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A Work in Progress

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A Work in Progress

Abstract

Inspired by a recent visit to the Australian museum to view its collection of Aboriginal artefacts from south eastern Australian I felt motivated to know what was in the collection and to attempt to understand what it might feel like, and ultimately, what it might mean to craft such objects today. Beyond the desire to manufacture my own artefacts I had no knowledge of their history: who the people were that manufactured them in the first place, the contexts in which they were produced, or the motivations of those who produced them. What does it mean for Aboriginal people today, disconnected from such cultural practice, to 'authenticate' their own lives and their cultural identities through making such objects - once functional objects of material culture, subsequently objects of ethnographic inquiry, and now increasingly contemporary art? This body of work is a still tentative work in progress about cultural work in progress and the discourses that inform our understanding.

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A WORK in PROGRESS

The objects are arranged in sequence with a view to show ... the successive ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed in the development of their arts from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous. ... Human ideas as represented by the various products of human industry ... If, therefore we can obtain a sufficient number of objects to represent the succession of ideas, it will be found that they are capable of being arranged in museums upon a similar plan. [Pitt Rivers, 1874:xi and xii]

Inspired by a recent visit to the Australian museum to view its collection of Aboriginal artefacts from south eastern Australian I felt motivated to know what was in the collection and to attempt to understand what it might feel like, and ultimately, what it might mean to craft such objects today. Beyond the desire to manufacture my own artefacts I had no knowledge of their history: who the people were that manufactured them in the first place, the contexts in which they were produced, or the motivations of those who produced them. What does it mean for Aboriginal people today, disconnected from such cultural practice, to 'authenticate' their own lives and their cultural identities through making such objects - once functional objects of material culture, subsequently objects of ethnographic inquiry, and now increasingly contemporary art?

In the museum I recalled from a young age (1960s) making visits with my family to Brewarrina, and spending time with relatives who were engaged in boomerang, shield and club manufacturing; for sale to tourists I now suppose. I felt a degree of pride at recognising the forms of objects in the museum, even in their seemingly tenuous connection to my own family. One by one I carefully lifted boomerangs, clubs, and shields from their orderly but otherwise nondescript placement. I held them aloft imagining myself employing each object in the fashion for which it might have been designed. Turning each artefact over and over, studying its shape and surface decoration, attempting to make an aesthetic judgment about quality of production and possible cultural significance, I found that I wasn't equipped to make such distinctions. I felt self-conscious and ambivalent about my intentions; what right did I have to be here, and to imagine appropriating these objects for my own ends?

From the point of colonisation Aboriginal people employed various strategies of resistance. Throughout the south east the production of shields, clubs and boomerangs became a significant means of Aboriginal resistance, not as tools of physical resistance but through the degree of cultural and economic independence from colonial control their production generated. Artefacts such as weaponry and hunting objects were collected both as souvenirs and as sources of ethnographic information about the 'primitive' people of Australia. By the late nineteenth century anthropological activity had become intense. Aboriginal people were the most studied indigenous people in the world. This created a high demand for Aboriginal artefacts. As well, a form of cultural tourism emerged, partly encouraged by the publicity of anthropological research and the desire at the time to see and know the 'primitive other'. Despite the protectionist regimes that controlled the Aboriginal reserve and mission systems, mainstream Australians increasingly developed a fascination with Aboriginal people and culture, in turn leading to a further expansion of arts and crafts production specifically as tourist souvenirs. Throughout the south-east Aboriginal people embraced the interests of tourists. Today the ongoing demands for tourist art ironically help to promote innovative developments in art and craft forms; forms initially motivated by the tourist art industry, but by and large independent of the colonial desires that underpin that industry. Aboriginal artists have increasingly gained the autonomy to produce entirely new art, unconstrained by earlier criteria of authenticity.

This body of work is a still tentative work in progress about cultural work in progress and the discourses that inform our understanding. I am currently undertaking a p/t PhD in Visual Arts at the Australian National University School of Art. *A Work in Progress* will be developed towards a final exhibition in 2014/2015.