Namatjira's absent presence in Australian national discourse

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Abstract
By the early 1950s Albert Namatjira had achieved an unprecedented presence in the Australian consciousness. He had sell-out exhibitions, received more press coverage than any other Australian artist, was lionized in Australia's capital cities and had become a household name. His success was due to more than the quality his art. His Aboriginality played into the mid-twentieth-century discourse of Australian nationalism and the look and subject matter of his paintings reflected the most prominent and popular school of Australian landscape art associated with this discourse. Why then is his work absent from official exhibitions designed to promote the idea of an Australian national identity?

Keywords
namatjira, absent, discourse, national, presence, australian

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Australian Painting in Britain: Cultural Diplomacy, Art and National Identity

A symposium to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary at the Tate Gallery in 1963 (first shown 1962 in Australia)

12th October 2012
Menzies Centre for Australian Studies
King’s College London

ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS

Australian Indigenous art within Australia’s cultural diplomacy around the world: Educational diplomacy through the Wandjina Song Cycle (1917-2010) by Miuron Katherine Aigner, Australian National University

Through an early 20th century Kimberley artist from the Kwini and Kulari tribes of Kalumburu in the Northern Territory of Australia, a large scale cultural diplomacy event was launched at the Vatican Ethnological Museum in October 2010. Their Australian Indigenous collection dates from the mid-19th century. After a great exhibition in 1925 the collection had not been seen together publically for around 40 years. As tens of thousands of Australians descended on Rome to celebrate the canonisation of Australia’s first Saint, the exhibition Rituals of Life launched the re-opening of one of the world’s greatest Museums. For the first time in the long history of the Vatican, the performance of didgeridoo and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers under the lights of St Peters captivated an international audience of thousands. Breaking cultural barriers through the totemic work of the Kimberley artist, the museum audience was educated with an appreciation of Australian culture, situated next to the great Renaissance masters.

Katherine Aigner has spent 15 years working with Indigenous knowledge holders and custodians around Australia and overseas. She made educational documentaries on preserving cultural heritage (including the award-winning Australian Atomic Confessions), worked as an assistant curator at the National Museum of Australia and
currently is an associate curator at the Vatican Ethnological Museum. Among her publications is the first comprehensive presentation of the Indigenous collections of the Vatican Museums in the catalogue *Ethnos: The Ethnological Collections of the Vatican Museums* (2012). She is currently completing a Research degree at the National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University on the late north coast Bundjalung filmmaker, activist and keeper of culture, Lorraine Mafi-Williams.

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**Cultural Diplomacy, Australian Art and National Identity**
Kate Darian-Smith, University of Melbourne

The importance of cultural production — particularly literary and artistic works — as the bearer of national images and identity abroad has in the early 21st century become the subject of renewed discussion in Australia. This has been particularly linked to the 'soft power' of diplomatic influence, and to ongoing discussions about a national cultural policy and the priorities of Australia’s economic, security and cultural engagement with the Asian region and the rest of the world.

This paper situates the *Australian Art* exhibition at London’s Tate Gallery in 1963 in the context of a longer history whereby the Australian collies and then the nation have officially exhibited of works of art and material culture abroad as representations of national wealth, creativity and identity. From the colonial period to the present, the will examine both historical and contemporary examples of the role of art and exhibition within Australia’s approach to cultural diplomacy and the staking out of its place on the international stage.

Kate Darian-Smith is Professor of Australian Studies and History at University of Melbourne, and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. She has published widely on Australian and imperial history; memory studies; material culture and heritage; and the historical and contemporary dimensions of children’s play. Recent publications include the co-edited book *Children, Childhood and Cultural Heritage* (Routledge 2012), and the chapter on World War II and Postwar Reconstruction for the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Australia*. She has held advisory positions with cultural institutions; and led major Australian Research Council funded projects, including in partnership with museums; and currently serves on the Council, Museum of Australian democracy at Old Parliament House as the Foundation Chair, City of Melbourne’s Arts and Heritage Advisory Committee. Kate is also a member of the Board, Australia-Japan Foundation/DFAT and on the Australian Studies Committee, Australia-China Council/DFAT. She has been involved for more than two decades in various Australian Studies projects involving cultural diplomacy and engagement in Europe and Asia.

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**Cultural Diplomacy in Context: Biennales of the South from the 1950s to the 1970s**
Anthony Gardner, Queen’s College and the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, the University of Oxford

From 1955 into the 1980s, the large-scale group exhibition called the biennial was a central part of the novel, inter-cultural networks developing among the countries of the third world and the south. From Ljubljana to Alexandria, and from Medellín to Sydney, these (now often forgotten) biennials were aimed at presenting an expanded regionalism very different from the Cold War binaries of the capitalist first and communist second worlds.

This paper examines the challenges these biennials pose for imagining cultural diplomacy then and the global today, contextualising the main foci of this conference by excavating some of the drives toward the regional in postwar exhibition histories.

Anthony Gardner is University Lecturer in Contemporary Art History and Theory at the Queen’s College and the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, the University of Oxford. In 2010-2011, he was the Research Forum /Andrew Mellon Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, and in 2011-2012, an ARC Research Fellow through the Art History program at the University of Melbourne. He writes extensively on postcolonialism, postsocialism and curatorial histories, with essays most recently in the MIT Press journal ARTMargins (for which he is Corresponding Editor) and the books Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture and The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art. Among his current book projects are a monograph on Mega-Exhibitions: Biennales, Triennales and Documentas (with Charles Green), the anthology Mapping South on south-south cultural relations, and Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art’s Critiques of Democracy, a study of European installation art in relation to post-socialist political philosophy.

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George W. Lambert’s Expatriate Self-Portraits
Keren Hammerschlag, King’s College London

This paper takes as its focus a puzzling picture of a medical examination entitled Chesham Street (1911), painted by the Australian artist George Washington Lambert while he was living in London. By placing this work within the context of the portraits which Lambert and his circle produced of themselves and each other during their time abroad, I interpret Chesham Street as an expatriate self-portrait. The composite nature of the patient in Chesham Street, I argue, reveals the artist’s dual personalities of cosmopolitan bohemian artist and working-class Australian boxer—personae that did not combine seamlessly. From a discussion of the artist as patient, I move to an analysis of other self-portraits by Lambert in which he is shown flexing his muscles, especially in the context of his passion for boxing. I consider how these portraits serve as complex inscriptions of illness and health and how this relates to the experience of living and working as an Australian expatriate artist in London during the early twentieth century.

Keren Hammerschlag is a Wellcome Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for the Humanities and Health at King's College London. She completed her PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2010 with a thesis entitled 'Death and Violence in the Art of
Frederic Leighton.’ She has published articles on Leighton in Women: A Cultural Review and Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, and is currently completing her book, Death at the Academy: Frederic Leighton and his Circle. Her current research interests focus on the intersections between art and medicine in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Forthcoming articles include: ‘Identifying the Patient in George W. Lambert’s Chesham Street’ in Medical Humanities (June 2013) and ‘The Gentleman Surgeon-Artist in Late Victorian Group Portraiture’ in Visual Culture in Britain (July 2013). She holds a Menzies Australian Bicentennial Fellowship to write a book on the Australian and Irish expatriate artists George Lambert and William Orpen.

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Australian Indigenous Art and Cultural Diplomacy
Gay McDonald, University of New South Wales

Sending abroad exhibitions of Australian Indigenous art to enhance Australia’s international identity has a relatively short history. Viewed with indifference by Australian museums until the 1980s, Australian Indigenous art is now regularly promoted as the cultural form that can best represent Australia in the area of cultural diplomacy.

The 2009 US presentation of Culture Warriors exemplifies this new role accorded to Australian Indigenous art. Celebrating the work of some of Australia’s most respected Indigenous artists, the decision by the Australian Embassy to send this exhibition to Washington D.C., seems hardly surprising. Yet this exhibition with its inclusion of politically provocative content departs radically from the celebratory tone of standard cultural diplomacy fare. Comparing this initiative with key precedents, the paper argues that Culture Warriors should be considered as an important point of reference for future cultural diplomacy initiatives organized by countries like Australia that continue to grapple with long-term issues linked to race relations.

Gay McDonald is a senior lecturer in the School of Art History & Art Education, at the University of New South Wales. She is also a founding member of in.site, a research group that encourages critical debate, projects and publications on experimental approaches to engaging audiences with contemporary art (www.in.site.unsw.edu.au), and a former curator within the NSW Regional Galleries network. Her research focuses on the construction and impact of exhibitions on audiences in the US, Europe and Australia and specifically the role of art museums in advancing foreign policy objectives via the ‘soft’ channels of cultural diplomacy.

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Namatjira’s Absent Presence in Australian National Discourse
Ian McLean, University of Wollongong

By the early 1950s Albert Namatjira had achieved an unprecedented presence in the Australian consciousness. He had sell-out exhibitions, received more press coverage than any other Australian artist, was lionized in Australia’s capital cities and had become a household name. His success was due to more than the quality
of his art. His Aboriginality played into the mid-twentieth-century discourse of Australian nationalism and the look and subject matter of his paintings reflected the most prominent and popular school of Australian landscape art associated with this discourse. Why then is his work absent from official exhibitions designed to promote the idea of an Australian national identity?

Ian McLean is Research Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Wollongong. He has published extensively on Australian art and particularly Aboriginal art. His books include *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*, *White Aborigines Identity Politics in Australian Art*, and *Art of Gordon Bennett* (with a chapter by Gordon Bennett). He is also on the advisory boards of *Third Text*, the international journal of postcolonial art, *World Art* and *National Identities*.

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Celebration and Controversy: *Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist Contemporary and its Legacy*

Sarah Scott, Australian National University

In January 1963, *Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary* opened at the Tate Gallery in London. This show, selected by the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board under the auspices of the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies and his government, was the largest survey exhibition of Australian art ever to be presented in the UK and Europe.

As such this Tate survey show performed a dual function. In line with the Australian official government policy to attract British migrants, it presented an opportunity to promote a celebratory, narrative of progress to British audiences. But the exhibition also aimed to present a definitive Australian art canon offering a unique opportunity, Australian contemporary artists believed, to present their work to a broader audience, hopes that were not fully realized.

Now in 2012, it is possible to look back at Australian Painting and see more clearly how the exhibition intersected with debates concerning the role of art and diplomacy in constructing an image of nation, and to critically assess the canon it presented – one that in keeping with the then predominant view, perceived Indigenous art practice as anthropological artefact rather than Fine art. Focussing upon the controversial discussions concerning the inclusion or exclusion of Aboriginal art from *Australian Painting*, this paper will consider how Australian Indigenous art has shifted from a marginal position to one that now dominates Australian representation of art internationally. It will also argue that the critical response to Australian Painting and the selection process behind it was one of the catalysts that generated an increasing professionalism within the Australian arts sector.

Dr Sarah Scott is Convenor of the Museums and Collections Graduate program at the Australian National University, Visiting Rydon Fellow at the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies in 2012, and author of a forthcoming book on Australian art and artists in London. She has previous taught at several institutions in Australia, including the University of the Northern Territory, and published on the cultural history of Australian art and the history of exhibitions of Indigenous Australian art.
Australian Painting: The Perspective from the Tate Gallery

Chris Stephens, Tate Gallery

This paper will look at and reflect upon the background to the Tate exhibition of Australian Painting in 1963. Drawing upon the Tate Gallery’s archive, it will consider the landmark Australian exhibition in relation to the Tate Gallery’s wider collecting and exhibiting policies at that time.

Chris Stephens is Head of Displays at the Tate Gallery, and oversees the presentation of the permanent collection at Tate Britain. He also leads the Modern British curatorial team there. Chris is a specialist in mid-20th century British art. He completed a doctoral thesis on art in St Ives and has published widely on that subject. Exhibition credits include Barbara Hepworth Centenary (Tate St Ives 2003), Francis Bacon and Henry Moore (Tate Britain 2008 and 2010).

The Spectre of Empire in the British Art Museum

Sarah Thomas, University of Sydney and Kingston University

This paper examines the virtual invisibility of colonial art in British art museums today, despite a wealth of recent postcolonial scholarship calling for Empire to be understood as central to British art history. While history museums tend to take a broadly inclusive view of the subject, fine art institutions such as Tate have long defined British art in its narrowest geographical sense, despite Britain ruling over what at its peak was the world’s largest global empire. The art of colonial Australia, for example, is more likely to be seen in such institutions as the National Maritime Museum, where the grand oils of such artists as John Webber and William Hodges sit comfortably within a narrative about British exploration and empire. The exhibitions and collection displays at Tate, on the other hand, operate as gate-keepers of an established British art historical canon, despite the institution’s acquisitions policy which promises to ‘frame and address changing historical narratives’. While there have been encouraging signs of change in recent years, colonial subjects continue to remain of minimal interest to British curators and directors today. This paper considers a range of complex museological and political issues which help to explain why this is so.

Sarah Thomas has held various curatorial positions, and has lectured widely in both Australia and the UK. She has been a regular contributor to art and history journals, and has written on a wide variety of subjects ranging from the eighteenth century to the present. She has lectured and delivered papers at the Courtauld Institute of Art, Kings College London, Tate Britain, the National Portrait Gallery, Warwick University, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and universities across Australia and the UK. Her publications include The Encounter, 1802: Art of the Flinders and Baudin Voyages, and ‘Slaves and the spectacle of torture: British artists in the New World, 1800-1834’. She
has recently completed her doctoral thesis on the subject of *Witnessing Slavery: the travelling artist in an Age of Abolition*. 