

Contemporary Aboriginal Art

What has been the most important issue, development or event in Contemporary Aboriginal art and why?

Documentation of the history of Aboriginal Art began 40,000 years ago.¹ This was the coloniser's epoch, from the time the British arrived till the end of World War 2.² For decades, Indigenous people and their art was looked at as 'primitive' by Westerners.³ Aboriginal art was framed by the arena of anthropology, on which scientific study was carried out. Objects were lodged within the corridors of natural history museums, rather than appreciated for their aesthetics. It was finally in the 1950s that Aboriginal artists were acknowledged in exhibitions; and by 1958, their art was elevated to the status of 'Fine Art'.⁴ With key socio-political events of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a radical development of Aboriginal politics.⁵ At the time Indigenous artists were working on the medium of paper, imitating the colonisers, or producing bark paintings. Artists such as *Tommy McRae*, *Albert Namatjira*, *Roy Bull* painted landscapes as their primary subject, using water or oil colours.⁶ Bark paintings from Arnhem Land, essentially religious pictures made by the Yolngu people, were commercialised to be sold to the Balanda (white) people.⁷ This was until, Yorta Yorta artist *Lin Onus* presented a new, young cohort of artists, stating "*(they) broke upon the scene in the late 1960s. Many were young, many were articulate, but they were all angry*".⁸ Constant neglect and suppression of their identity and style of work was the source of their rage;⁹ its history, embedded in a series of revolutionary strikes and petitions.¹⁰ This political activism by the young artists gave rise to a landmark event in the 1980s, unprecedented in the history of Contemporary Aboriginal Art — the Koori Art exhibition (1984).

The pioneering event of the Koori Art (1984) was a seminal presentation hosted by Artspace Gallery (Surry Hills, Sydney). Fostered by imminent figures *Gary Foley* and *Chicka Dixon*, in addition to the Federal Aboriginal Arts Board,¹¹ the Koori Art exhibit was the first of its kind,

¹ Mundine, n.d

² Mundine, n.d

³ Mundine, n.d

⁴ Mundine, n.d

⁵ Kleinert and Koch, 2009

⁶ Kleinert and Koch, 2009

⁷ Milpururru, 1987

⁸ Kleinert and Koch, 2009

⁹ Kleinert and Koch, 2009

¹⁰ Kleinert and Koch, 2009

¹¹ Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.

shedding light on emerging Aboriginal artists adopting Western materiality, concepts, and references.¹² These experimental artists aimed to fabricate a unique narrative of Aboriginality, one that was personal and mirrored the prevailing national circumstance.¹³ The exhibition disintegrated margins set to confine Aboriginal Art to have a specific visual character. It broadened the expanse of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, allowing for neo-Aboriginal aesthetics to find its space in formal institutions. For instance, Australian Indigenous photographer and filmmaker, *Micheal Riley*, produced a series of black and white photographic portraits of family, friends, and peers for the Koori Art exhibition (1984). This included the famous image of a young Hetti Perkins, the present-day leading curator, and cultural advisor.¹⁴ Before the '84 exhibit, Aboriginal Art was identified by the 'Western Desert dot and circle' acrylic paintings found at the Papunya northwest of Alice Springs.¹⁵ These paintings with their quintessential style, seemingly close to the western movement of abstraction, became popular and gained credibility in the Australian and International market. However, a medium such as photography executed by a Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man struggled to gain recognition. The practice of emerging Aboriginal artists was received as being 'too political' or 'not Aboriginal enough'.¹⁶ Their political and experiential portrayals, sieved through the lens of urbanism, were dismissed. They were perceived as inauthentic.¹⁷ Organised as an insurgence, the Koori Art exhibition featured 25 artists and over 50 works, accomodating 'Urban' artists initially shunned by art galleries and museums. The show included their multi-media manifestations of paintings, photography, batik, linocuts, and sculpture.¹⁸ The exhibition was nurturing Urban Aboriginal art as a movement. *Vivian Johnson*, the curator of the show encouraged the work of artists such as *Raymond Meeks*, *Euphemia Bostock*, *Gordon Syron*, *Fiona Foley*, *Michael Riley*, *Fernanda Martins*, *Tracey Moffatt*, *Avril Quail* and *Jeffrey Samuels*, all of who were implemented Europeanised styles of art-making.¹⁹ For instance, the work of *Arone Raymond Meeks* takes a stark departure from the aesthetics of traditional Aboriginal Art. His work addresses issues of sexuality, cultural values and belonging to Country, as he uses generously-spaced subjects of flora and fauna on a heavily inked substrate, depicting traditional imagery. Similarly, *Fiona Foley's* oeuvre reflects political issues facing Indigenous Australians, through the mediums of photography, textiles and installation. Curator *Vivian Johnson*, for the Koori Art show, also included students from the *Eora Centre* at Redfern.²⁰ This exhibition was an exemplar, giving rise to an authentic contemporary language for the Aborigines, reflecting the politics of the era. It was only after this groundbreaking exhibition of '84, Australia experienced and welcomed subsequent exhibitions which accepted the work of Urban artists.²¹ For example, *Tracey Moffat* was granted a show by the name *Pictures for Cities* (1984). She was also involved in the exhibition, *Two Worlds Collide* (1984), which featured several of her contemporaries from *Koori Art* of '84.²² These were additionally followed by the

¹² *Mundine, n.d*

¹³ *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

¹⁴ *The Commercial | Michael Riley Portraits 1984-1990 - Koori Art '84, n.d.*

¹⁵ *Mundine, n.d*

¹⁶ *Boomali | Scanlines, n.d.*

¹⁷ *Boomali | Scanlines, n.d.:*

¹⁸ *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

¹⁹ *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

²⁰ *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

²¹ *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

²² *Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.*

shows, *Urban Koories* (1986) and *A Koori Perspective Tour* (1990), which were travelling exhibitions including the works of multiple Urban Artists.²³

Djon Mundine in his publication, *The history of Aboriginal Art* reflects on Frantz Fanon's 'phases' of a post-colonial state which delineates a society's culture.²⁴ Mundine demarcates six of these stages, which form the Aboriginal culture we see today. These phases exist as a spectrum, containing overlapping edges; however, they draw an image of the gradual transformation of the Contemporary Aboriginal Art scene, through the years. The Koori Art exhibition served as an antepartum for the fourth phase of Contemporary Aboriginal Art, in which the artists formed the Boomali Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in 1987.²⁵ This was a crucial time for Aboriginal Art, where Indigenous artists had foregone emulating and idealisation of colonially imposed culture. The Boomali Aboriginal Artists Cooperative was established by key artists who presented at the 1984 exhibition.²⁶ Popular present-day Aboriginal figures such as *Harry Wedge, Elaine and Kylie Russell, Gordon Hooky, Rea and Brook Andrew*, also formed a subordinate part of the Cooperative.²⁷ This was a stage where the Urban artists found a harmonious balance between history and contemporary, marrying the notions of a national image with self-expression.²⁸ It was only in its fourth phase when Aboriginal Art detached itself from the label of 'folk art', to develop a sharp delineation between 'traditional' and 'urban or modern' art and artists.²⁹ Fuelled by the Koori Art exhibition of 1984, it is this demarkation, which allowed Contemporary Aboriginal Art to transcend into a more refined, fifth phase which sought space for the academic formalisation of Contemporary Aboriginal Art.³⁰ The fifth phase began in the 1990s. It was then Aborigines began to curate and write about art, directing the appropriate their culture.³¹ They now had an opportunity to study, care for and develop their art, artefacts, historic structures, and intellectual property. Indigenous people could develop and contribute narratives for a wider audience, for them to empathise and internalise the culture of the Country. For instance, *Fiona Foley*, an integral artist at Koori Art'84 collaborated with Djon Mundine to curate *'Tyerabarrbowaryaou II: I shall never become a white man'* for the 5th Havana Biennial in Cuba.³² This exhibition showcased Aboriginal culture on a large scale to a diverse audience, familiarising them with the history and current conditions of one of the oldest cultures. Moreover, it cut through the institutionalised rigidity to authorise them. It allotted them prestigious positions on museum governing boards and administrative sectors. As a result, Aborigines could advocate and participate in refining pre-existing policies and professionals standards. For example, essential participants of Koori Art'84 and founding members of the Boomali Aboriginal Artists

²³ Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, n.d.

²⁴ Mundine, n.d

²⁵ Mundine, n.d

²⁶ Boomali | Scanlines, n.d.

Michael Riley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Jeffrey Samuels, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, Arone Meeks, Euphemia Bostock, Avril Quail, Brenda L Croft & Fernanda Martens.

²⁷ McGrath, 1995

²⁸ Mundine, n.d

²⁹ Mundine, n.d

³⁰ Mundine, n.d

³¹ Mundine, n.d

³² *Tyerabarrbowaryaou II: I shall never become a white man | Exhibitions | MCA Australia, 1994*

Cooperative, *Brenda L Croft* and *Hetti Perkins*, have changed the fabric of Contemporary Aboriginal Art with exhibitions such as *'Still in My Mind'* (2017) and *'Art+Soul'* (2010).

In this day and age, works of Urban artists fetch enormous amounts at national and international auction houses. Therefore, making Koori Art'84 a crucial event in art history. For instance, in 2002 *Tracey Moffat's* 1989 series, *'Something More'* shattered records when it sold for an astonishing amount of \$226,575. Furthermore today, curators of Contemporary Aboriginal Art can dictate terms of acquisition and deaccessioning within institutions. They hold responsibilities of ethical care of collection of indigenous material including, objects of cultural patrimony such as human remains, sacred objects, and funerary objects. It was the organisation of Koori Art'84 which lead to an empowered Indigenous community, of artists and curators, who can use culture as a political and social tool to foster awareness and respect for Aboriginal culture, within and outside of Australia.

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