shoalhaven Heads, which was so successful, we decided the timing was right.
Vincent: You've been with the National Parks [and Wildlife Service] for over thirty years …

Pat: 'Bout thirty-three years.

Vincent: Technically you're retired now …

Pat: I'm retired now, yes.

Vincent: But you still come in [and help out] …

Pat: Well, they contacted me and asked me to come back and do some projects. So I've got … well, I had three projects, but as of yesterday I've got four projects I'm working on.

Vincent: And you were involved with tourism?

Pat: No, I was manager of education, information and tourism for the south coast region.

Vincent: And how did you get into the National Parks?

Pat: Well, I was one of those people that moved out of the city … I was born and raised at Jervis Bay. In fact I was born and raised in the Aboriginal community in Jervis Bay. So, I always wanted to come back. I couldn't afford to buy into Jervis Bay, so I went up the mountain. We had ninety acres of land and we were going to live off the land and, you know, be hippies, and self-sufficient. But we soon realised you can't do that. And I saw an ad in the paper – they wanted somebody out at the old visitors centre here at Fitzroy Falls to work on weekends. And I thought, “Oh, that will do me to start.” And my heart really wasn't in it, it was just that I had to get some work. So I came out and then I got the job. It was only weekends, but within a short space of time I realised that that's what I really wanted to do. And so, that's how the story started. I worked in the old visitors centre, which was just an old wooden shack, been threatened to be pulled down many many times, and many many times we made a couple of phone calls and got onto the local members and kept getting a little bit of funding every now and then. And here I am today as someone who worked for them for thirty-three years. I was part of the team that developed this new visitors' centre. I spent about fourteen years trying to raise money from governments to build this centre. We finally got money from the State Government – the then Liberal state government – because John Fay was the local member and he was also the Premier. So, we got some money through them. And I consequently went to university and got my degree. I got a degree in Applied Science, but my major was Aboriginal Studies.

Vincent: What was your focus?

Pat: Well, I always had a connection with Aboriginal communities ‘cause I went to school where I was the only non-Aboriginal kid. So, there was always that connection. And I guess that was the direction I was heading. I was an acting ranger on several occasions, but I wanted to get into education, and also into interpretation. That was my interest. But because I wanted those two jobs, I also had to take on tourism, which wasn't my favourite, but that was the package I became the manager of. So, I ran the visitors centre here for a short time and then slowly worked my way up the ladder, and for the last fifteen years I've been managing education, information and tourism.

Vincent: Particularly in regard to Aboriginal culture – the visibility of Aboriginal culture, or the interpretation [of Aboriginal culture] – what's changed in those thirty years?

Pat: I think what's obvious to me … I was working not only in interpretation and education … I had a very big role in education, and a lot of the schools around Nowra have a lot of Aboriginal kids … to me it just seemed a natural thing to get involved with the schools with their Aboriginal program. And also I trained up probably twenty [Aboriginal people] … [organised] training workshops for Aboriginal people to get them employment. I've had quite a lot of success there. I've now got a couple of Aboriginal rangers that got jobs as rangers after university. And so, it's been very successful. So, I guess working with students, and realising also that you have to work with communities. I had a lot of struggles with Land Councils, I just couldn’t seem to get a connection with the Land Councils, at all. I'd start to build up a relationship and then there'd be a change to staff there and I'd have to start all over again. So, I developed a very strong relationship with the women – the Aboriginal elders. And that was the best thing I've ever done. And therefore I had that strong link with the students, because Aboriginal kids respect their elders. To work with the elders made it a lot easier then to work with the students. So, that was the basis of my success. And working with the students – particularly Year 11 and 12 students – they all have these modern new ideas of what it was to be Aboriginal. They also had great desires to produce or show their culture in a different way, in a lot more modern way, and they wanted to get it out there. They didn't want to run rallies or stand up in front of large meetings – they wanted to show their culture in a modern way. And that's kinda how I got started.

Vincent: I don't know how much you have [down this way], but particularly up towards Sydney there's a huge amount of rock art, which the National Parks is responsible for. There seems to be some tension about the best way of preserving it. Whether it's a case of letting people know about it, and educating them, and maybe – for example, with the engravings – creating some sort of
walkway [around them], or whether it's safer – culturally and physically – to just not tell anyone about it. Has there ever been that idea of opening sites up [to the public] and letting them 'pay their way'? What's your take on that issue?

Pat: It's interesting, 'cause for the last ten years of my career I used to take students from Chevalier College and Oxley [Christian] College – up on the [Southern] Highlands – to a site out at Bundanoon. And because of its location it was fairly well intact. Apart from weathering, natural erosion, there had been no vandalism there because most people wouldn't even know it was there. Very significant site. Nobody's quite sure how old it is. They think anything between five and twelve thousand years old. It's got art, it's got axe grinding grooves, it's got engravings, and it's still got artefacts scattered around there. So, it's a very significant site. And it's surrounded by a lot of bush tucker – bush foods, bush medicines. And there's evidence that a lot of Aboriginal people travelling through the area would have camped there. So, part of the program we did with the students was to work out a management plan for those sites. You know, "Do we open it to the public? Do we protect it? What do we want to do?" And after an hour and a half with the students at the site, usually, most of them wanted to protect it – didn't want it open to [just] anybody. But then when it was discussed at greater length, they thought it was okay to open it to tourists, but they could only visit it with an Aboriginal person from the local community. So, that was the outcome in most cases: yes, we would open it, but you could only access it through a guided tour with an Aboriginal person. There are a lot of sites around here that, because of where they are, they've been badly vandalised, badly damaged. They're on private property, so they've been affected by grazing cattle rubbing up against it. We find that sites of significance that are in a high visitor area – such as Murramarang Aboriginal area, the midden site sin Jervis Bay, and the site at Bundanoon, and so on – that we do open them up to the public, but again we try and encourage or make it possible for Aboriginal people to interpret them. And part of my jobs with [National] Parks was to establish an Aboriginal education group. So, over a period of time I probably employed twenty Aboriginal people, from young to old, that now form the nucleus of a group we employ. And they go out to schools, they do guided tours, and anything that comes through [National] Parks, we hand to these people. They're employed by us. Deirdre's one of them. And they go out and interpret these sites that we make available to the public.

Vincent: So you've made a point of making sure there's great consultation with the Aboriginal community.

Pat: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. We wouldn't do anything without first consulting. Anything at all. This project I'm working on here at Fitzroy Falls … we only had a month to do the project, and probably two thirds of that month's been taken up by consultation. It's very very important that we involve them, that they have a say whether it's going to be interpreted or not, how they want it to be interpreted, and provide us with the information. And we don't do anything without very strong connection with the local community. We're very lucky in the Shoalhaven. We've got a very strong link with community there. Given that there's probably four or five different language groups, or tribal groups, in the Shoalhaven, that has not made it easy. But you'll find that a lot of them, particularly the women, have relatives that belong to different language groups, and they have that link, you know, so it does make it a little easier.

Vincent: Oh, look, I realised very early on [in my research] that even though I was looking at what is considered traditional Dharawal country … in regard to contemporary [Aboriginal] art that is made there, not all of it is going to be made by people who are of Dharawal descent. The reality of Australian history – with the Bomaderry Children's Home as just one example – is that people have come from all around, whether forcibly or, just in the last thirty years or so, have simply moved into the area.

Pat: Yes. Well, the six or seven people that we employ at the moment as our Aboriginal education rangers are from different language groups. Like, Jason is Wiradjuri. Now, he was stolen from his family and put into a home at Cowra. We've got Deirdre, who is Dharawal from La Perouse, but she crosses over down here with the Yuin nation. And when they go to a school or a group, first of all they get permission to go into that country – they always do that. Then they tell the school students where they're from – that they're going to interpret culture, but it won't be culture specifically from this country. They'll acknowledge the traditional owners of this country, but [state that] they [themselves] are from Wiradjuri. So, they'll interpret culture in a sort of general form. So, we always do that. We always recognise that they're not from country, and we need to acknowledge that.

Vincent: Beside the Bomaderry Creek and Shoalhaven Heads works have you been involved with any other public art?

Pat: No, not a lot. Only indirectly. There's a plaque up near the Gib [Mount Gibraltar] at Bowral acknowledging the local people. But I'm sure there'll be another [community artwork] sometime soon. 'Cause the more we expose culture to the broader community the better it's going to be – we break down those barriers. I found that those two sites [we've been discussing] have done just that. From being highly vandalised areas to now [cherished] …

Vincent: One of the things I'm arguing in my research is that [Aboriginal public] art creates an Aboriginal presence that has been denied or has been invisible to much of the community.

Pat: Yes.

Vincent: Is there a sense of reclamation for the people involved in those projects? Maybe 'reclamation' isn't the right word, but [a sense] that something's being acknowledged that hasn't been acknowledged before?
Pat: Yeah. I know definitely from Year 9 upwards Aboriginal culture is in the syllabus. And probably as much as forty or fifty percent of the students that take up that unit are not Aboriginal. But they choose to take on Aboriginal Studies. And that's been a huge difference, where you've got non-Aboriginal kids in the classroom with Aboriginal kids talking about Aboriginal culture. And it's really opening up a lot of doors for these young kids. I mean, the kids that worked on those two [public art] projects with me, they were a mixture of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids. And that's made a huge difference with people having a better understanding of what it's all about. And then taking this educational program we've got into schools … We offer two packages. One, we can go to the schools, [and the rangers] will take everything with them. Or, two, the schools can come to a site. And in the year that I left [the NPWS], 2010, we did ninety schools just in the Illawarra and Southern Highlands alone.

Vincent: Wow.

Pat: And that was all Aboriginal culture. So, it's being embraced in the schools …

Vincent: Look, I think that's changed even since I was at school. I don't remember learning anything about local Aboriginal culture …

Pat: Yeah. Well, now we do it in all the schools. In fact the demand on [our rangers] is quite high. That's why I'm training these ones at the moment, and anyone else we can get. So, yeah, I think things are improving. I hope so, anyway. It's all to do with the younger generation coming through having a better understanding. It's also very important too that we work with the broader community, not just the Aboriginal community – bring the broader community in to the program, as well. And that's why that [mosaic] down at Shoalhaven Heads has been so successful. We spent weeks and weeks and weeks cleaning up the place and putting new signs back in. Now, because the community has embraced it and loves it, they manage it. We don't even have to go down there, you know. They manage it. So, I think that's what the Aboriginal community has to do – work more closely with the broader community, and vice versa.

Vincent: I think those artworks, as a focal point, are a great means of that.

Pat: Yeah. There's no reason why any project designed to brighten up community areas – whether initiated by councils or community groups – can't include the Aboriginal community. For example, they're putting in a Botanic Gardens up in Bowral – they've got approval, and they've got the land, and they're planting. And they've got the Aboriginal community on their committee. And they'll be putting in a bush tucker garden, as well. So, these are the sort of things we should be encouraging. It's these joint projects that are going to break down those barriers.
A1.I16: Second interview with Noel Lonesborough and Debbie Callaghan (16.05.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)
No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewees.

*Interview conducted at the Boolarong Nangamai studio, Gerringong.*

Vincent: You were involved with the Digital Odyssey project … the big projection out at Bombo Headland.

Noel: Yeah. The projection was at the [Bombo] quarry in Kiama.

Vincent: The original intention was to have it at the little Blowhole, wasn't it?

Noel: No, at Bombo Headland. But we couldn't get access in there, I don't think. So they had to put it up at the quarry. There's a sports oval up there. Anyway, it's the same result.

Vincent: I'd heard that you wanted to project it onto the water coming out of the blowhole.

Noel: Yeah, I think it was, too. But that didn't happen. Change of plans.

Vincent: Tell me about how that project occurred.

Noel: Well, we [developed] a connection with Craig Walsh, and he came in and photographed us, painted us up, and projected us onto the rocks.

Debbie: That was down at the toothbrush. At Bombo. The first experiment.

Noel: We set it all up here, and done it out at the quarry.

Debbie: All my paint wore off by the time I got down to Bombo. I'd had it on all day. We'd been here [at the BN studio] all day filming. It was all set up upstairs. He interviewed all of us, and took a photo of us all painted up. The paint was just a spur of the moment thing. I think – the white ochre, the pipe clay. I didn't like looking at myself on a rock …

Vincent: I thought it was really good, 'cause it made youse look like you were part of it, part of the landscape.

Debbie: I would have rather it'd been in the water, with the moon or something on it, you know.

Vincent: Well, [Craig Walsh] kept a blog spot, and wrote every couple of days about how the project was going. And I swear he wrote something about how the original idea was to make the projection onto the water coming out of the blow hole …

Debbie: Well, it would have looked better on water.

Vincent: … but of course you can't depend on it coming up when you want it to. And it would only last a couple of seconds [each time], so …

Debbie: We did want it down the little blow hole, too.

Vincent: Well, I've only seen the photographs [of that night], but [the final result] looks really powerful.

Debbie: Did you see the group [photo]? That's deadly. There's Noel, myself, Steve, Bonnie … geez, I'm gonna frame that. That group one, aww, mate.

Vincent: Did you go to see the actual projection?

Noel: Oh, yeah.

Vincent: Good?

Noel: Bloody oath. I was a roadie! Yeah, it was good. Something different for us again.

Vincent: It's just a shame it was a one off, 'cause in a way it was such a powerful public artwork, but it was just then and there.

Noel: But he's goin' to other communities, see. He's goin' all over the place. He's supposed to be comin' back. But whether that happens …

Debbie: Let's hope it happens. It'll be good.
Vincent: (to Debbie) The Merrigong Environmental sculpture up at Mount Keira …

Debbie: That was good. That was run through Alison Page. There was a lot of us involved. All women. And it was the story about the Five Islands.

Noel: Was it just Wollongong women?

Debbie: I think it was just all Wollongong women. Lorraine, Narelle, Val Law, Phyllis, Auntie Lila, myself, Bonnie …

Noel: Who else was there? It was a long time ago.

Debbie: … was Tracey Henry [involved]?

Noel: Wasn't Mally Smart in it?

Debbie: Aww, no. I don't know about Mally.

Vincent: I don't remember seeing her name in conjunction with it.

Debbie: Nup. But anyway …

Vincent: Was that one of the first public artworks you’d worked on?

Debbie: Yeah. It was really good.

Noel: You've done murals at Bellambi, haven't ya?

Debbie: Oh, I've done some artworks through the Department of Housing for Bellambi Neighbourhood Centre [as well]. And we're doing another one, too.

Vincent: Well, the Mt Keira sculpture is a fantastic artwork. Had you known all the women involved, previously?

Debbie: Yes.

Noel: You didn't know Alison Page before that.

Debbie: Yes, we did meet her [before that]. I can't remember where, but we did. I tell you why [that project] was good – all us women workin' together, laughin' together, you know. It was all women. And that's not being discriminative. But it was all women, and we were all given a flower to represent [in] that piece of art. I know that Val Law done the lillipilli, I done the [Clematis linearifolia] - the old man's beard … Keira was one of 'em. Who did Keira? I think it was Aunty Lorraine and Narelle. There was a few of them, a few plants we had to [base] our art around, with the story of the Five Islands.

Vincent: Had you heard that story [of the Five Islands] before?

Debbie: Yeah, slightly. Drips and drabs. But it's not my area, not my story. And I think when they collected all the sticks up there [at Brokers [Nose], for the humpies to be bronzed, that there was the nicest part of the project – layin' out the bronze humpies with those sticks.

Vincent: So the sticks were collected up there on the mountain, were they?

Debbie: To get the shapes that were collected off that mountain, yeah. Little humpies. One for all the sisters. To represent each one. And they took the down to Victoria, because Alison's sister lives down there, and she done the bronzing.

Vincent: Was the goal of the project just to tell that story?

Debbie: That's a women's sacred site up there. It's all women's sacred site that those humpies are on.

Noel: Did you know that as soon as they put those sculptures up there, there was a landslip on the southern side [of the mountain], didn't it?

Debbie: But it didn't affect the humpies.

Vincent: I went up to see it for the first time probably over a year ago now. And the photographs I'd seen beforehand … I think [the sculptures] had just been put in. So the grass was really low, and it all looked a bit bare. But when I went up, the grass was really high, and it looked really …

Debbie: Eerie?
Vincent: No, I don't know about eerie … Mysterious.
Debbie: *(teasing)* He's up at a sacred women's site, walking around!
Noel: *(teasing)* You're muckin' around with women's business!
Vincent: *[There's no sign saying] not to go there. I didn't realise I wasn't allowed to go there.
Debbie: Didn't say you weren't allowed. It's there for everyone to look at.

*(Bonnie Foley-Brennan, sitting nearby, then recounts how – at the unveiling of the work – a single large cloud appeared and rained on the proceedings.)*

Noel: It rained on youse!
Debbie: Just on us! It didn't pour. Just a little tinkle. We were blessed that day.
Noel: I thought you were soaked.

Vincent: *(to Noel)* You've got the canoe outside. I just saw the photos, online, of you all up at Bundanon making it. You've been down to Bundanon a few times now …
Noel: Yeah. Jimmy Wallace done some research on Aboriginals using the river, down at the Shoalhaven, with bark canoes. And we were commissioned to make a bark canoe, through the Bundanon Trust. We used bark from a tree down there … It was on the Bundanon property. We never ring-barked it, just cut a strip out, and shaped it on the fire.

Vincent: And was that a new process for all of you?
Noel: *(joking)* Aww, I learnt to make bark canoes from me grandparents. Nah, we used modern tools, of course. In the old days that would have used the stone axe. We used a ladder instead of a branch with a fork on it*(?)*. And we're gonna go to the Sydney Maritime Museum for a conference, on bark canoe making, with these other communities around New South Wales, at the end of the month. And we're gonna re-launch [the canoe] again in Sydney Harbour.

Vincent: You gonna get in it?
Noel: Oh, yeah. I'll go in it.

Vincent: Was it hard to make, even with modern tools?

Vincent: So, you had to put it on the fire to be able to bend the bark?
Noel: Yes. We put the ends on the fire to heat up the timber so that when you pull it together it will fold. Bended nice and good, but it was harder than you think it is. And we used bark string to tie it all up.

Vincent: Debbie, you were given a chance to curate in the last Pallingjang exhibition …
Debbie: You know what, I totally enjoyed that. Louise gave me the chance to put an exhibition up all by myself. And I think I done a really good job. She helped me out, and she really taught me a lot. And to have that interaction with Cheryl Davo [Davison], Louise, and Jess Bulger … 'cause there was the three of us … Jess works at COFA with fine art. Cheryl Davison, she's got … what is it, a women's centre down at Moruya? Or Eden?

Vincent: Cheryl used to work here, didn't she?
Debbie: Yeah, she used to work with me. But we really enjoyed [curating for Pallingjang] even though Cheryl couldn't get up here 24/7, understandably. But really enjoyed it. Wrote profiles on all the Indigenous artists that [I was in charge of]: Steve, Auntie Lila, and Phyllis, from here. Mally Smart was [another] of the artists. I find she is a lovely person. You know, straight-forward. She was easy to interview and get a profile of. We were in the catalogue. Did you get the catalogue?

Vincent: Yeah.

Debbie: *[Clive] Bud Freeman had a hand in on that as well.

Vincent: Is there talk of another Pallingjang any time soon?
Debbie: [They're] usually three or four years since the last one …


Debbie: Yeah. So it will be about 2014, maybe. But I really enjoyed the screen printing with Tom Goulder, as well, when they were doin' their prints. That there was really good, just to see their art come alive [in another medium]. Yeah, really good.
A1.I17: Interview with Steven Russell (16.05.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

A member of the Timbery family, Steven Russell is a Dharawal man from La Perouse. He is one of the founding members of Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio in Gerringong and is renowned for his weaving skills. As a workshop facilitator he has been instrumental to the reintroduction of traditional coiling techniques to the south coast.

This interview was conducted in the front yard of Steven’s home in Gerringong. When I sat down to speak with him he was working on some Dreaming poles that had been commissioned for pivotal places along the Kiama Coastal Walk.

Vincent: I know you’ve spoken about it many times before, but just for the sake of this interview can you tell me a bit about your family connection to the NSW south coast?

Steven: Well, my connection to the south coast is through my mother. She was born at Port Kembla, up on Hill 60. And my grandfather was born under the figtree at Figtree. The old figtree at Figtree. It's knocked down now, but they've planted another one. A younger one. That's my connection to the south coast. And plus, all me life I've been back and forward down the south coast through seasonal work, such as bean picking and pea picking.

Vincent: And the Timbery name comes from one of your ancestors, doesn’t it? From the time white man first came here.

Steven: Yes, apparently one of the artists that come out – I think it was 1788, on the First Fleet – he ran into an Indigenous person, and apparently he was one of my ancestors. And [the artist] spelt the name with an i and not an e or y as the English does [now]. Spelt the name of Timberi. It was [pronounced] tim-ber-eye. It's not an English name. They only changed the i’s to an e and a y.

Vincent: It was his [traditional] name.

Steven: Yeah, it was his name. And he was one of me ancestors.

Vincent: You've been with Boolarng Nangamai since it began. It's been going seven years now. And the impression I get is that it's really evolved over that time.

Steven: Yes, I'm one of the founding members of Boolarng Nangamai. We all started off together at TAFE. And we went right through and achieved the highest certificate in the TAFE system – Advanced Diploma in Visual Arts. We couldn't go any further unless we started looking at university. It has changed, working with Boolarng Nangamai. It led us away from what our original idea was – for a studio [in which] to keep practising our art. Now we're teaching it. You know, it just took a different path to what our main aim was, while we stuck together as Boolarng Nangamai members.

Vincent: Is that the price you've had to pay to keep the place going? Many collectives have popped up, but because someone leaves, or through funding problems, they fold. And Boolarng Nangamai has so far survived that. But like you said, the original goal has changed somewhat.

Steven: Yes, it's changed a lot now. We're out teaching our culture [in] the schools – primary schools, high schools, universities, colleges, and working with other people such as Land's Edge, and the CMA – the Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority up in Sydney. We've done a lot of programs with them, with the youth. Now that's our aim – to get out to the youth, especially the primary school students, because the younger they are the more they'll take it in. While teenagers – I mean, I was a teenager, it's understandable – they're attention span doesn't last as long as primary school students. They're thinking of something else, what they're gonna do when school gets out.

Vincent: The older people are the more stuck in their ways they are, also.

Steven: Yeah, the younger ones pay more attention, while the teenagers get more distracted by other things. But it's still great working with them.

Vincent: Whether it's because of people like yourself, and groups like Boolamg, that are going out and teaching more, or whether it's just a sign of the times, do you feel people are now more receptive to Aboriginal culture? Do they appreciate the culture that is here?

Steven: Yes, they are. Especially when we get Aboriginal regional groups together, like through the CMA. They do a lot with their teenagers. And at the end of the day when they've finished a spear, or whatever the workshop was about, when they take it
home they think it's great. They're like little kids in a lolly shop, you know. Going home with something they made themselves. And that's what makes me want to do this. Just to see their expressions. See them skippin' around. *(laughs)*

Vincent:  
I'm glad you mentioned the CMA, 'cause [your workshops with them are] a great example of the educational role you're playing. How important is it to practice traditional techniques, whether it's weaving, or artefact making …?

Steven:  
It counts a lot. It [represents] everything we teach – to bring [those traditions] back. My uncles and my grandfather, they weren't allowed to teach it. And that's what we missed doing. Our culture is taught orally, while you're growing up. And it doesn't just take the sitin' down with ya grandparents or ya aunties as they talk about what they did. It takes a lifetime of learning. That's what our culture is about. And I'm still learning new things. Like, now, it's canoe making. And now I'm doing Dreaming poles. It's taken me away from my painting and the weaving that I really love doing. I haven't done either for a while now. Quite a while.

Vincent:  
You're one of the most recognised male weavers [from the south coast]. Is that changing? Are guys showing more interest in it?

Steven:  
Yes. Well, the guys get really into it during the workshops. And I tell them that it wasn't just women's business – [weaving] was men's business as well. They did weave. They wove a lot of things. And now, me being out there teaching it, they've put this label on me as a 'master weaver' from the south coast.

Vincent:  
Where do you get your [weaving materials] from?

Steven:  
For me weaving and me artefact making I get 'em locally, from off my country. And we don't have to travel too far.

Vincent:  
I suppose that's the other really important aspect of it – not only learning to make those pieces, but [the experience of sourcing them] …

Steven:  
You've gotta find where they grow, to get the materials that you need to weave, to make a basket. And the artefacts such as the boomerangs, spears, you know, there are certain trees that you need to go hunting for. And not cutting the whole tree down, just taking a branch here and there off one tree and leaving it. Not killing it right off. Leaving enough for new growth. New supply.

Vincent:  
You were just showing me the video of making that canoe down at Bundanon. It's pretty impressive.

Steven:  
Aww, that was great. That was a really great experience. Learning something that our ancestors did. We knew they made canoes. But actually makin' one that works was great. It was a really proud day for me and Noel [Lonesborough].

Vincent:  
I was fascinated by the way you cooked the fish in the canoe! I've heard over and over again how Aborigines would have a feed while they were out fishing. And I'd think, “How the hell do you have a fire in a canoe?” But there it was.

Steven:  
Yeah, in the video you seen it – a fire actually in the canoe. In the research I've done – in Cook's journals and in Joseph Banks' journals – I've found that when they sailed into Botany Bay in April 1770, Banks reckons he saw these lights on the bay. And as they got in further and closer to them, they didn't realise that they were canoes with fires in 'em. And they were all around the bay. He described them as something like fireflies. And that's one of my ambitions, especially round April – Easter time, we call it, but our ancestors would have called it something else – because the deep sea mullet are runnin', and that's when the big feasts were on, especially around the Sydney area. All the clans from around the Sydney Basin and up in the mountains would have gathered and feasted. And not just on the fish itself, but on the whales. And my ambition is to get my mob, the Dharawal people of La Perouse, involved in makin' up a few canoes, float them on the bay, and, just as our ancestors did, do some fishing and cooking in the canoe itself.

Vincent:  
And you're going to launch that [Bundanon] canoe in a few weeks, is that right?

Steven:  
Yes, at the end of the month we've got a Nawi conference – that's what we call a bark canoe. It goes for three days up at the Maritime Museum in Sydney at Darling Harbour. And we're gonna float it on the Wednesday afternoon.

Vincent:  
Just going back to the weaving quickly … I know you're from La Perouse. And of course La Perouse has a long heritage of art making. But I suppose from what you're telling me, a lot of that was relatively modern.

Steven:  
Yes. It was contemporary but it was traditional. Artefacts were sold to gain an income, you know, besides the rations that were given out back then. It sustained my family. And it's typical of La Perouse. I was actually born there.

Vincent:  
So they were traditional things done in a new way.
Steven: Yeah.

Vincent: In regard to traditional weaving …

Steven: That wasn't practised.

Vincent: Not at all?

Steven: Not at all, no. Well, I never seen it practised at La Perouse – the weaving. But I did see shell work, [as I was] growing up. A lot of people that went through La Perouse would have picked up the shell work.

Vincent: I think it's fair to say that your mum is the most famous shell worker from the south coast …

Steven: My mum is pretty well known for her shell work, now, especially the Harbour Bridges. Yeah, my mum, Esma Russell [Timbery]. And now me eldest sisters are in helpin’ mum to do the shell work. They're carryin’ [that practice] on. Mum's getting on in her age, now. She's eighty-one. She's havin’ a little bit of trouble gettin’ around. I try to get as much ----(?) shells [for her] as I can. And when I can, I know where I can get ‘em. There's certain times of year, on certain beaches, you get certain shells. I just haven't had the time in the last couple of years.

Vincent: So TAFE has been pretty instrumental in reviving that weaving tradition, then, hasn’t it?

Steven: Well, first off, when we started TAFE back in 2000, yes, they were ----(?) by holdin' Aboriginal art and cultural practice courses. But now it's pretty well died off ----(?) TAFE systems Aboriginal courses. But Boolarng Nangamai are trying to bring those Aboriginal courses back so the younger ones can get in and do something. And we’ll see where they go.

Vincent: Even though you say you haven’t painted for a while, you've got some very nice paintings of the Georges River. There's three or four of those …

Steven: Oh, yeah, I did a series of paintings about the Georges River and Botany Bay, 'cause what my ancestors did up there was fish. And a lot of my painting depicts fish and everything around fishing.

Vincent: But it's interesting how one image will almost be, I suppose, a 'traditional' aerial view … in one way it looks very abstract. And then you'll have another one where it's quite a picturesque, realistic view.

Steven: Aww, I was just trying to find my style of painting. I experimented with different angles. Like you just said, Vince, there's a landscape-themed painting, and an aerial view. A lot of Aboriginals do paint … they will depict looking down over their subject.

Vincent: One that really interests me is this one (I show Steve a black and white printout of “Fishing My Country”). You actually depict traditional stone carvings, am I right?

Steven: Yes. That's “Fishing My Country”. And yes, in it I put some stone engravings which there was at La Perouse. And it was of a whale. But in that painting I've got a fish and a kangaroo.

Vincent: Have you seen many of the actual engravings around Sydney?

Steven: When I was a kid at La Perouse, yes. But now, the Parks didn't do nothing about it. The weather got to it. And it's gone. It’s not visible any more.

Vincent: They're eroding really quickly.

Steven: Eroding really quick. But now there's another project I been working on with man called Clive Freeman. And we done our little project on the sites project(?) To try and get communities together to rejuvenate the old sites or start new sites. You know, we done rock engravings, or to even try to fix the old ones up where they're disappearing. When they're gone, that's it. They'll never be the same again. And if we don't do anything about it now it will be lost.

Vincent: I was going to ask you about that, 'cause some people have said that if they're not re-engraved they're going to disappear …

Steven: Well, that's what we’re working on now with Clive Freeman. But that's gonna take some time. Because we gotta try to get community involved and behind us, to support us to do that, so we can get the young ones out onto country and practising something that was practised for thousands of years.

Vincent: Has anyone said, “Oh, no! You can't do that.”
Steven: Arr, not at the moment. The people that we have seen think it's a great idea – to get out and practise something that's not practised anymore. And we are losing a lot of sites through erosion and through vandalism.

Vincent: I think it's a shame that more people don't know about them. I think people would be amazed by the rich [artistic] heritage around Sydney.

Steven: But a lot of the sites are sacred sites. Anyone just can't look at 'em or even go in and walk around on 'em. Even us. As we're not traditionally initiated Aboriginals. We may be the descendants from our ancestors, but we're not initiated men. And some areas are where only initiated men can go.

Vincent: So, it's a complex issue.

Steven: Yes. Oh, there'll be certain areas where we won't go into and try and touch up. But the more open and common engravings, as ones where the communities were [traditionally] involved, and quite large ones [like at] Bundeena … It's of whales. Two big whales and a smaller whale. [Their journey is] predicted in the sandstone facing south. That'd be the time of when they're travellin' back with their calves. That [site] predicts that sort of whale story. It predicts the whales heading south. Actually facing south.

Vincent: So, in regard to the protection of those types of sites, do you think the National Parks have been doing an okay job?

Steven: Um … yes, but the thing is … when you say 'protection', they're letting no one access 'em. Not even Indigenous custodians. They're blockin' everyone out.

Vincent: What about other heritage sites? Have you been involved in any consultation processes?

Steven: No, not at this moment.

Vincent: I'm trying to get a sense of whether local people feel that they're effectively consulted enough [about these issues].

Steven: No, they're not. I believe that, because they're not. A lot of stuff's been done behind closed doors. The communities that are involved with certain sites don't know about anything – don't know nothing. They're out in the dark(?)

Vincent: So, when they do ask, they're asking the wrong people?

Steven: Yeah.

Vincent: I wanted to ask about some of the public art works you've been involved with. Can you tell me about “Storylines” out at Belmore Basin?

Steven: Phyllis [Stewart] and I done a project with Tori [De Mestre]. And we put these stones, different shapes, in the footpath, and some Aboriginal names. But Council buggered it up by setting them too deep, where they should have just had 'em a certain height. And some stones are sunk in the concrete a bit too much.

Vincent: Oh, okay. They were meant to be poking out a bit?

Steven: I haven't actually been there and seen it myself, but I was told by a lot of people that that's what they done.

Vincent: I'm asking about it 'cause I heard that it was a midden site, and that Council had decided to get rid of the midden.

Steven: I didn't know that.

Vincent: I mean, it's a nice artwork. But at the same time I wish they'd been able to protect the midden there.

Steven: Well, they didn't consult anyone. They just went along and did it.

Vincent: And at the moment you're working with Kiama High school on some totem poles for the Little Blowhole [at Kiama], is that correct?

Steven: They're still in progress. I have worked with 'em on that. But now I'm workin' on the Dreaming poles for the Coast Walk between Gerringong and Kiama, through the Kiama council.

Vincent: What can public art do that art hanging in galleries can't?
Steven: Public art – you'll see it out there. It's in the people's faces. Where[as] the art gallery stuff is just stuck inside where a lot of people don't go unless their invited.

Vincent: What I'm arguing in my work is that, particularly here in the Illawarra, because we've got Lorraine Brown, Kev Butler, you know, there's quite a lot of public art work – it puts an Aboriginal presence in a landscape where it's been denied for quite a long time.

Steven: Yeah. Some people still believe that we died off, that no traditional artists still live here. But fortunately we do. We survived and we're still living here and we're gainin' momentum.

Vincent: Just quickly back to painting. Another one I wanted to ask you about was “Black Christmas”.

Steven: A few years ago we had those terrible bush fires along the east coast, south of Sydney, right down to the Shoalhaven, or even further down to Bateman's Bay, where it blocked people from getting' in and out, or from going south or north. We had to stay in where we were, in the areas where we were, 'cause that's how bad the bush fires were. We lost a lot of bush in that week. And it was around Christmas time that it happened.

Vincent: So that's just your memory of that time?

Steven: Just a memory of something, yeah.

Vincent: And just about the Georges River, again … In that video about the CMA project, you were talking about your [memories of your] elders taking you to the mangroves to cut out the [wood for the] boomerangs.

Steven: Yeah, again, with the Metropolitan CMA up in Sydney, we done a project doing a weaving workshop, and we done it as ---- ---- (?) suburbs on the Georges River. And it was actually the same cove as my uncles used to go up to get the 'knees' or the 'elbow bends' in the mangroves to make boomerangs.

Vincent: And was that the usual method of making those tourist boomerangs?

Steven: Yeah. 'Cause we only cut them branches with the bends in 'em. And not just off the one tree.

Vincent: I read somewhere the other day that either Sydney Harbour or Botany Bay – I'm not sure which one – has the highest percent of the state's mangroves.

Steven: Well, that would be Botany Bay, Georges River. Parramatta River as well.

Vincent: What significance has the Pallingjang exhibitions played in raising the profile of south coast art? I get the impression that, even in the early nineties – apart from perhaps stuff from La Perouse and Laddie's studio down at Huskisson – people just weren't seeing local art. Is that the case?

Steven: Yeah, well, they're [still] not seeing it. Like I said, art exhibitions are inside all the time, they're not around and about. Only a few towns in NSW were selected for the travelling [part of the Pallingang IV] exhibition. I feel that a lot of people don't get invitations or the message. ---- ----(?) information, such as posters, and that lets people know that a certain exhibition is comin’ along.

Vincent: So you think it could have been done better?

Steven: Yes.

Vincent: What about on the artist's level – of meeting other [artists], even if you know them but haven't seen them for a while … [strengthening] that network of artists?

Steven: Oh, yes, it's great. We don't get to see each other very often. Only by exhibitions. That's when you get to meet people you haven't seen for a while.

Vincent: I just think they're a great opportunity for the public – even if it's just the regular gallery-going crowd – to see some of the great work that's being made down here. Because, apart from perhaps the public artworks, we just don't see it that often. It's a shame.

Steven: It is a shame. We need to get out there more often.
A1.II8: Interview with Jeff Timbery (16.06.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

 Though he has not practiced as an artist in some time, Bidjigal man, Jeff Timbery, grew up learning his family’s art and craft practices. Models of the Sydney Harbour Bridge encrusted with shells, traditional wooden tools decorated with Australiana motifs – such pieces are exemplary of south coast Aboriginal art made for the tourist market throughout the twentieth century. Yet, as Jeff reveals, these are not mere trinkets – they illustrate the stories of his people passed down through the generations, and embody traditions that evolved in order to survive.

In the 1980s Jeff formed the Bidjigal Dance troupe – one of the first Aboriginal dance groups on the south coast. As a dancer and musician he has represented his people and culture on the world stage. Now working as a paramedic, I was able to meet and talk with Jeff at his home in Queanbeyan (ACT), where many examples of his family’s work are on display. I was also privileged to be given a didgeridoo recital, with Jeff’s daughter, Elouise, accompanying him on clapping sticks.

Vincent: I know you said that you haven’t practised for a while, but how did you get started as an artist?

Jeff: I started as a child. I was lucky enough that my family has always been involved with sharing our family’s culture – be that through demonstrations, or having a shop. Like, before I was born, the family owned shops and I’d go to different shows like the Royal Easter Show and the Canberra Show. They would go each year. I remember going to those places when they’d be working, and they’d have a stall [set up], basically. So they’d have like a shop display – a whole heap of artefacts and crafts, that sort of thing. And I remember as a kid me grandmother supplying tourist shops with our crafts – be that boomerangs and all sorts of different tools.

Vincent: What was her name?

Jeff: Rose Timbery. So as a kid I’d be involved with doing some of the artworks. My grandmother mainly did a lot of ‘burning in’ and then I’d highlight things with paint … highlighting the ends of boomerangs, and decorating ‘em. You sort of didn’t really think much about it when you were a kid. I mean, it was [just] a fun thing to do. But now as you get older you realise your grandmother was sharing something that you’re gonna have forever, and that it’s culturally [what] we’ve always done forever and a day … learning from your [elders] art and tools and your culture. When you go back thousands of years, that’s the way family have grown up. Aboriginal culture or law was all about learning from your elders – your grandmothers, and then you’d learn from your mothers, and then through your fathers when it would be traditional to go hunting. So I was lucky enough to have family always doing crafts and tools. And I guess, with that, you learn the language that was involved with it – boomerangs, null nullas, coolamons (?), woomeras, bull-roarers – all the words that we have for these sorts of things. We were keeping our language alive, but you never really thought about that either. It’s really important [to learn] those things as a kid.

So I was lucky that I had a lot of family demonstrating that. And I remember as a kid, when I was in primary school, takin’ a whole heap of me family’s crafts – like, a shield and a boomerang – to school, and givin’ a talk in front of the class. Yeah, again, I never thought that much of it neither as a kid – boomerangs and spears and bull-roarers was just toys that sat in the house, you know (laughs). But once you went to school I’d start talkin’ about it, and the other kids would ask me about it, like, “What do you use this for? How do you use that?” So it was sort of my start of talking on our family’s culture. And I continued that after high school – visiting schools and putting on shows for me dad. He got an Aboriginal craft shop started up in the early eighties, and that was when I got involved with me dad’s shop. [I was] doing artwork [there], and doing artwork at home – artwork that was from the family. Things that aunties and grandmothers had done, you just continued doin’ similar artwork, I guess, ‘cause you’re telling the same stories – the stories about the creatures that exist in your family’s country.

And Dharawal is a language group that I’m a part of. Bidjigal is the name of our family’s mob. And the Dharawal language … while I was growing up I was told our family’s country was from Sydney Harbour down south to the Shoalhaven River, and out west to the Blue Mountains. That was the language group we were a part of. We were a family that existed in that language group. And that’s where the creatures live in that area, the rivers, streams, all the stories that connect to the land and the creatures that exist – that’s what you inherit I guess. And [through] your family you learn the stories being told about how you would hunt for these animals, like how they’d go hunting for kangaroos. Of course we haven’t gone hunting with spears and woomeras and nulla nullas, hunting kangaroos, since well before I was born, but the stories still exist. So I can still tell my children about how this is a hunting technique, this is a woomera that’s used for launching a spear, [how] you [should] be downwind from creatures when you would hunt for them, [how] you’d find kangaroo droppings [in order] to track a kangaroo [because they] could tell you how long or short time ago it was [there].

All these sort of things, you just hear them as you grow up and you learn them, keeping your culture alive. Same with the artwork. It’s all interlinked really. It’s not just about paintings. It’s about all the stories you get told through the artwork or telling the stories. It’s about keeping your culture alive, which I find is important. Lucky enough I had all these family members that had continued to demonstrate it and share it. And I guess I grew up learning that it’s not my personal things. Like,
boomerangs 'n spears 'n the artwork, that's for everyone to share. I didn't own it. It belonged to all of us. And it's even the same when I go visit schools and give talks on the family's culture and history. I'd say to the children, “If you're born in this land then it makes you a part of the history of the land. So if you're a part of the history of the land, isn't the history of this land also a part of you?” When I talk on boomerangs, spears, and the artwork, I emphasise that they belong to those children too. Whether they're Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, they're a part of the history and belong to the land. They're connected to that history as well.

Vincent: It's interesting that you say that, 'cause one of the people that has [been of great help to] me is Les Bursill. He's done a lot of research on the rock art around Sydney. But one of things he does is he goes out to schools also, and he has the same attitude [as you]. He asks these kids where they were born. “Oh, I was born here.” “Oh, well, then you're Dharawal,” or, “Oh, you're Bidjigal.” So even if they're not Aboriginal, he believes that the only way people are going to appreciate the history of that area is to grow up feeling some sense of ownership. And when you feel ownership you feel a responsibility to protect.

Jeff: That's right. And that's what all children should know – to be a part of the land, that we all belong to it. It's all about sharing. We live in a multicultural world, and we [should] all share our cultures. I think that's what Australia should be all about. That should be our main identity. That's what every Australian should identify themselves as being connected to – the oldest race on the planet: Indigenous Australians and their culture. And I think that all children that have a connection to the history of the land are also a part of that, or belong to it. You see, the materials that we [use for] our artwork … if you were to look at our traditional artwork [here] on the coast, you'd find cave paintings done using ochres, and there was a lot of sandstone engravings done [also]. The same stories are done [now] … we're just using different materials. You know what I mean? We're using acrylic paints, we're using boards to paint on, or canvases, and that sort of thing. So the materials that we use have changed a little bit because … things get modern. The tools that we make the boomerangs with … we don't use stones to shape out the boomerangs [anymore]. It would take all day. We use modern machinery, modern tools. And I guess Indigenous culture has always been like that – it's always been adapting or changing. Our great great great grandfathers saw [to] that by demonstrating our culture, or sharing our culture – be that through boomerang throwing or putting on a corroboree … [and] demonstrating our art techniques – be that burning in or making our crafts and tools. They kept our culture alive by that demonstrating and sharing. And I think that's what we should continue to do – share our arts, crafts and tools. That's the way you're gonna keep it alive. And that's what I think is important. ‘Cause once it's gone, you know, it's very hard to get these things back.

Vincent: How has the general public's attitude towards these traditions changed in your lifetime? Are more people accepting of Aboriginal culture? Do they accept the history that is here, or are they still ignorant of it?

Jeff: Um … I've visited schools, [ranging] from pre-schools through to universities, giving talks … I mainly started in the early eighties … basically I was on my own to [begin with]. I found that, initially, the older ones knew the Aboriginal culture was there, but [they feel that] what [we] do isn't Aboriginal. So I tried to get involved with the children … and I guess things like racism was noticeable at a younger age. Visiting schools, as the years went by, I found that people's attitudes changed, and that they [did begin to feel that] they were apart … you know, belonging to … they embraced Aboriginal culture and history. Initially older people didn't know where to come from. I remember visiting a school and putting a show on, and at the end of the day – when you ask them if they [have] any questions – I remember a child saying to me that he wished he was Aboriginal so that he could throw a boomerang. And that's one of the reasons why I [talk about everybody] being a part of the land. That's what I said to this child – “You were born in this land. You're part of this land. These crafts and tools belong to you too. They're a part of you as well.” So I think people [have] started to understand and embrace and enjoy our culture.

More people want to get out and learn some Indigenous culture, I've found. I felt that, as a younger person, people were less knowledgeable of Aboriginal culture. Whether that [change has] been to do with documentaries … maybe that could have helped too, I don't know … but I've found that people's understanding of Aboriginal culture [is better]. Also, [they have a better understanding] that we live in the wider community – [that] we're not just living in [an isolated] Aboriginal community and we don't go out anywhere else. As the years have gone by people understand that we're all part of [the wider community] … that being Aboriginal isn't just makin' a boomerang or painting artwork. That being Aboriginal also is just being who you are yourself, and you inherit your family's culture and history, and that's a part of you. That's why I think it's important that we continue to share … Some of the significant things I was involved with was [in] '88, when they had the two hundred year's bicentennial. For us as Aboriginal cultural performers at the time, we were very busy. Communities wanted us to go and share Indigenous culture [with them]. They wanted the bicentennial of the ships and of Cook landing and that sort of thing, but I also found that they wanted Indigenous input to a lot of those celebrations, which was good. The sales (?) improved and improved. And two-thousand was the Olympic Games, and we were involved with that as well – be that through art work, and us dancing at the games. Yeah, people's attitude, again, was embracing Aboriginal culture. It opened the Games. And people wanted Aboriginal culture out there in front of the world, and I guess that's continued [strongly since].

Vincent: I suppose the criticism of something like the opening of the Olympic Games … I mean, you're right – in a general context there was a great appreciation of Aboriginal culture. But … I guess I find it a bit ironic that they used an image of the wadjina, and that western desert culture, to represent [Indigenous Australia], yet here they were in Sydney, where [it's said] there's more rock art than in Kakadu … it's just that people aren't told about it. So while there is a greater general appreciation of Aboriginal culture, do you think people know [specifically] about the heritage of this area?
Jeff: Not really. I guess it's [to do with] what people are exposed to. I can remember when I was younger, playing didgeridoo. I'd learnt from my uncles when I was young … (laughing) Well, you've got a photo there … (referring to an old black and white photograph I'd found of Jeff as a young boy receiving a didgeridoo lesson) … That's how old I was, right there. I haven't seen that photo for a very long time. I'm gonna show the kids. I don't think they've seen it. When I was younger and learning [to play the didgeridoo], of course I didn't think much of it. But as I [became] a teenager and got a bit older, I remember demonstrating it and someone saying, "Oh, you play the didgeridoo so well, you must be from the Northern Territory." So, sharing our culture, it's always been difficult saying, "No, no, just because I do this or that … like throwing boomerangs … It's part of this area too." You know, it's part of Dharawal country too. And Sydney. We do corroborees here too. We do dance, we do songs here. We have Aboriginal language. We speak our language here. Those sort of things, yeah, that's always been a struggle. And [it] makes me sort of sad when I go to art galleries in Sydney and [only] see Aboriginal art work that's come from the Northern Territory and other [such] places. You know, this shop advertises that they've got Aboriginal art for sale … which it is, but they're not even from the Sydney area, or the south coast area at all, and they've got ten thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars on their [labels].

Vincent: Yeah. And we're still continuing or traditions … I mean, we're still alive! I'm here talkin' to ya. We still make our crafts and our tools, and we continue our traditional styles that have been going on forever. But I don't know, for some reason our artworks aren't seen as … [authentic]. One of the terms that I learnt about when I was attending university … I mean, like I said, I was initially learning from me dad and family, and after I left high school I started in the sign writing and screen printing trade. I completed that and then did some subcontracting around that place. And then my main concentration was me dad's shop. Then I went to Wollongong University where I did Creative Arts. And that was where I learnt the word kitch … when they'd describe Indigenous art. I still don't really understand that word being [used] to describe Indigenous art, because to me our art means a lot more than a moulded old trinket from the thirties. For us, our styles, our burning in, our techniques, are still traditional [means] of storytelling, and that's what we're sharing. Our family making shell work and those sorts of things … I can't understand why they use that term to describe our traditions.

Jeff: Yeah, that's right, and everything that's related to it. So where you go get the shells from. Usually we'll describe those beaches in our family's language. The place names still have our language. Then the types of shells as well, we'll use the family's language. Where you go get wood from for makin' our boomerangs and that sort of thing, again what sort of materials you use, we're still making them from the same materials that has been traditionally done for thousands of years. So, yeah, I find it strange that they would use terms like that when what we put into the artwork is culture, is heritage, is ancestral ties to our stories. They mean a lot more than anything else. And sometimes the art work, when you see family do it, you don't want to sell it. You want to hang onto it because the stories that connect to them are important …

Vincent: It's a form of classification … to keep [certain practitioners] 'in their place'. But the irony is, as you said before, even if the stuff your family is making has this label of kitch on it, [due to] the fact that they've been made for the tourist market, the important thing is that [it] has enabled that practice to survive.

Jeff: That's right. That's what happens. It's the same with Dad in the shop. You set up a shop so that you can sell your arts and crafts, but you like to hang onto some of the things 'cause you want your grandchildren and then their grandchildren to continue to do what you do or have knowledge of the story the artwork is telling.

Vincent: I want to go off track slightly and talk specifically about the rock art. I suppose I'm a pretty good example of someone who was born and bred in the Illawarra [and who, until recently, didn't even know it was there]. On one level it's very very sad because, like with the engravings, they're eroding away, and people have very differing views about what should be done. Some people are like, "Well, they're sacred sites, they shouldn't be touched, and people shouldn't know about them." Then you get other people, often from the same camp, saying, "Well, no, we should re-groove them, they should become a part of our contemporary identity." And I suppose what I was trying to get at before was that, yes, there is a general acceptance of Aboriginal culture, but it's a safe acceptance because it's [seen as being] 'out there' [in the western desert] … someone said, "he far far away people". Whereas if you're going to accept Aboriginal culture here in Sydney, oooohhh, you've got [non-Aboriginal] people's property involved. So what's your opinion on the maintenance of these sites. 'Cause the reality is [those engravings] would have been regularly re-grooved [before contact]

Jeff: The stories that relate to them are the family continues a practice, traditionally practice, you know, travelling in those areas, camping and that sort of thing? Of course things have all changed over the last few hundred years. We have housing and all the rest of it. We've got all different careers. But I think it would be important for us to keep these engravings and other sites alive. The trouble is whenever we try and keep places or anything of Indigenous importance, usually you'll find it's the non-Aboriginal people making the decisions. It never seems to happen the right way. I would think that it should be done in a respectful way, in that the engravings should be re-engraved, go over the same grooves and engrave them before [they disappear] … I mean, they are [heavily] eroded. But have elders involved. There's a respectful way – to have elders involved with it all. And make sure communities are involved with the decision [making process]. I'm sure you'd [then]
see people wanting [re-engraving] to happen. But you know, I've seen engravings in Sydney where they've got Telecom towers bolted down through the centre of a rock engraving. And there's documentation of where caves have been destroyed where the artwork is. So I guess you need to find general community support too before it even gets worse in that way, before we even think about trying to touch them up.

Vincent: So maintenance is an option, but it has to be done correctly.

Jeff: That's right. I don't think someone should all of a sudden go out there and start re-groovin'. I'd prefer to have a lot of investigation done on traditional techniques. And I'm sure you could get enough Indigenous people involved, and elders as well. They could touch one up but make sure it's done perfectly before they move onto the next. And our family is sort of related all up and down the coast. As I mentioned, our family's country, we'd travel over the other side of Sydney Harbour. We'd get shells from there. My grandmother and great aunts would tell me about how we'd travel on the other side of Sydney Harbour and they'd collect shells for their shell work, 'cause it's part of family's country. And the same thing down south. Further south they'd travel [to meet] other family relations right down towards Eden, collecting shells up and down the whole coast. So family, we're pretty much the same mob up and down the coast …

Vincent: A very long network.

Jeff: That's right. So it would be easy enough to get a lot of people involved [in site maintenance].

Vincent: Oh, it just strikes me as sad that [of] the people I meet, often the few experiences they have had with heritage sites – and not just engravings – is when they're in danger of being destroyed. They're called in as part of a rather pathetic attempt at a consultation process.

Jeff: That's right.

Vincent: And that's a real shame. So I just think that not enough people know about [these sites] – and that includes a lot of local Aboriginal people.

Jeff: Yeah, that's right. And it's funny because … you know, the things that have happened [since 1788] … people have lost contact with [those] particular place[s]. Things have changed over the last few hundred years. We've all had to have careers and get jobs and attend schools. So all these traditional practices that kept these places alive, or people going to these places to continue our traditional practices, we've had to [keep our culture] in a different way, I guess. I mean, we still have respect for our land – our connection, our belonging to the land, our spiritual connection … but the practices have changed a little bit. So we don't attend to all these places that we once would have gone to.

Vincent: It's getting old now – that documentary, Memories of Jimmy Cook – but [in it] I remember you talking about fire-farming being practised all across Australia. What's your understanding of that practice on the coast? The theory I'm running with – and other people has said this as well – [is that the original inhabitants] must have used fire to keep the vegetation sparse. Because since colonisation [the scrub has become really] thick. [I've] gone on quite a few bush walks now to see some sites, and [it's] clear that a naked person walkin' through the bush would have been cut to ribbons. I mean, the [Royal] National Park is the perfect example – there's rock art sites all through there. They must have used fire to keep [the scrub] at bay.

Jeff: Well, [that style of] rock art was done up and down the whole [Sydney Basin], but most of them have been lost or destroyed, and land-filled, etcetera. It's only 'cause the [areas that are now] National Parks got preserved, and no construction has taken place [in them, that some rock art has survived at all]. So the amount [of rock art] in the National Park is [indicative of] what [was] up and down the whole length of the [Sydney] coast. As you go up north of Sydney, where there's the Hawkesbury River and there's a lot of National Parks, there's a lot of engravings around that area too. It's all the same sandstone plateau. Lucky those places are safe from development … not anything major [anyway]. And [the vegetation is] just as thick everywhere else. The [traditional use of] fire … What I learnt as a young person was that we were farmers of the land. Indigenous people were farmers of the land – we just didn't put fences around anything that we farmed. And part of the farming treatment of the scrub was through burning.

Now, from what I understand, you wouldn't burn the bush when you wanted to access a place – it [would happen] when you were leaving that area. Part of [it] was about regeneration. A lot of native seeds actually need fire to germinate, to continue to grow. So, when your mob would return back to an area, [they would find it] plentiful 'cause fire had been through [it in the recent past]. And it was controlled burning as well. It wasn't like somebody's lit it and run for their life. It was arranged [with precision]. There was a lot of people involved [and] everybody knew it was happening – [just] like a corroboree. When they had ceremonies, people knew it from very very far away. Messages were sent out and travelled. Everybody knew what was happening. Everybody down the coast knew. Nothing was ever done by surprise. So one of the things the burning of the bush and the scrub was about [was] regeneration. But also the animals as well, whereas they had a safe place to travel? Nowadays, when [the state services] burn the bush, it's a much slower burning [compared to that] traditional style. With bush fires travelling fast [the fire] didn't actually get down and kill the plants. Whereas now we try and slow the fire, I guess to try and control it a bit more. But [its effect on] the regeneration of the plants [isn't] quite the same. It doesn't [work] the same way.
Vincent: Well, because that traditional burning hasn't occurred [for so long], that's why we get such huge accidental bush fires, when they do happen, because there's all that fuel.

Jeff: Yeah. And [it was also] about accessing different areas … Traditionally there were trails or tracks that you would go on up and down [our country]. You know, when they talk about highways and freeways goin' over mountains … You don't find much [evidence of it] now, because they've built bypasses and bridges [over them] … but when you think back to the early days of the horse and cart, you'll find that they're the same Aboriginal trails that a mob have walked for thousands and thousands of years … When [the first settlers were] documenting discoveries of finding a pass over the Blue Mountains [for example] …

Vincent: They all had Aboriginal guides.

Jeff: … Aboriginal people were involved in all of those ["discoveries"], because it was the same trails and tracks that our mob had always travelled on. Same as with hunting grounds and corroboree grounds. Mobs went and camped at the same place that mob [had] always camped. Even though they might travel, and travel to a different area, they'd come back to that area, [and] still camped at the same place. Where you cross the river, [you'd] cross the river at the same crossing, like, for thousands and thousands of years. You didn't just find another spot, 'cause [it was understood that] "this is where your mob cross the river". So when you talk about the bush being too thick to travel through now, [like in the] National Parks, it's because nobody does travel on [some of] those trails and tracks anymore. But there was thousands and thousands of Indigenous people that lived here. I mean, we're now [only] three percent of the [Australian] population, or something like that, but we were a hundred percent of the population a few hundred years ago! And you see in all the documentation from early colonisation how healthy and strong Indigenous people were. Of course now, with the introduction of sugars, and medicines, and [western] farming of the land – cows being bred on kangaroo hunting grounds – and the introduction of disease, you know, all that all changed …

Our mob had to survive, had to change. [We had to] adapt to all of that, otherwise we'd be all gone. I wouldn't be here talking to you now. We would be wiped out. So we had to adapt. And with the missions and reserves being created, our mob knew they had to survive. We're just lucky enough that our mob is so smart that by keeping all the practices they've kept it all alive.

Vincent: Going back to something like traditional hunting and gathering … because of the dramatic changes [caused by colonisation], particularly in the way you can access the land … I suppose along the south coast some of the traditions that have really survived have to do with the coast [quite literally] – have to do with the seafood in particular. Would you agree with that?

Jeff: Yeah. Well, for our family, [certainly]. Like, I imagine you wouldn't have to go too far up the Shoalhaven River, where it starts to head inland, [to find] there's dams and everything up there now. And even out west at Warragamba dam. A lot of that terrain … [those] rivers and streams have changed so much. Swamps were another freshwater place for hunting and gathering food. But all those places have changed or [been] destroyed from the normal way in which we would access them. So all of our communities basically crowded along the ocean's edge. It was a form of survival that our mob created settlements on the ocean's edge. And growing up as a young person, that's all I've known – the seafood. Everything from shells to seaweeds to fish, and any other sort of [sea] creature. I know basically everything along the whole coast – where to get it, what to eat, how to prepare it. And, the same [as I mentioned earlier], you never thought much about that neither – about where you get [these resources], how to prepare it, what's sharp, what's not sharp, what's poisonous, how to make things non-poisonous. I never thought that much about it – that's just what you did.

Those were our traditions for thousands of years. We've eaten that, we've prepared it like that … and we never thought much of it. But I guess we were lucky enough that our mob stayed on the coast. And you can [see that in the] establishment of Aboriginal communities after European settlement. Up [through] the Illawarra and Sydney, you can see that they usually formed around rivers and on the ocean's edge. It's because of access [to the resources [needed] for the family. And … those are also probably to do with traditional camping grounds. Our mob probably never have moved from our traditional camping grounds and hunting grounds. You can draw a map and have a look at [where] these are. Of course the landscape's changed. Things get built. But if you go back far enough to early [European] settlement, you'll see that your early Indigenous reserves or missions were all where our family had traditionally hunted and camped. You can still find those [connections]. And lucky enough there's still a few Indigenous communities [living on that land] … Of course they're not missions these days, but we still call 'em that, our mob. They don't all survive up and down the coast – there's a lot got closed in the Illawarra. But if you go up to the Shoalhaven, or up to Sydney … they were a lot more frequent. And of course [as] the population changed, our reserves got smaller and smaller. Whether our population has changed that much, I don't know, but our reserves [at least seemed to have] got smaller and smaller.

Vincent: Well, even something like the Bomaderry Children's home … which, I only found out the other day was like one of the first places – definitely in New South Wales, I don't know about all of Australia – where children were officially removed to. But there's still elderly Aboriginal people living there because they grew up at the children's home, and they refer to it as the mish.

Jeff: Yeah, that's right. Exactly. It means just as much as these other communities do.

Vincent: And even if you go to these 'traditional' remote areas … I mean, it's their traditional land, but they're living on it in a different way to how they would have even fifty years ago. You know, they're living in the one spot as opposed to moving around. And the spot they happen to live is usually where the missionaries …
Jeff: Yeah, created their mission.

Vincent: One of the things I've noticed on the south coast … one of the past traditions that's really been revitalised in the last ten years has been the weaving. Did you see any weaving [as a child] …? I asked Steven [Russell], and he said he didn't see any weaving while he was growing up. I mean, he's doing it [professionally] now …

Jeff: Yeah, I'm seeing lots of families doing weaving as well … [My] family has always done knitting. Maybe that was part of the [evolution of the] weaving – moving [away] from the natural fibres [with] the introduction of wool. I can remember all my aunties, all my great aunts, and grandparents, they all knitted. That's all I can think of … that maybe the weaving got [subsumed] by knitting. Because the use of natural fibres started to diminish. But I can remember them all sitting around knitting jumpers and blankets …

Vincent: Even though it fell out of use, [some] people remember the old fellas still using [traditional weaving techniques] to make nets sometimes … That traditional weaving was still being used occasionally to make nets, except with new materials.

Jeff: Where I can remember seeing nets strung up was when I was at Wreck Bay. I remember going out to the community there when I was younger. And I remember seein' uncles workin' on the nets. You know, they'd be strung up in between the trees, and they'd be pickin' through 'em and weaving through them. But I would have been very young. I can't remember seeing it since. But we'd be goin' netting for fish and that sort of thing too when I grew up at the Basin, and they were like nylon nets. There was no use of natural fibres.

Vincent: Sorry, you said the Basin … Where did you actually grow up?

Jeff: Originally up at Mascot, out at La Perouse. That was in the seventies. And then when I was a teenager – twelve, thirteen years of age – that was when me parents moved down to Basin View, which is on St Georges Basin. And I was there til my twenties. And of course we moved up and down the coast, up to Sydney and so on, to go and see family and all in between. But around St Georges Basin itself was where I did a lot of fishing, and [went] camping, and, I suppose you could say, living off the land. I'd be out there camping either by myself or I'd have friends come with me. And I can remember stringing up nets. I remember one time me dad paddlin' across – 'cause he'd still come over and check on us – and he was bringing some bread, and I think some tinned food, for us. We'd been over there probably for about four days. And we ended up giving him a whole lot of crabs and some fish for him to take back home with him. That's just how I grew up – living off the land, things from the water. It was just something you did. I remember using spot lights connected to a car battery, with a spear made from bamboo – just a stick of bamboo with some barbs on the end of it – to get mullet underneath tree logs. Or other times we'd use nets and string them across the front of the creek for a couple of hours and then pull it in. And that was long enough, just enough to get a feed. When we got these things it was never to try and take everything. What I learnt as a young fella was to take just what you need, never any more.

Vincent: So, tell me about this photo. (referring to the aforementioned black and white print)

Jeff: This was at Mascot, actually. I remember this. Of course when I was younger I would have heard the didgeridoo being played. But me actually playing myself, I guess this was one of the times I actually started to play the didgeridoo. And if you wait just a sec … that particular [didgeridoo] there …

Vincent: Oh, you've still got it?

(Jeff goes to his garage to search for a small didgeridoo he has kept since childhood. He comes back a minute or so later with it.)

Jeff: If it's not it, it's identical. Have a look at the picture …

Vincent: Gee, it's light.

Jeff: That one was made out of … like, out of pieces of timber(?), I think, we made that one.

Vincent: It could be [the one in the photo].

Jeff: Close to it.

Vincent: So, you made that one?

Jeff: No, it was me grandmother's burning in on that one. It'd be Nanny Rose that done that.

Vincent: So, you got together the Bidjigal dancers?
Jeff: Yeah.

Vincent: Tell me a bit about that.

Jeff: Well, like I was saying, I use to go to different shows, and people would want to hear didgeridoo as well as see boomerangs. So I used to play a little bit for people. But didn't think much more of it. I'd just play a quick little tune or something. And then of course as you got older, a teenager, friends wanted to hear it as well, so I played it more often. And then as well as going with dad to talk about artwork, schools wanted to hear didgeridoos and see some dancing. So we started to share more and more of that. As a young person growing up, family were always … you know, whenever you had a get together, somebody would have a didgeridoo, or … there'd always be music and dance, whether it be [of] a more traditional style or just having the radio going. But then as a teenager … ’cause Dad got the Aboriginal craft shop going, we'd meet a lot of Indigenous people from other parts of Australia who’d visit us. So I was lucky enough to learn not only from my own family, but also with those mobs as well. And they would tell me that they've got dance troupes here, they've got dance troupes there, but [there was] nothing on the coast. So we got involved with a group that was out western New South Wales … Kamilaroi dancers. They were much older than us. We were only teenagers, [and] they were sorta older men. But they said, “These dances are a part of you too,” and I guess it's the same thing with our art as well.

We got more and more involved, and they got more and more involved with us, helping us to share more and more when we’d go visit, until eventually we started to do our own sort of dance programs, I guess. We’d just do a couple of dances, and then demand got more and more, so we just told more and more of our family's stories. And then there was all different family members all around the areas(?). Somebody always knew something, or somebody knew a dance of this, or somebody knew a song of this … so we spoke with all these different family members. We were starting to put all this together. “Oh, this is a story. This is a song. This is a dance.”

Vincent: So the physicality of it as well as the stories were influenced from everywhere.

Jeff: Yeah, that's right. And all up and down the coast, once we started to do a little bit more, our own family started to [talk about] what they saw when they were younger. It started to get our own family talkin’. Like, now, you can travel up and down the coast, and there's lots of Aboriginal young fellas with dance troupes and that sorta stuff – it's awesome. But when we started in the eighties there wasn't really any dance troupes going. Hardly any. Maybe a couple.

Vincent: I'm pretty sure there's two just in the Illawarra alone.

Jeff: Yeah. And of course it's got bigger and bigger now. It's awesome.

Vincent: So were you [working with the Bidjigal Dancers] up until you moved here [to Queanbeyan]?

Jeff: Arr … yeah, until I joined the ambulance service, I guess. I went and did tours of Canada … I went there two or three times, just for the purpose of dancing and sharing our family's culture. Toured England, Scotland, did school visits did there, um … went and visited Wales as well. The bloke I was with, he happened to run an outdoor education camp called Optimum Experiences. He was originally from England, and he come over as a teenager. So he wanted to go back and see his grandparents. And he said, “Well, what about if we visit schools while we're there?” And I said, “Sure. I'll come with you. You know, boomerang will travel(?)” So yeah, we went over there and did that. Went to South Korea with other family members. When we toured there it was biennale festival, and I think it was the second Australian and Korean cultural Exchange, it was called. They've had many more since of course. And went to China where I performed in Beijing and Shanghai, which was with the symphony Orchestra … I toured with an Australian soprano singer Camille Mercep. So that was the two shows we done there [in China].

Vincent: It took you to a few places.

Jeff: Yeah, the didgeridoo playing and sharing our family history and culture. It was an awesome time and people were so appreciative of what you were able to share. I just loved to tour. But unfortunately you can't make enough money to own your own home, and have children, and marry. People don't want to pay you every week to do that.

Vincent: This was probably the first painting I saw of yours (referring to a black and white print of “Cooreenboon”), and it's a collaborative work, isn't it?

Jeff: Yeah, that's right. Randall [Sinnamon], who's a local artist at Huskinson, where me dad's got the Aboriginal craft shop, had approached us about … like, we've always been friends for many many years … he approached us, said would we be interested in going in a art competition with him. [One] where we could do something together, ’cause it was a sort of reconciliation art prize [the 5th National Indigenous Heritage Art Award in 2000]. He suggested we do something where he could do something in his style, which I guess is more European art style, you could say, and then with me/self, more [in the tradition of] my family's paintings and images.
Jeff: (laughs) Almost. Yeah, almost. The outside edge is basically [in a] more traditional European style. I guess. And then the inside is more of the Indigenous art style [of] my family. We were both living around Jervis Bay at the time, so the place was easy for us to select – where we would want the story to [be set]. And basically [Randall] depicted the headlands and the trees and the bird life that exists there. [My contribution] was about the land and the animals mean to us … When we speak about the land being created we always speak about the animals being part of creation, and also our belonging to these creatures or these animals. And that's all creatures. Whether they be insects or any other animals, they all have a connection and belonging or a story related to their creation. And that was what my involvement [produced] – the creatures that exist around where we were living at the time. So that's what Jervis Bay represents for me.

Vincent: Is it as cut and dry as – you did this bit (pointing to the central composition within the painting), and he did that bit (pointing to the outer edge)?

Jeff: Dave was involved initially when we were sort of getting the [individual sections] together, but then he had a few too many projects happening at the time to get some brush on the canvas.

Vincent: And he worked with you, with the Bidjigal Dancers?

Jeff: That's right, yeah.

Vincent: Well, look, I think I've asked you everything I wanted to ask. Is there anything you wanted to add? Whether it's about south coast art, or the culture, or its reception …

Jeff: When I've travelled all around the world people have appreciated the artwork. I guess the only trouble for us, as in Indigenous people … our [arts] practice isn't recognised in any TAFE or educational institution. [It would be good to] have younger people learn [those skills] like you would have a carpenter get an apprenticeship, or like a plumber getting an apprenticeship, or like myself – with the sign writing – getting an apprenticeship … [Currently] there's no one that can sign you up as an apprentice Aboriginal craft maker. So for us to get funding to actually train somebody, assist with [them] learning how to use bansaws (?) or cutting machinery, the best way to cut the grain, and what selection of timbers to use, so that they can make canvases, do canvas paintings … for a young person [who] wants to take on the craft making [mantel], there's no [financial] help that exists out there … We could go to university, possibly do creative arts, but not everybody has the ability to attend university [and] do the courses that are put on offer. [And] Indigenous [learning] is a life long process, it starts when you're born, basically … I feel that you're born with these skills and you're born with these traits – boomerang making or Aboriginal art is a part of you.

Vincent: Well, you're people have been doing it for more than forty thousand years …

 Jeff: Well, we'd say forty thousand years, nine months, two weeks, and about three and a half hours … And when you think about that sort of length of time … when we talk about our connection to the land, or spiritual belonging to an area or place, doesn't matter if buildings go up, or roadways or bridges, or the area gets bulldozed, it still doesn't lose its spiritual connection to you. You still have a spiritual connection to that place – its creation, its identity. [Through] storytelling, that place is still there. But yeah, I just hope they could do some investigations on how they could fund Indigenous people who have [talent] for crafts. I mean, someone like my father could get funding to sign someone up for an apprenticeship … Have some sort of TAFE course that's available for [younger people to] learn some business management … you know, skills Indigenous people will need that wanna own their own shops; get opportunity and knowledge on all those things.

Vincent: Well, I know that Diana [Wood Conroy] – who you knew from University [of Wollongong] – she always wanted more Aboriginal people to [enrol in Visual Arts], but it never seemed to happen. But then again, the University wouldn't be able to teach the [specific] things that your father would be able to teach. There has definitely been a revitalisation of the [traditional] weaving, [and] I know TAFE played a significant role in that. But when I spoke to Steve [Russell] just recently, he said that even that's died away. So … maybe it comes in waves.

Jeff: That's right. I do see that it comes in waves. But with me father's craft shop, there's things that they could probably try. Whether it's government bodies that gets these things created or … Other places, where they talk about Indigenous archival places, or places where people can have artwork permanently displayed … I think there could be lots of Indigenous museums. They should be created all up and down the coast. And not just for Indigenous people to [access] privately by themselves, but there could be somewhere were all this Indigenous art is available for everybody [to see] … I think that might help them have a wider connection or belonging [our heritage]. Whether that means local councils creating some sort of building which then houses crafts and tools … because, for our mob, being from the south coast, we've got our arts and crafts and tools scattered in museums all around the world. You can got to England and other countries and they've got these museums which house Indigenous [work] – some of which were physically stolen or taken away, [while] others were purchased. Whereas we could establish a [building] in every large town or small city which is dedicated to just the Indigenous people of that area.

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Vincent: I think it's a really good idea. I was just talking to Raymond (Jeff's son) about it … Yesterday I saw [several] artefacts from Nowra [in the storeroom of the National Museum]. It's not good to have them mixed in with artefacts from Victoria or South Australia, willy nilly. Why shouldn't they be at Nowra, whether it be in a museum or … I think the term being used now is a keeping place?

Jeff: Well, with keeping places things are only put in storage …

Vincent: Oh, okay …

Jeff: Whereas I would prefer it to be more of a museum setting, as in everybody can see these things. And that would then give the wider community a sense of connection to these things. And they would be good educational tools for local schools, a place in that suburb to take school groups, and employ Indigenous people to do tours of these places.

Vincent: Well, I think the first step has to be [repatriation of objects] from the vaults of all the big museums in Europe. [When it comes to] stuff from this area … anything from those first few years of contact, very few [of them are still] here in Australia. They all went overseas straight away.

Jeff: And, you see, for our mob, stealing wasn't in our culture. Like, where you crossed the river, you built a canoe. But you didn't carry that canoe then across land a hundred kilometres to your next camp site. Where you crossed the river, that was where the canoes were left. So you could come back there and that's where the canoe was. The stone axe tools used for making a bark canoe, for example, the stone axe tools that were used the stringy bark trees that grew there, they were left there at the river bank because you didn't need a stone axe tool specially made for making canoes inland on the dry mountaintop. You left it down by the river side. So that's why there was a lot of things taken [by the early settlers] – they were described as being found where Aboriginal people discarded them. But they weren't discarded. That was where they were put in place because “This is where we always cross the river”, in the same way we were talking about bush tracks. “This is where you cross the river. This is where you walk.” You didn't [suddenly decide to] walk half a kilometre in [another] direction, ‘cause this was the track you walked on.

Vincent: I've had conversations with people about Aboriginal material culture. We now accept that the term 'nomadic' doesn't capture the complexity of that traditional lifestyle, but at the same time there was still a lot of walking around being done. So you're not gonna carry around a lot of excess material. You make it for there and then, and leave it for the next time you come round.

Jeff: Or for the other families that were gonna cross the stream. ‘Cause everything was shared. Traditionally in Aboriginal culture there was never the idea of possession or ownership. And that's what I think maybe took Indigenous people by surprise on Europeans’ first arrival. When settlement started to take place and farms were being created, Indigenous people were getting shot at for taking sheep to feed their family. And there's documentation of that happening …

Vincent: Oh, yeah …

Jeff: Our mob didn't understand. Why would you not share that sheep? Getting a kangaroo and sharing it with the family – that was the purpose of these creatures. So I think that was very hard for Indigenous people to grasp that idea of possession or ownership, at first. And I think even today … you have a look at how many Indigenous people own homes, or own several homes, and rent them out to wider community members?. I don't think it's even half the [Indigenous] population?. It's the same with the ownership of anything – houses, cars – our mob still share everything with each other. We've never lost that. And it's the same when our mob talk about Native Title and land claims. It's not about us kicking somebody off their property or out of their house because we want to own it. We just want recognition that this is our traditional country, and we traditionally belong to this area, this space. If that was [more understood] it would do a lot of healing for the wider community.
A1.I19: Interview with Dave Lambert and Brad Welsh (26.06.12)

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

Amendments to this transcript were made by Dave Lambert but only to his own words. Brad Welsh did not offer any amendments.

Recently retired, Dave Lambert worked as a rock art conservator for the NPWS for over thirty years. For much of this time he worked in unison with Brad Welsh, an Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer, originally from Kamilaroi country. Together they have remediated both man-made and natural damage to significant rock art sites throughout NSW. I was keen to meet with both Dave and Brad to get their opinions on a range of issues concerning the conservation of rock art in the Sydney Basin.

This interview was conducted at a cafe in Killcare on the central coast.

Vincent: Tell me a bit about your respective roles with the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Dave: Well, I started out as a ranger with a geology background. Then I became a sort of naturalist. I started doing rock art conservation in 1977. The geology background comes in with [the examination of] natural minerals, rock weathering, and so forth … they're relevant to the conservation of the rock art.

Vincent: So in 1977 what did you have to go by? Had there been much foray into rock art conservation?

Dave: Well, there was a guy over in Western Australia who had been working for the Western Australian Museum. He was a geologist, also. I met up with him over in Perth, and we did some stuff over there. Then he came over to New South Wales. We looked around the Sydney area, then out west at Mootwingee. That's how it all kicked off in 1977. The main issues at that time were vandalism on rock art sites. That's what we concentrated on. Then later on it became more of a maintenance issue.

Vincent: Vandalism isn't as rife now?

Dave: Oh … it's been continuous. It's still going on.

Vincent: And then in the mid to late eighties you produced a manual …

Dave: Yes, 'Conserving Australian Rock Art'. That was for the Institute. That was an Institute grant. The 'Australian' part comes into it because you do end up doing contract work [in] other states, through National Parks. And there's some other papers that have been written as well.

Vincent: Is it relatively uniform … the way rock art around Australia degrades?

Dave: Oh, no. There's different issues in different parts of the country. For example, down your way, down south, there's a thing called dry lichen in shelters. You don't get it anywhere else. Up in the Sydney area you've got [issues specific to] the Sydney sandstone … that's fairly unique. Then you've got granite country which has it's own set of issues. In the desert, in the arid parts, especially out in western New South Wales and more arid parts of Australia, the main issues there with paintings is related to water flow and heavy rain, where you get figures cut totally by surface water flow. Then there's different salt issues … Salt eats into the rock. So, yeah, different issues all over.

Vincent: And you recently retired?

Dave: Yeah. I just do a little bit of contract work now.

Vincent: And Brad, you still currently work for the National Parks.

Brad: I currently work with the Office of Environment and Heritage. I'm an Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer. I suppose when I started doin' some rock art stuff with Dave … [it] was more of a move by the department … Dave training people up to do rock art conservation work. I've been working with Dave for quite a while.

Dave: Yeah, I don't know what year it was … Late seventies? Early eighties?

Brad: I started [in]'83. So, yeah … from there onwards.

Vincent: And is [Gosford] your heritage country?

Brad: No, it's not my country. I'm from out west, from Kamilaroi country.
Vincent: Were you born here?

Brad: No, I was born out west. We ended up in Sydney due to my younger brother … he needed the hospital [here]. So we ended up in Sydney.

Vincent: So, even though you might go [to other places] to do different [projects], do you mainly work in this [Gosford] area?

Brad: Yeah. Nowadays, I suppose, I cover the Office of Environment and Heritage area (?). In New South Wales I'll do the rock art -- -- ---- (?) . I work with the people ---- ---- (?) . So basically I'm working from the Hunter River, down south to the other side of Wollongong, and then west to the Great Divide. So pretty much the whole Sydney Basin. That's my core area. But if I get called outside to other areas, I'll do that as well (?) .

Vincent: So, using Nowra as an example … [is it a case of] someone saying, “Look we've got a site that's been vandalised,” or, “It's becoming degraded,” and you'll go in and investigate?

Brad: Yeah. If people need me to go down there they'll let me know. Otherwise I wouldn't know what's going on down there.

Dave: We have done work down there. We did some work on an engraving site ---- ---- (?) where we removed a lot of dirt and [plant growth]. There's a lot of vegetation encroachment onto engraving sites. And involved in that were … (to Brad) Were they local Parks people or the community?

Brad: Bit of both. Parks people and community …

Dave: There was Dootch Kennedy …

Brad: Dootch Kennedy and the Illawarra [Aboriginal] Land Council (?).

Vincent: Where were those engravings? I'm not asking for specific [coordinates] …

Dave: They were in the catchment area.

Vincent: Oh, Woronora, yeah. 'Cause [the engravings] sort of die off the further south you go.

Brad: Yeah, it wasn't the Nowra area.

Vincent: Yeah. It's strange … Once you get into the Illawarra there's no [rock] shelters … so there's no [rock] art on the Illawarra lowlands at all …

Dave: Yeah, there's not many shelters down there.

Vincent: … or those [sandstone] platforms where you get the engravings. So [the rock art is] very much up in the [Illawarra] escarpment.

Brad: The same applies for up here on the central coast and around the Hunter [Valley], where you've got pretty much no art sites on the low country …

Dave: Until you get up into the hills, yeah.

Brad: ---- ---- ---- (?) geology.

Vincent: Paul Taçon talks about the high places in almost every culture being more spiritual because they're closer to the heavens. So as well as being geological, do you think it's also a cultural thing?

Brad: Oh, yeah, it's a cultural thing too. But basically on the lowlands we've got around here there's [just] no shelter for them [to have made art in]. They'd have to go into the high country for shelters.

Vincent: And when you talk about the rock art with local Aboriginal people, do they have an understanding of the [original] purpose of the art? Or do you think the gap [in knowledge caused by] colonisation was just too great?

Brad: It varies in different places. For the art around Sydney Harbour, a lot of that information has been lost. There are still some people in the La Perouse community that have associations with sites in their country … the Dharawal mob. Not all the art sites. They've got stories that have been handed down, but only [for] some of the engravings. [In general] there's a fracture there between traditional association and contemporary. They've got information on that ---- ---- (?) . Now, from Sydney...
Harbour to the north of the city, there's been too much impact by white settlement. Then again, you go the other side of the Hunter River, and those people still have ... it's not a traditional association, but some association with those sites.

Vincent: I've just found that with all the art sites I've gone to see, and all the different people I've spoken to, you get very different ideas about what the original purpose of the art was. I guess to a certain extent [our understanding of them] will always be ... interpretive. You were talking before about the erosion of the engravings, and I was actually quite surprised when you said they're probably not eroding as much as people think.

Dave: Well, wherever I have done measurements, it is really hard to pick the changes. Perhaps I should a bit more careful [with how I explain it]. The one thing you do notice is that it is really variable, even at the one site. There's a whale engraving at La Perouse, right down on the water, and the rock is really weathered ... it's really salt-affected. And even there you've got parts of the whale, like the nose and the fin, that are really quite [discernible]. But the tail and the middle parts are gone totally, and they've been gone for ... well, you don't know how long. But having said that, in the eighteen hundreds, [William] Campbell and [R.H.] Mathews recorded them as full figured ... but they might have taken a bit of license ... you just don't know. So, presuming they were intact then, those figures are [largely] gone. Up here, at Daleys Point, you've got pretty faint engravings and there's a lot of superimposition and so forth. So there's a lot of stuff that's gone there, and the rock there is pretty crap as well. So, where you've got pretty crap rock, you are getting stuff disappearing. Where the rock's reasonably sound, it's still very hard to measure any difference [in groove depth]. We've tried. We've set up a micro-erosion metre ... little probes and that sort of thing. But that didn't work. It was too hard to detect change accurately. For example, where you're getting lots of lichen and micro-organic growth, you'd be trying to measure erosion but you'd be growing growth. So you can try to measure it down to a micro-millimetre at say 50 points in a triangle, but you just get totally confused with variable numbers ... It just doesn't make a lot of sense. Also, the thing is, what do you do? The main thing that impacts [those engravings] are encroaching vegetation and soil cover. As soon as you get soil cover, you get chemical weathering and you end up with a friable rock, and when that gets exposed again, it's soft and friable and can erode [more rapidly]. So the thing to do is to keep them clear of vegetation and soil. That's the primary maintenance issue with engravings. And to intervene with things like rock consolidants and chemical interventions generally do not meet with general approval, particularly when you get into any sort of traditional country. Generally speaking, traditional Owners do not like chemical intervention. And mostly Land Councils and people don't like chemical interventions either. So the best things are the natural approaches to conservation. And maybe one day, communities might adopt the practice of re-engraving where the situation is warranted.

Vincent: That's what I was getting to. A few of the people I've spoken to are very much interested in the idea of re-engraving some of the sites. How does that sit with you guys, either personally or as National Parks employees? Is it a move that National Parks have looked at?

Brad: Yeah, they've looked at it. We've done a study on the La Perouse one. But I suppose National Parks' position on this is that they won't promote it – the re-working. If it was to be done, it would definitely need to be a community move. The Office of Environment and Heritage would be happy to provide assistance if there was total agreement within the community...

Vincent: But there's never total agreement [within the community].

Brad: (laughing) That's why I can't see it being done. I've personally got no issues with it as long as the community are happy and they had a good ----(?)

Dave: Yeah. We've kind-of figured out the way [engravings were] traditionally done with stone tools. I reckon we could recreate an engraving.

Vincent: With the pecking and the rubbing ...?

Dave: Yeah, the pecking and the grooves ... with stone tools, which is how I think it was done. We have looked at traditional stone tools used to make engravings. These tools are held at the Museum. We have made our own from quarried basalt. When the tool is weighted properly you can reproduce the same groove shape and profile that you see at the sites ... so I'm pretty sure we've got it figured out how the engravings were made. But it's not my place to go and do it. The other thing I should say is that there have been cases where people have taken it upon themselves to try and re-groove sites they've made a real hash of it.

Vincent: People have tried it?

Dave: Yeah ...

Vincent: I've seen where someone people have scratched them to highlight the outline ...

Dave: No, no, there's been a couple [of extreme cases] ... 

Brad: Was it Berry Island, down on the Harbour ...?
Dave: Someone came in and did it, I think, using a hammer and chisel … you know, like a steel chisel. And the other case was done down near Bondi …

Vincent: Oh, yeah … that was sanctioned by the [Waverley City] Council.

Dave: Yeah. It looked like they'd just used a pick.

Vincent: Oh, everyone I've spoken to about that [site] says it's just a travesty.

Dave: Yeah, that's right. But I'm sure if I went and did it as outlined before, people would say the same thing. I mean, I wouldn't do it anyway … it's not my place. I wouldn't even consider doing it.

Vincent: At the end of the day I suppose all rock art that isn't re-touched is going to disappear. So, I suppose you've got the option of it either disappearing or sustaining it but losing its …

Dave: Authenticity.

Vincent: Well, there's people down my way, of Dharawal descent, who are interested in the idea of re-engraving and turning something that is an artefact, in one sense, into a focus of contemporary identity. But yeah … people do seem to disagree about how to go about it. I don't know if it will ever be resolved. [I guess] it's either going to disappear physically or it's gonna to disappear as an artefact.

Dave: Yeah. Mind you, I think some of the stuff that's [currently] in good condition will still be in good condition for a long time.

Vincent: Can you give me some examples?

Brad: Mt Kuring-gai … See, the engravings were in different stages of being worked [when Europeans arrived]. You get some with a thin and shallow groove that hadn't been worked that often, and then you've got other ceremonial sites, like out at Mt Kuring-gai, that had been worked, I imagine, seasonally. They've got a bigger and deeper groove. So all those bigger ones [had] been worked continuously over, I don't know, a hundred years, fifty years, whatever it might be when they'd come back and perform ceremonies. I think those ones, there's no threat of them disappearing in the next hundred years. But the thinner ones that had only been worked once or twice traditionally, they're, I suppose, more under threat.

Vincent: I limited myself to [visiting sites] south of Botany Bay because I became so obsessed with it all. I'm not gonna venture into Kuring-gai until I've got this PhD done. I became so obsessed with it that it took me a while to really start looking at the contemporary side of [my research]. But another thing people disagree about is the dates … Some people say [the engravings] can't be older than, say, seven thousand years, because they wouldn't have had the [right] tools prior to that. How long do you think it was being practised for?

Brad: (laughs) I wouldn't even attempt to guess how long it was being done.

Dave: Yeah. The only dating on engravings … we're talking engravings, not paintings … the only way of dating an engraving is to find something that's sitting inside or on top of the engraving that's [accumulated] since the engraving was done. Out in western New South Wales you get like a veneer that forms inside [the grooves] … It forms over the rocks … someone people call it desert varnish … it's like a black veneer …

Vincent: Is that what they call a patina?

Dave: You can call it whatever you want … but people have had a shot at dating that. But they've also said it formed in a different sort of climate. So when you're talking like that, you're talking round about the thirty thousand years [mark]. That's out Mootwingee, near Broken Hill. But you can't look at an engraving and say, “Oh yeah, that's so many years old.” You just wouldn't know. But certainly you're talking a long time. And using that western New South Wales as an example, you can assume that people have been engraving for a very long time.

Brad: The longest scenario would be as long as they've been using stone tools. There's always the potential they've been making engravings since then.

Vincent: Well, they talk about the Panaramitee engravings, where they're chipped away … I forget the actual term …

Dave: Pecked.

Vincent: Yeah, pecked. People say it's one of the older [engraved] art forms, and that [in comparison, something like] the Sydney style is very much in the last few thousand years.
Dave: Yeah, well, that's not our area. I wouldn't argue that at all. I mean, provided it wasn't under water, I think people would have been on the coast and they would have been practising art.

Brad: What's not to say there have been engravings made already in other locations that have weathered away [because] people stopped going there, stopped using those areas?

Vincent: What interest do local Aboriginal people have in these sites? Do they know they're there? I mean, as a non-Aboriginal person growing up in the Illawarra, I had no idea about the rock art that was here until I started doing this research.

Brad: There's generally a lot of interest from the Aboriginal community, but I think in the metropolitan or the urban areas (?), Aboriginal communities aren't aware of everything within their areas. And I think basically they need to be shown and educated as well. If they're from that area traditionally, like the Dharawal people around Wollongong and La Per, they know all those areas. But if you get people that have relocated to those areas, they won't be knowledgeable. They may need to be educated and trained in that as well.

Vincent: So … how can that happen?

Brad: Um … What we've been doing up here on the central coast – and I'm just talkin' the central coast now – we've got an Aboriginal Co-Management Committee, [and] we've been running cultural camps for school children and also families. We've had about three over the last four years. So we take them out and we teach the kids about their country. That's one method.

Vincent: So you've had actual excursions out to some sites?

Brad: Takin' 'em out to the site, give 'em Aboriginal site awareness training. We've been running a couple of those with the Land Council in the Hunter [Valley].

Vincent: What have people that've attended those [sessions] thought? What's been their attitude?

Brad: Oh, they're very happy with it. But the thing is, because they can't really make a living out of it, their input, or their follow-through, is limited – due to, say, family and work commitments, all those sort of things.

Vincent: Yeah. I think that's always going to be a problem …

Brad: That's always the catch.

Vincent: Like, with all the mining that's going on up on the Woronora Plateau, they consistently require people to come in as custodians, as part of the consultation process … and you could spend your life doing that, but you won't get paid.

Brad: That's right.

Vincent: It's a very big ask – to always be there, and always giving advice. And in many cases they feel they're not being listened to anyway.

Brad: Well, the only way they can do that now is through traditional owner groups, and also the Land Councils. But then, they still haven't got the infrastructure to support those community representatives, who have been elected as sites officers, to go around and do all that consultation. But there are people who make time to go and do it on weekends and stuff like that.

Vincent: I remember … We had an Aboriginal cultural centre open at the top of Bulli Pass not long ago. It's closed down now. But they tried to have an open day for the Dharawal Nature Reserve, or whatever it was called at the time. But it was a bit of a let-down 'cause it poured down with rain, so they weren't allowed to go in there [and see any of the rock art]. It just strikes me that a lot of people down my way … some of them only get to see the art when they're called in because it's under threat. It's a real shame that that's the only time they get to see it. [Perhaps that's a situation] specific to the Illawarra, considering its geography and the location of the art.

Brad: But having said that about the Land Councils and traditional owner groups … the National Parks and Wildlife Service runs discovery programs, which include Aboriginal Discovery Guides, where you take schoolchildren to see these sites and give them a bit of background on cultural heritage. So it's happening slowly. But there's not enough, I'm afraid (?). There's not enough resources to provide everything to everybody.

Vincent: Okay, you've brought up funding … What would you guys say to the criticism that it's not just the funding … that there's an anti-heritage attitude within the National Parks – [be it towards] Aboriginal or European heritage?

Brad: (to Dave) You can answer that one. (laughs)
Dave: No, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say it's anti. People always try to promote what their own area [of interest] is … People in the Department are all vying for the dollars. So I suppose the guy who's interested in the antechinus, or something like that, is going to be pushing his concern for threatened fauna. But it doesn't mean he's anti-heritage. I mean, people within the organisation will argue for their own things. But I've never been too much involved with how the funding works.

Brad: With the National Parks, let's not forget … The management and protection of sites is administered under the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The Office of Environment and Heritage have moved that from National Parks to the Country, Cultural and Heritage Commission(?), so basically they're the authority on it rather than the National Parks. National Parks is only responsible for sites on National Parks' [land]. And, from working with rangers, and I've worked in offices, I haven't found people to be anti-heritage. Now, a ranger's role is a big role. It covers all sorts of natural and cultural heritage stuff …

Vincent: Well, it strikes me that even if there wasn't [an anti-heritage attitude], the logistics is still huge. If you think about how many heritage sites there are – rock art, middens, whatever – it's a pretty big ask [of a few rangers] to be able to look after them all.

Dave: Yeah.

Vincent: You've spoken about taking people out on guided tours, but I know there are places elsewhere in Australia where certain sites have really been done up – they've got walkways and signage … And some people have said that maybe one way of combating the lack of funding is for the sites to pay their own way. Is that an option? To do these sites up [and make people pay to see them]? I mean, I know that the Jibbon Headland site, for example, use to have signage at one stage, and there was even a little pamphlet produced for visitors. But I think the attitude now is “Don't tell anyone about it,” because [that promotional atmosphere isn't there anymore] …

Dave: Yeah, I don't know … Maybe one of the options is guided tours, [where] you've got someone employed [specifically for that]. But with sites near Sydney,… because you'd be taking a lot of people there, you need some sort of natural protection for it, so you don't get people coming back unguided. Because once you start opening up major sites to attract that sort of interest visitors just keep coming back. You've gotta weigh up showing sites versus their protection.

Vincent: But sites that are quite isolated, that many people don't know about, still get vandalised. So the idea of protection through [non-disclosure] doesn't seem to work.

Dave: Yeah, but more commonly the sites that people are taken to are the ones that get vandalised. I'd make that generalisation, rather than the other way round.

Vincent: Well, I thought your article on fire and rock art was interesting. 'Cause I thought, “Wouldn't it be great to have walkways around some of these sites,” but then you claim that they actually pose their own problems [in the event of a fire] …

Dave: Yeah.

Vincent: … they can actually erode the rock even more.

Brad: Yeah. But in saying that … I don't think [these sites] could pay for themselves … Self-management [wouldn't work]. I don't think you'd get the [necessary] numbers [of paying visitors] through. [The sites] won't pay for themselves, and they won't pay for the community. The only time you get a high influx of visitors is in the school holidays. And then, you know … what are you gonna charge? For [the sites] to pay for themselves and their boardwalk you're gonna have to charge something like a hundred dollars per person just to go and visit a site. People aren't gonna do that.

Vincent: And people are just so used to being able to walk into the National Park …

Brad: Yeah … and go and do it [themselves].

Vincent: … that they might actually resent being blocked from a site [unless they're willing to pay].

Dave: Yeah.

Brad: And any income that comes through National Parks from visitors … let's say they go to West Head, 'cause a majority of them go there to see the Aboriginal Heritage … all that income from the entrance fees would return to the treasury. None of it reflects back onto the site management.

Dave: And just getting back to the vandalism … Bulgandry is one [site] where there's a boardwalk, and at that site the engravings get scratched by vandals every couple of years. The most vandalised art site I know of is a site called Bull Cave down near Campelltown. That had a big cage in front of it, and someone went out there with bolt cutters and then spray painted the whole thing with red paint. And we could never get that spray paint off. You can remove paint in most situations, but with that
That's still as it was [when it was vandalised]. That vandalism followed a lot of school visits by the local schools. They'd take the kids out there and show them the sites. And that was sort of the outcome of that practice.

Vincent: That's interesting. I was going to mention Bull Cave. It's obvious that the graffiti is quite old, so I assumed you mustn't have been able to get it off.

Dave: No. We've tried different ways, but we can't get that paint off without removing the [actual] art. We only remove graffiti when we can remove it without ruining the art. It's a compromise ... otherwise it's us doing the vandalism. If we take the graffiti off as well as the art, then we're the vandals. So in situations like that we just have to step back and say, "Sorry, we can't do it. Maybe the technology will come later. But at the moment we can't [repair it]." And the art's been there for a long time ... The art is still there underneath the spray paint. But paint is one of those things that cross-polimises. It's harder to remove it the older it gets. So the only way might be using a particle abrasive technique, but it's pretty tricky.

Vincent: Bull Cave was one of the first few sites I visited, after Jibbon Head, and I was just so disgusted [by the vandalism]. And when [you consider] a cage had been put up [to discourage vandals] ... it must have screamed, "Look at me! Look at me! Come and vandalise me!"

Dave: Yeah, well, that's always been the argument with cages. It was a management approach used in the sixties and seventies. But it throws up a lot of challenges to the vandals ... and [the vandalism] escalates [as a result].

Vincent: Has anyone ever been caught? Do we know who vandalised Bull Cave?

Dave: There was one prosecution out at Mootwingee where someone actually graffitied their name and address (laughs) ... and they signed the visitors book ... something along those lines. But no, generally the sites are pretty remote, where no one's watching anybody. I remember once discussing this with the Department of Planning at a group of engraving sites near Somersby. The Department of Planning staff thought we were really overreacting ... They were planning the industrial area, and had conducted a comprehensive archaeological survey ... there's a lot of engravings sites in there. There was one engraving that they thought was pretty good, and they couldn't understand why we were hesitant about promoting it [as a tourist attraction]. A bit later it got scratched in and the Planning people changed their minds and soon went off the idea of promoting the sites. You don't like being negative all the time on these issues ... You often get new people coming up with ideas about promotion and everything else, and often it does end in vandalism.

Vincent: Can you think of any examples where newly uncovered ones, or old ones, have really been looked after by the urban community? You know, where they've sort-of cherished it as a local landmark? Like, I remember reading an article about you guys cleaning one of the engravings down in Sydney, and of the photos I saw it seemed like the whole community was out [to see it], and having a fun day ...

Brad: You talkin' the Aboriginal community or just the community in general?

Vincent: The community in general. The urban community.

Brad: (to Dave) Mt Kuring-gai engraving site threatened by Sydney Water. I think Sydney Water were gonna lay some pipes through it. The general community out at Mt Kuring-gai, they jumped up and down, and eventually the Australian Museum come out, - --- ---- ----(?) ... and now it's called an 'Aboriginal Place'. So there are places like that, but none that I know of that's more recent. A lot of those sites that are around Sydney, and probably even around the central coast, you'll find that they've been reserved or gazetted ---- ----(?) by the government, and they're on maps. That's the cases where community has said, "Hey, we want to protect them." (to Dave) ---- ---- ---- ----(?) another one?

Dave: Yeah, that's right, there was one landowner there that donated his land or bequeathed his land ----(?) the Aboriginal ----(?) ... But you get variability. In any community you get people that are for conservation, and you always expect a couple of rebels that don't go along with it or have some axe to grind.

Vincent: (to Dave) So, when you were still working, and maybe working in unison with Brad, how often were you going out to see a site or clean it up?

Dave: Oh, there'd be several projects a year, and in different places. And there was a lot of stuff that would come up. Like, if some major vandalism occurred, you'd be out there as soon as possible.

Brad: I think [the number of projects we do is] determined again by resources, by financial ability. State Treasury provide five hundred thousand a year, over the past twelve, thirteen years, for the site conservation people. And then I suppose they ---- ---- (?) projects and work around that, so around Australia(?) ... People put up projects for conservation work, which is not in relation to vandalism ... it's more just conservation work. You'd be lookin' at, I don't know ... four projects a year?
Dave: Yeah.

Brad: And that's only within New South Wales. Then there's the other ones where vandalism happens and community want a quick reaction to it. So they'd be on top of those four projects. And because of Dave's name and background … he's [worked with] communities around Australia … a lot of those communities trust Dave, I suppose, and they're still callin' him back twenty-four years after him first goin' out and doin' work with them.

Dave: So far we've only talked about engravings, and the main threat there is, like I said, soil build-up and vegetation encroachment. With the painting sites … and I'm just thinking [of examples] down your way, the country you're talking about … the big threat to those is salt erosion and water. So they're water issues, if you like. Have you been to Whale Cave?

Vincent: If there's only one other place I can go to, it would be that one. But I just cannot get there. (laughs)

Dave: Oh, okay. In that southern area, there are not many large art sites. But Whale Cave is definitely one of them. I'm talking over a hundred figures or motifs inside. I don't know how many [exactly] but there'd be at least a hundred.


Dave: Yeah. Oh, you don't want to build it up too much, because it doesn't sort of blow you away as far as the visual impact of it [goes]. But when you look closely at it you can see there's a lot of stuff in there. That [site] was affected by mining subsidence … underground mining subsidence. And in the days that it happened … it was very hard to tell exactly what was going on because [the southern coal fields were] a bit of a closed shop in those days.

Vincent: I don't think it's got any better. (laughs)

Dave: But from what I have gathered over a number of years, the coal mining company hit a fault line, and [had to] stop mining. So it affected their mine plan. And with [long wall] coalmining you extract a whole seam and then get broad area subsidence, which is a collapse. The land above the extraction area is impacted all the way to the surface. So if you, say, take a two metre seam of coal out, you only get about a metre drop at the surface, but you get a lot of fracturing and [other damage] above the extracted zone. As a result, you get changes in the rock permeability and the flow of ground water. It presented at Whale Cave initially as just a couple of cracks. We actually started measuring one or two, and then all hell broke loose. The front of the roof collapsed and you got a whole lot of fracturing inside the shelter. When we met with the mining subsidence board, they denied that it was mining subsidence. They said it was tree roots and everything else. So they wouldn't accept the blame at all, but they volunteered to [devise] some sort of engineering solution to the problem, which was to prop it up with these old wooden mine props. And that's how it is today.

Vincent: Has the art been directly affected by any of that?

Dave: Absolutely. Because you now have micro fissures in the back of the shelter, and when it rains you get water seeping through the rock and coming out over the art surface. And because you've got clay pigments, they're directly affected by that water. So the art is deteriorating at a much faster rate than it [normally] would.

Vincent: Everyone calls it a cave …

Dave: It's a shelter. A big shelter. You can walk into it. It would be, about 5m deep. And you can walk around inside the shelter without having to duck your head.

Vincent: So when was the last time you saw it?

Dave: About twelve months.

Vincent: What [state] is the art in?

Dave: Oh, well, like I said, it's very hard to be objective about it [by sight alone]. But what we did see was wet art which is a no-no. And so the solution here is … well, it's not a solution, but the best maintenance approach is to try and keep the shelter as dry as you can. So you start looking at the roof of the shelter, cutting back vegetation and removing soil, trying to get the water away from the shelter as best as you can.

Vincent: Is that where you'd use a drip line?

Dave: No, no. Drip lines won't work in this case because it's not coming in over the surface. Drip lines stop surface water from coming in. What you're getting at [Whale Cave] is ground water coming in through the back of the shelter. You can't stop it but you can mitigate it a little. It's a maintenance issue … keeping the veg and the soil clear on the roof. So they're the main issues
with [conservation of] art sites. The other thing is [that] in that escarpment country, in the water catchment area, you've got quite large shelters with mostly fresh rock in them. And the fresh rock is caused by salt weathering. It's like a rising damp in buildings. So the salt builds up in the rock fabric, and it actually blasts away the surface of the rock. You end up with a real clean-looking white rock and very few old surfaces. Generally the old surfaces have got art on them. So there would have been art in some of the shelters, but you've got this salt erosion that's making the art disappear. Whale Cave is one of the few shelters with intact art. So any other shelters that appear with a lot of art, they should be looked after, should have a high priority in that area, because they're rare, and a lot of the art that was there has gone.

Vincent: I think it was Kelvin Officer … I mean, this is something he wrote a long time ago … he estimated that the art in that area, in that type of environment, would only last a few thousand years … like, there wouldn't be anything older than that. But from what you're saying it sounds like it would be even less than that. (laughs)

Dave: Well, possibly. But I think the art in Whale Cave could be pretty old. Because you haven't got that salt action happening there. And that's what I'm saying – if you've got a shelter with a lot of art in it, it won't have the salt. Salt erosion is quite rapid. But it doesn't happen everywhere. So if you've got anything that's intact, it shouldn't be a tourist site and it shouldn't be developed – it has a very high conservation value.

Vincent: So how can that happen?

Dave: Oh, well, if it's intact, it's being conserved by good fortune. And it happens by making sure the land's reserved, that there's restricted access … those sorts of things.

Vincent: And no mining.

Dave: No mining. No mining underneath. Definitely.

Vincent: Well, all those mining companies are obliged to publish their [heritage assessments] online … A friend of mine recently was part of a group being consulted about a seam going in [up on the Woronora Plateau]. And my friend's not very good with the internet, so I downloaded all these reports for him. And I said, “Look, from what I can see [in these reports], the stuff they've already mined is considered [from an archaeological point of view] to be of higher heritage value. So they've already set a precedent. Even though every site should be considered important, you're gonna have a hell of a time convincing them not to mine this section.”

Dave: Yeah, well, the other thing is … in the seventies we had to do this thing about mining under National Parks. Neville Wran was the Premier. And the issue was whether the Wollemi would become a National Park … because when you create a National Park … if the government objects, you can't gazette it as a National Park. You have to resolve those objections. Mines department were objecting because [the government] wanted to dig for coal under Wollemi. We wanted it made a National Park. At that time we looked at mining subsidence as an impact. So we had to [make this decision] – would we allow mining in National Parks? If we would, the mines department would withdraw their objections to Wollemi. It was during this project we went and met with subsidence engineers … this is in the seventies, I'm talking about … and the storyline [never changes]. Every time you pointed to some sort of damage that was done by underground mining, they would say, “Look, that was in the old days,” you know, “Today we're much more advanced. We can control this, and we can do that.” And they'd throw all these sorts of figures around. During that time, along came the damage at Whale Cave. Anyway, the upshot of it was that Neville Wran said there'd be no mining under National Parks, so our project got pulled, we got Wollemi anyway, and the mines were really pissed off. (laughs) So, it went along those lines. But not that long ago, it might have been five years ago, we met with BHP. You'd point to damage that had been done [by mining] at Whale Cave, and their line was exactly the same as it was in the seventies – “They were the old days. Today's methods are much more advanced…” And I thought, “Oh yeah. I've heard this story before.” (laughs) And that'll always be the line used by the miners. And when you point to Whale Cave, they'll say, “Well, that wasn't us. [We're] sure they were using antiquated mining techniques and subsidence engineering techniques …”, blah blah blah … “BHP said they would look into it and come back to us ” Well, they never have.

Vincent: Surely it's just a logical conclusion that if you remove huge amounts of earth from under the ground, whatever is above it is going to collapse [into that space].

Dave: Yeah, that's right. But they say they can control it … The line is exactly the same as it was thirty, forty years ago.

Vincent: But, as far as you're both concerned, the best way of protecting sites from [sporadic acts of vandalism] is by not letting people know where they are … apart from the odd excursion with Indigenous people!

Dave: I think the main thing is to make sure you look after the main sites. Instead of investing your time in a lot of minor sites … 'cause you gotta restrict what time you're spending on what … you make sure you put your effort into the main sites. And whatever time's left you put it into the others.
Vincent: To what extent have you been involved with consultation [processes associated] with heritage sites?

Narelle: Was you up near the Avon [River]?

Vincent: No, this wasn't up on the plateau … it was the [Royal] National Park.

Narelle: Ah, right.

Vincent: I can't get in there [the Woronora Plateau]. You know Aaron Broad?

Lorraine: Yeah, Aaron …

Vincent: We tried to get to Whale Cave – I think it was late last year – but we got lost. (laughs) So we didn't reach it. But see, we got stopped straight away by a ranger. And Aaron didn't take any shit. He said, “Look, we're going to this site to check up on it.” Whale Cave is one of those disgusting examples where a really important site has been totally destroyed by the mining …

Lorraine: Oh, so the mining's destroyed it?


Lorraine: Oh, goodness me.

Vincent: The last interview I did was up in Gosford a couple of weeks ago with two fellas I've been trying to get a hold of ever since I started this research. A white fella called Dave Lambert – until recently he worked for the National Parks as a rock art conservator – and the black fella he's worked with for like thirty years, Brad Welsh …

Lorraine: Oh yeah, we know Brad.

Vincent: Okay. Well, this is the type of stuff I talked with them about. I didn't mention Whale Cave … It's one of the few sites I really want to visit that I haven't been able to get to 'cause it's in that [Water Catchment] area. But Dave brought it up [in conversation] … He said it's one of the most significant sites in this area and, you know, subsidence from the long wall mining has caused the cave to collapse.

Lorraine: Well, that long wall mining, that's what we're totally against. We've sent a couple of the boys out there … 'Cause we're part of the [Illawarra Local Aboriginal] Land Council. And we're totally against that long wall mining. Because it's gonna destroy everything – our art, our water, the underground streams, everything. So we're totally against it. And no matter what we say … They could probably take our people on site, but they're not listening to what people are sayin', are they, Narelle?

Narelle: 'Cause whoever owns that land now … They own it. They can do whatever they want with it. They just bring us in for the …

Lorraine: Oh yeah, we know Brad.

Narelle: … so that they can get impact reports, lardy dah dah … They say that they're gonna do this and that 'cause of the heritage … And if you look at some of the places that they're lookin' to be mining with the long wall mining … They mined up on the
Avon River. Now, you look at the damaged stuff, ‘cause that's the future down the track. What of the next generation? And what of the surrounding flora and fauna? All our history and cultural stuff … without it, who are we?

Vincent: That day we tried to see the cave and we got pulled up straight away … they kept saying they don't let people in ‘cause they've had threats to the water supply …

Lorraine: Awf …!

Vincent: … and I'm thinking, “That's bullshit. If this is such an environmentally sensitive area, why are you allowing mining in here?”

Lorraine: That's right. And no one's allowed to walk in there.

Vincent: There was four of us and I was the only one with bag. And if I was gonna try to poison the water supply I'd need a lot more than what I'd be able to carry in that little backpack.

Lorraine: It's just their excuse. The trouble with people today is that they're workin' for today. They don't think about tomorrow and all the things that's gonna happen tomorrow. People are diggin' big holes in the country, you know, mining, takin' this and that. But what are they leavin'? They're leavin' big holes! Nothin' else. It doesn't get filled up. You know, all the goodness of the land's being takin'. Australia is a pretty self-sufficient country, but we're not gonna be self-sufficient for nothing soon ‘cause even our water's gonna be gone. Why don't these people wake up and see what they're donin' and see the destruction of it? It's past the point [of no return]. The Government's gotta start pullin' people up. They're allowing people to come into the country, and rip it up just for dollars. Nothing's being done about it.

Narelle: There's balance in our natural environment, but they're takin' all this stuff out from here and putting it there. And what their long term solution is for the damage to Aboriginal heritage … you know, for those cracks made by the mining they … they stick in some of that special super glue, that rock glue. How long's that gonna last? That's short term stuff.

Lorraine: They're destroying our heritage in this country - the stamp on this country from our ancestors that [proves] they had ownership of this land. They wouldn't damage their own [non-Indigenous history ] as much as what they're donin' to ours! A lot of people would fight for it. But we've got thousands and thousands of years of it, and what's being done about it?

Vincent: What I think makes it easier for them to get away with it is that a lot of the [heritage] that's left – the stuff that hasn't already been destroyed – is in areas like what we've been talking about … areas that you're not allowed into easily or places that are physically difficult to get to, like the [Royal] National Park. I mean, it's open [to the public], but a lot of those sites, you gotta know where they are.

Lorraine: That's why they don't wanna tell people know more, because once they know where they are, they destroy them – people that go out bush walkin' or yahoon' or whatever, they destroy the art in those caves. And it's no significance to them. They're just destructive. They've destroyed things that mean so much to Aboriginal culture and history, that are our ties to this country. When they go out and destroy them, what does that say? What kind of respect is that for our history? Do you go overseas and destroy the Pyramids? You know, do you destroy those areas over there when you visit them? No.

Vincent: A lot of these sites are older than the pyramids.

Lorraine: Yeah. The Australian history that's in their country is older than other countries' [histories].

Vincent: I asked those two fellas – because they've been in the job so long – if it's better to not tell people bout these sites, and try to protect them that way …

Lorraine: Well, I reckon it is.

Vincent: … or is it better to educate the public about the value of these sites, and hope that through education there won't be vandalism.

Lorraine: It doesn't matter how much you educate the public, you will always get your vandals. They've gotta build [barriers] around [sites] to protect the art. In some areas in Australia … they've [got] areas where you can't go in there no more. To me, it's better for them to know, and not the public. Because once the public knows, and they get into those areas, and they know they're there, they'll just purposely go and destroy 'em. You got a lot of people where Aboriginal history or art means nothing to them. “Oh, it's nothing. It's just a hand print!” But it's a hand print that might have been put there thousands of years ago, and it means something to Aboriginal people because it's [a sign of] ownership, the stamp of our people, or our clan, you know, that this was our area, and this is the art that is contained in this area.

Vincent: Well, it's proof of sovereignty …
Lorraine: It is. It's ownership.

Vincent: … and in a way – whether it's conscious or subconscious – [its] destruction is an attempt to black-out history.

Lorraine: Yep, that's right.

Vincent: Would it be true to say that local Aboriginal people only get to see some of these sites when it's threatened and they have to have this tokenistic Aboriginal consultation process?

Lorraine: Well, I think the main people that get to see this stuff are our sites officers or our National Parks [and Wildlife Service] worker. They protect them. It's good to go and see if you're doing studies, but to me … I'm just as happy [to see them] in a film or whatever. I don't [necessarily] want to know where it is.

Vincent: You're happy just to know it's there and that it's okay.

Lorraine: I know it's there, it's okay, and [the sites officers are] protecting it.

Narelle: They know it's there, they know how many sites are archived, and how many sites that ain't archived for a reason …

Lorraine: Yeah. We've been given the privilege of [being involved with] that.

Narelle: … 'cause there's places even we can't go [for cultural reasons].

Lorraine: Yeah, there's people that've worked there that knows that.

Narelle: But with the long wall mining …

Lorraine: Oh, I hate long wall mining. It affects everybody.

Narelle: … take a look at the impact on the Avon River. It runs into all our drinking systems. It's not about now, it's about future generations.

Lorraine: People don't know we've got an underground water system that runs all the way from Queensland to Wallaga Lake. Imagine if people destroy it. That's all our fresh water …

Narelle: What about future generations: your kids, your grand kids, you know?

Lorraine: … They want to pollute everything.

Narelle: The water's already got fire comin' out of it! You know, there's water up there with fire comin' out of it! Fire from the water!

Lorraine: They try to deny it but you've got people on farms where fire's comin' out of their taps!

Narelle: Yeah, fire comin' out of your friggin' taps in your sink! It's ridiculous.

Vincent: In regard to the consultation process … I'm sensing that even when your opinion is asked for, they don't listen.

Lorraine: They don't. And the Lands Council flares up about it. We leave a lot of it to the Lands Council, with Sharalyn and Dootch, 'cause they're our [spokespeople]. Like, Sharalyn [Robinson] is our Lands Council CEO, [and] Dootch is one of our main activists that's been fighting for years and years. Even Aaron [Broad-Henry], and he's only young. But ever since he's been down here he's been taught a lot of things by his grandparents and his great grandparents. He knows a lot of the sites that people mightn't know, and he's like an encyclopaedia. Aaron. He's taken that much knowledge into his head from his great grandmother and that, where she told him about everything – the sites and the women's areas … What a kid full of knowledge. And that's good to have in our culture. Because there's our fighters to keep protecting what's ours. And that's good. 'Cause they're the ones we need to keep it available for people to see. Our people … If we don't see it, well, that's alright too, just as long as we know it's there [and] it's protected. And you got people like Aaron to say, “It's there, it's protected, we're looking after it.” It's just as important – knowin' without seein'.

(Peter talks about the destruction of Aboriginal sites as a result of the damming of several river systems up on the Woronora Plateau.)

Vincent: Look, I've been to a shelter which, as far as I could tell, had not been looked at by an archaeologist in thirty years … The land it's on is owned by a mining company, and [the shelter] is right by an access trail. And when we got to the shelter [we found
that it had been] filled in. It was filled in – a shelter with art in it. And by the growth of the trees growing out of the dirt, you could tell it had been filled in probably as soon as it had first been surveyed … it had a huge gumtree growing out of it! But they hide these things that are done to sites.

(Peter talks about how the destruction of heritage sites often goes unreported and remains unacknowledged.)

Vincent: That’s why I think it’s a really difficult balancing act. ‘Cause like you said, on one level it makes sense not to tell [the general public] about [certain sites], because in some way there’s that protection. But on the other hand, if people don’t know about them, if they’re destroyed, there’s no one to say, “Wait a second! You can’t destroy that!” Do you know what I mean?

Lorraine: Yep.

Vincent: To me, it’s a difficult balancing act.

Lorraine: Well, if anyone had any brains they’d know that it’s an Aboriginal site, especially if they see a cave with art in it. But the thing is, a lot of people won’t admit that it’s there if they don’t want ’em to know. We’ve come up against people that have done that. And I don’t mean [individual] people, I mean industries that have done that. They don’t want us to know because they’re worried it will stop their work.

Vincent: They’re the worst, I think. They’re the ones responsible for the most destruction of sites.

Lorraine: They are. It’s greed. To me it’s just “Money! Money! Money!” It’s not heritage or anything like that. Just total destruction of things that are really important to datin’ the world and its cultures. We’re part of the old cultures of the world. And they’re destroying it.

Vincent: So how often would you guys get involved in a consultation process?

Lorraine: Well, we get stuff sent out to us, for consultations …

Vincent: ‘Cause your on a list of [stakeholders]?

Lorraine: Yeah, we’re on the list of local groups in this area. But then if we don’t want to handle that area, we know that it's on Sharalyn, because Sharalyn’s the Lands Council. Dootch and all them work with Sharalyn. They’re all the head sites officers. And we only send our guys in when we need to. Other than that we leave it up to the Lands Council. It’s our business, but we’re all members of the Lands Council. And they’re responsible to our community. So it’s their job as well as ours, but the Land Council’s got the power to go in. Anything to do with any site, you’ve got to contact the Land Council first – your local Land Council. There’ll be so many sites officers that will go and do that area, and there’d be other odd groups bringing their one or two [representatives]. The Land Council might have about eight to ten official sites officers that will work that site, and the smaller Aboriginal groups will bring in their sites officers to work with ‘em.

Vincent: It strikes me that this local Land Council is very well respected by the local community …

Lorraine: Because it’s run fairly now.

Vincent: Because I’ve heard a lot of people talk about other Land Councils really disparagingly.

Lorraine: This Lands Council would have been the same as that years ago, believe me … ‘cause we always attended the Lands Council meetings. But Sharalyn Robinson runs this Lands Council fair and square, and she’s one of the best [CEOs] we’ve had. So we put our trust in Shaz because she’s workin’ for the Aboriginal people … She was our Aboriginal Liaison Officer for the [Wollongong City] Council for ten years before she took up the Lands Council job. And we got a lot of trust in Shaz because she has always fought for Aboriginal rights, even in her job in [Wollongong City] Council. So that’s why we put a lot of faith in that Lands Council, with Dootch and all them other sites officers that have been workin’ on sites for years. That’s why it’s important.

(Peter talks about the inappropriateness of some Aboriginal people’s involvement and recent influence on local heritage procedures – particularly those people who are not traditionally from the area.)

Lorraine: [Those people] should be consulting with the Aboriginal Lands Council and bringing [their ideas] to the Lands Council meetings. [Those ideas should] be voted on by the people – the Aboriginal people of the area – not [just] by one group of people, because those [issues concern] all the Aboriginal people in this area, not just one group of people. And that’s why it’s gotta be brought to the Lands Council meetings before decisions can be made. And that’s why there’s been arguments in the past, because [not] all the people [are] getting that information and voting on it, and choosing to work with or without the
group [in question]. That should be the whole community's decision, not one group of people. One group of people haven't got the right [to make decisions for] this whole community.

Vincent: Does the wider Aboriginal community care about these [issues]? I mean, I [know] you're involved with the Land Council …

Lorraine: Most of the local Aboriginal community care about it, because we've had big arguments in the past … We've got a good Aboriginal contingent that do ----(?) here, because it's our culture. It's just that? … before they make [any] decision it should be brought back to the people. And the Lands Council is the biggest part of the people. Now, if you don't want to attend [those] meetings then that's your problem.

(Peter talks more about locally accepted ways in which to deal with heritage issues, and emphasises Dootch Kennedy's special role in such matters.)

Lorraine: No one can take it away from Dootch. Because I tell you what, they never got their arses down there – sorry to say that – but they never put their arses out there to fight for them rights. Dootch and them did. They put the tents up, they took their chance with coppers and everybody else, you know, fighting for the rights out there, just like they're doing at Sandon Point and anywhere else they might go. And they're the ones that have been don't it for all these years. And they're the ones that they should bring in to agree or disagree with those issues, along with the Lands Council.

Vincent: I'll tell you why I asked that question. My supervisor, who's an archaeologist by training … When that large midden at Bellambi Point was uncovered twenty years ago or so, and some initial studies were done on it, my supervisor was down there and she took some photos, and she even made some paintings about the midden. And she went along one day and there was that bulldozer there rippin' it all up, and it was an Aboriginal guy driving it! And he said, “Oh, this is the old culture.”

Lorraine: That's not good.

Vincent: And I know it's [an example of just] that one person, but I wanted to get an idea of what …

Lorraine: “This is the old culture.” What does he mean by that? (laughs)

(Peter talks about the traditional practice of burying people amongst sand dunes and middens, and how this is illustrated at Bellambi Point.)

Lorraine: Same over the back here (referring to the sand dunes behind Coomaditchie lagoon). There are all burial sites right along this here [area of coastline] … along the back of us.

Vincent: I think my supervisor found out that all the sand from the midden they were diggin' up was being sent to South America to be put into some huge concrete canal. Even though there are groups, such as yourselves, who are really concerned about these issues, I just wanted to get an idea of whether the wider Aboriginal community first of all know about these sites and [secondly] whether they care about them.

Lorraine: They should. It's just like us don' our art. We're not Central Desert people, we're east coast Aboriginal people. We were practically wiped out. But we will maintain our art as much as we can to keep our culture. And, you know, someone comes up and tells me, “But that's not traditional art,” and I say, “Well, what's traditional art?” I say, “I'm an east coast Aboriginal person. I was brought up around the ocean and in the fresh water streams here. This is my colour scheme, this is me. It's the art of a local Aboriginal person. So don't tell me I can't use these colours. ‘Cause I ran in the bushland all around my grandmother's property, and it had every colour under the sun. We used to suck on the bush food plants, eat the berries, and you name it. So don't tell me I can't do it. ’Cause that's what I identify with, that's me.”

(Peter talks about the pre-contact and then twentieth century history of the Coomaditchie / Hill 60 area, including how the landscape has changed through industrial 'development'.)

Vincent: I remember you saying that you'd eventually like to see this area – the Coomaditchie lagoon and the sand dunes – made an official reserve of sorts.

Lorraine: Yeah. Lands Council got it back now. It's all Land Council's over here. So we all have to sit down and decide what we want over the back. Whether we want sporting fields, a big gathering place … So we'll be consulting with the Lands Council on that. But we don't want houses over there. Because, like I said, we go over there pippi-ing. It's still our grounds for pippi-ing. We get our feeds there still today. So to have all houses over there will destroy that area. All the pippis and all the shellfish has gone off the rocks. My husband reckons they shouldn't be havin' skin divers there no more because they're just skinnin' everything from the ocean. They shouldn't allow any skin divers. He's been fishing there since he was five years old … You can get the biggest feed [around there]. Everything. Conks. Everything. But [most people] don't understand … There's no use takin' the little ones … We've had to tell them to put the bucket loads of pippis back, 'cause what are you gonna get out of a pipp that big? You've gotta leave 'em there to maintain [the stock]. Don't strip the oceans. Just take what you need, and don't take the
Peter: He even educates ‘em about the waves, ‘cause so many of ‘em have been washed in over here. They don’t know how to read the ocean. And when you’ve been going there for years … he can see places where the waves are smashing but they won’t touch him, because he knows it all. And he tries to tell the people. He told ‘em not to stand there or they’ll get knocked in, and they got knocked in on the roughest days. And he managed to save a couple of people … they tried to swim back through the undertow, and he told ‘em, “No, go back out and swim that way,” you know. And he told the other fella to go get [help from] the other fella up the top in the lookout. But I mean, all that there [knowledge] is important. If people work together, things will last. But if you get people that just want to destroy everything, then we’re gonna have nothin’. And this country’s already goin’ down the shit chute as far as I’m concerned.

Lorraine: I reckon that’s disgusting.

Vincent: Just the fact that they’re even talking about allowing uranium mining in New South Wales …

Lorraine: I mean, where is the line going to be?

Vincent: Talking about the gathering of seafood … It seems to me that when it comes to traditional hunting and gathering, practices associated with the coastal waters seem to have survived more than those of the land. Is that the case?

Lorraine: Yeah, I think so. But if they keep allowing people to [over harvest], and if they don’t watch the coastline, we’re not gonna have anything left. It’s just gonna get totally stripped. It’s lasted this long, but we’re starting to lose it all. Take the Lake [Illawarra] … Why aren’t they using that to breed fish and [other seafoods]? Why ain’t they got big breedin’ areas on this lake? Why ain’t they got breedin’ areas built on the ocean’s coast? Why? Why not put your money in that to preserve [the natural stocks], and get our food sources up and running again? Why are we buying all overseas foods? Our coastal food is really important. But it’s not gonna be there if they don’t start growing it again. You can’t say they can’t grow it. They can grow [wheat] on a bit of open earth. Just like you grow the plants to grow the bread they can breed the fish to feed the people too. They can breed anything these days. So why aren’t they doin’ it?

Vincent: Because they’re exploitin’ the natural stocks.

Lorraine: Yep. And it’s gonna run out.

Vincent: When we first spoke you told me about how the bush regeneration you’ve done around the lagoon started – that you and Narelle had decided to do a bushcare program, and it sort of went from there. But what about the actual formation of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation? Did that occur around the same time?

Lorraine: That’s why we became a registered body. Because to get funding you have to be a registered body. Our teacher, Tina, who we were doin’ bushcare with … We started clearing the weeds, and we said to Tina, “Can’t we build a track or something through here?” And then she goes, “Well, why don’t we go chase some funding? We can create some jobs for ourselves.” And we had a big discussion of it – Narelle, Tina, and me – and we said, “Yeah, let’s go chase it, ay.” So we started chasing the money. And then we had to chase the people to match it with ‘in kind’ [support], so we could match the amount of money we were getting. And that’s how we became the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation, because we had to become a registered body to get funding, to create jobs for ourselves.

Vincent: And along with the idea of creating this [area] as a reserve of some sort, you’d like to see in the future the young folk getting jobs as rangers?

Lorraine: Yes, that’s what we’re still lookin’ at. They can get it everywhere else, right? I was just lookin’ at another [promotion] that just come on our email, and it’s for the young fellas to get trained up and become rangers. Now, Wreck Bay’s got all of that down there, and they take care of all their own country. That’s all our mob down there too. But why can’t it be done here? We’ve got...
some of the biggest midden lines here. Why can't we get our boys trained up – even if it's just two rangers – to take care of country, take care of these areas? Keepin' the tracks open for people to view it and go through it? Why should something be covered up after all the money that's gone into it, and after all our labour we've put into it? We've been doing it since 1992. We became a registered body in ninety-three. And we've been busting arese over here to keep [this area] clean. But now that we're getting older, and they took away our CDPs, it's hard for us to keep our track clear, 'cause we haven't got the power to do that. And our boys are sick of workin' for nothin'. They've done that much trainin' … We put a couple of 'em through the National Parks' training program to get those skills … So why don't they let us do it here? We've got MM [Beach] where all the biggest middens are, Hill 60 where all the biggest middens are, Coomaditchie Lagoon and all this bush area here. Why not give us a couple of rangers that can take care of this area and keep it up to date for people who wanna come and tour the place? You know, we're in a high industrial area, and it's one of the most important lagoons because, like we said, it's a perched lagoon. The only other one like it is down at Jervis Bay, at Cave Beach. And they're very important lagoons because all the other lagoons got wiped out. So why not let us have rangers for this area?

Vincent: What have people's reactions been [to that idea]? Why hasn't that happened yet?

Lorraine: I don't know. We've been askin' for it for so long it ain't funny. And the boys have done that much trainin’ … like I said, we had boys that had gone through five years of training at the [Wollongong] Botanic Garden, we've got men and women that have done bush regeneration for years, and we all know this here area. And, you know, it's not very nice when the local community keeps blamin' the Aboriginal people for all the fires …

Vincent: Ah, yes, you get arsonist attacks …

Lorraine: … 'cause we're the ones that planted it over and over again.

Vincent: That's like out at Sandon Point where people are cutting down trees. It's someone sabotaging it, isn't it?

Lorraine: Yeah. We put all them trees in because it was a dirty big dump there. First the Council and then the Steelworks [used it as a dumping ground]. And it was [just] left [there]. You'd be lucky to find a tree growing over there [before we started doing bush regeneration]. Maybe a wattle, but that's about it. Them open-cut mines out the back here, people wouldn't believe how deep they were. We used to [be able to] drive down in 'em.

Vincent: This leads me to the question of your relationship with [Wollongong City] Council. 'Cause it seems to me, on one level, in regards to conservation, you have a bad relationship with Council. But then when it comes to art, you've got so much public art around the place … is it a case of, "We want your art around to make it seems like we're supportive of Aboriginal culture, but when it comes to the crunch, we think you're asking for too much"?

Lorraine: No. The Wollongong [City] Council has backed us in a lot of ways. They've always donated the plants for us to plant over the back. They've donated mulch when we've needed it. They've donated [the services of] people like Mike ----(?) who's come in and helped us clean the place up over there. And when we've had people dumping stolen cars over there [they've helped us out] …

Vincent: So, they have helped then.

Lorraine: We've worked in partnership, yeah. But I reckon BHP should be culpable as well. Because you wouldn't believe some of the stuff that [got dumped] there from BHP. We do, because we were the recyclers then. And we were called all the names under the sun, believe me. We seen what went into that ground – drums with skulls and bones on it – you name it. We worked there. We know what went into that ground because we earned the money from recycling [it]. We scrapped it, in other words. So we know what went in there. But I reckon BHP should put just as much money back in over here as … They've backed Cringilla Park. What's the difference of putting some money in here where they destroyed a whole lagoon? See this lagoon here? There was another big lagoon at [over] the back [in the sand dunes] … a massive big lagoon that was totally destroyed.

Vincent: They filled it in?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: Why?

Lorraine: Don't ask. I wouldn't have a clue.

(Peter talks about the failings of the Government's Indigenous employment scheme, and the need for specialised jobs at Coomaditchie.)
Shaun done five years in that [Wollongong Botanic] Garden, right? And I'm really pissed off with Council about this … He done five years of study to become an employee in that Garden. He had to go to TAFE. When you study plants it's another language – you gotta know all the botanical names. He did all that. Soon as his trainee-ship or cadet-ship was finished he's out the door. And my other son, he was workin' in the Youth Centre … He was employed for six years, right? He ended up havin' to do four years 'cause he got a couple of distinctions in Uni. Soon as those four years are up he was out the door. Now they've got people doin' Aboriginal walks in the Botanic Garden that ain't Aboriginal. Does that make sense? And that's the chance that our people got. So, you know, we're still tackling things like that. And there was a bad incident when one of our young girls went in there. One of the Council employees in there told 'em, “I don't like Aboriginals. I don't like Asians. And you're only here because it's an Aboriginal-identified position. So don't think you can just come in here and take over …”'  

And that young girl, you know, she didn't know how to react to that. 

I wouldn't know how to react to that. 

I wouldn't have wanted it to be me – I'd show you how I'd react! (laughs) Because when you've had to tolerate it all your life, it's past sickening. But we're still sufferin' it now. The other day we had a young girl down town who was told by a police officer, “What you doin' living up here with these dirty so and so's …?” I wouldn't like to use his actual words on your tape. You know, “They're good for nothings, they're this and that.” You know, we've had seven kids go through to Year 12 … We've had one that's become a barrister, one that's nearly a nurse – she's just finished her training – we've had one with five years at the Botanic Garden, a couple of others that have gone through university … There was another young one there – she ended up dying, but she went right through to Year 12 and succeeded. And that's only in this little tiny community. We've busted our arse trying to upgrade that [natural lagoon area] and break down barriers [in the community], but what good is it gonna do when you got police officers saying stuff like that to young kids? How hard to do we have to try to break down the barriers [between] people in this country? Will I come in on the boat and break it down? Huh? Will I come in on a boat? Because my people are still the lowest people on the ladder in this country. And like that woman said to Julia Gillard when she seen her out there … she said, “Well, this is my country – where's my house?” You get all the racist people complaining about the money that Aboriginal people get. Little do they know that tourism and the arts create that much funding for this country. We're the traditional owners of this country and yet we're still the lowest people on the ladder. We've got people in shops that have said they'd never employ an Aboriginal person because “all they are are prostitutes and drunks!”. And that's in this shopping centre down here (referring to the large shopping complex in Warrawong, just down the road). They said it to Sue's face. She didn't know what to react to that. We tried to tell her … 

Sue Leppan [the non-Aboriginal secretary for Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation]? 

Yeah. You ask Sue. The racism is still alive and well. We have to keep fightin' every day of our lives just to be recognised. There's certain people that ---- ----(?) right? But there's a lot of people that don't give a damn about it either. 

I don't know what to say to stuff like that, Lorraine. I know it happens, but … 

Yeah, well, we get it bluntly to our faces. 

I don't understand … 

I'd like to get that cop and bring him up here … I want to call a big meeting with the inspectors, 'cause he's got no damn right saying that to our kids. Same as that security guard down in that shopping centre who called our little eight and nine year-olds “little black sluts”. That happened a couple of weeks ago. That's what they're callin’ em. That's why I'm going through the police ----(?), and that's why we gotta have our little community centres and our little Aboriginal Legal Aids and our Aboriginal community workers and health workers, because we don't know where we fit into society sometimes. It gets really hard. I've had people go to Wollongong Hospital … this nurse didn't want to touch him because he was an Aboriginal! Why the hell is she becomin' a nurse? They're the things we got to face. And that's today! That's not back when they first landed, that's today. 

Sounds like something from the 1940s. 

It does. But it's still very much alive, believe me. We're still livin' it. And our kids are starting to live it even worse than what we did 'cause there's coppers left, right and centre. We got police officers on their backs [being racist] to 'em and degrading them. 

I'd say “report it”, but if it's the cops that are doing it as well … probably nothing would happen. 

Yeah. It's such a shame that they don't spend the time to treat people [equally]. There's good and bad in our culture – just like any other culture. There's alcoholics in our culture just like any other culture. There's bad neighbourhoods in our culture like in their cultures. There's drug addicts in our culture as much as there is in theirs … you know what I mean? And they go, “Lorraine, you're racist.” I said, “Yeah, I know I am.” If they're racist against me, then I'm racist against them! (laughs) That's
why we have our centre, 'cause it's good for people to come in and realise, “Ah yeah, those Aboriginal people, they are human.” (laughs)

Vincent: Oh look, I know on some level I must be prejudiced against certain people … I'm sure I have my hang-ups …

Lorraine: Oh, I'm not perfect myself.

Vincent: … but I don't understand how people can be like that. I don't understand it.

Lorraine: Oh, it's incredible. And now we're fightin' for our kids again. That's what knocks 'em down, and they say, “Well, why should I work for [non-Aboriginal people]? They call me names.” Down in Nowra at that big [factory] … it [used to be] Horlicks, but I don't know what they call it now … they put up a sign about an Aboriginal. It was a joke. And an Aboriginal guy works in that centre. They put up this thing about how, you know, “an Aboriginal has twenty dogs” and blah blah blah …

Vincent: Oh, in the staff room?

Lorraine: Yeah. Stuck it up for everyone to read and laugh at. But not one of 'em admitted to [doing] it. They damn well put it up but they weren't brave enough to admit they put it up. How do you go about [dealing with situations] like that?

Vincent: One of the first few times I came here there was a group of people – I think they were volunteers or work-for-the-dole – doing the bush regen …

Lorraine: Well, that's one way of keeping our bush regeneration project going. The green corps come in sometimes and bring their young trainees in to help us. And then you've got the guys who are doing their community service hours, you know, working' off their fines. They come in and do that. So they come out the back and they do a little bit. And then when we have our TAFE classes we'll go over there as well. Like, if we're doing bush regeneration with sites officers, we go over there and do more plantin'. But that's the only time we can do it. Or with the Port Group … the bush regeneration group, they work up the other end, and they work that end for us. But that's the only way we can do it.

Vincent: When I spoke to you last year they had just done some tests on the health of the lagoon and you were waiting for the results …

Lorraine: (surprised) It's good! Yeah. And I tell you what, we had shrimps and everything in there. I mean, you should have seen it – we scooped a big net through and we had little shrimps and all the insects that belong in good clean water.

Vincent: So, it's doing okay then.

Lorraine: It's doin' okay.

Vincent: 'Cause I was shocked when you said it has three main drains coming in from the road. I thought, “God, it must be filthy!”

Lorraine: Hopefully people have taken notice, 'cause it's cleaner than what it used to be.

Vincent: And what about the carp? Are they still in there?

Lorraine: Oh, they're monsters. They'd be bigger than your boat. Council's helpin' us with that. They're [thinking of doing] a shock system, where it shocks them and they come to the top. It doesn't hurt the other [animals] … It's some special treatment. I don't know what it is, but they're gonna try it over here. 'Cause some of 'em are that big! Believe me. When they pulled them out … Oh, goodness me. They're monsters. We want them out of there otherwise we're gonna lose everything. We're gonna lose the turtles. See, it affects their eyes. The carp are mud dwellers. They like stirring up the mud and takin' everything from the bottom. That's why they destroyed all those big red gums on the Murray River, 'cause they eat everything around the roots.

Vincent: And you said you lost the reeds that way as well.

Lorraine: Yeah, all our reed system. We were thinkin', ‘Where are all our reeds goin’?’ That's why – 'cause someone threw their gold fish in there! Lucky the young fella said his uncle [who was responsible for introducing carp into the lagoon] died. I said, “Yeah, he was lucky, 'cause I would have killed him myself!” So, education, too. People need educating.

Vincent: You have that Southside Festival every year, don't you? That's to celebrate and raise awareness about the lagoon, isn't it?

Lorraine: We've got two Southside Festivals. One is like the health one. We have it down beside the Lake [Illawarra]. This year it's gonna be like a real big picnic day – a healthy family day. And things are free for people who can't afford it. Families just can't afford things. So, there's bottles of water, and there's corn, and apples, and stuff like that goin', and the kids can [do activities] … like, last year they had a scarecrow-building [workshop]. I've never seen so many kids have so much fun. How often do kids
get to make scarecrows nowadays? Our kids had a ball, they must hav' come home with about four or five [scarecrows] (laughs). But it was good because they're things that aren't done by city kids. It was good. And they had the dancin' – they had the Zumba – the little kids were doin' Zumba, you know. It was really good. And when we had our festival we usually base it on a dreaming story, or we teach [the public] about the lagoon – the turtles and the reeds, and stuff like that. We made a big scroll out of calico for people to sign – to say they'd look after the lagoon and the area around the lagoon … Not to wash their cars in the gutters, you know – wash 'em on the lawn [instead]. Don't put things down the drain, don't drop plastics that's gonna go into the water, and stuff like that.

Vincent: So, what's the turn-out for something like that?

Lorraine: Well, last time we did it we did the dreaming story of how the swans got their black feathers, and we had over two thousand people sitting up there [on the banks of the lagoon] at night time.


Lorraine: Yeah. We had big fires flaring, and drums firing, and ---- ----(?), and all that stuff happening. And it was just a gold coin donation. If you haven't got it you haven't got it … People who got it would pay, people you hadn't, doesn't matter – you still got a corn cob and sausages for free.

Vincent: I'm glad you mentioned dreaming stories because I wanted to talk specifically about some of your public art, like, the Gurungaty Water Place. Can you tell me the story of Gurungaty?

Lorraine: Well, [the] Gurungaty [Water Place] was based on the duel between the big fish, Gurungaty, and the Rainbow Serpent … how the Rainbow Serpent was chasin' him. And as he chased the big fish they smashed the earth open thus creating the water ways of the Illawarra. Anyway, Gurungaty got away from him, and he still lies hiding from the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent didn't know where he went, so now they say the Rainbow Serpent still lies in the escarpment, waiting. So that's why we did that [work] there. We worked on it with Nick Brash, the other artist, who's non-Koori – 'cause it was a reconciliation project – and so it's also based on the way white people, I mean, you know, non-Koori people, handled water, so [we included] pitchers and jugs and things like that, whereas the Koories walked from their waterholes to waterhole. They had to know where they were. And that there town fountain is an actual water spring. People used to drink out of it. That's why that's done there. Now the Serpent's on the outside of the fountain, on the footpath, 'cause he's still lookin' for Gurungaty the fish.

Vincent: Down at the little blow hole [in Kiama] Aaron Broad and Jodie Stewart did a mural of Gurungaty as well.

Lorraine: Yeah. I haven't seen that.

Vincent: Oh, it's not an amazing piece of art, but it's a nice little mural. But Gurungaty was one of the first tiled works or mosaics you did, wasn't it?

Lorraine: Yeah. Well, the toilet block at Shellharbour Pool was the first tiled one. We worked with ---- ----(?) on that. She come in and showed us how to put tiles together like a jigsaw puzzle. So we did all that. And that's where we started mosaicing.

Vincent: And you obviously liked it, 'cause you've done a few now.

Lorraine: Yeah, yeah, it was really good, because it was another skill we picked up. Workin' with other artists gives you an extra skill and it gives you contacts too. Like, if we got jobs we'd contact them to come and be our partner in it, or if they got jobs they would come and ask us. We've had some really good partners.

Vincent: The other one I wanted to ask about was the Merrigong Environmental Sculpture …

Lorraine: Oh, yes.

Vincent: … 'cause that's a pretty impressive work.

Lorraine: That was good. 'cause we did that with Alison Page and her sister. Her sister was the main artist because she does bronze work. But that brought all us women together … I think there was nine Aboriginal women artists. It's the first time we all worked together on a project. And we took our time enjoying it. We went up to the mountain, picked up the plants, and the nuts off the trees. All the tiles around the base of [the gunyahs] are all handmade clay tiles, and the women pressed their designs onto them. So yeah, that was a really good design because they all took their time on what they wanted to do, and we all had so many tiles each. But Narelle and I got the biggest one.
Lorraine: Yeah, the real big one, you know. And then we had to decide how we were wanted to place them. The first one, it didn't feel right. And we had sort of like a presence of the wind at that time. It was really blowin', and it just come out of the blue from nowhere. You know, we were workin' on Oolaboolawoo and his six daughters. So we thought, “No, the positions not right,” so we positioned them again and we finally got them right, and it just seemed like, “Okay, he's agreed with us now. He's gone. There's no wind.” And, I mean, that was a really good project because [of the age range of the artists]. The oldest Aboriginal artist, one of our elders, was Aunty Lila [Lawrence], and she's in her sixties. And it went right down to one of our youngest which was Allie [Alison Day], that's one of our artists here [at Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation]. I think Allie was the youngest, and she would be about thirty. And she only recently started doing her art. So that was a really good project. We really loved it.

Vincent: One of the other artists I've spoken to is Deb Callaghan, and she said she just loved that project, getting to work with all the other women.

Lorraine: It was fantastic. And you know all the sticks are off that hill, off that mountain. They were all taken down to Melbourne and bronzed. And we thought, “Wow, what a powerful project.” It's a women's area. And with so many women workin' on it, it was fantastic.

Vincent: So, stories like that, 'The West Wind' and 'Gurungaty', are those stories you've known since you were a child?

Lorraine: No, we've only known them recently, like, since the nineties. Don't forget I'm from down Nowra. But all our people are [related to] the people up here on Hill 60 ... They're still all our mob. But I wanted people to know the local dreaming stories, 'cause it wasn't used much in anybody's art. Narelle and I, when we hit the scene, we were sort of the first major Aboriginal artists [in the area], and I said to Narelle, "Let's find all the dreaming stories. We'll do them in our art so people get to understand them." And then Nick found the one on Gurungaty for us, and he said, “Lorraine, there's a beautiful one of the waterways. How 'bout we use that?” So me and him we went and chased it up, had a look at it, and we were happy with that, so we [created] the design to suit the story, and it became a significant [memorial] for that main waterhole. We wanted people to understand that it's based on how the waterways were created and how the spring came to be, you know, the underground spring. And there's more [stories] we want to chase up as well. There's more dreaming stories that people haven't heard [in generations].

Vincent: So where would you go to find this stuff? Archives?

Lorraine: In the archives, yeah. And through Michael Organ's books, 'cause he worked with Dootch and Carol Speechley. Carol's an archaeologist. You know Carol?

Vincent: I've heard the name.

Lorraine: Yeah. She was good to work with as well.

Vincent: I think the largest work you've done is the Dapto Ribbonwood Centre.

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: It's just like a kaleidoscope of colour …

Lorraine: Yeah. Well, when we first got that [commission], they wanted us to do repetitive designs. And Narelle said, “Lorraine. I'm not going to sit here on this wall doing repetitive designs,” and I said, “I ain't either.” I said, “If we wanna do anything we want to create the theme of Dapto, and why it's on the Ribbonwood Centre.” So that's why we did it. Dapto's full of streams. It's full of streams all the way back. So we wanted to get the streams, the bird life, the bush, the mountain, the lizards … We included all that stuff. And we included things like a kid reading a book, and one on a skateboard, because [there's a lot of youth in the] area. And we wanted to create the theme of Wollongong. It's a steel city. And our flame tree is the emblem for this town. We're coastal, which is the dolphins. And we never knew it was [going to be called] the Ribbon[wood] Centre, but I said to Narelle, “And then we'll connect [all these elements] with a big ribbon as a connection of life.” Then Sue [Leppan] goes, “You know what? This centre is called the Ribbonwood Centre.” See, we never knew that.

Vincent: So it was meant to be.

Lorraine: Yeah, it was meant to be, 'cause we connected it all with the main stream going through. Then we put … 'cause don't forget there was tribes [living by] the streams, like the Hooker Creek tribe and all that. And we thought, “Oh yeah, let's do the ribbon of life and connect it.” We've got the big [meeting place symbol] as the centre – you know, the one with the black [and white] pieces comin' in – that means it's the centre where people will come and use it from all directions for different things … which they are. That's what we set out to do. We weren't gonna do repetitive designs. We didn't do what Council wanted us to do.

Vincent: Oh, they really wanted repetitive designs.
Lorraine: Yeah. We said, “No, we're not doing it.”

Vincent: You [presented] them [with] a final design of what you were going to do, though, didn't you?

Lorraine: Aww … not really.

Vincent: The little column outside the Wollongong Courthouse … In a way it's quite a small piece, but I think it's quite significant.

Lorraine: Yeah, that was given to us to do by Bill Wheeler. He was a judge. But he'd also worked with people like ---- ----(?). And all them, all those years fighting for Aboriginal rights. And he said there was no recognition of Aboriginal people [at the Wollongong Courthouse]. And you know he nearly lost his job fighting over Aboriginal people up in Sydney when he was still a barrister. That man was a very special man. Bill was a really beautiful person to talk to. He's dead now. He ended up gettin' a disease and dyin'. But he run the courthouse, and he was a beautiful person. And he wandered on in here, and he said, "Lorraine, I want the blues and the different colours [of the ocean]." And I said, “Oh okay then, Bill, whatever you say.” He said, “Yeah, maybe something nice and bright with hand [stencils], to show people that it's a welcoming place.” You know, even though people are going there to court, it's just nice to have something that's different to the grey courthouse. And that's why he also started the Aboriginal art exhibition for NAIDOC week. He put the Aboriginal flag in there as well with the Australian flag.

Vincent: Oh yeah, 'cause those exhibitions were in the courthouse, weren't they?

Lorraine: Yeah, Bill started all that.

Vincent: Well, even though it's a beautiful work, it's also significant because Aboriginal people are over represented in the prison system.

Lorraine: They are. That's why Bill wanted to have it. He said, “It's not a nice place to be. I want you to do something that's nice and bright. Make it a bit more friendly for Aboriginal people.” And while we worked there we had everybody talkin' to us. And a lot of the ones that were going to court we knew. (laughs)

Vincent: Those posters (pointing to posters on the wall) … they were for a health campaign …?

Lorraine: Shellharbour Council gave us six [themes] … like (reading the titles) 'Dispossession', 'Walkin' Country', 'Changes to the landscape' … and there were two others ones that go there too. And they asked us if we could create some art work to go with those [themes]. And that's what we done.

Vincent: Where are the actual paintings?

Lorraine: Shellharbour Council's got 'em.

Vincent: The 'Changes to the landscape' … that's a [depiction of a] midden, yeah?

Lorraine: Yeah, that's a midden. A lot of burials were done around the coastlines.

Vincent: It's a beautiful picture. It's just fantastic.

Lorraine: A lot of mothers and babies were killed along the coast as well, you know, slaughtered. So we've used that image of in under the middens. And this one here, the 'Dispossession' … you could say that [non-Aboriginal] people own the land where our cave arts are. They own it, but it belonged to our ancestors. It wasn't given – a piece of paper – to take it over. And with dispossession, they couldn't get back to their traditional lands. Cities were built on 'em. They were taken from them.

Vincent: There was also a safe sex poster, wasn't there? I've seen it around the back here. Or is that an older one?

Lorraine: Oh, that's in the toilet, yeah. We did that as part of a HIV workshop, because Port Kembla was a high drug [use] area. And a lot of people were using the toilets. Well, we learnt how to handle (fix?) and how to pick 'em up and [dispose of them properly]. And we fought to get a [safe disposal] box on there so they could put their (fix?) into the boxes. And the box was on there 'til the drug scene was gone. 'Cause we were pickin' 'em up in the gardens and everywhere. People were using outside our windows and they left the needles on the steps and on the slippery dips in the park here. So we did that as a big workshop. And we did the artwork with all the different women. They all did a piece of art work each. And we did a same sex relationship [one] as well. So, that was a part of all that art work. And it was like … what was the other one we done … a handling(?) on people with AIDS workshop. We did a big three to four day workshop down Batemans Bay area, and it was learning how to handle people with AIDS, and how to talk to 'em – things like that. So they're the big workshops we also attended to deal with the people we were workin' with. We did all that sort of trainin'.
Vincent: And it strikes me that that is what makes your and Narelle’s art different. ‘Cause it’s not just this final product that's put out there. It's very much about collaboration and the process of getting it to that [final] stage.


Vincent: Even in a lot of the public work. ‘Cause even some of the most dramatic public art – irrespective of where it is – people can still sometimes just walk past it. Whereas if people have collaborated on something, and maybe they feel part of it, it gets the message across that way. Even if it’s just for that small group of people that worked on it.

Lorraine: Yeah. Well, it’s like the ‘Safe Streets’ project we worked on out there at Bellambi, on Rothery [Road]. It was a really rough area. A lot of the other things were destroyed like the big fish Didier [Balez] made. He's a guy from Wollongong Uni …

Vincent: Yeah, I know Didier.

Lorraine: He did big fish and that, and they were taken. (laughs) And the signs that one of the local women made – ‘cause she could draw and paint, she done all the birds from around the lagoon – they sprayed all over them. But the totem poles we worked on with the kids, where they chucked the clay out and they painted it, and we glued ‘em all to the poles … We had one pole that was all tiled, but it also had the kids’ crabs and everything they made. That's why when the kids came back they recognised all their stuff. We let them make shells and crabs and stuff like that, and we put them all on the poles. One whole pole was tiled for ‘em. And the grout Kim Williams got us was special grout that she found out about down in Melbourne. It was like sand, ---- gold there (?), and when you grouted it, you know, it was fantastic because it just fitted all the stuff that was on there. But I think the kids looked after that because kids were involved in that.

Vincent: Hmm. It's like the one out at Bellambi Surf Club that Kev Butler did …

Lorraine: (laughs) Yeah.

Vincent: When it did eventually get graffitied most of the graffiti was around the art panels. There wasn't very much [graffiti] on the actual boards. The one that got the most vandalised was the one that Kev did, not the ones done by the kids. (laughs) So, it did work in a way.

Lorraine: (laughs) Yeah.

Vincent: Last time we spoke you mentioned growing up on your grandmother's property, and how that was a place where some of those traditions were still passed on.

Lorraine: Oh, yeah. Like, we had to burn off every summer because our house was right down the back of the bush. All the front part was just thick bush. And we used to be there when my grandmother burned it off. We'd make the brooms out of the old green tea tree, and you tied the branches together to put the fires out so that it doesn't get out of hand, you know … you kept an eye on it. And Nan used to throw some big witjuti grubs on the coals and eat 'em while she was burnin'. But also, you know, we could run all over our property and get a hell of a lot of tucker that people didn’t know about. It was very very nice. It was really good-tasting food, the bush foods. We had wild cherries, geebungs, and we had the honey … you know the ---- (?) plants, with the black things pokin' out of 'em? You'd suck on 'em and get all the honey out of 'em. We used do that while we were walkin’ to school through the bush track. And afternoons we used to come home there, across the rocks to the big basin there, and our aunties would be on the rocks and in the water swimmin’, and our grandmother. You know, they’d all be there waitin’ for us to come home from school, and we’d all have a shower under the waterfalls and then go home through the bush track. It was a long way to walk. I wouldn't do it these days on my own, walkin’ on a bush track that far. But my mother used to walk us to school every mornin’, ‘cause Dad was a worker, you know. And mum used to walk us to school every mornin’ and then come pick us up in the afternoon – the family would be with them in the afternoon. And we'd all go home after we’d had a swim.

Vincent: I find it interesting that you mention the use of fire because one of the things I've been trying to get a sense of is to what extent fire was used in this area traditionally. I've had people telling me that they probably did use it but it certainly wasn't to the extent [that it is used] in other areas …

Lorraine: Yeah. Not to the extent [that it is used] in other areas …

Vincent: … because it's quite a wet environment here.

Lorraine: That's right, yeah. They had bigger fires that they purposely lit to burn … We used to burn the property for our safety as well, because we lived in such a thick area of bush … You wouldn't know if anyone was down there it was that thick.
Vincent: Well, going to see all these sites in the National Park … people wearing next to nothing could not walk through it the way it is now, 'cause it's been two hundred years of non-burning …

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: It's really thick. The only way they could have kept these dreaming tracks open to access these sites was to use fire …

Lorraine: Yep, they used fire to keep them open.

Vincent: … especially up that way. Down this way we get more rainforest …

Lorraine: Well, in all the documentaries they say the constant burnin' created the trees, certain eucalyptus trees. It created them 'cause of their constant burning. You know, the Aboriginal people created a new plant because of that. They're good to watch [those documentaries].

Vincent: Well, I know a lot of the plants here need fire to germinate …

Lorraine: Yeah, they do.

Vincent: But it just strikes me that there were so many reasons for [using] fire … fuel reduction, so that you didn't get those huge [uncontrollable] fires …

Lorraine: Yeah, that's right.

Vincent: … To keep tracks clear …

Lorraine: Yeah.

Vincent: … It often forced game out [of hiding] …

Lorraine: It did, yep.

Vincent: … Just a whole range of reasons they used it. But you're the only person [that I've spoken with in the course of my research] that has told me that they remember seeing burnin'.

Lorraine: Well, yeah … we used to do the burnin' with our grandmother, our mother, and our aunts. Yeah … I've had a bit of a life. It's been good. Been good.
**A1.I21: Interview with Clive 'Bud' Freeman (18.08.12)**

Recorded interview conducted and transcribed by Vincent Bicego (UOW)

No amendments to this transcript were offered by the interviewee.

I have been friends with Bud for a number of years now. A Jerrawangala-Katungul man from Wreck Bay, Bud is an active ambassador for his people and culture. He has worked for numerous organisations including Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture Studio and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and has recently started his own cultural advisory company, Galamban.

I was keen to formally talk with Bud about his community’s co-management of the Booderee National Park – the only one of its kind outside the Northern Territory. Also, at the time of this interview, Bud had only recently arrived back home from La Paz, Bolivia, where he had presented a paper on Sydney rock art at the 2012 IFRAO (International Federation of Rock Art Organisations) Congress. I was keen to hear more about it.

This interview was conducted at the home of Julie Freeman, Wreck Bay Village.

**Vincent:** Tell me a bit about your connection to this land.

**Bud:** I'm a Jerrawangala-Katungul from Yuin nation. My grandmother was born in La Perouse. She's a Jerrawangala from Kurnell -- (?), on my mum's side, Gorawarl. And on my father's side, he's a Local(?) from Snowy Mountains and very closely connected with Wallaga Lake as well. So, all of the south coast and high country is a part of my traditional lands – Dharawal Aboriginal nation and Yuin Aboriginal nation as well as Wiradjuri. My connection into all of those places has been maintained through my mother and father reconnecting us as kids back on country. I'm one of four children in my family. The eldest resides here on the [Wreck Bay] community with me, and the other two reside in Yuin as well.

**Vincent:** Ever since I've known you I've had the impression you move around a lot, but you're based here?

**Bud:** Yeah, I'm based here.

**Vincent:** So, even though you've obviously travelled and seen quite a lot of your traditional countries, this is largely where you grew up?

**Bud:** This is the place I grew up all my life. I've lived here all my life. Although I moved away, my moves were opportunistic. I moved away to go to university, so I moved into Wollongong, where I studied science. And I moved to Canberra to work with the Federal Department of Environment. I moved back to Wollongong and worked with National Parks there, and down in Gerringong with helping set up Indigenous Businesses through Boolarng Nangamai, the Aboriginal Art and Culture studio.

**Vincent:** You do seem to have worked for so many different organisations … what are you currently doing now for employment?

**Bud:** Well, although I've worked in a lot of different organisations in both Federal Government and State Government, I've also worked in not-for-profit organisations, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I've worked in Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art and Culture studio … I'm currently working here at the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council … But, yeah, I'm really working at trying to assist Indigenous peoples' reclaim their heritage and make that into viable businesses. So, you know, if they paint, I'll assist them in making a business in the arts industry. Also, assisting people who tell stories or may have heritage knowledge to share that in a way that's financially beneficial for them so that their skills can become their work …

**Vincent:** And is that through the company you recently set up?

**Bud:** Galamban. Well, Galamban's been set up to showcase and promote our connections to country here … So, yeah, in a way it is. But one of the things we do with Galamban is that we try and put together [things] like communal skill-sharing activities. We also look at settin' up art workshops so that people with skills can share that with younger kids so that there's a mentoring relationship between skilled Indigenous people and younger generations who may not have those skills yet. And just to facilitate and foster that transfer of knowledge from generation to generation, I think [that]'s what our main focus in Galamban is. And also [to ensure] that that generation of new, upcoming Australians is not only Indigenous people but non-Indigenous people as well. So, with Galamban we also promote the sharing of that knowledge to non-Indigenous people where we see appropriate. It's all about appropriation, in that sense … but, yeah, being able to provide a better Indigenous understanding of the landscape for non-Indigenous people as well.

**Vincent:** What's special about the land we're on right now, [as well as] Booderee National Park? Are we technically in Booderee? I'm geographically challenged … (laughs)

**Bud:** The lands of Wreck Bay – four hundred and three hectares – isn't inside Booderee National Park, it's surrounded by Booderee National Park. But all of Booderee National Park and the Jervis Bay Territorial Land Grant Act of 1986. The first grant of land that the Wreck Bay
Community Council was successful in gaining was the community's four hundred and three hectares. That was in 1986. And we fought for the rights to manage and occupy the Booderee or the then Jervis Bay National Park. We were successful in that claim in 1995, and joint management was the key to its success. Joint management is an arrangement where the Director of National Parks is the tenant, and the Wreck Bay Community Council is the landlords. So, it's a lease-back agreement for ninety-nine years, and in such time there's to be a rental regime. So, they rent the Booderee National Park from the community for a specified sum, and the community also get twenty-five percent out of any revenue made from Aboriginal land.

Vincent: And to what extent is the community in control of what happens with the Park? Once you lease it, do you have any say about what goes on?

Bud: We're a legal entity, the Wreck Bay Community Council, and we elect a board of directors, and the majority of the Booderee National Park Board of Directors are Wreck Bay Community representatives. So, if decisions needs to be made in regard to culturally looking after or caring for country, we have the majority on the board to have that say. In saying that though, there is one fundamental bit of the legislation, and bit of the lease, that is a little bit condescending, in a way – but it's important for caring for country and it's important for the most up-to-date management practices – and that's that the Director [of National Parks] has the right to over rule decisions made by the community or the decisions made by the board if the decision is in conflict with current Government policy or Government practices.

Vincent: Has he used that right to veto?

Bud: Ah, look, that veto right I don't think has been used … [or] I think it's been used [only] a couple of times … But look, the majority of the time, and in all circumstances where it's culturally appropriate, the community takes precedent. We do have a close relationship with the Director of National Parks, and we work as a community to foster that relationship.

Vincent: And is this a relatively unique situation in the south-east?

Bud: Well, this is the only National Park of its kind outside of the N.T.

Vincent: That's jointly managed.

Bud: That's jointly managed. The model of joint management has been adopted by different states – Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, as well as Western Australia – but the majority of Indigenous participation in land management and caring for country these days is Indigenous Protected Areas. New South Wales have followed suit with the joint management arrangement, however not in the same capacity as us. In our circumstance we are the landlords and the land title holders. We have given the Crown the right to occupy the land and manage it in accordance with the IUCN Category 2 National Park status. So, the difference with this particular 'friend' agreement and joint management arrangements [throughout the rest of] New South Wales is that New South Wales gets the right to joint management but only in the way that they can participate in the management of the Park. These days they call it co-management. [But] in many of the cases in New South Wales [the Indigenous peoples] are actually not the landlord – the Crown still maintains the rights and ownership of the land – and the agreements to manage the Parks are the only agreements in place. So, that's what joint management means to the majority of Parks under joint management.

Vincent: In the management of their own land, what positive effects do you feel that that recognition has had on this community, at least in your lifetime? Is there a sense of self-determination that is perhaps lacking in other places?

Bud: The joint management arrangement, for us, is about being able to reclaim our land, reclaim our heritage. And the reason that the community supports joint management, in that sense, is because we could not take the land of Boodere National Park back and look after it ourselves. We just don't have the financial resources or backing [to do that]. In that particular time the best way forward was to lease it back to the Crown for a specified amount of money and for them to maintain the ongoing day to day management. The National Park costs in excess of five million a year to run. The conservation management in the Park is very expensive, the environmental caring for country is very expensive, and unfortunately the community just hasn't got the capacity to financially look after it. But in saying that, the visions and aspirations of the community is sole management. So, we actually put mechanisms in place under the joint management scheme to reclaim components as we get skill development better under wraps. For example, over the last fifteen years of joint management, or there about – it's nearly twenty years – what we've done is established a contractable arm of the Council – the Wreck Bay Community Council – and in that contractable arm we take over the Park piece by piece [as] we develop skill sets that are relevant to do so. So, the first contracts that we have taken are the entry station contracts. So, now we manage and operate the staffing and all of that for the entry station. We also have taken over the horticultural stuff – so, all of the re-vegetation and all of the grounds maintenance in the Park, and that's paid for by the Director. We do the roads maintenance, we do the cleaning contracts for all the camping areas and all the facilities in the Park. And, just very recently, we've now got the contract to do the cultural heritage management in the Park. So, over the years we're chipping away at that sole management. The Director has the right to choose the agency that he wants to manage the Park. It's financially viable, at the moment, for the Director to choose his own Department – Parks Australia – to operate the National Park there, but he's not legally obliged to do so. He could choose an environmental company if they were the best ones to do it. He could have also give that to New South Wales National Parks.
Vincent: Does the Park provide much employment for this community, or at least skilled training?

Bud: Well, under the joint management arrangement we have a unique position – it's called a Training Officer. Now, that Training Officer only functions to train community members and staff in the Park to transfer skills. We start the training for the National Park at our pre-school. It's not something that people go off and say, “I wanna work in the National Park” – we start the skill sets at our pre-school. Our community has an Indigenous pre-school, Gadjahgohlanima, and we build caring for country in at that level. We teach the kids about understanding environmental issues. We have the National Park do the programs in that place. We have elders in the community go in there and talk about the roles and responsibilities of caring for country in that way. Then, when they go to primary school, we have the Junior Rangers program, and the Junior Rangers program is an incentive to get younger children to become environmentally and culturally focussed so that traditional ecological knowledge is still a main part of their education so there's a flow on effect. We then also, in high school, have a new program – a school-based apprenticeship program – where they can come into the Park in Years 11 and 12 and they actually leave with a certificate in Indigenous Land Management. So, there's mechanisms in place right the way through their schooling and training, and this is greatly supported by the Training Officer's role in Booderee National Park. But the facilitation of the cultural content is driven by the community and because of the majority on the Board.

Vincent: Well, I know that it's very much admired outside. One of the people whose work I've been looking at, and who I've spoken to, is Lorraine Brown from Coomaditchie. And she speaks very highly of what you guys have achieved down here. She says their goal is to one day have Coomaditchie made into a Reserve of some sort, and for it to provide employment for the Aboriginal community there, you know, as Rangers or the like … 'cause they've done so much work to keep the lagoon and sand dunes healthy. Ideally, she says, she'd like to see a smaller version of Booderee up in the Port Kembla area. I'm not sure it's achievable given the built environment …

Bud: Well, it is actually very achievable, but it's not achievable under the framework of our joint management arrangement because we are very supported by a piece of legislation our community have really culturally developed – the Jervis Bay Territory Act. Although Indigenous people didn't write it, Indigenous people have influenced it greatly because, unlike other states and territories, the majority of residents in the Jervis Bay Territory are Aboriginal people. In the Jervis Bay Territory Aboriginal people aren't a minority. Really, our voice as a people, inside of a state, is really heard. So, yeah, the development of the Jervis Bay Territory's Act and some of the changes and amendments are very culturally appropriate. It's a democratic way of setting the legislation up, and it's supported by the people here. But they [the Coomaditchie Aboriginal community] have the opportunity to do that, and the way in which they could is through the Indigenous Protected Areas program. That's just as good a classification as a National Park. It's just a different IUCN category – a Protected Areas category.

Vincent: One of the things you're working on at the moment is very much involved with rock art. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Bud: Well, I've been working at trying to establish an Indigenous organisation called ARACO – the Aboriginal Rock Art Conservation Organisation – and it's come about from just a lack of community involvement and an ability to be able to transfer skills and knowledge of rock art onto traditional descendants. If we think about some of the work that artists in the south east are doing, it's very much a continuation of that art style. That just says to me that – although we've been locked out of country, and although that rock art may not be a part of cultural practice here in the south east region [any longer] – the style's still being used, just in different ways. So, I think that it's really important that we reintroduce some of the techniques: the skill of, maybe, re-engraving, or, you know, the skills of understanding how it was done, why it was done. I think that those stories and heritage needs to be reintroduced, and I don't think that they're very far back [in the mists of time]. I know my grandfather was engraving at La Perouse. There's other people's stories about their grandparents engraving, also. So, it's not as far back as what people say they are. I think they try and put rock art in the context of pre-contact. I think that discards the art work and the practice itself, because Aboriginal people have been continuing that. Some of [those engravings] are as recent as up to forty years ago, thirty years ago. And there are some Aboriginal people that are continuing to do rock art, although these days it's very frowned upon because they're doing it in existing rock art sites. They're going in and retouching the works. I personally feel it's not appropriate because the consultation for re-engraving or retouching that work needs to be one that comes from the community.

Vincent: Well, as you were saying yesterday, it's a very controversial topic. By non-Aboriginal people [those engravings] are seen as ancient artefacts which will lose their authenticity if they're touched in any way other than perhaps just being cleaned. Now, you feel that that [attitude] doesn't recognise the sense of continuity that you're trying to achieve …

Bud: Well, like I was saying, it's about lookin' at them as being sign posts. Think about a sign post that says dangerous cliff. If you remove the sign, does that take away from the fact that there's a dangerous cliff still there? [Those engravings] are indications of culturally significant areas. If they're removed, it doesn't remove the significance of that area. To some extent, some Aboriginal people are happy, well, not happy, but they're not as concerned as other people are about the rock art vanishing, because [the content of the work is still] reinforced in oral history. They [would] still have a connection with that landscape in the absence of the signposts that were [there] in the past. I don't feel like that, but some people do. There's a lot of different ways of thinking about country and the reason for that is because all different families have different ways of caring for country. Some people are fishermen, some are medicine people, some people have got oral histories, some people care for a particular species of plant and animal. It's just like today's society: there's the doctors, there's the bakers, there's the candlestick makers! (laughs) It's the same principles. Society's fundamentally built on the same principles no matter where you go.
Everybody and every family's got their place. And [Australian Aborigines] had a very rigid structure in our social make-up, even down to the marriage of particular people. If there were skill shortages then marriages traditionally would be set up so that that skill would be coming from that particular family into an area where that skill was really needed. Even our own creation stories talk about that. There's the story of Bundoola and why the Wiradjuri wanted the skills of being able to control the weather – the reason they took him in the first place. There's that history, there's that heritage that's strongly associated with that [situation].

Vincent: But the re-engraving is a practice you'd like to see restored, so long as it's done traditionally? I mean, the nightmare example that everyone talks about is the Bondi engravings. In the ‘60s, I think it was, the [Waverley City] Council decided …

Bud: To sand blast it.

Vincent: … that they needed re-engraving, and … they fucked it up, basically. Not only was it not done by Indigenous people, it wasn't done traditionally. People say those engravings are just totally wrecked now, that they don't even look like they were properly done.

Bud: Mmm. Well, see, there's a couple of ways in which engravings were done. They were pecked out or they were ground out.

Vincent: My understanding is that [locally] a pecked outline was created and then the stone was rubbed away between them to create the outline.

Bud: Yeah, the dot-to-dot principle. To my understanding that's how it was done. But you have to think about the concepts here, you have to think about the reality with this work. They were only but a stencil for ceremonies. They'd build the earth up on them and make earth mounds. They'd be the outlines of where they'd continually build the earth mound. So, when ceremonies happened, that's where they'd take place. But that's a different story …

Vincent: One of the other people I interviewed was Djon Mundine. For the last twenty years he's being trying to get this public art work up on the sandstone wall [that forms] a boundary of the [Royal] Botanic Garden across from the Opera House. He wants to do a stone carving using traditional figures. That got us onto the topic of actual engravings. And he said that the re-engraving of traditional engravings not only would [prevent] them from vanishing, but it would be a great revitalisation of culture … you know, that it would continue special associations with these places or create a new context for them.

Bud: Yeah, but what needs to happen first is at the grass roots level. Aboriginal people need to be taken out and they need to be shown what is happening with their heritage, particularly in the Category 2 areas where their one hundred percent locked out of.

Vincent: Like Woronora.

Bud: Like Woronora … where some of the largest concentrations of rock art sites are. They need to understand that what is happening in the Illawarra Escarpment with coal mining. They need to understand the damage that that can cause. They need to understand the damage in regards to subsidence. They need to understand the damage in regards to acidic rain. There's a whole range of things that people need to understand before they can even think about re-engraving. Yes, we can go out and we can make new sites, but shouldn't our priority be conserving the sites that we already have? That's what I think ARACO will focus on. That's my aim, that's ARACO's vision: to reintroduce people back into their country and to show them the urgency of what's happening, because if we don't know what's happening, it's easy for us to just disregard it.

Vincent: Well, I remember one of your attempts. It was when you were working at Darkes Forest. You organised an open day …

Bud: Yeah.

Vincent: … but the weather prevented that, and you gave a lecture about the rock art, instead, at Jumbulla. Was that one of your first attempts to reintroduce people to the art?

Bud: Um, no. I've been taking people out on country for a long time, and I've been showing them some of the stuff. But that was the first public attempt … Instead of just going out in a four wheel drive and pickin' community up, sayin', "Let's go and have a look at what's happening," that was the first real way of sharing that with everybody in the community. And I think it's not only the responsibility of Aboriginal people to protect this heritage. This is part of the national collection, this is a part of the Australian story. It's every Australian that comes here's role to ensure that the heritage of Australia is protected. It's just as important as anything else.

Vincent: Well, when were speaking yesterday you told me about a really great idea. Rather than being under the jurisdiction of the National Parks [and Wildlife Service] you want to have these sites under the jurisdiction of the National Gallery or the Gallery of New South Wales.
Bud: Well, I do think we need to change the classification of these. I understand and fully support the role of National Parks in conserving the environment around them because …

Vincent: The sites are a part of the environment.

Bud: They're a part of the environment, and we have to conserve them in situ. I understand the trees create an opportunity for protection, and I understand that the Category 2 creates an opportunity for protection, but we need to think about these sites becoming a part of Australia, and that, you know, not only Indigenous people have the right to speak about their conservation. It needs to be an Australian movement to protect the work. The Burrup Peninsula is a prime example. It's some of the most finest motifs on the planet. Some of the oldest, arguably. And they tell a story of that particular place. They fit within the human evolution. Not [just] Aboriginal, but human evolution around the world. They are a fundamental part of telling the human story, and that's why they're World Heritage Listed. They're significant to the world …

Vincent: But now they're under threat …

Bud: Now they're under threat.

Vincent: So, what's standing in the way – here [in the south east] – of Aboriginal people accessing and conserving the rock art?

Bud: There's a lot of issues preventing that. We cannot worry about the environment when we have basic human rights to worry about. A majority of Aboriginal people are living in substandard conditions. We can't think about prioritising the conservation of the environment without thinking about conserving our family and our home. So, there's a major push in communities particularly to get basic human rights, the rights to determine our own futures …

Vincent: I think that's important. I think that's probably why …

Bud: Survival is important …

Vincent: … so many Aboriginal people perhaps aren't as concerned as I thought they might be with rock art [conservation] – because they're trying to survive day to day.

Bud: Well, that's exactly right. If you think about the life expectancy about Aboriginal people … you know, a male is forty five and a female is fifty five. There's a greater disadvantage to Aboriginal people. There's national programs now to try and bridge this, you know, the Bridging the Gap programs. But we totally understand that the health of the environment is a direct reflection on the health of us as people – we haven't separated ourselves from the environment. We're just like the rest of the plants and animals in Australia that's vanishing 'cause we're part of that native ecosystem. We haven't evolved all this time in this landscape for us one day just to separate [ourselves from it]. What happens to our environment is happening to us. If they kill and continually take pieces of that out, then they're killing us as well. And that's the fight, that's the argument. When you think about the Illawarra Escarpment being coal mined in that way … They may release a program like Bridging the Gap, but they'll also increase the amount of damage to the environment. Then they say, “Well, why are you still dying at forty five?” and try to blame it on substance abuse, try to find other reasons. They're not taking any responsibility for what they're doing to country. I mean, the Government in the same breath of Bridging the Gap programs have increased mining in Australia by ten times. And they're wondering why nothing's getting up, wondering why there's been no significant change in Aboriginal people's health. So, there are things, political things, that stand in the way of Aboriginal people. And there's still the isolation from [culture]: not being able to go out and practice culture and being connected to a spiritual thing. We are very superstitious, Aboriginal people. You know, we believe that if we damage a site we're damaging ourselves. Or, if they damage a site, then we're [still] gonna be the ones that feel the repercussions of that, because it's our responsibility, it's our birthright, to speak up for country. So, when they do the wrong thing in one place, we feel that. And that [interconnectedness is what] the rock art talks about. The stories talk of it.

Vincent: Well, I'd always known about the strong [cultural] connections between people up and down the coast, but it really came home to me yesterday when I saw some of the southern-most Dharawal [rock art] sites, and your mother identified the spirit figure [depicted there] as … What's the fella called, again?

Bud: Mumuga.

Vincent: Mumuga. And then in the video you showed me of your visit to Jibbon Head [with Julie Freeman, Steven Russell, and Dean Kelly] … I mean, that was one of the very first sites I'd [visited] because a friend of mine lived out at Bundeena … But you identify Mumuga in the rock art there, as well, and I think that just shows the connection all the way down [the coast].

Bud: Mmm. Well, that's the reason why … The rock art can't be classified as what people call graffiti. It's not about people goin' and just puttin' works up on the rocks for the sake of doin' a drawing. The continuity in the art style is there in Dharawal [country], it's there in Yuin [country] as well. And there are continual things throughout that whole Aboriginal nation, you know, from Kamay all the way down to the [Wallaga] Lake's entrance and along Wadbilliga. That whole Aboriginal nation talks about the
same sort of stuff. And it's really important, you know, in Beecroft or Bundalla(?) that that story is continued and that the art work is understood from there because that's the birthplace of this nation. Bundoola made this country, he populated this country, and we are his descendants. All of us kids are descendants of him, right the way from La Per down [to] there. And the stories that he told, the stories that were part of his heritage, is us today. So, although we may not have had a connection with a particular art site, we can go there and understand it. We don't even need to be able to be there to know what that story's about, because it's still told. A prime example is when Uncle Guboo Ted Thomas talked about the story of the frog ceremony – paintin' yourself like that frog, using the clap sticks in sort of a chant to get the frogs to sing, and then the song for that ceremony would actually be the frogs singing. They'd sing up country and they'd sing in the rain. It had nothin' to do with humans. It was a relationship between a human being and a frog to make it rain, 'cause the frogs were the guardians of the rain. And that relationship, you know, that's how closely connected with the environment that Aboriginal people were.

Vincent: And you said that when you saw a [rock art] site [not long ago] you knew immediately that it was [depicting that ceremony] …

Bud: Well, yeah, I had an opportunity years and years later [to see it]. I'd only ever been told the story that in the Illawarra escarpment – we were told in Wadhilliga – that there's paintings of this ceremony and that one day we might get an opportunity to see 'em. And I did, I saw 'em [just recently]. I got an opportunity to see 'em, and straight away I knew what that story was about because they were stories that were [still being] told to us. They're stories that are part of the south coast. So, that's fascinating.

Vincent: Mmm, absolutely.

Bud: And, you know, this is what [contradicts] people [who say], “Today's Aboriginal people didn't paint the rock art, therefore they can't interpret it.” That doesn't mean anything to us. That's just like saying, “Okay, you didn't create the speed sign, so therefore you shouldn't abide by it.” That's a load of crap. It doesn't work that way. If you have the knowledge, and there's a skill to be able to look at that sign and understand what that means, then you take ownership of that, and you abide by what that sign's tellin' you, 'cause it's just the way.

Vincent: On a technical level how are you planning on taking ARACO forward? I know you're working with Jo McDonald and Jillian Huntley at the moment …

Bud: Well, it's been a really slow process. I think it's important that we create the Aboriginal organisation so that it has a name and that it has something that Aboriginal people and governments can have a point of contact for. I just feel at the moment that there isn't somewhere that you can call upon to conserve rock art or to talk about rock art or to put concepts together. There's nowhere where we can do that. I mean, National Parks New South Wales is supposed to have that as part of their charter, but it just gets amalgamated with so many other jobs that they have to do. The majority of the time I feel as though National Parks in New South Wales are concerned about recording these sites for the purpose of understanding how they're going to impact other things, rather than recording the to better understand the conservation values that they [can inspire in] Aboriginal people.

Vincent: I've heard people say that, within the National Parks, there's apathy towards cultural heritage of any kind … That they're main priority is the environment, and that both Aboriginal and European heritage is looked upon as an inconvenience.

Bud: Yes, that's exactly right. But it's also because the western system set up the National Park [Service in the first place]. And although cultural heritage forms a part of that, the way in which they assess the cultural heritage – their methodology of understanding cultural heritage – is from within a western system. They will still put an archaeologist above an Aboriginal person. Anybody can become an archaeologist. They will still classify somebody who's researched indigeneity to be better knowledge holders of indigeneity than Aboriginal people themselves. I think that that is a fundamental flaw in the system. I think that that's not right. You know, who knows our culture better than us? How can a non-Indigenous person be employed to ascribe an Indigenous value? What's the methodology for them assessing that value? And is the consultation with community enough if they go out and ask any Indigenous person residing in that area? That Indigenous person may come from Bundjalung and may [just] be [living] in Dharawal country. They could put an association, an Indigenous value, to that art site which may be associated with Bunjalung. Or it might be from Yorta Yorta. They could be Anangu. How do you do this? Aboriginal people in Australia are not the same. We're uniquely different within our own environments, [and we've got] our own language. You can't use anybody else to put a value on things [from our own country]. And if you research, the majority of the research comes from different countries anyways. You tell me which archaeologist has studied Dharawal to be able to say that they're an expert in Dharawal country. They use one [Australian] Aboriginal nation to get a classification as an archaeologist that understands Aboriginal Australia, and unfortunately the majority of the research has been done in the NT, it's been done in other regions.

Vincent: I'm sure Caryll Sefton would say she's an expert on Dharawal.

Bud: Yeah, well, I'm sure she would. But I'm sure that her research methodology could be totally blown out of the water by comments such as, “You didn't paint the work [therefore] you don't know the work.”
Vincent: You mentioned consultation. What I've been hearing is that the consultation process is either non-existent or tokenistic [at best].

Bud: Well, I think, and like I've said before, the consultation process is only about consulting [any group of] Aboriginal people, and – the majority of the time – to better understand the site before it's destroyed. Let's be honest, the majority of [non-Aboriginal] people that go out and [report on] these sites are drawing conclusions from their own world view. And of course [the reports will] be looked at by the same [kind of] people. They're communicating with their own kind. They're going to hold precedence over Aboriginal people because they're better understood, because they're saying precisely what they want them to say. It makes it easier [for the powers that be]. And in a lot of cases people are not being paid for archaeological reports that have been carried out because it doesn't draw a conclusion that the [commissioners] want. How is that ethical? And you can answer a question. If you go to one particular site and you ask an Aboriginal person who is a fisherman what that site means to them, the value of that particular site – if it's not related to fishing heritage – is going to be very uniquely different than somebody who is an art family. You know what I'm saying?

Vincent: Yeah. But I do think that in most cases when Aboriginal people get to see these sites it's because the sites are under threat.

Bud: That's right.

Vincent: They're called in because it's a compulsory part of the process of destroying a site to make way for a long wall mine or the expansion of road. It strikes me that that's some of the few times Aboriginal people get to see their heritage – when it's about to be destroyed. That's just totally wrong. And we were talking about sovereignty last night – rock art as signs of sovereignty. I do think there's a subconscious – if not totally conscious – agenda to get rid of those claims. Don't you feel?

Bud: Yes, I do. I do feel that but, you know, I just think that Aboriginal people are very wounded at the moment. I think that we are still in healing. I do think that we will get to a point where we will really start to make a move to reclaim things, but … If we don't make a move on trying to fix our health up, what are we fixing this for? Because we won't be around. We're dying younger and younger. So, what are we doing? We're only ever gonna be preserving it for somebody else to benefit from it. And the reality in this is that if they [had] wiped all us Aboriginal people out, these sites would have been priority number one for conservation.

Vincent: You reckon?

Bud: You better believe it. Cause all around the world in those colonised areas they say the same thing and they do the same thing. That's why in South America they say, “Oh, there's no more Inca people left. There's no more Mayan people left,” and look at the conservation in those places.

Vincent: I don't know anything about South America. They put a lot of money into it, do they?

Bud: Mmm, yeah. Same as in Egypt with the Pyramids.

Vincent: It's like you said yesterday, people fly into Sydney to fly out to Kakadu to see the rock art out there …

Bud: Well, Sir David Attenborough stated that a long time ago. You know, he calls [the Sydney Basin] the East Coast Kimberley. He says he finds it fascinating that the majority of people that fly into [Sydney] are flying into an area of such concentrations of work, [and yet they] leave that to go somewhere else – to go and visit the rock art sites in the Kimberley and in the NT. It's only because of what's advertised most. And in and around Sydney, that's Ground Zero. That's where that Atomic cultural bomb went off. That's where [colonialism?] started. It disseminated from there out and around the country.

Vincent: But that's why it's not advertised …

Bud: It's too close to their backyard. It's actually in their backyard. To be honest, in Sydney it's in their backyard, it's under their house.

Vincent: People know it's Aboriginal land but they won't accept it. So, if people want to see rock art, they say, “Out there! Far far away!”

Bud: Yeah, it's like the final frontier: “If you want to experience an Aboriginal person, you got to the desert, to the uninhabitable places.” And [yet] they've walked passed twenty [Aboriginal people] in the street already to get to the airport. And they've driven past places that are totally cultural landscapes.
Appendix 2

Descriptions of rock art and other heritage sites visited in the study area and in some neighbouring localities

LEGEND

Table colours (corresponding with markers on Maps 0.01, 0.02 and 0.03 on pp.--- of the Methodology):

- Rock art sites visited between January 2010 and March 2014
- Significant artefact sites without ‘art’ visited in the same period
- Rock art sites visited after March 2014 (when primary data collection ceased)
- N/A Rock art sites visited outside the parameters of the map

Table background colours:

- Within the study area
- Outside the study area

[Table A2.T1] Rock art sites visited between January 2010 and March 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On map</th>
<th>Description of site(s)</th>
<th>Date(s) visited</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>a Engravings at Bondi Golf Course: compact and busy remaining segment of a much larger complex. Includes anthromorph and marine creatures. ‘Re-cut’, as a means of preserving them, in the 1960s.</td>
<td>31.10.12</td>
<td>Bondi, Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b Whale/shark engraving along the Bondi to Coogee Coastal Walk. Similarly re-cut as above.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>a Concealed vertical whale/dolphin engraving along shoreline, Jibbon Headland.</td>
<td>17.10.12, 13.12.12</td>
<td>Royal National Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b Extensive engraving assemblage atop Jibbon Headland: two very large whales, smaller whale or shark, sting ray,</td>
<td>23.01.10, 15.05.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Date(s)</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kangaroo, and other much eroded figures. Much visited by locals and tourists. Vandalism / interference discerned: Several figures noticeably interfered with on last few visits (grooves highlighted variously with scratching and chemicals; genitalia on central spirit figure ‘smudged’ away).</td>
<td>17.10.12, 13.12.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Large shelter with faded drawings of turtles on private land, Bundeena. [Turtle drawings only seen in later digital enhancements of photography].</td>
<td>23.01.10</td>
<td>Bundeena, Sutherland Shire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Extensive engraving assemblage, Marley Headland. Highly eroded. Includes anthromorph (including one of the only definite ‘female’ human engravings), terrestrial, and marine creatures.</td>
<td>17.03.13</td>
<td>Royal National Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a  Maianbar whale engravings, off Maianbar Road, overlooking Port Hacking shallows. Highly eroded. Vandalism discerned: grooves highlighted with scratching.</td>
<td>23.07.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b  ‘Luma Luma’ engraving, opposite side of Maianbar Road: lone anthropomorphic figure with large, forked penis, and three large prongs instead of head – or perhaps an unusual headdress. Lines on arms suggest initiation cicatrices.</td>
<td>15.03.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Shelter with charcoal drawings (wallabies, snake, echidna) and extensive midden, South West Arm.</td>
<td>13.12.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Muddy Creek engravings and steel axe grinding groove. One engraving of kangaroo looks particularly similar to that drawn in the shelter described above. Vandalism discerned: several figures scratched to highlight grooves.</td>
<td>12.07.12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shelter with red hand stencils and midden, on the way to Winifred Falls.</td>
<td>08.07.12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a  Lone anthromorph engraving, off Bundeena drive. Vandalism discerned: grooves recently highlighted with thick layers of white chalk.</td>
<td>29.08.13</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b  Lone anthromorph engraving, off Bundeena drive. Strange mythological creature. Vandalism discerned: grooves recently highlighted with thick layers of white chalk.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c  Stone arrangement (circle), off Bundeena drive, with extensive coastal views</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d  Abstract (circular) engravings, off Bundeena drive. Vandalism discerned: grooves scratched extensively to highlight the engravings (though not fresh).</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>a  ‘Woman with snake’ engraving. Bears some similarity to a drawn figure in the shelter described in 3a [Blue].</td>
<td>13.12.12, 29.08.13</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Dates</td>
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<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>‘Wagilag sisters’ – large engraving assemblage. Includes a line of at least five dancing male figures; two women squatting as if giving birth, with a child beside them (the women have what appear to be duck bills, and one of them has a webbed foot); and a large natural pool (with axe grinding grooves around the edge), the shape of which Les Bursill believes had been deliberately modified (pre-contact). Vandalism discerned on most recent visit: thick layers of white chalk used to highlight grooves, identical to sites described in 9a, b, and d [red].</td>
<td>23.07.10, 12.07.12, 28.02.13, 29.08.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>‘Lightning Brothers’ – two small (male) figures in depression (pool of rain water) on ridge with extensive view.</td>
<td>28.02.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>‘Seven Men in creek Bed’, off Wises Track. Highly eroded dancing male figures in creek bed. One figure on elevated boulder (located only on second visit).</td>
<td>17.02.13, 28.02.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Extensive engraving assemblage near Uloola Falls. Interestingly ‘stick-like’ stylisation of most schema (spirit figures, macropods) – suggesting an earlier period of the Sydney-Hawkesbury style. Turtle (highly eroded due to its position in a natural water channel) and eels more ‘rounded’ and therefore more likely later additions to the ‘composition’.</td>
<td>19.02.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>a Shelter with large charcoal depiction of goanna; red ochre drawing possibly of echidna. Both faded.</td>
<td>05.12.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b ‘Goanna shelter’ – large charcoal depiction of goanna, and other smaller subjects (also in charcoal). Incredibly red earth makes up the shelter floor and immediate surrounds.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>a Macropod and fish engravings in stone creek bed.</td>
<td>31.10.10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b Small engraved human and fish figures [scratched]; strange hand/mundoe engraving; engraved channel.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c Large shelter with extensive drawings (‘Hairy man’ and ‘nulla nulla’, charcoal, ochre, and bi-chrome). Some strange geometrical / abstract shapes (drawn). Axe grinding grooves on semi-vertical surface near foot of the shelter and in the natural drip-line.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>a ‘Pecked snake’ (intaglio) and roo engraving (abraded) near Waterfall Station. Two forms from seemingly different traditions and times.</td>
<td>05.03.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b Wallaby engraving</td>
<td>09.07.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c Bandicoot engraving</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d Line of mundoes. Cat-like form nearby. Vandalism discerned: scratching of grooves.</td>
<td>09.07.10, 05.03.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>‘Dumpy bum’ – engraving of strange (mythological) creature similar to that described in 9b and 18 [both red].</td>
<td>09.07.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>‘Church cave’ – deep, vertically inclined stone recess with drawings on back wall. Red ochre ‘wandjina’ (large round head with two eyes and a slit for a nose), and a running man (also ochre). Old Bible and video cassette lying on ground nearby.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>Segmented snake engravings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>Vertical wall with yellow (ochre) drawings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Low but prominent overhang with ceiling designs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c</td>
<td>Wet shelter with charcoal drawings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d</td>
<td>Wet shelter with charcoal drawings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>‘Rainbow Serpent’ site. Perhaps the most impressive and arguably significant engraving assemblage in the Dharawal rock art ‘canon’. Large stone platform surrounded by thick vegetation. At least four dancing male figures engraved near the tail of an enormous serpent (the shape of which, Rick O’Brien has said, suggests a death adder). The men have interesting details such as cicatrices and head dress. The snake also has engraved marks (holes) down its body and scar-like lines near its head. The form of a kangaroo is engraved (superimposed) over the snake’s head, as if the snake were chasing or becoming the kangaroo. Other smaller nearby engravings are lizards and other macropods. Highly eroded in places. Much water seepage across platform after rain.</td>
<td>09.07.10, 05.03.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>‘Boy and his fish’ engraving. Smaller (non-life-sized) figure superimposed with large ‘fish’.</td>
<td>09.07.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>Incomplete snake engraving (‘snake head’)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>Shelter with red hand stencils</td>
<td>09.04.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>‘Bondell men’ – at least two dancing male figures, heavily eroded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The ‘Pituri site’: Extensive engraving assemblage off Sebastopol Trig Fire Trail. Fantastical creatures depicted (one wielding a boomerang); human figures uncommonly small; animal tracks. Assemblage only partially extant – section destroyed for sandstone in early 20th century. Highly eroded.</td>
<td>19.05.10, 09.04.12</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>Small shelter with red ochre anthromorph drawings near Barden Creek.</td>
<td>21.04.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>Engravings of two dancing men, and an uncommonly large and beautifully curvy kangaroo near Barden Creek –</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
arguably from the later phase of the Sydney-Hawkesbury style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Small shelter with thin (emaciated?) white forearm and hand stencils at Mills Creek.</td>
<td>06.06.10</td>
<td>Barden Ridge, Sutherland Shire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Extensive drawings (charcoal and ochres) in large shelter, Georges River. Two large figures (one of a bird [possibly being speared], the other of a four-legged creature, but highly worn away by water seepage) are central. Some beautiful drawings of animals in the leaping / pelt fashion.</td>
<td>16.06.10</td>
<td>Minto Heights, Campbelltown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>a. Low-lying shelter with extensive red hand and foot stencils (all ages).</td>
<td>06.06.10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. ‘Bull Cave’ – charcoal drawings and extensive white clay hand stencilling in large shelter only metres away from suburbia. Central charcoal figures have been interpreted as depictions of cattle that strayed and were lost in the region soon after Europeans arrived. Underlying (earlier?) versions of each bull are still discernible. Kelvin Officer suggests [pers. conv. August 2010] this is one of the most important rock art sites in the entire country. Sadly, it is also one of the most extensively and grotesquely vandalised sites I have seen. Thick red and black spray-paint has long since been applied in crude drawings and language. Dave Lambert says [Interview 26.06.12] this occurred not long after school groups were shown the cave in the 1980s as a means of introducing them to local Aboriginal history. A small overhang only a few metres away also contains some hand stencils.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Abstract drawings in small overhang, not far along the same ridgeline as Bull Cave.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>a. Charcoal drawing of lizard in large shelter. Intersection of Cobbong Creek with main access road.</td>
<td>04.08.12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Extensive and impressive charcoal drawings in large shelter across the road from 24a [red]. Two noteworthy panels, in particular, depict an enormous serpent and a kangaroo (somewhat reminiscent of the composition described in 16e [red]), and a number of large birds (most likely emus and bush turkeys), respectively. One small horizontal surface hides a smaller charcoal macropod, not visible unless lying on the floor. Many indeterminates.</td>
<td>04.08.12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Less extensive and determinate charcoal drawings in a large shelter, only metres away from the above.</td>
<td>04.08.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>‘Clegg’s Cave’ – extensive charcoal (some red ochre)</td>
<td>31.08.10</td>
<td>Woronora Special</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Elaborate (infilled and designed) charcoal drawings of snakes in medium sized shelter. <em>Visited with the Illawarra Prehistory Group.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>a Lone engraving of large kangaroo on Stokes Creek. Round / curvy stylisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>b Red ochre, poorly defined drawings (possibly one of a pig) in medium sized overhang on Stokes Creek.</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>a ‘Whale Cave’ – extensively decorated, relatively deep shelter of particular renown. Elaborate clay and charcoal compositions over particularly old-looking ochre figures. Some yellow ochre also evident (bi-chrome eel). Central figures include enormous whale (or fish?), emu (or other large bird), and dancing anthropomorphs. Long-wall mining responsible for significant cracking of the shelter’s ceiling and walls. One decorated panel in particular has broken in half. Cage erected to protect the art from visitors (before the mining damage) has long since buckled under the weight of the falling stone, and is twisted and rusted. Water seepage in several areas – including over art. <em>Visited with NPWS ranger (‘Aboriginal Heritage conservation officer’), Mark Simon.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>a Charcoal figurative drawings and red hand stencils (very faded) on vertical wall – particularly exposed.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Panaramitee-style engravings (bird and macropod tracks) and red hand stencils in medium-sized overhangs (actually enclaves of an enormous solitary boulder on the Illawarra escarpment). <em>Private land. Visited with the landowner.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>a Lone macropod drawn (or scratched) into small area of exfoliation. Stylisation significantly different to art in</td>
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northern parts of the study area.

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<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Extensively decorated medium-sized shelter and alcoves. Some motifs stylistically and technically similar to those found in the northern parts of the study area, others not. Interesting departure from more familiar Sydney-Hawkesbury style: more stick-like figures which appear to have been scratched into the rock (perhaps initial pigment applicant has weathered away).</td>
<td>Reserve, Cambewarra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Small shelter with four drawn (or scratched) anthromorph figures. Stick-like, as in the shelter described above.</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Small charcoal drawings (anthromorphs, animals, abstractions) in large but low-ceilinged shelter overlooking tributary of Bomaderry Creek. Unusually sharp-edged depiction of four-legged creature (possibly a dingo). Thick lichen growth. Clear signs of rock climbing / abseiling taking place almost literally on top of the art. However, no signs of direct interference. Arguably a satellite site for #6 [blue].</td>
<td>Bomaderry Creek, North Nowra</td>
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<td>10.12.13, 13.11.14</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>‘Hidden Valley’ shelter – indeterminate charcoal drawings, thick white clay used to paint utensil (axe) outlines, red ochre paint used in large impressive abstract / serpentine design. Most of the art has been caged. Extensive vandalism (graffiti) on stone surfaces around and leading up to the site.</td>
<td>Nowra Creek, Nowra</td>
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<td>01.12.13</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Enormous shelter with extensive middens and various styles / techniques of art. Spirit figure (white clay) is, according to traditional owner, Julie Freeman [pers. conv. 17.08.12], the same as that at the Jibbon Headland engraving assemblage. Thus, the depiction of this spirit ‘book ends’ Dharawal country. Some red ochre painted tally(-like) marks and other larger abstract designs. Fine thick white clay outline of a fish, similar in technique to the axe outline described in #34 [red]. Perhaps strangest of all: extensive panel of red paint prints made with an animal’s claw.</td>
<td>Abrahams Bosom Reserve, Currawong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>17.08.12, 04.08.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Similarly large shelter with extensive middens. Art restricted to extreme left of the shelter. Red tally marks again, and some white clay stencils (blown) of utensil (possibly boomerangs).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>24.08.12, 04.08.13</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### [Table A2.T2] Significant artefact sites without art visited in the same period

| On map | Description of site(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Date(s) visited | Location                           |
|---|---|
| 1  | Extensive beach midden with large, discernible stone tools; fenced.                                                                                                                                                    | 29.08.10        | Garie Beach, Royal National Park   |
| 2  | Shell middens along rocky sea edge with clear southerly view towards Kiama. All but covered by coastal vegetation (only small sections now visible).                                                                                 | 09.07.11        | Bass Point, Shellharbour           |

### [Table A2.T3] Rock art sites visited since March 2014 (after collection of primary data had ceased)

| On map | Description of site(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Date(s) visited | Location                           |
|---|---|
| 1  | Small lone engraving of macropod on solitary boulder just in from the shoreline.                                                                                                                                     | 25.05.14        | Bradleys Head, Mosman              |
| 2  | Engraving of what seems to be a snake. Possibly part of larger assemblage. Highly eroded.                                                                                                                              | 05.10.14        | Heathcote National Park            |
| 3  | a  | Large impressive red ochre painting of kangaroo in medium-sized shelter high above the Woronora River with a view of the Holsworthy Military area. Interesting charcoal drawing of a spirit figure holding or struggling with large serpent.            | 31.12.14        | Royal National Park                |
|   | b  | Small shelter (higher on the same escarpment as the above-mentioned shelter) with indeterminate charcoal drawings.                                                                                            |                 |                                    |
| 4  | Medium-sized shelter above the ‘limestone cave’ [aka. Palona Cave] on Palona Brook. Charcoal drawings of birds and a large red ochre of fish (faded) with charcoal outline. Some of the better Dharawal drawings of birds (alongside #24b [red]). | 31.12.14        | Royal National Park                |
| 5  | a  | High-ceilinged, but shallow shelter, with extensive charcoal drawings. Subject matter and provenance are perhaps the most baffling of all sites seen in the course of this research. Close to a large religious compound, this site has clearly been visited many times and interfered with. Certainly some of the more bizarre motifs (such as men with strangely shaped heads, and fantastical creatures) are authentic, as there is precedence for such material at other Dharawal sites. But it is actually the more mundane subject matter, such as a pair of fighting men, and other figures brandishing weapons, which (due to their rendering) are conspicuous. Stylistically they are not similar to other drawn motifs of the region, and yet | 26.10.14        | Clements Creek, Wilton             |
the appearance of the charcoal itself looks of the same vintage of the ‘authentic’ schema. Macropod motifs (including a joey in a pouch) at the extreme left of the shelter are arguably non-Aboriginal additions – they are stylistically inconsistent with the local style, and the charcoal looks particularly fresh. An attempt has clearly been made to remove large amounts of graffiti - with varying results.

b Low-ceilinged shelter (immediately next to the shelter described above) with substantial crumbling around the drip-line. Charcoal drawings on horizontal ceiling: mainly large fish. Some appear incomplete, some weathered.

c Absolutely enormous shelter. One part of the back ‘wall’ extensively covered and scratched with signatures and dates. Aboriginal art is restricted to a tiny alcove at the base of the wall and consists of no more than half a dozen red ochre stencils of infants’ hands. Some have been superimposed by scribblings.

6 Highly exposed ‘shelter’ (due to high ceiling) – really just the base of a cliff. Extensively decorated with charcoal anthropomorphs. Some red ochre and white clay appear to form an original layer, but what they depict is unclear. As with #33 [red], which is no more than 200 metres away, the location is popular with rock climbers. Shiny metal bolts immediately above the main art panel indicate that climbing takes place literally on top of the art. However, and once again like #33 [red], there is miraculously no sign of direct interference.

13.11.14 Alum Rock, Bomaderry Creek

[Table A2.T4] Rock art sites visited outside the parameters of the map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Description of site(s)</th>
<th>Date(s) visited</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Decorated overhang amongst a group of enormous boulders. Small, painted figures (animals and anthropomorphs), stylistically more in common with art from the south of the study area than the north. Neat, compact ‘composition’, considering the large amount of space available. Excellent tourist access and guidance: interpretive signage, boardwalk at site, and guestbook in metal box. Recent entries in guestbook suggest the site is visited almost daily. No vandalism of any kind detectable.</td>
<td>05.02.14</td>
<td>Namadgi National Park (ACT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>a Very large and long, extensively decorated, shelter low on Coles Creek. Many different surfaces used. Charcoal, clay and red ochre used in varying degrees.</td>
<td>08.05.14</td>
<td>Coles Creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Location</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Bi-chrome abstract designs (or possibly plant depictions) on hidden back section particularly beautiful. Large boulder at shelter entrance (in drip-line) has many many axe grinding grooves. This site has clearly been promoted to the public in the past: there is interpretive signage and rope barricading (both in poor condition) and a metal box for a guest book.</td>
<td>McDonald State Forest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Small shelter of particularly white sandstone, not far from the site mentioned above. Anthromorph and animal figures on wall and ceiling – though provenance is conspicuous. Faded, scratched(?) primary shapes seem authentic, but thick charcoal outline is arguably a recent addition. Metal box for guest book present.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Medium-sized shelter with very fine prospect over (high above) Coles Creek and the surrounding bushland. Very fine (and in good condition) bi-chrome figures drawn on back wall (clay infill, charcoal outline), particularly that of a kangaroo (red ochre infill, charcoal outline). Absolutely enormous (and chubby) spirit figure with boomerangs and clubs rendered on horizontal ceiling. Must lie flat on back to see and photograph clearly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Highly exposed sandstone shelf just along the ridgeline from the shelter described above. Drawn (charcoal) motifs hard to make out – some geometric in appearance. Highly eroded axe grinding groove on shelf floor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Engraving of kangaroo now in the middle of suburbia. Located close to the M4 highway. Grooves appear to have been re-rubbed / enhanced. One sname (circular engraving) and some axe grinding grooves nearby. Site signposted.</td>
<td>13.09.14 Kangaroo Street Reserve, Lawson</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Like the site described above, not far from the M4 highway. Rock platform on edge of gully, now on edge of suburbia. Three engravings of emus (or bird-like anthromorphs) spread over a large area. High water run-off across rock surface. Area marked with interpretive signage.</td>
<td>13.09.14 Ticehurst Park Protected Area, Faulconbridge</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

Survey of the public art

Colour of each table corresponds with markers on Maps A3.M01-A3.M13. Grey-scaled cells indicate that a work was:

- [ ] Seen and photographed by the author.
- [ ] Not seen by the author. Photographic evidence obtained from another source.
- [ ] Not seen by the author. No archival photography of the work was found.

[Table A3.T1.01]
Coomaditchie Artists
71 works (23%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref</th>
<th>Location / Space Type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 | 1.1    | Shellharbour Road, Kemblawarra  
Private residence  
CIVIC / PUBLIC  
Other works at this location: #2 | Mural (painted wooden fence). Exterior. | c.1990  
No longer exists | Photo courtesy of CUAC |
| 2 | 1.2    | Shellharbour Road, Kemblawarra  
Private residence  
CIVIC / PUBLIC  
Other works at this location: #1 | Mural (painted wooden fence). Exterior. | c.1990  
No longer exists | Photo courtesy of CUAC |
<p>| | | | |</p>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.1a</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other works at this location: #4, 5, 6, 7, 249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.1b</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other works at this location: #3, 5, 6, 7, 249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
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<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
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<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Pre-school</td>
<td>&quot;Merging of the Dreamings&quot;</td>
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<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
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<td>Other works at this location: #3, 4, 5, 6, 249</td>
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<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illawarra Senior College</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Interior. Note: Installed behind glass. In immaculate condition.</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Kembla Community Centre</td>
<td>Mixed media murals (poles). Exterior.</td>
<td>c. 1992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollongong Youth Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior. No longer exists. Long since painted over.</td>
<td>c. 1992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Kembla Study Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Interior No longer exists. Study Centre destroyed by landslide.</td>
<td>c. 1992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoalhaven High School</td>
<td>Mural (painted ceiling). Interior.</td>
<td>c. 1993</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Work Type</td>
<td>Location Details</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Shoalhaven High School</td>
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<td>c. 1993</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Wollongong City Gallery</td>
<td>Painted panels (18). Exterior.</td>
<td>Temporary display commissioned for The World's Indigenous Peoples conference. Panels now permanently stored (and some on display) at Kemblawarra Hall.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kiama Public School</td>
<td>Murals (painted concrete pipes). Exterior.</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Kiama Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Noogaleek Day Care Centre, Berkeley</td>
<td>Mural (painted walls). Interior.</td>
<td>c. 1993</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 18 | 11.1 | Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall  
**CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
*Other works at this location: #14 (partial), 19, 20, 21, 22, 23* | Murals (painted footpath). Exterior.  
1993  
*Now heavily faded.* | ![Photo](from time of production) courtesy of CUAC |
| 19 | 11.2 | Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall  
**CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
*Other works at this location: #14 (partial), 18, 20, 21, 22, 23* | Murals (painted panels). Exterior.  
c.1997 | ![Photo](from time of production) |
| 20 | 11.3 | Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall  
**CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
*Other works at this location: #14 (partial), 18, 19, 21, 22, 23* | "From the Mountains to the Sea"  
Dreaming poles (painted bollards). Exterior.  
2000 | ![Photo](from time of production) |
| 21 | 11.4 | Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall  
**CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
*Other works at this location: #14 (partial), 18, 19, 20, 22, 23* | "Communities Against Crime"  
Mixed media mosaic (wall). Exterior.  
1999 | ![Photo](from time of production) |
| 22 | 11.5 | Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall  
**COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
*Other works at this location: #14 (partial), 18, 19, 20, 21, 23* | "Kemblawarra Dreaming Mural"  
Mural  
2007  
*No photo available* |
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<th>No.</th>
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<th>Type</th>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Coomaditchie Lagoon / Kemblawarra Hall</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mosaic (wall), Exterior. “ACTIVATE : Green and Gold Bellfrog”</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Wollongong Town Hall</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>“Gurungaty Water Place” Mosaic (fountain and footpath). Exterior. By Lorraine Brown and Nick Brash Plaque reads: “Officially opened … on 27th May 1997 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the referendum which gave Aboriginal people citizenship.” See also: #193</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service, Wollongong</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Dreaming poles (painted bollards). Exterior.</td>
<td>c. 1998</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Mount Ousley Pre-School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior.</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Bomaderry Public School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted walls). Exterior. Note: One of the only artworks from the entire study area with invasion subject matter.</td>
<td>c. 1999</td>
<td>Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Number</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>33 18.3</td>
<td>Painted tiles (footpath inserts). Exterior.</td>
<td>Shellharbour Village foreshore</td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>#</td>
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<td>Type</td>
<td>Details</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>SACYA (Shellharbour Aboriginal Community Youth Association), Oakleigh Park Hall, Warilla</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td>Other works at this location: #36, 240, 302</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>SACYA (Shellharbour Aboriginal Community Youth Association), Oakleigh Park Hall, Warilla</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td>Other works at this location: #35, 240, 302</td>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>Community Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Belmore Basin, Wollongong</td>
<td>“Blue Dreaming” Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>Other works at this location: #38, 39, 141, 142, 274, 275</td>
<td>2001 (or 2002?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
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<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>Osborne Park, Wollongong</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mural (painted traffic box). Exterior.</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>Wentworth Street, Port Kembla.</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Painted billy cart. 'Five Islands Go-Cart' Made for the Port Kembla Billy-cart Derby.</td>
<td>2012</td>
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Photo from Wollongong Advertiser (21 Nov 2012, p.2)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Shellharbour War Memorial</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mixed media mosaic (footpath). Exterior.</td>
<td>2002</td>
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</table>
Part of a larger project to re-vamp Hooka Park that involved various artists and community groups. See also: #269 | 2003 |
| 26  | Stanthorpe Mews, Bellambi    | CIVIC / PUBLIC            | Dreaming poles (mixed media). Exterior.  
Part of the “Safe Streets” program that involved various artists and community groups. | 2004 |
| 27  | Warrawong High School        | EDUCATION FACILITY        | Painted panels  
Other works at this location: #270, 286                                           | 2005 |
| 28  | Cringila Park                | CIVIC / PUBLIC            | Mosaic (bread oven). Exterior.  
Collaboration with local ethnic groups                                                 | 2005 |
| 29  | Health Ministry of NSW, Burelli Street Office | COMMUNITY CENTRE | Mural (painted panel). Interior.  
Originally commissioned for Orana House, Port Kembla Hospital                            | 2005 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>KU Corrimal East Pre-school</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Room divider murals (8 painted panels, paired back to back). Interior.</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Wollongong Family Relationship Centre</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior.</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Mount Kembla Mine Memorial, Stones Road</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mixed media mosaic (footpath). Exterior. Collaboration with Cynthia Turner</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Work ID</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Port Kembla Gateway, corner of Five Islands Road and Horne Street</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed media mural/sculpture (wall). Exterior.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>By Lorraine Brown and Celeste Coucke</td>
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<td>Other works by Celeste Coucke: #269, 276</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>MM Beach, Port Kembla Heritage Park</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dreaming poles (4 painted poles/bollards). Exterior.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part of a bush regeneration project. Site of an enormous midden.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>57</td>
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<td>Unanderra Public School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mural (3 painted panels)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Wollongong Courthouse</td>
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<td>Mural (painted column). Exterior.</td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Farmborough Road Public School</td>
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<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
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<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 painted canvases (diptych). Interior.</td>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2008</td>
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<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>International House (UOW)</td>
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<td>Murals (4 painted panels). Interior. Made in collaboration with students/lodgers of the International House (University of Wollongong).</td>
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<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>Jumbulla Aboriginal Discovery Centre, Bulli Tops</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Painted canvas</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No longer on display. Discovery Centre now defunct. No photograph available.</td>
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<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>Smith Street Pre-School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Smith Street Pre-School</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other works at this location: #66</td>
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<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Port Kembla Olympic Pool</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior. Community project involving various local artists. Several specially shaped panels by the Coomaditchie Artists.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>68</td>
<td>Shell Cove GP Super Clinic</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Murals (3 painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
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[Table A3.T1.02]

Kevin Butler
60 Works (20%)

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<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>Kiama Municipal Library</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>1993</td>
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<td>Oak Flats Primary School</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>No longer exists / on display No photo available</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>Bellambi Neighbourhood Centre</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior. NAIDOC week 2008</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td><strong>9.2</strong></td>
<td>Bellambi Neighbourhood Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td>Dapto Neighbourhood Centre</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>NAIDOC week 2001</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>No photo available</td>
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<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td>Kanahooka Community Centre</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>2002</td>
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<td>Reconciliation Project</td>
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<td><strong>85</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td>Berkeley Neighbourhood Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Interior.</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td>Blackbutt Community Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td><strong>87</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.1</strong></td>
<td>Edmund Rice Christian Brothers College, Mount Keira</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>88</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.2</strong></td>
<td>Edmund Rice Christian Brothers College, Mount Keira</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>Nev's Bait and Tackle Shop, Towradgi</td>
<td>COMMERCIAL</td>
<td>Murals (painted panels). Position unknown.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No longer exists / on display</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>Nev's Bait and Tackle Shop, Towradgi</td>
<td>COMMERCIAL</td>
<td>Sculptural sign (painted boat with human form). Position unknown.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>No longer exists / on display</td>
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<td>91</td>
<td>Woonona Public School</td>
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<td>Mural</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<td>92</td>
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<td>Mural. Painted. Exterior.</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td>93</td>
<td>Mount Brown Public School, Dapto</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas) Position unknown</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<td>94</td>
<td>Woolyungah Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>95</td>
<td>18b</td>
<td>Woolyungah Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong</td>
<td>Dreaming poles (3 painted structural poles). Exterior.</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>96</td>
<td>19.1a</td>
<td>Wombarra Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas). Interior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>19.1b</td>
<td>Wombarra Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas). Interior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>98</td>
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<td>Wombarra Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas). Interior.</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>School</td>
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<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>Towradgi Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>102</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>Towradgi Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>103</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Gwynneville Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall and garage door). Exterior.</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Keiraville Pre-School</td>
<td>Murals (4 painted panels on 2 sandwich-board structures). Moveable.</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>105</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Wollongong Shepherd Centre</td>
<td>Mural (painted fence). Exterior.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo courtesy of Kevin Butler" /></td>
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<td>106</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>Port Kembla Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo courtesy of Kevin Butler" /></td>
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<td>107</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>Port Kembla Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo courtesy of Kevin Butler" /></td>
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<td>108</td>
<td>25a</td>
<td>Bulli Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas)</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo courtesy of Kevin Butler" /></td>
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<td>109</td>
<td>25b</td>
<td>Bulli Pre-School</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas)</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo courtesy of Kevin Butler" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>25c</td>
<td>Bulli Pre-School</td>
<td>Education Facility</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bulli Pre-School Mural" /></td>
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<td>111</td>
<td>Bellambi Surf Life Saving Club</td>
<td>Community Centre</td>
<td>Murals (8 separate painted panels)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bellambi Surf Life Saving Club Mural" /></td>
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<td>112</td>
<td>Bus Shelter (near Koonawarra Community Centre)</td>
<td>Civic/Public</td>
<td>Mural (painted bus shelter)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Bus Shelter Mural" /></td>
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<td>113</td>
<td>Austimmer Public School</td>
<td>Education Facility</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Austimmer Public School Mural" /></td>
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<td>114</td>
<td>St. Michael's Primary School, Thirroul</td>
<td>Education Facility</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="St. Michael's Primary School Mural" /></td>
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<td>ID</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Image</td>
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<td>115</td>
<td>St. Michael's Primary School, Thirroul</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel) Position unknown</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>Bellambi Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
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<td>118</td>
<td>Holy Spirit College, Bellambi</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Number</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>Material</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>121 31.5</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>Holy Spirit Collage, Bellambi</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>122 31.6</td>
<td>Sea of Hands installation for NAIDOC week</td>
<td>Holy Spirit Collage, Bellambi</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>123 31.7</td>
<td>Sea of Hands installation for NAIDOC week</td>
<td>Holy Spirit Collage, Bellambi</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>124 32</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels)</td>
<td>Bulli High School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td><strong>33a</strong></td>
<td>Tarrawanna Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td><strong>33b</strong></td>
<td>Tarrawanna Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td>Thirroul Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
<td>Illawarra Legal Centre</td>
<td>Mural (printed reproduction of painting). Exterior.</td>
<td>2010</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>36</strong></td>
<td>Short Street Preschool, Corrimal</td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas). Interior.</td>
<td>2012</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Val Law
9 works (3%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space Type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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</table>
| 132 | 1       | Oakflats cycleway (&) Shellharbour Village foreshore  
CIVIC / PUBLIC  
Other works at this location: #31, 32, 33 | Embossed designs (footpath). Exterior. | 2000 | ![Embossed designs (footpath). Exterior.](image) |
| 133 | 2       | Dapto Ribbonwood Centre COMMUNITY CENTRE  
Other works at this location: #40, 271 | Dreaming pole and courtyard mosaics (1 concrete column and 4 ground-level mosaics). Exterior. 
Made in collaboration with Tori de Mestre, Jannett Clauston, and students from Dapto High school. 
Other works by Tori de Mestre: #141, 142 | 2001 | ![Dreaming pole and courtyard mosaics](image) |
<p>| 134 | 3 | Engadine Primary School | Mural (painted wall). Exterior. | 2006 |
| 135 | 4 | Grays Point Primary School | Mural (painted wall). Exterior. Part of a larger ‘Dharawal’ discovery area in the school playground, coordinated by teacher, Kay Moriarty. See also #241 | 2007 |
| 136 | 5 | Keiraville Primary School | Mural (painted wall). Exterior. Other works at this location: #79, 264 | 2008 |
| 137 | 6 | Wollongong Botanic Garden Discovery Centre | Mural Position unknown Keiraville after-school class workshop Other works in the vicinity: #78 Unknown | No photo available |
| 138 | 7 | Corrimal Primary School | Mural (painted panels). Exterior. | 2008 |
| 139 | 8 | St Francis Xavier Primary School, Wollongong | Mural Position unknown No longer exists / in display No photograph available | 2008 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space Type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artists</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>141</td>
<td>1a</td>
<td>Osborne Park, Wollongong CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>“Osborne Park Storylines” Courtyard installation (mixed media footpath inserts). Exterior.</td>
<td>Tori de Mestre with Boolarng Nangamai members: Russell Ping, Steve Russell, Kelli Ryan, Phyllis Stewart</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>142</td>
<td>1b</td>
<td>Osborne Park, Wollongong CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>“Osborne Park Storylines” Boomerang-shaped bench (carved wood). Exterior.</td>
<td>Tori de Mestre with Boolarng Nangamai members: Russell Ping, Steve Russell, Kelli Ryan, Phyllis Stewart</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Elizabeth Park, Bellambi CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mural (painted fence) Exterior.</td>
<td>Boolarng Nangamai member, Debbie Callaghan-Hempstead</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
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</tbody>
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*Other works co-produced by Val Law: #204*

**Boolarng Nangamai artists**

13 works (4%)

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<p>| Table A3.T1.04 |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td><strong>4.2</strong></td>
<td>Little Blowhole, Kiama</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Boomerang-shaped bench (carved wood)</td>
<td>Exterior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 148 | **5** | Bombo Headland | CIVIC / PUBLIC | Digital display/projection. | Exterior. | Collaboration with Craig Walsh | 24 Nov. 2010 only. No longer on display. |   | Photo from <digitalodysseyblog.wordpress.com>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 149 | Kiama High School
EDUCATION FACILITY
Dreaming poles. Exterior.
At least 3 painted structural poles.
Boolarng Nangamai member, Steven Russell, with Kate Littrich, SACYA members, and Koori students from Kiama High | 2010 |
| 150 | Mount Keira Demonstration School
EDUCATION FACILITY
Other works at this location: #151
Mural (painted wall). Exterior.
Boolarng Nangamai member, Steven Russell, with students from Mount Keira Demonstration School | 2011 |
| 151 | Mount Keira Demonstration School
EDUCATION FACILITY
Other works at this location: #150
Dreaming poles (5 carved wooden posts). Exterior.
Boolarng Nangamai member, Steven Russell, with students from Mount Keira Demonstration School | 2011 |
| 152 | Berkeley Community Hall and Senior Citizens Centre
COMMUNITY CENTRE
Mosaic (courtyard wall and water feature). Exterior.
Boolarng Nangamai with senior citizens | 2012 |
| 153 | Kiama Coastal Walk
CIVIC / PUBLIC
Dreaming poles (2 x carved and painted wooden poles) | 2012 |

Other works co-produced by Boolarng Nangama artists: #204
### [Table A3.T1.05]

Fiona Stewart (facilitator)

3 works (1%)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space Type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artists</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>154</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gerringong Museum COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Russell Ping (from Boolarng Nangamai), “Shorty”, and Gerringong youth. Other works by Russell Ping: #141, 142, 154</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Photograph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Werri Beach (north) CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>“Survival” Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Denise Freeman and Dean Walker</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Photograph" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Werri Beach (south) CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>“Respect” Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Michael Brown and Richard Campbell. Other works by Richard Campbell: #149-155</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Photograph" /></td>
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</table>
**[Table A3.T1.06]**

Richard Campbell  
7 works (2%)

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<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 157| 1        | Oak Flats Primary School  
*EDUCATION FACILITY*  
*Other works at / near this location: #73, 242* | Mural (painted panels).  
Exterior. | Unknown | ![Image](image1.png) |
| 158| 2.1      | Barrack Heights Public School  
*EDUCATION FACILITY*  
*Other works at this location: #159, 160, 161, 162, 195, 250, 251* | Mural (painted panel).  
Interior. | 2003 | ![Image](image2.png) |
| 159| 2.2      | Barrack Heights Public School  
*EDUCATION FACILITY*  
*Other works at this location: #158, 160, 161, 162, 195, 250, 251* | Diptych mural (2 painted panels).  
Interior. | Unknown | ![Image](image3.png) |
| 160| 2.3      | Barrack Heights Public School  
*EDUCATION FACILITY*  
*Other works at this location: #158, 159, 161, 162, 195, 250, 251* | Mural (painted panel).  
Interior. | 2003 | ![Image](image4.png) |
161 2.4 Barrack Heights Public School
*EDUCATION FACILITY*

Other works at this location: #158, 159, 160, 162, 195, 250, 251

Mural (painted panel). Interior.

2004

162 2.5 Barrack Heights Public School
*EDUCATION FACILITY*

Other works at this location: #158, 159, 160, 161, 195, 250, 251

Mural (painted door). Interior.

*Note: Apparently painted in a previous location of the school.*

2005

163 3 Saint Paul's Catholic Primary School, Albion Park
*EDUCATION FACILITY*

Mural (painted wall). Exterior.

2008

Other works co-produced by Richard Campbell: #156

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[Table A3.T1.07]

Rick O'Brien with Strong Brother and Strong Sista

7 works (2%)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 164| 1        | Endeavour Sports High, Caringbah
      *EDUCATION FACILITY* | Mural (painted water tank). Exterior. | 2010 | ![Photo](image) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>165</td>
<td>Mimi's Kindergarten, Cronulla</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall and door). Exterior.</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>166</td>
<td>Mimi's Kindergarten, Cronulla</td>
<td>Mural (painted footpath). Exterior.</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>169</td>
<td>Loftus TAFE Child Care Centre, Loftus</td>
<td>Mural (painted board) at entry.</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### [Table A3.T1.08]

Les Bursill OAM (facilitator)
4 works (1%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>171</td>
<td>1a</td>
<td>The Point Preschool, Oyster Bay EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #172</td>
<td>Mosaic/mural (footpath). Exterior.</td>
<td>c.2010</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Mosaic" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>172</td>
<td>1b</td>
<td>The Point Preschool, Oyster Bay EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #171</td>
<td>Mosaic (wall hanging). Exterior.</td>
<td>c.2010</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Mosaic" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Saint Aloysius Catholic Primary School, Cronulla EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Murals (painted walls). Exterior.</td>
<td>c.2010</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Mural" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo courtesy of Margaret Fowler
**[Table A3.T1.09]**

Jasmine Sarin  
4 works (1%)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 175 | 1a | Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service, Wollongong  
**COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
*Other works at this location: #26, 80, 176* | Mural (painted doors and windows). Exterior. | Unknown | ![Photo](image) |
| 176 | 1b | Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service, Wollongong  
**COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
*Other works at this location: #26, 80, 175* | Mural (painted doors and windows). Exterior. | Unknown | ![Photo](image) |
| 177 | 2 | Warrawong High School  
**EDUCATION FACILITY**  
*Other works at this location: #47* | Mural (painted wall). Interior. | 2007  
*No longer exists* | ![Photo](image) |
Pioneer Hall, McCabe Park, Wollongong CBD.
COMMUNITY CENTRE
Another work painted here: #207
Mural (painted wall).
Exterior.
Temporary work only.
The rear exterior wall of McCabe Park Community Hall is regularly re-painted – giving different artists a chance to display their talents.

2 or less
35 works (12%)
Works where the primary artist or facilitator has performed that role for only 1 or two works in the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
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<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artists</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>179</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Bomaderry Public School EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #28, 180, 181, 182, 183</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Reggie Ryan Other works by Reggie Ryan: #197</td>
<td>c. 1990</td>
<td>Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Bomaderry Public School EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #28, 179, 181, 182, 183</td>
<td>“The Sea” Mural (painted panel). Position unknown.</td>
<td>Mary Wellington</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 181 | 1.3 | Bomaderry Public School  
EDUCATION FACILITY  
Other works at this location: #28, 179, 180, 182, 183 | “Goannas” Mural (painted panel). Exterior. | John Pender  
Other works by John Pender: #187 | 2008  
Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge |
| 182 | 1.4 | Bomaderry Public School  
EDUCATION FACILITY  
Other works at this location: #28, 179, 180, 181, 183 | Dreaming poles (2 painted posts). Exterior. | John Pender and Desmond Locke  
Other works by John Pender: #186 | 2010  
Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge |
| 183 | 1.5 | Bomaderry Public School  
EDUCATION FACILITY  
Other works at this location: #28, 179, 180, 181, 182 | “Alphabet Snake” Mural (painted footpath). Exterior. | Desley Stewart | 2010  
Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge |
| 184 | 2.1 | Koonawarra Public School  
EDUCATION FACILITY  
Other works at this location: #185, 186, 228 | Mural (painted wall). Exterior. | Facilitator unknown. Made with the students of Koonawarra Public School. | 1993  
Photo courtesy of Dionne Hanbidge |
| 185 | 2.2 | Koonawarra Public School  
EDUCATION FACILITY  
Other works at this location: #184, 186, 228 | Mural (painted wall). Exterior. | Unknown | Unknown
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</table>
| 186 | Koonawarra Public School  
  **EDUCATION FACILITY**  
  Other works at this location: #184, 185, 228  
  Tracey Carlson(?) | c.2011 |
| 187 | Noogaleek Children’s Centre, Berkeley  
  **EDUCATION FACILITY**  
  Other works at / near this location: #17, 188  
  Mural (painted plaque). Exterior.  
  Jimmy Carlson | c.1993 |
| 188 | Noogaleek Children’s Centre, Berkeley  
  **EDUCATION FACILITY**  
  Other works at / near this location: #17, 187  
  Mural (painted front door)  
  Joanne Davis | c. 2007 |
| 189 | Peace Park, Sutherland  
  **CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
  Other works at this location: #220  
  Gateway / courtyard installation. Exterior.  
  Coloured concrete columns and footpath mosaic.  
  Gordon Hookey (Boomalli Artists Cooperative) and Lino Alvarez with wards of Kirinari Youth Hostel (Sylvania Heights).  
  Other works by wards of Kirinari Youth Hostel: #298, 299 | 1993/4 |
| 190 | Unknown (Jerrinja LALC?)  
  **COMMUNITY CENTRE(?)**  
  Mural  
  Made with / for the Jerrinja / Culburra community.  
  Facilitated by Anna Glynn | 1993 |
| 191 | Bulli Public School  
  **EDUCATION FACILITY**  
  Other works at this location: #192, 245  
  Triptych mural (3 painted panels). Exterior.  
  Carol Hawthorn | 1994 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Work Description</th>
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| 192 | Bulli Public School  
**EDUCATION FACILITY**  
Other works at this location: #191, 245  
Mural (painted panels). Exterior  
Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service with students from Bulli Public School.  
2008  
Photo courtesy of Lesley Lawson |
| 193 | Moreton Bay Figtree Park, Figtree  
**CIVIC / PUBLIC**  
Site of a giant Moreton Bay Figtree from which the suburb takes its name. The tree was used as a birthing site by local Aborigines.  
“Spirit of the Figtree (Yaroma)” Mosaic (footpath). Exterior.  
Vic Chapman, Tess McLennan, Graham King, and Aldous Cox  
1997 |
| 194 | Stella Maris Catholic School, Shellharbour Village  
**EDUCATION FACILITY**  
Mural (painted wall). Exterior.  
Theresa Ardler  
Other works by Theresa Ardler: #203  
1997 |
| 195 | Barrack Heights Public School  
**EDUCATION FACILITY**  
Other works at this location: #158-162, 250, 251  
Steven Henry  
1998 |
| 196 | Jane Ardler Centre, Nowra.  
**COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
Other works at this location: 197  
Mural (painted wall). Exterior.  
Brad Braddick  
1999 |
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<th>Type</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>197</td>
<td>Jane Ardler Centre, Nowra</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall) - Exterior</td>
<td>Reggie Ryan</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY CENTRE</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other works at this location: 196</td>
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<tr>
<td>198</td>
<td>Culburra Public School, Culburra.</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall)</td>
<td>Glenn ‘Duff’ Duffield</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>EDUCATION FACILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>199</td>
<td>Near 73 Addison Street, Shellharbour Village</td>
<td>Mural (painted bus shelter)</td>
<td>Russell Ping (from Boolang Nangamai) and the “Good Graffiti Squad”</td>
<td>c. 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CIVIC / PUBLIC</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>Corrimal High School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel) - Interior</td>
<td>Daniel Laughton with students from Corrimal High School</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>EDUCATION FACILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other works at this location: 140, 224, 280</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>201</td>
<td>Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy, McCauleys Beach, Thirroul.</td>
<td>Mural (painted yurt) - Exterior</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CIVIC / PUBLIC</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Selected Works (online PDF).*
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Artwork Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>203</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Jumbunna Children’s Centre, Nowra <strong>EDUCATION FACILITY</strong> Mural (painted panel). Interior. Theresa Ardler Other works by Theresa Ardler: #194 c. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dave Walsh's track, Mount Keira Summit Park <strong>CIVIC / PUBLIC</strong> Merrigong Environmental Sculpture, aka. “Six Daughters of the West Wind” Sculptural installation (mixed media). Exterior. Alison Page and Tina Lee with: Lorraine Brown and Narelle Thomas (CUAC); Jodie Stewart. Phyllis Stewart. Bonnie Foley-Brennan. Lila Lawrence, and Debbie Callaghan-Hempstead (Boolarng Nangamai); and Val Law and Alison Day. 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>205</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Wollongong High School of the Performing Arts <strong>EDUCATION FACILITY</strong> Initially displayed at the front of Wollongong City Gallery Series of painted panels. Exterior. Peter James Hewitt 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hampden Bridge, Kangaroo Valley. <strong>CIVIC / PUBLIC</strong> Mural (ground mosaic). Exterior. Unknown c.2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>McCabe Park Community Hall</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior. Incomplete. Temporary work only. The rear exterior wall of McCabe Park Community Hall is regularly re-painted – giving different artists a chance to display their talents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>Sutherland Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>Sylvania Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Photo from Shoalhaven City Council Reflection on 2012 (online PDF), p. 2.
[Table A3.T1.11]

Leonie Barracluff (facilitator)
4 works (1%)
**Hindmarsh Park, Kiama**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mixed media mosaics (footpath). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>c. 2007-2011</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other works at this location: #217</td>
<td>&quot;Celebrates the original creek in Hindmarsh Park which was of importance to both local Indigenous Australians and early settlers.&quot;</td>
<td>Kiama Municipality Cultural Plan 2007-2012 p.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Dreaming poles (carved wooden bollards). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>c. 2007-2011</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other works at this location: #216</td>
<td>&quot;Celebrates the original creek in Hindmarsh Park which was of importance to both local Indigenous Australians and early settlers.&quot;</td>
<td>Kiama Municipality Cultural Plan 2007-2012 p.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table A3.T1.12

**Non-Aboriginal**

**5 works (2%)**

Authored by non-Aboriginal artists, but references Aboriginal people, their culture and/ or history, in some way. Some are about the issues faced by local Aboriginal people, others are simply inclusive of a stereotypical Aboriginal visual aesthetic. The degree to which there was (or at least seems to have been) consultation with local Aboriginal people is highly variable.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Across from Cnr Princes Hwy and Geards Place.</th>
<th>Mural (painted traffic box):</th>
<th>Irina Bruckner</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Princes Highway, Waterfall</th>
<th>“Roy takes a break after showing Kelton the best fishing spots” Photographic print (billboard poster). Exterior. Temporary. See also #222</th>
<th>Derek Kreckler</th>
<th>2012 No longer exists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4a</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Princes Highway, Heathcote</th>
<th>“Streuth!” Photographic print (billboard poster). Exterior. Temporary. See also #221</th>
<th>Derek Kreckler</th>
<th>2012 No longer exists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4b</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Juvenalia
31 works (10%)

Prominent works produced in a stereotypical Aboriginal fashion and largely produced by children and adolescents. Often these works were often designed by a resident teacher or carer (as opposed to a practising Aboriginal artist). Most works are by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children alike, though some were exclusively produced by the former. Similarly, while some of the primary facilitators or designers are Aboriginal (e.g. a resident Aboriginal Education Officer), others are not. I have no doubt – particularly in regard to some of the older works – that some had no Aboriginal involvement. It was particularly difficult to obtain definitive details about some of these works. Constant staff changes at schools over a long period of time has meant that the ‘who’ and ‘when’ is now unknown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / Media</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>223</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Minerva Public School, Sutherland EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Photo from the Minerva Public School website." /></td>
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<tr>
<td>224</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Corrimal High School EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #140, 209, 280</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel). Interior.</td>
<td>Students of Corrimal High School. Facilitator unknown.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>225</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Woonona East Public School EDUCATION FACILITY Other works at this location: #77, 226, 227, 268</td>
<td>Murals (2 painted walls). Interior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>228</td>
<td>Koonawarra Public School</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>Painted footpath. Exterior. Students of Koonawarra Public School. Facilitator unknown.</td>
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<tr>
<td>229</td>
<td>Kanahooka High School</td>
<td>Murals</td>
<td>2 painted panels. Interior. Unknown One of the panels includes the words (names?) “Sven” and “Snell”.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
<td>Kanahooka High School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>Works made off-campus by students of Kanahooka high school: #112</td>
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<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
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<td>Students of Kanahooka High School. Facilitator unknown.</td>
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<td>Works made off-campus by students of Kanahooka high school: #112</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Joy in Achievement” Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
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<td>Students of Kanahooka High School. Facilitator unknown.</td>
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<td>5.5</td>
<td>Kanahooka High School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>Other works at this location: #229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 262</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Students of Kanahooka High School. Facilitated by Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Jocelyn Burns.</td>
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<td>Kanahooka High School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
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<td>Other works at this location: #229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 262</td>
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<td>Works made off-campus by students of Kanahooka high school: #112</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Koori students of Kanahooka High School. Designed and facilitated by Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Jocelyn Burns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>234</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>#</td>
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<td>Other works at this location: #229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 236, 262</td>
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<td>Works made off-campus by students of Kanahooka high school: #112</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Interior.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students of Kanahooka High School. Designed and facilitated by Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Jocelyn Burns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>235</td>
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<td>2009</td>
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<td>Work Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artist(s)</td>
<td>Completion Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>236</td>
<td>Kanahooka High School</td>
<td>Mural (painted panel)</td>
<td>Interior. Displayed immediately outside the Principal's office.</td>
<td>Students of Kanahooka High School. Facilitated by Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Jocelyn Burns.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artist/Contributors</td>
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<tr>
<td>243</td>
<td>Illawarra Sports High School, Berkeley</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels)</td>
<td>Students of Illawarra Sports High School and their parents.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>244</td>
<td>Illawarra Sports High School</td>
<td>Sea of hands</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>installation. Exterior.</td>
<td>NAIDOC WEEK installation. No longer exists.</td>
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<td>245</td>
<td>Bulli Public School</td>
<td>Mural (painted bus</td>
<td>Brentyn Lugnan and other students of Bulli Public School.</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shelter). Exterior.</td>
<td>Part of the &quot;Adopt a Stop&quot; initiative.</td>
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<td>246</td>
<td>Mount Terry Public School, Albion Park</td>
<td>Murals (3 painted</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>panels). Exterior.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>247</td>
<td>Mount Terry Public School, Albion Park</td>
<td>Triptych mural (3</td>
<td>Students of Mount Terry Public School. Facilitated by teachers Renee Harris and Annabel Marley.</td>
<td>NAIDOC week 2009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>No.</td>
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<td>Education Facility</td>
<td>Other works at this location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>Additional Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>249</td>
<td>Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>#3, 4, 5, 6, 7</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Students of Kemblawarra Public School</td>
<td>NAIIDOC week 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>252</td>
<td>Engadine West Public School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mural (painted canvas collage). Interior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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</table>
[Table A3.T1.14]

Inclusive
26 works (9%)

As opposed to being specifically “Aboriginal” in style or content, these works, though of the same ilk as those in the previous category (ie. made largely by children/adolescents), are inclusive of Aboriginality as part of a broader group identity. While the Aboriginal flag and its colour scheme is a recurring motif in a number of works from other categories, it appears here as a symbol of inclusion and acknowledgment amongst the signifiers of other cultures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Artist(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>257</td>
<td>The Old Fire Station Community Arts Centre, Kiama</td>
<td>Mural (wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>TAFE Outreach Program</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>258</td>
<td>Princes Highway, Albion Park (near Creamery Road turn-off)</td>
<td>Mixed media mosaic/mural (bus shelter). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>259</td>
<td>Illawarra Senior College, Port Kembla</td>
<td>Mural (painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artist/Details</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cnr King and Queen Streets, Warilla.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>267</td>
<td>Queen Street Bakery</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>(painted wall). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>268</td>
<td>Woonona East Public School</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>(painted panel). Interior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>269</td>
<td>Hooka Park, Berkeley</td>
<td>Sculpture / Mosaic (carved and engraved stone bench with shell frieze). Exterior.</td>
<td>Part of a larger project to re-vamp Hooka Park that involved various artists and community groups.</td>
<td>Celeste Coucke and Ana Pollak with local community groups</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>271</td>
<td>Dapto Ribbonwood Centre</td>
<td>Mural</td>
<td>“Dapto Yesterday and Today”</td>
<td>Sam Newstead</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Completion Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>272</td>
<td>American Creek, Mt Kembla</td>
<td>Bart</td>
<td>Mural (engraved metal) on bridge.</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>275</td>
<td>Osborne Park, Wollongong</td>
<td>Col Henry</td>
<td>Other works by Col Henry: #275</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>Other Works</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>277</td>
<td>Thirroul Community Centre and Library</td>
<td>“Ngaraba-aan” (Past, present, future) Mixed media sculpture (carved wooden bench with metal relief). Exterior.</td>
<td>Ana Pollack</td>
<td>Other works by Ana Pollack: #269</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>278</td>
<td>George V Park, Port Kembla</td>
<td>Installation (printed graphics on stone tablets). Exterior.</td>
<td>Michael Keighery</td>
<td>Other works by Michael Keighery: #38, 273</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>279</td>
<td>Kids Uni (Out of School Hours Care Centre) at the Innovation Campus (University of Wollongong)</td>
<td>Dreaming poles (3 painted wooden posts). Exterior. 1 of 3 groupings of painted posts that celebrate the cultural heritage of the children that attend the care centre.</td>
<td>Children and teachers of Kids Uni (OOSH).</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[Table A3.T1.15]

Miscellaneous
15 works (5%)

Beyond location I was able to obtain very little information about these works. All display “Aboriginal” stylistic traits or content, but the authority of many is conspicuous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Map ref.</th>
<th>Location / Space type</th>
<th>Form / media</th>
<th>Artists</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>280</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Corrimal High School EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Murals (4 painted panels). Interior.</td>
<td>Unknown. Possibly a very early series of works by the Coomaditchie Artists.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>[Image]</td>
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<tr>
<td>281</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grand Pacific Drive (across the road from Warilla Grove Shopping Centre) CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Mural (painted bus shelter)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>[Image]</td>
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<tr>
<td>282</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>The Old Fire Station Community Arts Centre, Kiama COMMUNITY CENTRE.</td>
<td>Mural (painted cow sculpture). Exterior. Unknown.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>[Image] No photo available</td>
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<td>283</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The Old Fire Station Community Arts Centre, Kiama COMMUNITY CENTRE.</td>
<td>Mural (painted cow sculpture). Exterior. Unknown.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>[Image] Photo from Daisy the Decorated Cow’s Facebook page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>284</td>
<td>Kurnell</td>
<td>Sea of Hands</td>
<td>Sea of Hands installation.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>287</td>
<td>Corner of Memorial Drive and Railway Street, Corrimal</td>
<td>Mural (painted traffic box)</td>
<td>Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>c.2003-2006</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>288</td>
<td>Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation: Cultural Centre &amp; Keeping Place, Kenny Street, Wollongong</td>
<td>Mural (painted panels)</td>
<td>Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Owner</td>
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<tr>
<td>289</td>
<td>Princes Hwy (overlooking the Northern Distributor), North Wollongong</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Metal mesh design (road barrier). Exterior. 1 in a series of many designs positioned above freeways throughout the Blawarra. This is the only one that seems to reference Aboriginal culture directly.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>290</td>
<td>Wollongong City Beach</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Stencil design (stainless steel fence insert). Exterior. 1 in a series of approximately 40. This is the only stencil that seems to reference Aboriginal culture directly.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>291</td>
<td>Cronulla High School</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Dreaming poles</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>292</td>
<td>Woodyungah (UOW)</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Sea of Hands installation</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>293</td>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>Sea of Hands installation</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>294</td>
<td>Crookhaven Headland Reserve</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Dreaming poles (carved, wooden). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2013</td>
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Table A3.T1.16

Signage
10 works (3%)

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Photograph</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>295</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Boomerang Public Golf Course, Princes Hwy, Maddens Plains. CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Double-sided sign. Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Street view from Google Maps" /></td>
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<td>296</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Loftus, Waterfall and Otford entrances to the Royal National Park. CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Sign (mixed media sculpture / mural). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Installed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Street view from Google Maps" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>297</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Surf Lane, Cronulla COMMERCIAL</td>
<td>Mural (commercial signage). Painted directly on wall.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Street view from Google Maps" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>298</td>
<td>4a</td>
<td>Kirinari Youth Hostel, Sylvania Heights EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>&quot;Coming Together, A New Start&quot; Mural (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>Brendon Copeland James Barnett Justin Duncan Joshua Thomas Michael Sinden Derek Hardman Other works by wards of Kirinari: #188, 299</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Street view from Google Maps" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Installed by</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>299</td>
<td>Kirinari Youth Hostel, Sylvania Heights</td>
<td>EDUCATION FACILITY</td>
<td>“Kirinari Youth Hostel” Sign (painted panel). Exterior.</td>
<td>Same as #298?</td>
<td>c. 1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>River Road, Shoalhaven Heads</td>
<td>CIVIC / PUBLIC</td>
<td>Printed graphic (sign). Exterior.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>c.2008</td>
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<tr>
<td>303</td>
<td>Thirroul Community Centre and Library</td>
<td>COMMUNITY CENTRE</td>
<td>Printed graphics (banners/ signage). Exterior.</td>
<td>Greer Taylor</td>
<td>2009</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 9 | Discovery Centre at Kamay Botany Bay National Park  
COMMUNITY CENTRE | “Welcome Wall” Installation (engraved metal sheets). Exterior | Susan Freeman (Freeman Ryan Designs) with input from Dean Kelly. | 2009 | Photo courtesy of Bruce Howell |
Geographical spread of the public art

Master map on p.64 of Methodology.

Legend

- Coomaditchie Artists
- Kevin Butler
- Val Law
- Boolarng Nangamai artists
- Fiona Stewart (facilitator)
- Richard Campbell
- Rick O’Brien with Strong Brother and Strong Sista
- Les Bursill OAM (facilitator)
- Jasmine Sarin
- Two or less
- Leonie Barracluff (facilitator)
- Non-Aboriginal
- Inclusive
- Juvenalia
- Miscellaneous
- Signage
[Map A3.M01] Sutherland Shire (Kurnell)
[Map A3.M02] Sutherland Shire (Sylvania Waters)
[Map A3.M03] Sutherland Shire (Heathcote)
[Map A3.M04] Illawarra (Helensburgh)
[Map A3.M05] Illawarra (Bulli)
[Map A3.M06] Illawarra (Wollongong)
[Map A3.M07] Illawarra (Port Kembla)
[Map A3.M08] Illawarra (Dapto)
[Map A3.M09] Illawarra (Shellharbour)
[Map A3.M10] Illawarra (Kiama)
**Table A3.T2.01a**

### Coomaditchie Artists (1/3)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>N. Position</th>
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<th>Media</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Context</th>
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<td>Fixed-world landscape</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Aboriginal vegetation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal vegetation</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal animals</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Religious beliefs</td>
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<td>Human events</td>
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<td>Iconography</td>
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[Table continues on the next page.]
Table A3.72.01b

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary/Graph</th>
<th>Coomaditchie Artists (2/3)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Includes a sample of the Killburne language.</td>
<td>Includes the word 'Walkaround'.</td>
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<td>Includes the word 'Wimarekal'.</td>
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<td>Identification / body paint</td>
<td>Overview / Head / Eyes /</td>
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<td>Silhouette / Legs / Feet / Abdomen</td>
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<td>Carve / Lines</td>
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<td>Bone / Wood / Shell / Fabric</td>
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<td>Weave art</td>
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<td>Patterns / Dyeing (e.g. stamp, dotting/lyrical)</td>
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<td>Animal marks</td>
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<td>Textiles / Tassels / Cords</td>
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<td>Footprints / Smudge</td>
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<td>Hand prints / Smudge</td>
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<td>Aboriginal flag (or its colour scheme)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Symbols (e.g. Sunflowers, Morning glory, water lilies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Salt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mythology</td>
<td>Aircraft / Abstract</td>
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<td>Linear</td>
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<td>One-dimensional</td>
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<td>Single plane objects on plain background</td>
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<td>Astronomical characteristics</td>
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<td>Aesthetic/epigraphic characteristics</td>
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<td>Nomenclature, conceptual / ideological / genetic</td>
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<td>Biologically non-literal</td>
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<td>Historic local features (other than Killburne society)</td>
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<td>Probably Killburne Encumbrance, but could have travelled</td>
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<td>Clearly Killburne Encumbrance (no identifiable features)</td>
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<td>Riparian / Lagoons</td>
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<td>Coastal (coral reef and aquatic)</td>
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<td>Prominently / totally terrestrial</td>
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<td>Specific spirit / mythological figure</td>
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<td>Ethereal / Unseen</td>
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<td>Forster at / contact</td>
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<td>Contemporary (post-contact)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Non-flying Birds (e.g. ara, cock turkey, lark)</td>
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<td>Humming / Grass / Tree / Person</td>
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<td>Fleece / Coated / Blacksheep</td>
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<td>Back / Water / Moon</td>
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<td>Pelican</td>
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<td>Continence / Steele / mermaid</td>
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<td>Frog</td>
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<td>Tariff</td>
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<td>Fea / Stadium / Auditorium / Stadium</td>
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<td>Field / Sports</td>
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<td>Whale / Whales / Seal</td>
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<td>Insects / Bugs</td>
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<td>Egg-laying mammals (e.g. Echidnas, platypus)</td>
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<td>Other exoskeleton (e.g. people, whales, birds)</td>
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<td>Kangaroo / Wallaby</td>
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<td>Lizards / other reptiles (except snakes)</td>
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<td>Other / skeletal remains or skeletal features</td>
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<td>Rainbow serpent (no large permanent scale)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
<td>Photography</td>
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<td>Carving / Engraving</td>
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<td>Metal</td>
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<td>Stone / Earth / Rocks</td>
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<td>House / House / Home / Hut</td>
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<td>Paint</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Sculpture / specially designed object</td>
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<td>Movable mural / decorating (pandanus, canvas)</td>
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<td>Other construction (e.g. Iron Shingles, telegraph lines)</td>
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<td>Fixed-standing sculpture / pillar</td>
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<td>Stretched sculpture / pole</td>
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<td>Ground level surface / Steep / Rock</td>
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<td>Wall Paint</td>
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<th>Interior</th>
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[Table A3.T2.01c]

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<th>Coomaditchie Artists (3/3)</th>
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<td><strong>Vocabulary profile</strong></td>
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<td>Initiative a sample of the Dinélanguage</td>
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<td>Initiative the word Diné</td>
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<td>Standardization (body part)</td>
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<td>Location (address)</td>
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<td>Steven Vago (aka. Steven)</td>
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<td>Cameron</td>
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<td>Remainder - other (no chart)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Local rock art</td>
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<td>New art</td>
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<td>Text</td>
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<td>Patrons / Exhibitions (eg. Breck, Davids, Vail)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animal rocks</td>
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<td>Four generic rocks</td>
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<td>Hand-painted rocks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal flag (or in color scheme)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbols (eg. Sunflower, Morning glory, water hole)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naturally</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native</td>
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<td>Indigenous</td>
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<td>Artistic / abstract</td>
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<td>Linear</td>
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<td>One-dimensional</td>
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<td>Vogel sphere objects on plain background</td>
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<td>Standardized characteristics</td>
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<td>Anthropomorphic characteristics</td>
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<td>Diné / conceptual / spiritual / generic</td>
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<td>Recognizably non-local</td>
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<td>Distinctly local features (other than Aboriginal context)</td>
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<td>Probably Dinécosmic (but could be anywhere)</td>
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<td>Clearly Dinécosmic (in identifiable Dinécosmic)</td>
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<td>Potentially / totally aquatic</td>
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<td>Potentially / totally terrestrial</td>
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<td>Potentially / totally in-between</td>
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<td>Concepts / meanings</td>
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<td>Recognizable / identified individually</td>
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<td>Specific Spirit / psychological figures</td>
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<td>Present / all of the above</td>
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<td>Contemporary (post-contact)</td>
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<td>Non-flaying skins (eg. mink, beaver, fox)</td>
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<td>Mgeme / Cow / Bison</td>
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<td>Patents / inventions / knowhow / tools</td>
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<td>Black / painted / paint</td>
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<td>Pellets</td>
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<td>Cowraos  / shells / starfish</td>
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<td>Frog</td>
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<td>Turtle</td>
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<td>Elk / Horses / Seakane / toothpick</td>
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<td>Fish (general)</td>
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<td>Whale / dolphins / seal</td>
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<td>Insects / bugs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egg laying mammals (eg. Edithia, platypus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other mammals (eg. porcupine, scurine, lobo)</td>
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<td>Kangaroo / variety</td>
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<td>Lizards / other reptiles (except lizards)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other psychological concepts (eg. primary function)</td>
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<td>Relevant species (eg. large permanent scaled)</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Photographic</td>
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<td>Carving / engraving</td>
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<td>Metal</td>
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<td>Wood</td>
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<td>Clay / earth / chalk</td>
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<td>Minerals (geomorph (eg.</td>
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<td>Paint</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Sculpature / spatially defined object</td>
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<td>Animals or/and (salient, erect, convex)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other elements (eg. fish scales, taffle loss)</td>
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<td>Free-standing column / pole</td>
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<td>Structural elements / pole</td>
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<td>Ground-level surface / basement / road</td>
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<td>Wall / fence</td>
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<td>Beetle</td>
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### Kevin Butler (1/3)

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<th>Form</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Human Forms</th>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Depiction</th>
<th>Iconography</th>
<th>Trad, material culture</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<td>Table 4 A3.T2.02b</td>
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</table>

| Vocabulary profile: |
| Includes a sample of the Bininj language. |
| Includes the word “Bininj.” |
| Noun: |
| Identification / body part |
| Longclothes / head area |
| Women’s hats / caps / costume |
| Canoe | |
| Ceremonial / clothes / costume |
| Other |
| Local rock art |
| X-ray art |
| Bone |
| Patterns / Designs (eg, Barrie, dot-pattern) |
| Animal tracks |
| Foot prints / vessels |
| Hand prints / vessels |
| Aboriginal flag (in colour scheme) |
| Symbolic (eg, Snuggums, Meeting place, water hole) |
| Naturalistic |
| Native |
| Mythology |
| Astral / Abstract |
| Linear |
| One-dimensional |
| Single plane objects vs plane background |
| Geometric characteristics |
| Abstraction |
| Recognizable / non-identifiable |
| Substrate / conceptual / archetypical / generic |
| Recognizable non-identifiable |
| Discursively local features rather than Bininj specific |
| Clearly Bininj Concepts (eg, identifiable features) |
| Recognizable / non-identifiable |
| Professional / broadly applicable |
| Pigments / Legends |
| Central (restricted and spatial) |
| Professional / broadly applicative |
| Generic / non-identifiable |
| Recognizable / identified (labelled) |
| Specific Spirit / mythological figures |
| Ethereal / Ancestral |
| Pre/par contact |
| Contemporary (post-contact) |
| Other |
| Non-flying birds (eg, roos, birds, turkeys, etc) |
| Hogs / Turtles / Perises |
| Muru / Conclusions / sandhills |
| Bush / water hole / means |
| Palms |
| Cosmic events / shells / carvings |
| Frog |
| Turtles |
| Fish / Vines / banners / crests |
| Fish / shells |
| Whales / reptiles / sea |
| Insects / bugs |
| Egg-laying mammals (eg, Echidna, platypus) |
| Other mammalises (eg, possums, wombat, bandicoot) |
| Reptiles / wildlife |
| Lizards / other reptiles (except turtles) |
| Other mythological creatures as primary features |
| Rainbow Serpent (eg, large, prominent, snake) |

| Other |
| Photography |
| Carving / Engraving |
| Wood |
| Clay / earth / shells |
| Metal (irregular / flat) |
| Paint |
| Other |
| Special / specialized object |
| Identifiable material / dimensions (panels, canvas) |
| Other constructs (eg, bars, shelters, traffic blocks) |
| Free-standing columns / pillars |
| Separated structures / poles |
| Ground-level surfaces (houseparts / roads) |
| Wall / image |
| Battery |
| Engraver |

Kevin Butler (23)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Carving</td>
<td>Engraving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay, shell</td>
<td>Mould</td>
<td>Relief</td>
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<td>Paint</td>
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<td>Stone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>Specially designed object</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Movable</td>
<td>Decoration (gods, statues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Sculptures (gods, statues) (including votive figures, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Fire-stands (votive figures)</td>
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<td>Seated gods, statues</td>
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<td>Consecrated shrines (hence statues)</td>
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<td>Wall paintings</td>
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Note: Table A3.F2.03
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Final result</th>
<th>Felt</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Content</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fiona Stewart</td>
<td>Drawing, Painting, Sculpture</td>
<td>Canvas, Paper</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Air (wind)</td>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>Human forms</td>
<td>Composition</td>
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Note: The table represents works facilitated by Fiona Stewart, highlighting various art forms and their media.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<th>Media</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Human Forms</th>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Depiction</th>
<th>Imagination</th>
<th>Total materials noted</th>
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[Table A3.T2.06]
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<th>N</th>
<th>Neo-Assyria</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Depiction</th>
<th>Iconography</th>
<th>Trad. motif details</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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**Works facilitated by Les Bursill**

[Table A3.T2.08]
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<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Farm</th>
<th>Media</th>
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<th>Human Forms</th>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Iconography</th>
<th>Trad. Material</th>
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Note: This table represents the activity matrix for Jasmine Sarin.
<table>
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<th>Column 1</th>
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<th>Column 3</th>
<th>Column 4</th>
<th>Column 5</th>
<th>Column 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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### Table A3.T2.10b

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Venetian's profile</th>
<th>Includes a sample of the Bruneian language</th>
<th>Includes the word &quot;Bureunan&quot;?</th>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Scarifications / body paint</td>
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<td>Lexicomm / Hard chew</td>
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<td>Wear / warp / tars / /cotton</td>
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<td>Canoes / boats</td>
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<td>Bow/spear / daik / spear</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local rock art</td>
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<td>X-ray art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pattern / Stylization (e.g. Raft, domino gralp)</td>
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<td>Animal tracks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Footprints / smudges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hand prints / mark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal flag (or its colour scheme)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbol(s) (e.g. Sunglass, Shooting glass, water lock)</td>
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<td>Naturalness</td>
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<td>Shape</td>
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<td>One-dimensional</td>
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<td>Single plane (objects on plane background)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animalistic characters</td>
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<td>Reusability minimal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity local human rather than (Bruneian more?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probably Bruneian Encapsulated, but could be anywhere</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Clay / marble / shells</td>
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<td>Music (pianos / flutes)</td>
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<td>Free-standing column / pole</td>
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<td>Structural column / pole</td>
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Note: 2 or less (2)
### Table A3.T2.11

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<td>Includes a sample of this historical language</td>
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<td>Includes the word “Hercules”</td>
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<td>Latroche</td>
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<td>Women’s bags</td>
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<td>Canoe</td>
<td>/sweater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisvasuaw</td>
<td>/shirt /sweater</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<td>Local rock art</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decor</td>
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<td>Patrons</td>
<td>Sky/landng (eg. Winds, deities/ogres)</td>
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<td>Animals</td>
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<td>Four-point symbols</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hands, in the shape of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginal flags (or in the colour scheme)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbols</td>
<td>(eg. Snakes, Meeting place, water sites)</td>
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### Periods

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<td>Nok</td>
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### Styles

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<td>Single plane objects on plain background</td>
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### Contemporary (post-contact)

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<tr>
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<td>Peacocks</td>
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<td>Monkey</td>
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<td>Beaver</td>
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<td>Fish, in the shape of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whales</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birds</td>
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<td>Rocks</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay / earth / stone</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
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<td>Clay / earth / stone</td>
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### Footnote

- [Table A3.T2.11] Works facilitated by Leonie Barracuff
### Non-Aboriginal

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<th>Composition</th>
<th>Depiction</th>
<th>Iconography</th>
<th>Trad. material source</th>
<th>Source</th>
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[Table A3.T2.12]
### Juvenile / Adolescent (1/2)

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<th>Iconography</th>
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Table A3.T2.17

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<th>Plants</th>
<th>Composites</th>
<th>Deposition</th>
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<th>Track material culture</th>
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Note: (1) Includes length of the removed segment.
# Data summaries

[Table A3.T3.01] Master: characteristics of the public art

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### [Table A3.T3.02] Number of works by artist and artist type

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<td>60</td>
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<td>Val Law</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 (2.96)</td>
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<td>Boolang Nangamai artists</td>
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<td>Fiona Stewart (facilitator)</td>
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<td>Richard Campbell</td>
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<td>Rick O’Brien et al.</td>
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<td>2 (2.3)</td>
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<td>Les Bursill (facilitator)</td>
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<td>Jasmine Sarin</td>
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<td>1 (1.32)</td>
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<td>2 or less</td>
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<td>12 (11.51)</td>
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<td>Leonie Barracluff</td>
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### [Table A3.T3.03] Space type

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<th>Still exists (# / %)</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>48 (15.79)</td>
<td>12 (3.95)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 (2.63)</td>
<td>1 (0.33)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Boolang Nangamai artists</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12 (3.95)</td>
<td>1 (0.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona Stewart (facilitator)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (0.99)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Campbell</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7 (2.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick O’Brien et al.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Bursill (facilitator)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine Sarin</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (0.66)</td>
<td>2 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or less</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33 (10.86)</td>
<td>2 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonie Barracluff (facilitator)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (0.99)</td>
<td>2 (0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenalia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27 (8.88)</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25 (8.22)</td>
<td>1 (0.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 (2.63)</td>
<td>7 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10 (3.29)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td><strong>167</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>258</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERCENT</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.99%</strong></td>
<td><strong>54.93%</strong></td>
<td><strong>17.76%</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.32%</strong></td>
<td><strong>84.87%</strong></td>
<td><strong>15.13%</strong></td>
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</table>
### [Table A3.T3.04] Murals (all types)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Actual #</th>
<th>% of 304</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fixed Mural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall / Fence</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground-level surface (footpath / road)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural column / pole</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free-standing column / pole(s)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other structure (eg. Bus shelter, traffic box)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moveable mural / decoration (panels, canvas)</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall PERCENT</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
<td></td>
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### [Table A3.T3.05] Infrequent but noteworthy forms and media

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Actual #</th>
<th>% of 304</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other structure (fixed mural)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic / electricity box</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus shelter</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fountain / water feature</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Window</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water tank</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete tunnel / pipe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete bread oven</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipping container</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fishing boat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sculpture / Specially designed object</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carved wooden bench / chair</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water fountain</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandstone (sculptural)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal abstract sculptures of traditional utensils</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel fence / barrier designs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yurt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind vane</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other (media / forms)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed media</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carved poles (as opposed to simply painted)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete embossing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea of hands installation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painted cow sculpture (&quot;Daisy the Cow&quot;)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy Cart</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light / projection display / performance</td>
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### [Table A3.T3.06] Years of production

<table>
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<td>2012</td>
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