

## **Contemporary Aboriginal Art**

Emergence of new art forms and the continuing change and adaptability within Aboriginal art. Fiona Foley, Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt.

**Jessica Griggs – August 2, 2010**

Modern art forms, practises and methods have been a continuing development and inspiring subject for many Aboriginal artists, who have incorporated several art methods of photography, sculptural forms, installations, printmaking processes, textiles and various painting methods; mixing traditional with contemporary. The emergence of such art forms and practises has been adapted by the Aboriginal people quite willingly, as their art has become more and more popular within various cultures around the globe, encouraging them to use contemporary art mediums, but continue with traditional styles. Throughout this essay, the emergence of new art forms and the continuing change and adaptability within Aboriginal art will be discussed, along with references to Aboriginal artists Fiona Foley, Gordon Bennett and Tracey Moffatt, focusing on their artworks, career and their adaptability of changing styles and mediums in the contemporary art world.

Central to Aboriginal life is art and craft; in fact it is connected to the spiritual domain and exists in many ways throughout their culture (Caruana 1993, 7). The ever-changing fashion of the world has evidently changed Aboriginal art in many ways, recognising numerous indigenous artists for their unique art forms. New forms and mediums within Aboriginal art began to develop during the mid-nineteenth century, with artworks of ink and pencils on paper and boards, having similar styles to the traditional rock and bark paintings (Caruana 1993, 195). In recent years Aboriginal art has flourished with the introduction of synthetic paints, allowing indigenous artists to express their culture with a wide range of colour and texture. The adoption and increase of some new art forms, technologies and materials have become more dominant than other art mediums like pencil drawings, and although materials such as synthetic paints became more of a dominant medium for art making, it also complemented the change, but did not replace existing art forms or processes (Caruana 1993, 11).

Wally Caruana discusses that while Cubists, Surrealists and Dadaists were producing new art forms, the rural and urban Aboriginal art continued to express traditional values with works of weavings and decorated boomerangs. At this time the Australian Aboriginal art was deemed as being an expression of a degenerate tradition, or as kitsch (Caruana 1993, 197). Having said this, Aboriginal artworks have intrigued many viewers and art critics throughout the years, as the Aborigine people sought to preserve their traditions and culture, this led to a thriving art style in the twentieth century and encouraged many up-coming Aboriginal artists. Three well known Aboriginal artists who have adapted to contemporary ways are numbered among many other artists, but hold an equally interesting story and career in the art world. These artists are, Gordon Bennett, Fiona Foley and Tracey Moffatt.

Among many art processes and methods, printmaking stands as a popular medium to many artists. Lin Onus (McGuigan 1992, 4) discusses that the modern media and technology is perhaps the most significant development in artistic imagery that is produced by Aboriginal people. Stories passed down from generations will continue to be relevant themes for Aboriginal artists, as ‘...the use of contemporary technology gives [them] the opportunity to communicate matters important to them, on a much greater scale than ever before’ (McGuigan 1992, 4). Onus goes on to say that printmaking processes are exciting for any artist, as it gives innovation with new techniques and involves collaboration between several artists. Ideas are flowing and innovative, which express each artist’s talents in their own unique way.

Development in new technology, and artistic methods have grown to be a positive outcome, unlike previous years where Aboriginal artists were suppressed. ‘One of the ironies pertaining to Aboriginal socio-economic development has been that technology previously used to suppress, is now being used by Aboriginal people to rebuild a national community’ (McGuigan 1992, 5). McGuigan (1992, 5) gives a good example of this process, which is seen in the creation of Aboriginal Arts Management Association; they protect artists rights, endorse opportunities and encourage a better responsiveness and acceptance between Aboriginal artists and the world.

Printmaking processes were first introduced in 1983, when Theo Tremblay, John Bulun and England Bangala organised to print numerous editions of lithographs made by Aboriginal artists (McGuigan 1992, 6). Fiona Foley was one artist among many that produced these lithographs. Over years of art workshops and encounters with the western ways of life and contemporary art mediums, Foley is now one of the most distinguished Aboriginal artists in Australia. Her work portrays many issues about politics and indigenous society and culture. 'She has the gift of making the right mark, in the right place, for the right purpose and to the right effect' (James 2007). 'There are two aspects to [Foley's] work: one contains the political element and the other a spirituality tied up with Aboriginal heritage and [the Australian] land' (McGuigan 1992, 62). Her work takes a strong political stand, affirming that Aboriginal culture and art is still strong, even after surviving two hundred years of a more dominant culture. Foley's work soon changed from printmaking into sculpture and photographing installations, as she sought the best mediums to suit and express certain issues.

*Annihilation of the Blacks*, created in 1986 by Foley, tells of some treatments that Aboriginal people experienced from the colonisers. Made from wood, synthetic polymer, feathers, hair and rope; the piece exhibits a striking appearance and strong story to any viewer (Caruana 1993, 206). It is amazing how much more detail and story an artist can put into a three dimensional piece, rather than it being just another two dimensional drawing or painting. Sculpture or installation pieces certainly give viewers a sense of reality and tangibility, especially if it is portrayed as a life size installation.

Foley's current works are often executed in pastel, crayons, ink and pencils, reflecting space and form with visible places and cultures. Her first and earliest memory of art involvement was during her childhood when she won fifty cents for her crayon drawing. Since this time Fiona obviously became more inspired to display artworks and communicate her ideas of Aboriginality to the world. Her photography became well known for its different style and portrayal of women with portraits of faces and bodies that were often simple with few adornments which signified certain political views.

Emergence of new art forms and mediums continue to arise today, with many artists using mediums that some would not even deem to be art, the introduction of synthetic paints, modern technologies, installations of all types, film and photography have certainly overpowered many traditional art methods. The introduction of synthetic paints to Aboriginal artists was a significant time in history, as it gave them a new medium to establish with their unique style. At first, however, many argued that the acrylic paintings had little value because they were only produced for the market. 'There were problems within Aboriginal communities, as some objected to sacred stories being shown to the uninitiated, but as time went by, these issues were thoroughly discussed and...resolved within each tribe and the acrylic movement proved both financially and culturally beneficial' (McGuigan 1992, 11).

McCulloch (1999, 208) discusses that new forms of art such as glass-making, screen-printing, textile methods, three dimensional works and even jewellery, are constantly emerging with many Aboriginal artists. Methods of glass sculptures became a unique way for Aboriginal artists to portray their culture during 1988. The Warburton glass project started at this time, involving the making of large panels and platters created by sands of the desert. Aboriginal artists then etched traditional storytelling designs and cultural significance into the glass panels. Screen-printing took place in the 1900s, and has continued to be a famous medium for many Aboriginal artists, because of its wide range of colour mixing, pattern making, detail and accuracy (McCulloch 1999, 208-209).

McCulloch (1999, 210) goes on to say that the growth of individual artists would have not been so, without the appearance of art schools. This has been the key to the success of contemporary Aboriginal art. Combinations of innovation, tradition, spirituality, culture, visual sensibility and artistic skill, has shaped Aboriginal art and design as a unique art movement and style within the contemporary art world. 'And it is their continued existence which will ensure that this art maintains its success both as an innovative and exciting art form and as a unique expression of cultural survival' (McCulloch 1999, 210).

Other art forms that have been developed in the Aboriginal art often entail methods of language or writing poetry. Poetry has been a well known art form for centuries; reflecting artist's views and personal feelings through creative writings that illustrate images and stories in individual minds. Aboriginal poetry connects to the meanings of their indigenous life, ancestry, Western cultures, the land, love and spirit of the Aboriginal culture. Literature or writing is by far a powerful way to express these subjects and certainly a new art form for many Aboriginal artists. Through the years, Indigenous artists have adopted the English language and used it for beneficial purposes to portray their culture and deal with political issues. Gordon Bennett is one artist that uses words and sentences to communicate ideas that have provoked many viewers.

Bennett first discovered he was of Aboriginal descent at the age of eleven, but did not like the idea, for reasons of white people's teachings that Aboriginal people were primitive. Sadistic remarks and jokes toward Aboriginal people led Bennett to be disheartened and sad, which lowered his self-esteem. Bennett wrote his feelings down, but his Aboriginality was pushed away from his life, with influence from the white Australia. Interaction with others in society was minimal as he wanted to avoid comments about the Aborigine race. However, as years went by Bennett started to read books on psychology and found out about different personalities. Soon after he decided to study art at a college and took up painting as he felt really comfortable with this new way of expressing himself (Thompson 1990, 147-48).

Bennett's new idea was that a person can not go through life when he hates a part of ones self, so to solve this dilemma, Bennett expressed these ideas and realised that Aboriginality was not something to be ashamed of. Bennett has remained with this idea throughout his art career, expressing strong messages of his heritage and identity, rights, religion, politics, language and issues between two worlds, Aboriginal and White Australia. Bennett's investigations and artistic expressions of being between these two worlds often reflect violent characters of the history of colonisation. Bennett's intentions are to provoke and undermine complacent attitudes of the injustice towards Aboriginal people (McLean and Bennett 1996). His works are very contemporary, inspired from his own imagination of traditional Aboriginal styles and also western

styles including imagery from previous artists like Mondrian, Van Gogh and also from the Renaissance era.

Language and spoken words are important to Bennett, ‘...because it’s the way we construct our views of the world (Thompson 1990, 152). In many of Bennett’s paintings he uses the words Boong, Nigger, Coon, Heathen, Darkie and Abo to express a message of conditioning processes and being defined or categorised by these words; signifying derogatory associations made by white people. He discusses that some people say they are ‘just words’, but they mean a lot more than just words (Thompson 1990, 148). This is why Bennett suggested that language is very important, and thus uses it as a tool in art to express certain messages.

Language captivates an audience and also makes viewers discern certain issues, even if only a few words are displayed, it remains a powerful tool for many artists to influence viewers of the ideas. Bennett’s idea of using numerous derogative words soon developed into using only the first three or four letters of the alphabet, which corresponded with ‘Abo, Boong and Coon’ (Thompson 1990, 152). In 1987 Bennett created *the coming of the light* which portrays ideas of distinctive racist remarks about Aboriginal people; making the power of language the main awareness, particularly in the way it is used to define and confine people (NGV 2010). Most of Bennett’s works are compelling and confronting, with strong visual images and significant meanings, he likens it to an ongoing process of expressing self-portraits.

Bennett questions all fundamental references of Western culture, for example ‘...the belief that God did give us the world to be used and abused, that he gave us language which constructs the world around us, that this is all God-given or natural. [Bennett conveys that it is] *not* natural, *none* of it is natural, none of it is the way things are or the way they should be because we always have this ability to construct things and therefore to change them’ (Thompson 1990, 152). Bennett believes the world needs a holistic model of life or even world-view rather than a linear progression.

Communicating messages to an audience can be difficult, especially if the wrong materials are used. In Bennett's case however, art materials and forms have demonstrated complimentary significance with his ideas. Installation pieces created with metal, fluoro lettered lights, computerised text, ceramic pieces, stencils, newspaper articles, paintings, drawings and photography all play an important part in displaying and portraying certain messages. Bennett's 1993 installation *Mirror Line* '...used some of the most prized works from the University of Melbourne's art collection, displaying them with such a strong narrative structure and cross-referencing that the viewer was forcibly centred around the stark binary of Aboriginal and Euro-Australis' (McLean and Bennett 1996, 115).

During the 1970s many artists moved away from traditional art methods of painting or drawing and decided to work with ephemeral ideas and performance-based art; black and white photography was one main activity. Bennett was among these artists who adopted methods of photography, using his own body to perform the artworks for camera shots. Bennett prepared a performance (*Nuance*) photograph performance by painting his face with polyvinyl acetate glue. Once the PVA glue was dry, he slowly peeled it away while photos were taken. His idea was to suggest a subtle critique of opposite skin tones, white and black. The process is seen as peeling away the white skin and revealing or discovering the real Gordon (McLean and Bennett 1996, 60-61). Non-toxic mediums like PVA glue are well used in the art industry, and have served the purpose of being a medium that works for many artistic ideas, including ephemeral or performance art.

For many Aboriginal artists, photography has proven to be a wide method of expressing many issues within the arts and media. Queensland artist Tracey Moffatt has acquired photography and film as a way to express her cultural views and political issues within western and indigenous culture. Moffatt's work and practice in film and photography mainly focus on race and gender questions, with intersections in cultural perspectives of the contemporary Australia. In 1993 Moffatt created a ninety minute film, featuring issues of racial stereotypes in the Australian society, representing three ghost stories belonging to Aboriginal and Anglo/Celtic associations. These stories are told in a

disguised manner but still in generic circumstances, of how indigenous and non-indigenous Australians understand and live with each other (Korff n.d.).

Access to the industry of modern technologies like film and television production is important for artists like Moffatt, as it gives them a new way of expressing cultural issues and getting a message out in the world. Graeme Turner suggests that 'if we are interested in films which challenge rather than simply reproduce existing racist ideologies, we must realise how important it is for black Australians to have access to media of representation' (McKee 1996, 196).

Contemporary art forms and methods will continue to be an inspiring subject for many Aboriginal artists, with combinations of ancient styles and modern art mediums. Art is essential to Aboriginal life because it connects to the spiritual domain and exists in many ways throughout their culture (Caruana 1993, 7). New art forms and mediums have been a wide acceptance for Aboriginal artists as it gave them many introductions to contemporary ways and allowed them to express their culture and talents in many unique ways, with a wide range of colour, texture, style and form. Stories passed down from generations will continue to be a relevant theme for Aboriginal artists, as '...the use of contemporary technology gives [them] the opportunity to communicate matters important to them' (McGuigan 1992, 4). Aboriginal artists will ensure that art is maintained as an innovative success to their unique expression of cultural survival.

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