

# To Tread Lightly: Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and representation in a regional university

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## Abstract

My heritage is Wiradjuri, a Central New South Wales nation with a powerful connection to Lake Cargelligo and a number of inland rivers. Our old ties with the river have facilitated strong ties with tribes up and down the rivers which have extended as far as South Australia. In addition, Wiradjuri has strong familial associations with Yorta Yorta, Gamilaroi and historically significant ties to neighbouring nations, such as the Wonnarua with whom we collaborated during the 1826 uprising against the British (Miller, 1995). Our broad associations also included ceremonial and marriage arrangements with peoples much further afield, such as Aboriginal people who shared Mount Bogong in the Victorian Alps. Cultural ties and reciprocity arrangements extended as far as Southern Queensland and during the Bunya Pine ceremonial cycle, there were huge gatherings of people, including Wiradjuri, who travelled significant distances to share food. This is the present location of the College of Indigenous Studies, Education and Research (CISER) at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). It is at this university that I now plan and implement innovative art theory that provides a narrative of Indigenous art in the contexts of human rights, land rights, intellectual property rights, politics and international networks. In this way cultural exchange continues between myself as Wiradjuri and Aboriginal communities in Southern Queensland in an unbroken chain which honours both past and present associations.

## Keywords

Aboriginal Art, Torres Strait Islander Art, community, copyright, galleries, Indigenous art, Indigenous art theory, Indigenous culture, Indigenous history, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), museums, representation

## **Introduction**

This paper explores a new curriculum development at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), a regional Queensland University with campuses in Toowoomba, Ipswich and Springfield, covering the lands of the Giabal, Jarowair, Jagera, Yuggera, Ugarapul, and Kambuwal (USQ, 2017a). It is an institution which places equal value on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, as expressed in the university Protocols which recognises them as “living culture” and which offers a “deep appreciation for their contribution to, and support of, our academic enterprise” (USQ, 2017a).

Working in this environment requires the team at the College for Indigenous Studies, Education and Research (CISER) to focus on promoting understanding and appreciation of local knowledges and cultural values (USQ, 2017b). We encourage partnerships and participation in showcasing local Indigenous culture and histories, both at CISER and in the larger USQ community through Indigenous performance, story in art and research contributions. For example, a recent exhibition at the USQ library featured a sculptural representation of the Pleiades (also known as the Seven Sisters) story. Exhibitions such as this serve to acknowledge that “in all probability, long before other civilizations had named the celestial objects in the night sky, the indigenous people of Australia had not only given them names but had also built an astronomical knowledge system which they incorporated into their social, cultural and religious life” (Bhathal, 2006, p. 27). In fact, the Aboriginal people of central Australia divided the sky into two groups, the winter sky, also known as the nananduraka group, included Scorpius, Argo, Centaurus and nearby stars. The summer sky, also known as the tanamildjan group, included Orion, the Pleiades and Eridanus (Mountford, 1976).

The experiences of Torres Strait Islanders, located in the northernmost continental extremity of Queensland, and the Aboriginal people of Queensland is at the heart of CISER’s core focus. This focus underpins the development of ISE1003: *Contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Representation*, the new Indigenous art subject at USQ. Through the curriculum writing, course development and implementation, my own understanding of the unique Queensland experience with both Aboriginal Queenslanders or Murri people, and Torres Strait Islander communities was enriched. This echoed an experience I had at a Victorian university ten years ago which had similarly fostered a deeper understanding of the Koorie (Victoria and south-central New South Wales) Koori (New South Wales and Victoria) and Nunga (southern South Australia) experience. The work of artists such as Vernon Ah Kee and Richard Bell, and the particularly powerful story of the Torres Strait Islander experience informed subject development that was itself framed around a North Eastern Australian pedagogical art narrative. This use of traditional story and practice in the making of the new curriculum further shaped my own identity as an artist and teacher.

## **Contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Representation**

Efforts to establish an Indigenous perspective in courses that explore Indigenous art are regularly hampered by the lack of Indigenous academics working within the field of art history (Leslie, 2012). We have sought to challenge the status quo by ensuring from the outset that ISE1003 was developed and subsequently taught by an Indigenous artist. This means that the dynamic circumstances which produce particular historical and contemporary events, and politically charged visual commentaries, can be explained from an Indigenous political standpoint. The histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are very different from the rest of Australian society; an Indigenous voice can interpret this for the novice. USQ is, however, not alone in seeking to ensure the prominence of Indigenous voices. Griffith University, also based in Queensland, has helped advance the development and expression of north-eastern Australian talent and accompanying visual voice by offering an Indigenous art degree. Griffith has produced some of the most prolific workers in the field by using a team of Indigenous teachers to articulate strategies for the adaptation of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in urbanised contexts (Griffith University, 2017). Although the curriculum that I have developed is smaller than the one taught at Griffith, it has adopted an equally innovative approach to Indigenous art theory. The course has created space and depth for students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art history and critical theory across a broad spectrum, and is accessible to both a domestic and international audience.

The course addresses issues related to museum and gallery contexts, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and Copyright. In designing and implementing ISE1003 we seek to advocate for Indigenous artists in a manner which reflects the spirit of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2008) but also one that is relevant to our specific context. This approach is vital, because curriculum planning need to keep abreast of developments in gallery and curatorial spaces which can be dismissive of the rights of Indigenous artists (Burns Coleman, 2005; Le Roux, 2014) including Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). As Le Roux (2014) contends "Aboriginal art has been, and to a certain extent, is still endangered by cheap imitations, fakes and the transgression of Indigenous artists' rights and community protocols" (p. 75). This learning journey encourages further enquiry during which students examine their ability to research and in the process create a dialogue between themselves as receiver and reviewer in conjunction with Indigenous artwork. The course includes visits to galleries as part of a process of negotiating an understanding of the artist's viewpoint based on Indigenous knowledges gained in the course.

## **Story-making: A new art curriculum**

The structure of the course encourages engagement with Indigenous representation and visual dialogue, not in a static relationship but as part of lived reality. There are thirteen sequential topics which encompass:

- Topic 1: An overview including NAIDOC;
- Topic 2: Traditional ways of being and doing;
- Topic 3: Place and the power of story, including the film *Ten Canoes*;
- Topic 4: The art of Antiquity, how this influences contemporary perspectives, standing on the shoulders of giants;
- Topic 5: Nineteenth century Australian Indigenous art, stories of colonisation and cultural exchange;
- Topic 6: Gatherings, case studies and context;
- Topic 7: The effects of a political stance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art movements;
- Topic 8: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and the quest for Sovereignty, cultural and actual;
- Topic 9: Law and Intellectual Property Rights, an Indigenous standpoint;
- Topic 10: People and community, commonalities of language and community;
- Topic 11: Ways of being and ways to continue to be;
- Topic 12: World Indigenous people; and
- Topic 13: How the arts has unified a message, descriptions of international success.

As students and fledgling researchers in this area, historical representation as well as contemporary ideas have a performative relationship to Indigenous art dialogue and telling (Caruana, 2015; McCulloch & McCulloch Childs, 2008).

Both an archaeological and historical lens are used throughout the course. This approach helps to emphasise that these disciplines include Indigenous expertise, thereby ensuring that Indigenous viewpoints pervade the course. Land, identity, cultural and spiritual values and traditions, politics and policy, sovereignty, citizenship, reconciliation, IPR and copyright are issues explored within this framework. In addition, these are viewed through the lens of anthropology and cultural studies which are necessarily critiqued as they have inherent limitations, including well-documented historical and colonial implications for Indigenous peoples (Neale, McKinnon & Vincent, 2014).

The course therefore seeks to promote divergent responses to stereotypes that have been perpetuated regarding Indigenous knowledges (Neale, et al., 2014). The perspective taken in the course seeks to challenge students' pre-conceptions about Indigenous knowledge and people through artwork which provides both cultural and social critique. This process begins by building on existing student knowledge and

understanding through a dialogue of listening and telling, in a manner similar to how curriculum works in most disciplines through scaffolding and exposition. Characteristically within Indigenous education, the model is to build not only the capacity of the learner to grow in knowledge, but the learner to feel a greater sense of self-esteem and to gain a greater feeling of self-efficacy during the learning and gathering of knowledge. However, this can also be a 'double-edged sword', as students must maintain humility and recognise the material they are learning belongs to Indigenous communities from whom it is gathered, and not themselves. It is useful, therefore, for students to understand the complexities of Indigenous intellectual property and how intellectual property relates to Aboriginal Law. In this sense, *Aboriginal law always stays the same* (Neidjie, Davis & Fox, 1985; Stanner, 1979) it never changes, whereas 'white man's law' changes all the time (Graham, 2008; Neidjie, et al., 1985). This means that Aboriginal customary law has certainty and is protective of cultural and intellectual property, drawn as it from laws that have protected Indigenous people's rights for thousands of years. In contrast, state and Commonwealth law is constantly being negotiated, and hopefully improved, to include Indigenous rights to ownership of knowledge and cultural practices. This is not an approach taken by anthropology, where the research is *owned* by the researcher.

One of the issues which arise when working within Indigenous studies is the continuous 'noise' that comes from non-indigenous experts. Part of my vocation has been to challenge those who lay claim to Indigenous cultural sovereignty or who deny the existence of Indigenous rights. This is, in the words of feminist poet Robin Morgan (2014), a "pore war". The nature of working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies is that it demands one become an agent of social change and social justice. It is a contested space, however, full of 'cultural sharks' and purveyors of 'other' people's knowledge. Curriculum initiatives such as this course seek to inculcate in students a desire to likewise be agents of change and to recognise and support Indigenous rights in relation to physical and spiritual sovereignty.

The course opens with an overview, which is an introduction to aspects of Aboriginality and Torres Strait Islander identity. This provides an opportunity to showcase aspects of north-east Australian art and creative practice through National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week, particularly those which could provide insights into Indigenous expressions of identity. The NAIDOC Theme for 2017 was *Our Languages Matter*, a theme explored at the Cairns Indigenous Art Festival (CIAF, 2017). This theme was also the basis of an exhibition at Artworx gallery (USQ Toowoomba campus) curated by David Akenson and Robyn Heckenberg (20 June - 19 July, 2017). Both exhibitions helped to raise the profile of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art produced in South East Queensland. The Toowoomba exhibition made an overt link with the Black Lives Matter activism in the United States, a move that further emphasised the inherently political nature of Indigenous art and artists. This exhibition also informed one of the assessment pieces

which required students to create a journal of events, artworks and other activities intended to cultivate spontaneous expressions of interest. The students produce a tangible product similar in manufacture to a practicing artist who would produce journals and artists' books as part of their practice.

The second section of the course explores deeper notions of Indigeneity by looking at the implications of traditional ways of being and doing. The whole ethos of sustainability and protecting the environment has changed the way many people see Indigenous traditional knowledges (Bourke, Bourke & Edwards 2009). We analyse *Ten Canoes* (de Heer, Ryan, de Heer & Djigirr, 2006), the first movie filmed entirely in Australian Indigenous language. Set in a time before Western influence, it is an explicit examination of story-telling and place that is in effect a morality tale about duty and obligation. *Ten Canoes* exemplifies the way the creative process works through a layering of story and layers of cultural artefact. Using the movie as a starting point, the course then explores art practice from antiquity drawing on the creation stories that tell us Aboriginal people were made here and that Ancestral Spirit Beings made the land. Central to this view is a recognition that wisdom and contemporary knowledge comes from *all that went before*. Therefore, when we are looking at the work of nineteenth century Aboriginal artists and the contact stories of the Torres Strait Islanders, we are looking at knowledges that were handed down over thousands of years, the same knowledge base drawn from to tell the story of *Ten Canoes*.

The nineteenth century in Australia was an era of great change for Indigenous Australia, one which decimated their numbers and dispossessed them of their traditional lands. To survive, Aboriginal people had to adapt their ways of living off the land in order to develop economic relationships with those who had usurped them. Indigenous performance and artwork instead became part of survival. For example, Indigenous researcher Maryrose Casey (2011) highlights how public performance in the nineteenth century became not only part of the Aboriginal economy, but part of a telling of cultural ways of being. The drawings of nineteenth century Aboriginal artist Tommy McRae for instance, are visual representations of an old way of life before colonisation. They are now seen as historical artefacts, ones sold at the time as part of a strategy of adopting a western economic model that allowed him to survive. He gives us a window into life on the goldfields, life for tribal people at that time, and gestures in visual form regarding place and nature and the strong regard for the continuity of tradition. He and William Barak are significant artists for our art histories, as their resilience and economic endeavours, are a testimony of survival in a difficult colonial frontier, mission regime driven by government policy that at best, saw the passing of Indigenous Australia as inevitable. Remarkably William Barak saw the first white men come into Victoria and as an old man the whole of the state taken over by the colonisers. He was, in effect, a living link between the ancient world and the colonised world that had dispossessed his people of their land and which sought to destroy their culture.

In little more than a century a culture that had survived for more than forty thousand years was all but destroyed, yet there are cultural practices that have been ‘re-awakened’ and rekindled in recent decades. CISER is committed to making a contribution to this awakening by exploring it in the context of contemporary art in the south east of Australia (Croft, 2007). In particular, there is a focus on the strong work of cloak makers, which is now a thriving art industry, and the revival of traditional wood carving for galleries and museums. This has been possible because there were a few of the old people, now passed away, who were keepers of this knowledge and taught the skills to young ones who are now custodians of that knowledge.

Expanding on this exploration of traditional art practices, the course then concentrates on northern Australian stories and analyses the contemporary relationship to the sea, sky and community. From the Torres Strait, stories of boat building and pearl and trochus diving are often a stimulus for art making. For example, Torres Strait Islander artist Ellarose Savage creates art work that integrates references to deep sea diver’s helmets into her highly ornate imagery of the diving gear worn by her forebears (National Museum of Australia, 2014). This is an integral part of the history of the communal life of Torres Strait Islander workers on boats and also resonates with the pre-colonial skills required for survival at sea.

By examining the re-awakening of some Queensland east coast traditions, the course highlights the meaning of both old traditions and new skills. We then consider some of the community traditions that McRae and Barak (Sayers, 1994) used in their graphic depictions of life in the nineteenth century. Their stories of gatherings link ancient ways of being to the contemporary life by emphasising the symbolic and literal importance of sharing. This not only showcases this work within their own communities, but also more broadly to the general public. The cultural corroboree of Koorie performers entertaining audiences at football matches and other ‘white’ community events in the nineteenth century, reveals to the students that cultural gatherings have always been symbolic manifestations of cultural sovereignty and a way to communicate. This is then linked to events such as the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and the *Our Languages Matter* showcase at USQ (Akenson & Heckenberg, 2017). In their journals the students describe a broad range of gatherings they had found for themselves, reiterating the purpose of community sharing.

The next topic discusses connection, environment, land, sea and the stories related to country. Aboriginal art by virtue of demonstrating links to Country, is an authentic statement of Native Title (Winter & Gurang Land Council, 2002). For example, *Ngurrara Canvas*, from the Great Sandy Desert Native Title Claim (AIATSIS, 2017; Office of Native Title, 2007) was considered proof of Native Title. On this occasion, Native Title was supported by this painting of Country which included images of “significant places and waterholes (jila, jumu)” by over 40 Traditional Owners (AIATSIS, 2017). Indigenous art which discusses connection to Country is inherently

political, a connection emphasized in ISE1003. Richard Bell's work, for example, is dominated by a range of political statements including: *Aboriginal Art - It's a white thing* (Caruana, 2015, p. 245). Queenslander Vernon Ah Kee wears T-Shirts emblazoned with the words *australia drive it like you stole it* (Ah Kee, 2017). However, his most profound comments are evident in his portraiture work (Ah Kee, 2017a) including his project titled *Investigating Ideas of Barak* which explores the life of William Barak an Aboriginal artist and important cultural leader in Victoria's Indigenous community (Ah Kee, 2014). Leah King Smith also honours the Victorian story as well in her *Beyond Capture* series (O'Reilly, 2005), which celebrates land connection and the acknowledgment of ancestors. This work solemnly affirms the significant place of Aboriginal people in Australian history through her engagement with 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic archival photography. Going beyond the usual methods of rendering imagery, the work provides a unique voice and presence for Indigenous people who see her work as a form of memorial (O'Reilly, 2005).

Turning northward students also consider the immediacy and universality in the artwork of people in the Torres Strait. These artists create art from commercial fishing's discarded flotsam and jetsam, including ghost-nets which are a global problem (Gilman, Chopin, Suuronen, Kuemlangan, 2016; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015). There are spiritual consequences related to the loss of local wildlife for Torres Strait Islanders who consider them to be totems which symbolically makes them kin. This detritus becomes the muse for small and large sculptures, coloured and textured by the ghost-nets from which they are constructed, and in the process transforms waste into fine art (CIAF, 2017). Local communities such as Moa Island use the ghost-net story during cultural gatherings with stories being told through shadow puppetry (GhostNets, 2012). The children of communities are the enactors of this very contemporary narrative with education and politicisation used as important ways to challenge commercialisation. Subsequently the environmental destruction wrought by pollution becomes a means through which self-determination and cultural sovereignty can be expressed.

The course explores how Indigenous artists challenge what they characterise as a colonial relationship that still exists between Indigenous Australia and the government, one which reflects that impact of invasion. Students examine how this enforced pathology has affected the behaviour, health, and governance of Indigenous Australians through a discussion of sovereignty and sovereign rights. Sovereignty is problematic for Indigenous Australians because there is no treaty or agreement for Indigenous Australia, unlike the one that exists in New Zealand. Sovereignty has never been formally relinquished. It is interesting therefore for students to engage with art work such as *Trespassers Keep Out!* (National Gallery of Australia, n.d.) by Avril Quaill. She uses an Aboriginal Flag and the image of a defiant old man with his arms folded which turns the western legal concept of trespass back on 'white' Australia.

One public expression of this fight for Indigenous cultural sovereignty is the issue of Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights and copyright, which is explored during the course. An Indigenous standpoint looks uniquely different to a mainstream view. For Indigenous Australians, it is not only inappropriate to claim someone else's ideas and designs, it is actually against traditional law. This is not the case with European views of artistic effort. Western artists see appropriation as advantageous to expressing a point, as is evident in postmodernism. In the Carpet Case, also called *Milpurrurru & Others v Indofurn Pty Ltd & Others* (Janke, 1995), Indigenous artists were upset they had work appropriated, without their knowledge, into the designs of carpets sold on the Australian market for \$4000 each. The work was of a spiritual and sacred nature (Blakeney, 1995; Golvan, 1996), and under Aboriginal law the perpetrators could have been punished for this appropriation. The fact that foreign designers stole the work from educational material produced by the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) to make the carpets, highlights the lack of understanding or protection. One of the artists in the case, George Milpurrurru produced *Goose Egg Hunt*, and was the first Aboriginal artist to have a solo exhibition at the NGA, therefore this was a significant work (Janke, 1995). The artists were financially compensated but the amount provided could not fully recompense for the spiritual and emotional damage that had occurred.

There is an interesting tension regarding emotion and spirit in relation to Aboriginal artists' use of appropriation as they always protect and honour Indigenous art designs, and would never use these indiscriminately due to traditional laws regarding ownership. Richard Bell used a technique in his pop-art work of Lichtenstein's graphic "comic strip" styled posters. Similarly, Lin Onus used the Wave motif of Japanese wood-carving in his series of the ongoing adventures of X and Ray, typified in *Michael and I are just slipping down the pub for a minute. The great wave off Kanagawa* was from the *36 views of Mt Fuji* series (1826-33) by Katsushika Hokusai (National Gallery of Victoria, 2017). Indigenous artists, however, never appropriate work from another Indigenous artist, where the laws regarding appropriation are deeply spiritual, and immovable, and are not subject to change. Appropriation is viewed as a western concept, not an Aboriginal principle. In Onus's 'heart work', for example, he sought permission to use symbols from Arnhem Land which required adherence to cultural ethics and standards. The refinement of standards to support artists and creative practitioners within Australian law is an important element for students to understand. In ISE1003 students study Terri Janke and Artists in the Black (AITB) to gain insight. Terri Janke has a law practice with a website that has many resources (Terri Janke and Company, 2017). On a recent TED talk Janke (2016) discussed the reality of working in such an important field of cultural value. However, artists themselves also need to be aware of the issues involved.

The next topic in the course demonstrates how language programmes, dance and performance agendas manifest cultural survival strategies and community aspirations through the language of Country and connection to totemic relationships.

This ties together the holistic relationship through which Indigenous Australians see the world and themselves, and as participants in their own lives and realities. The course is constructed as an ongoing Indigenous artscape narrative: ways of being and ways to continue to be, portraying a contemporary artist view of tradition through bloodlines and links to home and country. The capstone of the course is a twinning of topics: the second last topic has a fluidity of perspectives referencing the world through Indigenous people and seeks commonalities between visual and performing arts.

The final topic in the course considers the Australian Indigenous voice, the Australian Indigenous experience and the unified message. This is guided by descriptions of Australian Indigenous artists who have achieved international success. These include Clifford Possum (McCulloch & McCulloch-Childs, 2008), and his extraordinary move to International renown with the 1988 Institute of Contemporary Art in London retrospective (Art Gallery of NSW, 2017) to the present, with Tracey Moffatt, who recently represented Australia at the Venice Biennale (Kelly, 2017); and the contemporary generation of Indigenous film-makers such as Warwick Thornton with mature commentaries such as *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton, 2009).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this course in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and cultural practices offers a unique opportunity to focus on Queensland art movements specifically, as well as providing a general overview of Australian Indigenous art practice and culture, in addition to global Indigenous artists. The course is framed by the belief that Australian Indigenous creative practice has a very long history, one that predates the arrival of Europeans by over forty millennia. Students become aware through their learning journey that this domain belongs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Students learn to tread lightly, with respect and responsibility which in Wiradjuri is called *Yindyamarra*.

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