

## RESEARCH ESSAY

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### VANTAGE

*Shedding light on the new generation of curators of Aboriginal Art — Brenda Croft, Hetti Perkins and Brook Andrew, this research essay looks at ways in which curatorial practice breaks down pre-existing paradigms of exhibition.*

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In 2018, curator Maura Reilly coined the term, ‘Curatorial Activism’, to define it as — “*the practice of organising art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that large constituencies of people are no longer ghettoised or excluded from the master narratives of art.*”<sup>1</sup> With an apparent imbalanced ratio within museums, of male to female, white to POC and straight to members of the LGBTIQ community, there is an increasing need to distort the foregoing narratives often seen in art spaces. Moreover, this age sits in the midst of movements such as Black Lives Matter, #OscarsSoWhite, #Metoo and EndSARS. These revolts impose for a new way of portraying contemporaneity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, pressing institutions to break down pre-existing paradigms of curating art. There is a demand to counter hegemonic initiatives which have taken a Euro-centric stance while communicating the past. As a consequence, the art world has brought to the forefront a whole new generation of curators; curators such as Rosa Martinez, Michiko Kasahara, Paweł Leszkowicz, Gitanjali Dang, Simon Njami and Amelia Jones who challenge the prevailing art system, questioning its perspectives, history, privileges and organisation.<sup>3</sup>

Zooming in to the sub-continent of Australia, a similar transference has occurred. It was in the 1990s, when Aboriginal people began to curate their own culture.<sup>4</sup> Prior to the 90s, anthropologists collected indigenous cultural material to categorise them as ‘curiosities’ rather than art.<sup>5</sup> With no delineation to set them apart, there was a blur between ‘traditional’ and ‘urban’ artworks. Pioneers such as members of the Boomali group, set foundation for present-day curators to not only find a seat at the table but in fact prove their modernity to art institutions.<sup>6</sup> It has been a constant struggle with western definitions of modernity defining the terms of contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> From the twentieth to through to twenty-first century, Aboriginal Art has been looked at as a political tool used by curators to appropriately showcase a unique indigenous experience of decolonisation and its forms of postcolonial modernities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reilly, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Genova, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Reilly, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Mundine, n.d.

<sup>5</sup> Mundine, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> McLean, 2013

<sup>7</sup> McLean, 2013

<sup>8</sup> McLean, 2013

One professional held at high regard as a curator, paving the way for Contemporary Aboriginal Art is Brenda L. Croft. Croft was born in Perth (1964) and currently lives and works in the city of Adelaide.<sup>9</sup> She is a celebrated First Nations multi-disciplinary artist, independent curator, writer and educator, who is best known to be a founding member of the renowned Boomali group.<sup>10</sup> She is from the Gurindji/Malngin/Mudburra peoples from the Northern Territory of Australia.<sup>11</sup> Croft has had a long-standing practice and has carved her way through the industry as an artist as well as a curator. She co-curated her first show in the year 1994 and since, has been representing Aboriginal people as well as the entire nation on multiple national and international fronts.

Brenda Croft is recognised for her scholarly approach to exhibition making, led by intensive research. With her foot set in areas of photography, performance and installation art,<sup>12</sup> Croft sheds light on stories and culture of indigenous people, preserving the human experience.<sup>13</sup> In an interview with SBS, Croft explains the legacy she aims to leave behind, stating — “*My work is about giving a voice to the voiceless, making the invisible visible – listening, seeing, sharing.*”<sup>14</sup> This philosophy seems to reflect not only when she is immersed in taking photographs of the Country and its people, but also in her curatorial practice. Croft is a revolutionary and by the means of her exhibitions, she elevates the status of visual art to that of an emissary. She creates precedents which serve as agents for morals. For instance, an important exhibition curated by Croft in partnership with UNSW Galleries (UNSW Art + Design and University of Queensland Art) was ‘Still in My Mind’ in 2017. The exhibit revolved round the Gurindji location which experienced the Wave Hill walk-off in the year 1966.<sup>15</sup> Wave Hill walk-off was a strike set up by 200 Gurindji stockmen, servants and families against poor living and working conditions. Croft used the Gurindji as a place, experience and visuality to fabricate ‘Still in My Mind’.<sup>16</sup> Brenda Croft was also Australia's representative at the 47th Venice Biennale which took place 1997-9 which included the esteemed artists, Yvonne Koolmatrie, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Judy Watson. The presentation was titled ‘Fluent’.<sup>17</sup> For the show, she worked with a long time colleague by the name Hetti Perkins. Croft and Perkins, together have realised multiple curatorial projects which have shifted the course in which Contemporary Aboriginal Art is received by the national and international audience.

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<sup>9</sup> Brenda L Croft, 2010

<sup>10</sup> Brenda L Croft, 2021

<sup>11</sup> Ms Brenda L Croft - Researchers - ANU, 2021

<sup>12</sup> Ms Brenda L Croft - Researchers - ANU, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Coulthard et al, 2011

<sup>14</sup> Marlow, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Ling, 2011

<sup>16</sup> STILL IN MY MIND : Gurindji Location, Experience And Visuality, 2017

<sup>17</sup> Ms Brenda L Croft - Researchers - ANU, 2021



*Still in my mind: Gurundji experience, location and visibility*

*Photo Courtesy : University of New South Wales*



*Still in my mind: Gurundji experience, location and visibility*

*Photo Courtesy : University of New South Wales*

Hetti Kemerre Perkins is an art curator, writer and a deemed cultural advisor.<sup>18</sup> She is an Arrernte and Kalkadoon woman; a woman of compassion, looked at as a 'mother' to those in the art industry who may not necessarily be related to her. She is also known to have initiated an Age Care Centre in Alice Springs, by the name Hetti Perkins Home for the Aged.<sup>19</sup> Perkins is one to believe art is the voice for her people.<sup>20</sup> This philosophy of nurture and sensitivity towards the Country and its people is one that can be seen as a chain linking numerous of her projects. Her career surged when she presented Aboriginal art on an international stage with the exhibition, 'Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia' (New York, 1988) to then again showcase another reputed exposition by the name, 'True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag' at the South London Gallery (1994).<sup>21</sup> The latter also translated to a subsequent UK tour which exposed Aboriginal Art to a whole different cultural fabric.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Perkins held the position of a Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at AGNSW for a lengthy span of 22 years (1989-2011).<sup>23</sup> At her time there, she curated one of her most eventful exhibitions, titled *Art + Soul*, which was celebrated not just as a presentation within realms of the museum space, but was produced in the mediums of a book and a documentary series.<sup>24</sup>



*Art + Soul*

*Photo Courtesy : Art Gallery of New South Wales*

'Art+Soul' took place in the Yiribana Gallery of the Art Gallery of NSW from the August 2010 to June 2011.<sup>25</sup> Most of the art presented was retrieved from the collection of the AGNSW while some were sourced or commissioned. These were all presented in cohesion through the themes of 'home and away', 'dreams and nightmares' and 'bitter and sweet' where Perkins brought together 60

<sup>18</sup> Hetti Perkins, 2021

<sup>19</sup> "Hetti Perkins Home For The Aged". 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Media, 2021

<sup>21</sup> Awards 2017 : Hetti Perkins Testimony, 2017

<sup>22</sup> Awards 2017 : Hetti Perkins Testimony, 2017

<sup>23</sup> Hetti Perkins, 2021

<sup>24</sup> *Art + Soul : study guide*, 2010

<sup>25</sup> *Art + Soul : study guide*, 2010

Indigenous artists, performers, dancers, musicians, writers and scholars to be a part of the exhibition.<sup>26</sup> The main aim held close by Hetti Perkins while staging 'Art+Soul' was to preserve a pivotal moment in Australian history. Her goal was to foster artworks which stemmed from culture to reflect innovativeness. In her exhibition making process, Perkins challenged the romanticised version of Indigenous culture.<sup>27</sup> She incorporates multi-faceted, multi-media works which expel a range of narratives. This proactive inclusion renders Aboriginal Art as one that is extensive, stretching beyond the arena of dot paintings.<sup>28</sup> Included in 'Art+Soul' as a part of Brenda Croft photography exhibit, was also the writing of Herald Sun journalist Andrew Bolt. Bolt, with his previously written article, inappropriately accused nine fair-skinned indigenous Australians of announcing their Aboriginality for the sake of 'political and career clout'.<sup>29</sup> In this way Perkins uses her curatorial strategy to symbolise an unnecessary, unjustified need to illustrate the 'percentage' of Aboriginality within Australian society.<sup>30</sup> Another feature of 'Art+Soul' were photographs of Mervyn Bishop, Jimmy Little, Harold Blair and Bert Groves who were all well accomplished but denied official recognition as Australian citizens at a point in time.<sup>31</sup> Perkins also added in footage of political speeches such as that of Charles Perkins, the phenomena of collection of Western Arnhem Land bark gatherings by John Mawurndjul and rock-art sites. In addition, she put forth work of Christian Thompson which takes an opposite approach to art making when compared to traditional bark paintings or rock art. Although, Thompson's artworks are as embedded in Aboriginality as traditional art, his work exudes a young, new-age atmosphere. Similarly, she displays work of Micheal Riley who works in the medium of photography and film-making. In this way she juxtaposes customary forms of producing art with present-day manifestations, to arrange a spectacle of a wholesome view of what Aboriginality looks like.

Another exemplary curator, who addresses dominant narratives of colonialism and modernist histories impeccably, is Brook Andrew. Brook Andrew is an interdisciplinary artist and curator born in Sydney, NSW (1970). He lives and works in Melbourne (Victoria) and Paris (France). As an artist, his practice stretches across a variety of mediums including installation, performance and museum intervention. He makes use of Wiradjuri language and actions to intercept devices and imagery of museums.<sup>32</sup> Throughout his career, he has been vocal about his rejection of ethnic classifications.<sup>33</sup> He dismisses the idea of being labelled as an 'Indigenous artist', 'Aboriginal artist', 'Wiradjuri artist', 'Aboriginal photographic artist' or 'urban-based Indigenous artist'. He prefers being neutrally recognised in accordance with his professional title rather than an inherited one.<sup>34</sup> For Andrew, exhibition making is all about forging a new language which strays away from a rigid interrelation between art and a narrow outlook on identity. He is not one to exclusively

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<sup>26</sup> *Art + Soul Open Weekend - Celebrating The Diversity Of Indigenous Culture, 2013*

<sup>27</sup> *Power, 2010*

<sup>28</sup> *Power, 2010*

<sup>29</sup> *Power, 2010*

<sup>30</sup> *Power, 2010*

<sup>31</sup> *Power, 2010*

<sup>32</sup> *Loxley, n.d.*

<sup>33</sup> *Riphagen, 2013*

<sup>34</sup> *Riphagen, 2013*



emphasise on Aboriginality, identity politics and political activism.<sup>35</sup> Another important feature Andrew holds close in his process of creating, is a focus on connecting with people rather than taking an instructional or educational approach, which is a recurrent methodology used by museums. He implements a certain sense of play, while incorporating ideas and subversions.<sup>36</sup> Highlighting Brook Andrew's work, it was stated in *Art Asia Pacific* (Issue 69), "...Andrew's practice also reveals that while we often think of globalisation as homogenising cultures and meanings, individual perspectives remain diverse...it is [his] refusal to be didactic that underscores his maturity."<sup>37</sup>

For the 22nd Biennale of Sydney which took place in the year 2020, Brook Andrew was appointed as the artistic director. Under his guidance, the biennale was named NIRIN, which translated to



22nd Sydney Biennale : NIRIN

Photo Courtesy : The Conversation

<sup>35</sup> Riphagen, 2013

<sup>36</sup> Brook Andrew Interviewed 2006 On 'White Word 1', 2006

<sup>37</sup> Rawlings, 2010



22nd Sydney Biennale : NIRIN

Photo Courtesy : Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

‘edge’ in Wiradjuri language.<sup>38</sup> This was the first time when the Sydney Biennale held a non-anglicised title. His aim for NIRIN was to allow collaboration between artists and audience, make space for edgy ideas and facilitate the work of participating artists, to highlight what makes particular practices urgent.<sup>39</sup> Andrew wanted to transcend the generic definition of art by looking at the world through indigenous philosophies, ceremonies or food preparation techniques.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, conceptualising the biennale around seven themes rather than one over-arching one. These themes were, DHAAGUN (Earth: Sovereignty and Working Together), BAGARAY-BANG (Healing), YIRAWY-DHURAY (Yam-Connection: Food), GURRAY (Transformation), MURIGUWAL GILAND (Different Stories), NGAWAAL-GUYUNGAN (Powerful-Ideas: The Power of Objects) and BILA (River: Environment).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, he brawls with the conception of what an artist is. The 22nd Sydney Biennale engulfed creatives such as Namila Benson, who is a media presenter and Kylie Kwong, a chef and author giving them the status of an artist. Andrew in this manner, once again softens the pre-conceived notions of who must be included while exhibition making.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Benson, 2020

<sup>39</sup> Benson, 2020

<sup>40</sup> Benson, 2020

<sup>41</sup> Biennale Of Sydney Announces 2020 Exhibition: NIRIN, 2020

<sup>42</sup> Benson, 2020

Additionally, Andrew also elevated the biennale to becoming a game-changer commercially. Brook Andrew, in an interview for the Biennale of Sydney, speaks to Namila Benson stating how the process of intentional inclusion of artists from different parts of the world, belonging to a diverse range of communities allowed a variety of foundations to fund the biennial like never before. He chose 98 artists from 47 countries and claims that the Australian Council increased their grant offer as compared to the amount offered for the previous biennials.<sup>43</sup> There was also a contribution from the Canadian Council, the Council of New Zealand and a \$10,000 grant offer from Council for Australian-Arab Relations.<sup>44</sup> The increase in funding was also a consequence of the pressing issues that were tackled by the artists included. This shows the calibre of Brook Andrew as a curator. The new age curator envisions to surpass frontiers of exhibition making, stimulating the institution.

Although the three examples of Brenda L Croft, Hetti Perkins and Brook Andrew are followed by limitations, reducing the complexity of a life's work; it can be seen how each curator brings unique experiences, personalities and strategies to the profession. The new generation of curators of Aboriginal Art usher a strong sense of personal identity as well as a conscious understanding of the Country and its people. Moreover, there is a constant empathy towards what defines Aboriginal art — what it is versus how it is perceived, both nationally and internationally. Consequently, encouraging new age curators of Contemporary Aboriginal Art to adopt methodologies that challenge pre-existing paradigms of formal intuitions such that of a museums, galleries and art centres.

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<sup>43</sup> Benson, 2020

<sup>44</sup> Department of Foreign affairs and Trade, 2020



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