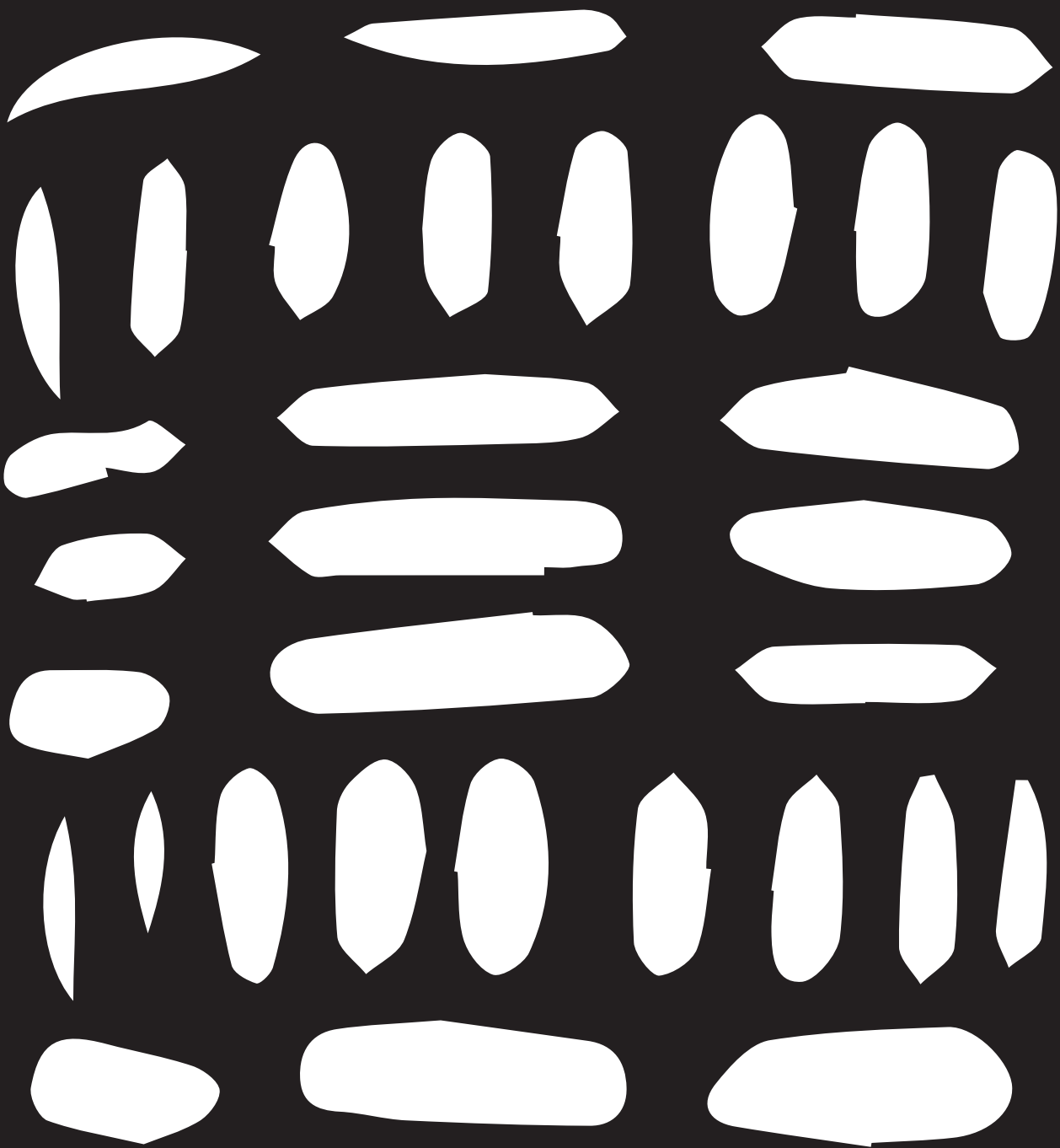


Maree Clarke

Ancestral Memories



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Edited by Myles Russell-Cook with contributors

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Contents	Director’s foreword	vii	Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories		List of illustrations	181
	Principal Partner’s message	ix	Myles Russell-Cook	1	Contributors	189
					Acknowledgements	191
			‘Living and breathing art and culture’: Maree Clarke and the ‘art’ of cultural maintenance			
			Fran Edmonds	15		
			Restoring the spirit of the possum-skin cloak			
			Kimberley Moulton, Yorta Yorta	59		
			Maree Clarke: making art public			
			Charlotte Day	81		
			As slippery as an eel			
			Claire G. Coleman	99		
			Art and family			
			Hannah Presley	115		
			‘Steeped in the now’: Maree Clarke’s photography			
			Helen Ennis	125		
			Kopi: art of reclamation and healing			
			Judith Ryan AM	161		

Director’s Foreword

Maree Clarke is one of Melbourne’s most dynamic cultural leaders. A Yorta Yorta / Wamba Wamba / Mutti Mutti / Boonwurrung woman, Clarke is an artist, designer, curator, researcher and leader in the reclamation of south-east Australian Aboriginal art, design and culture.

Through her multidisciplinary work – which includes photography, printmaking, sculpture, jewellery, video, glass and more – Clarke challenges the harmful notion that the cultural practices of the South East have been ‘lost’ due to colonisation, instead using her work to assert the continuation of her Ancestral memory. Clarke’s work highlights a deep engagement with and reverence for the customary ceremonies, rituals, objects and language of her Ancestors.

Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories is the first major monograph of the Melbourne-based artist and designer, covering more than three decades of artistic output, including her critically acclaimed work of recent years. This publication documents Clarke’s life as told through her art and features major mixed-media installations; contemporary jewellery incorporating gold, glass, kangaroo teeth, river reeds and echidna quills; photography; video; lenticular prints; and photographic holograms.

Through essays and texts from leading authors and thinkers, including a number of Clarke’s close friends and associates, this publication – produced to sit alongside the exhibition *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories* – offers a comprehensive insight into the life and work of this significant artist.

We acknowledge the commitment and ongoing support the NGV receives from the Victorian Government, through the Honourable Daniel Andrews MP, Premier of Victoria; and the Honourable Danny Pearson MP, Minister for Creative Industries. I also acknowledge the exhibition’s curator Myles Russell-Cook, who has worked closely with Maree Clarke on this project, and Andrew Clark, Deputy Director; Don Heron, Assistant Director, Exhibitions Management and Design; Donna McColm, Assistant Director, Curatorial and Audience Engagement; Misha Agzarian, Assistant Director, Fundraising and Events; and Jane Zantuck, Assistant Director, Marketing and Corporate Partnerships, for their leadership and support. I sincerely thank Vivien Anderson and the team at Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, for their continuing support. I would like to thank Principal Partner Deakin University and Vice-Chancellor Professor Iain Martin for their ongoing support of Australian art at the NGV, and commitment to engaging with Australia’s rich heritage and Indigenous knowledges. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge Museums Victoria, Melbourne; Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne; and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne, for their generous loans. We also thank the contributors to this publication, who each provide new perspectives on Maree Clarke’s life and works.

Lastly, I profoundly thank Maree Clarke for her generosity in sharing her story with us, and for her ongoing work as a cultural leader and teacher, activist and spokesperson for the Australian artistic community.

Tony Ellwood AM
Director, National Gallery of Victoria

Principal Partner's message

Deakin University has been in partnership with the National Gallery of Victoria since 2016, and we are delighted to join with the Gallery in presenting the *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories* exhibition at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia.

Deakin sees its partnership with the NGV as an opportunity to build appreciation for visual arts and cultural heritage and help the community to celebrate its richness and significance. Deakin is committed to reconciliation and treaty, advancing the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and moving Indigenous knowledges into the mainstream of Australian life. We applaud Maree Clarke as the first solo artist to exhibit at the NGV who has ancestral ties to the Country on which the gallery stands, and for her remarkable life's work, which is presented in this retrospective.

In viewing her art, we can feel Maree's visceral connection to the Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung peoples of Victoria. Through an incredible range of mediums and materials, she conveys the unique characteristics of her people's land and their place within it. Maree's work is so original – she transfigures objects by evoking their context with great clarity and resonance.

This is both a deeply personal and expansive exhibition that fuses the eternal with the new. I hope you enjoy it.

Professor Iain Martin
Vice-Chancellor
Deakin University





Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories

Myles Russell-Cook



It is appropriate that the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) is holding a major survey exhibition and publishing a significant book about the work of Maree Clarke, an artist who has made Melbourne her home for many years. Clarke has contributed immensely to the local art community, with a legacy unlike that of many others. She is connected to the traditional lands of the Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung peoples. The NGV, in the city of Melbourne, or Naarm, is built on the traditional lands of the Boonwurrung and the Wurundjeri. In 2003 the NGV presented *Remembering Barak*, an exhibition that honoured (on the centennial of his death) the life and work of the great Wurundjeri ngurungaeta (head man) William Barak. Eighteen years later, the NGV proudly presents *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories*, the second solo presentation of a person upon whose Country the NGV stands, and the first ever solo exhibition by a living artist and a woman with ancestral ties to Naarm.

Despite being separated in time by more than 100 years, Maree Clarke and William Barak share a great many things. Both are known as cultural leaders, activists and spokespeople for their communities. Barak's face has been forever embedded within the Melbourne city skyline (on the face of Swanston Square Apartment Tower), while Clarke's more than thirty years of public art commissions can be experienced at ground level on many corners throughout the city. Barak painted some of his greatest masterpieces after smallpox devastated his community, and in a strange twist of fate, as the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed the world, Clarke was awarded the Melbourne Metro Tunnel commission, for an unprecedented public art commission that will ensure her art is a feature of our city for generations to come.

Throughout her career Clarke has developed a deep and contemplative, multidisciplinary practice that continually reclaims and celebrates Aboriginal customary ritual, language and art. There are very few people, let alone Victorian artists, whose presence can be felt across centuries, and yet in mounting this exhibition, we bear witness to one.

I first met Maree when I was a child. Our families became connected through my mum's close friend Shannon Faulkhead, who had known the artist since she was very young. When I was in my early twenties Maree invited me to model for and be involved in one of her art projects, the photographic installation *Ritual and Ceremony*, 2011–12. The first exhibition I ever curated was a small showing of work by Maree Clarke, Treahna Hamm, Kelly Koumalatsos and Ray Thomas, at Swinburne University's temporary Art Space in 2012. The show was organised through the Design Anthropology program as part of the

Indigenous Design Dialogues lecture series. Since then, Maree and I have remained connected as friends, and bonded through our shared goal in bringing Indigenous art to the forefront of public understanding. Despite having been friends for a long time and having grown up only ever knowing Maree by her first name (and often just as Ree), in accordance with academic conventions for writing about artists, I refer to her by her last name throughout this essay as a mark of respect. Other authors in this book have chosen to refer to Maree by her first name, due to their close personal relationship with her.

Clarke's life revolves around family, art and design. Central to her practice is, and has always been, a deep respect for the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer. Family is paramount for Aboriginal people. As documented throughout this book, as well as in the exhibition, Clarke has produced many collaborative projects over the years with family and friends, often bringing everyone together for making workshops at the Koorie Heritage Trust, Footscray Community Arts Centre or in her backyard studio in Yarraville. In her interview essay in this volume titled 'Art and family' (p. 115), NGV Curator of Indigenous Art, Hannah Presley, helps the reader to understand how Clarke's philosophy and upbringing have shaped both the artist and the woman she is today. Presley describes Clarke as the 'favourite aunty we all wish we had' – an ironic statement as, despite being one of the most respected Aboriginal artists and people living in Victoria today, Clarke has always resisted the title 'Aunty'. Through a series of extended quotes, we are invited into Clarke's personal memories as she recounts her experiences dealing with racism growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

Clarke was born in Swan Hill in the north-west of Victoria and lived for a time on Balranald mission, NSW, and at Manatunga mission in Robinvale, Victoria, before settling in Mildura (a border city on the southern bank of the Murray River). The early chapters of Clarke's life are outlined with familiar detail in an essay by her long-time friend, senior researcher at the University of Melbourne, Fran Edmonds. In her essay, 'Living and breathing art and culture: Maree Clarke and the art of cultural maintenance' (p. 15), Edmonds offers insight into Clarke's life growing up along the Murray River, known as Dhungalla. Edmonds captures the vastness of Clarke's oeuvre, from her beginnings working as a jeweller in the 1980s when she, along with her brother Peter Clarke and sister Karen Clarke-Edwards, established the Aboriginal arts enterprise Kiah Krafts, through to her early work as a photographer training alongside Muroona and South Sea Islander woman Kim Kruger under the tutelage of Melbourne-based photographic artist

Viva (Jillian) Gibb. Edmonds highlights Clarke's curatorial career as well as her many significant contributions to archival research.

Clarke's early work as a jeweller can be traced within this exhibition through a number of significant works loaned from the collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust, an important Aboriginal organisation in Melbourne where Clarke worked as senior curator and exhibition manager for a number of years. These early examples of art made for the body highlight Clarke's love of materiality, which in many ways has come to define her oeuvre. On loan is a selection of necklaces featuring black wattle seeds, echidna quills, quandong seeds, kangaroo teeth, leather, sinew, gumnuts, melaleuca seeds, acacia seeds and more. From these natural, foraged elements Clarke continued to explore mixed media, with more recent examples of her jewellery utilising 3D printing in synthetic polymer and gold. The juxtaposition of old and new reinforces a continuum of making that exists across millennia.

In 2019, Clarke's jewellery was featured as part of a five-page spread in Australian *Vogue's* sixtieth anniversary edition. Her unique body of sculptural neckpieces was displayed in conjunction with bespoke silk garments produced by emerging Gunnai, Wiradjuri, Gunditjmarra and Yorta Yorta textile artist Lyn-Al Young. Worn by Yolngu model Magnolia Maymuru, the two vastly different artists celebrated a shared connection to cultural heritage. Juxtaposed against Young's silk drapery, Clarke's supersized body adornment embodied hard-edged vibrancy and her love of texture. She explains her supersizing of these customary objects as being a way to reflect the scale of the loss of knowledge of cultural practices post colonisation. Among the designs presented in *Vogue*, Clarke presented a traditional-style 50-metre river-reed necklace, two contemporary river-reed necklaces re-imagined in clear glass, and kangaroo-teeth necklaces that combined customary making techniques with cutting-edge, gold-carat 3D printing.

In 2008, Clarke began producing Thung-ung Coorang (kangaroo-teeth necklaces), working with her long-time collaborator and dear friend, the late Uncle Leonard Tregonning. The raw materials for Thung-ung Coorang derive entirely from roadkill. Poignantly, Clarke is a dedicated, lifelong vegan, and as such, she views the process of gathering and preparing the kangaroo body with ritualised meaning. She collects the front two teeth from the kangaroo carcass (the only two that can be used), boils them and strips them of any plaque. The whole process is a family affair; she works with nephews and nieces to collect the materials. In her backyard studio, once all the teeth are ready, Clarke and her

family prepare kangaroo sinew taken from the tail, which she then uses to bind each tooth to a strip of natural kangaroo leather.

Clarke's traditional river-reed necklaces are interspersed with seeds and feathers. For the presentation in *Vogue*, Clarke presented on the body a dramatic, fifty-metre, black reed necklace interspersed with scarlet and fern-coloured parrot feathers. To prepare them, Clarke collected river reeds from along the Maribyrnong River, boiled them and stripped the outer surface. The reeds were then dyed black to represent mourning practices. Each one was carefully shaped and adorned with feathers and hung from a wax thread. One of the most theatrical moments in her exhibition sees a collection of suspended river-reed necklaces floating within the gallery. Visitors walk underneath and around these elongated hoops and are prompted to consider the sheer scale of what was taken. By transforming the necklaces from objects made for the body into immersive installations, Clarke both literally and metaphorically invites people to step inside her cultural heritage.

Clarke has spent a great deal of her artistic career researching collections, such as that of the Koorie Heritage Trust and Melbourne Museum (Museums Victoria), as well as museum collections internationally. In many ways Clarke's work is a strong riposte to the old ways in which museum collections treated south-eastern Aboriginal material culture. Most museum collections of south-eastern material were amassed with the intention of 'capturing' Aboriginal culture before it became – as was popularly expected – 'extinct'. Motivations to collect were rooted in what is known as salvage anthropology, an outdated term given to the study of 'native people' under threat from colonisation, who were widely assumed to be destined either for 'extinction' or 'assimilation'. Through her art as well as her physical presence, Clarke stares back at the museum collection, engaging and re-claiming the collection itself as inspiration for her contemporary art and design.

Senior Curator, South Eastern Australia Aboriginal Collections at Museums Victoria, and Yorta Yorta woman, Kimberley Moulton, explores this facet of Clarke's work through her essay titled 'Restoring the spirit of the possum-skin cloak' (p. 59). One of the highlights in the *Ancestral Memories* exhibition is the loan from Museums Victoria of what is popularly referred to as 'the Yorta Yorta cloak', a possum-skin cloak collected from Maiden's Punt, Echuca, in 1853 that is made up of more than seventy possum pelts. Moulton explains how the designs of this cloak are believed by many Elders to be a map of the river systems that, for many Aboriginal communities, historically were (and still are) vital. The Yorta Yorta

cloak is one of only two historical cloaks held in Australia, and for this exhibition it is presented alongside a newly commissioned cloak made by Clarke. This new cloak is made of sixty pelts, with each pelt representing a year of Clarke's life. Historically, possum-skin cloaks were ubiquitous throughout south-eastern Australia. They were highly desired by coloniser-settler Australians and were easily – and forcibly – collected and replaced by inferior woven blankets. By the mid twentieth century only around a dozen cloaks had survived, preserved in museums. In the 1990s Maree Clarke, along with a number of other Koorie artists, including Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm and Kelly Koumalatsos, began reclaiming the practice of possum-skin cloak-making as a way of honouring their Ancestors.

Through a close examination of Clarke's work as a possum-skin cloak maker, Moulton exposes what she describes as 'the myth that cultural practice was "lost"'. As both a Yorta Yorta woman and a senior curator at a museum, Moulton, in her essay and touching poem, 'Dreaming of Biganga' (p. 63), presents a real example of how Aboriginal people working in museums continue to decolonise the ways in which their material is treated, challenging the relationship between traditional artefact and contemporary art.

This continuum of old and new can be felt through a number of other works in the exhibition, including *Ritual and Ceremony*. Comprising eighty-four portraits of named Aboriginal men and women from Victoria, *Ritual and Ceremony* speaks frankly about the physical presence of Aboriginal people in the South East. Over the years the photographs that make up the installation have been imagined and re-imagined in numerous configurations, locations and contexts. The work's adaptability can be seen as speaking to the adaptability and resilience of First Nations people throughout the world. In 2017, the NGV presented an exhibition titled *Colony: Frontier Wars*, in which Clarke displayed *Ritual and Ceremony* as a response to the masses of material held within collecting institutions by makers whose names were not recorded. Clarke uses the naming of individuals as an antidote to absence, challenging visitors to the gallery to consider the legacy of erasure that has been perpetuated within its walls. In *Ritual and Ceremony* Clarke uses white ochre painted on the faces and hair of thirty-eight women, and on the eyes and T-shirts of forty-six men, to represent widows' caps and ceremonial body paint, as well as scarification markings. Clarke does this to honour all that has been lost:

The work represents the mourning practices of Aboriginal people along the Murray/Darling rivers. It talks about loss of land, language

and cultural practices. I worked with Aboriginal women who represent the thirty-eight tribes of Victoria. The women are dressed in long black dresses that represent our mourning practices today and the men wear black T-shirts with my interpretation of scars worn for different events including the loss of a member of the tribe. The white marks across the eyes of the men and women represent traditional mourning practices. All eighty-four people had the opportunity to share their stories of loss, sorrow and mourning.¹

Clarke's work as a photographer is contextualised within a broader discourse of contemporary Indigenous photography in an essay by Australian photography curator, historian and writer, Helen Ennis, titled "'Steeped in the now": Maree Clarke's photography' (p. 125). Ennis situates Clarke's photography within her entire oeuvre and explores the impact Clarke's work has had on photography more generally. A number of Clarke's early black-and-white photographs can be seen throughout the exhibition. These works offer insight into Melbourne's history as a site for Indigenous activism. Ennis observes how Clarke's social documentation has endured across decades and continues to inform multiple facets of her practice. Clarke's photographic legacy runs the gamut from studio and self-portraiture to location photography that includes landscape and photojournalism. Her more recent foray into lenticular lightboxes and holograms continues to push the boundaries of what contemporary Indigenous art and photography are and can be.

In picking up the camera, Clarke asserts her power to tell her own story. Since the birth of photography in the 1820s there has been an unequal power dynamic between subject and photographer. Aboriginal people were often photographed as the subject of ethnographic and anthropological research. Clarke, along with other important Indigenous photographers such as Tracey Moffatt and Destiny Deacon, switched her position from subject to photographer, asserting her sovereignty (as a Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung woman and artist).

Alongside the photographs that comprise *Ritual and Ceremony* is an installation of eighty-four contemporary kopi (skull caps). Kopi were traditionally made from gypsum (a soft calcium chalk-like substance) and ochre and would be worn by women on their heads for substantial lengths of time as an integral part of mourning rites, before being placed on the grave of the deceased. In her essay titled 'Kopi: art of reclamation and healing' (p. 161), esteemed Australian curator, Judith Ryan AM, discusses the

unique ways in which Clarke uses her research-based art practice to ‘give birth to what has been extinguished, stolen or abandoned’. Ryan explains how in Clarke’s *Kopi: connected to Country*, 2011, the art objects become both an allegory for and an insight into tradition and disappearance. In 1967 and 1974 the discovery of the skeletal remains now known as Mungo Lady and Mungo Man confirmed that for Aboriginal people, complex funeral rituals of caring for and mourning the deceased have existed for at least 42,000 years. Clarke extends on those ancient mourning ceremonies, using her art to simultaneously revive and reflect on the loss of contemporary Aboriginal ritual mourning practices throughout Victoria and the South East.

Within *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories* we see Clarke build on the connections of ritual and ceremony. Ryan describes the kopi installation as ‘a performative process of making that effects an inexplicable transference between how things once were and how they are today’. And while much of the exhibition seeks to investigate the relationship between the past and the present, we are also invited to consider how these practices will continue to exist into the future.

When I imagine the future of Melbourne, it gives me great comfort to know that alongside the Barak building on Swanston Street, Maree Clarke’s presence will continue to be felt by generations to come. In her essay titled ‘Maree Clarke: making art public’ (p. 81), Director of Monash University Museum of Art, Charlotte Day, looks in detail at the legacy of Clarke’s public art in the city of Melbourne. Day considers Clarke’s career as a public artist through the lens of the international Black Lives Matter movement. We gain a sense of Clarke’s legacy through a number of works, including one of Clarke’s earliest public artworks, a commission completed in 1992 with Lardil woman Sonja Hodge, of two painted poles in front of Melbourne’s City Square. Day situates Clarke’s practice within the complexities of public art, reminding readers that public art requires an artist to be able to ‘respond to site and place, history and present conditions, as well as to engage with viewers/users in ways that are very different to inside a gallery or museum’. From this consideration of Clarke’s impact on the present, acclaimed Wirlo-min/Noongar/Australian writer and poet Claire G. Coleman simultaneously plunges us into deep time and a future at the end of the universe in her short story ‘As slippery as an eel’ (p. 99).

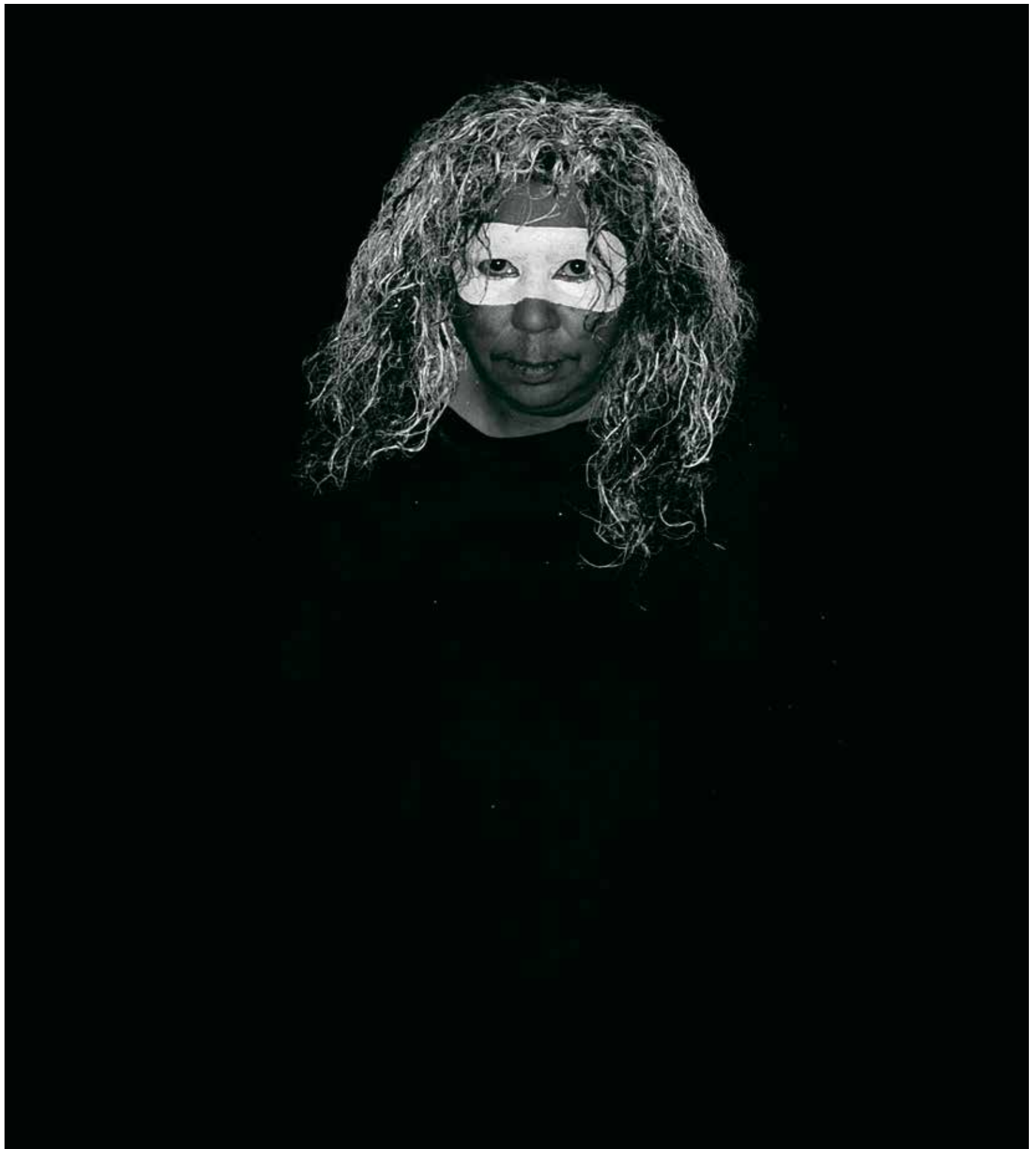
Using Clarke’s superb clear-glass installations *Ancestral Memory I* and *Ancestral Memory II*, both 2019, Coleman metaphorically hyperjumps readers through a wormhole with her speculative fiction response. Coleman paints for us a world in which

Aboriginal people have taken to the stars, navigating celestial bodies using star gates inspired by eel traps. Coleman’s thought-provoking story celebrates the continuum of past, present and future, echoing Clarke’s own trajectory as an artist. In Coleman’s short story, as in Clarke’s exhibition, it is very difficult to maintain the line between the past and the present. The familiar linear timeline that posits that Aboriginal people first arrived in Australia at least 65,000 years ago is closed into an infinite circle. The past becomes the future, and the present.

So much of Clarke’s work is made from and about memory – whether a personal memory, like the memory of sleeping as a child in a suitcase on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, or a memory of growing up and visiting her nan’s house, or a cultural memory inscribed in the landscape, written on Country. Ancestral memories echo across time; they are found in Ancestral objects and in new renditions of ancient crafts. These memories forge and reinforce the connections at the heart of Maree Clarke’s work.

Notes

- 1 Maree Clarke, artist statement, 2013, first published in the exhibition *Colony: Frontier Wars*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2018.



Maree Clarke *Maree Clarke* from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012, printed 2018, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

‘Living and breathing art and culture’: Maree Clarke and the ‘art’ of cultural maintenance

Fran Edmonds





Maree Clarke *Necklace* c. 1987, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne

Maree Clarke is a generous artist. Her work maintains culture not in a static or restricted way; it embodies her philosophy to share her knowledge, skills and ambitions with her family, community and vast networks, all while remaining connected to Country. At a time when the world is reeling from the effects of a global pandemic, where lockdowns have been enforced worldwide to reduce the spread of COVID-19, restricting people's capacity to move freely, Maree's work reveals the importance of maintaining connections between people, places and things, as a way of dealing with change during times of crisis. As an Aboriginal art-maker, curator and cultural mentor, her work responds to the ongoing effects of colonisation and contests the many forms of lockdown that have restricted her community's cultural practice for more than 200 years.

As a Mutti Mutti / Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung / Wamba Wamba woman, Maree's work focuses attention on the histories and culture of south-east Australian Aboriginal people. Significantly, this is a collaborative enterprise, which entails learning, sharing and experimenting as you go. As Maree declares in this statement below, her approach is to:

learn as much cultural knowledge ... through research, through talking to Elders and then to actually physically make those objects and items – it feels incredible. And then when [I am] teaching and passing on that knowledge, which is what making art is all about – because it's useless if we just keep it to ourselves. So, our job as artists is to pass that on to our family and communities and anybody who wants to learn, really.¹

Maree grew up along the Murray River (Dhungalla) in north-west Victoria, in and around the border town of Mildura, a region she remains closely connected to through kinship and connections to Country. In south-east Australia, colonisation was rapid and devastating. In the place now known as Victoria, assimilation policies were implemented earlier than elsewhere in the country, culminating in lingering misperceptions about the authenticity of an ongoing/living Aboriginal culture in the region.² Maree, and her art and art-making, respond to and speak back to such restrictive notions. She has developed and honed her cultural knowledge and artistic prowess over thirty-plus years, always learning, always experimenting, constantly looking for new ways to make and create.

Maree is a multimedia artist; her art-making is diverse and includes photography, 3D printing, jewellery made with organic materials, video installations,

sculptural work and more. It involves broad community participation, and often takes place in her backyard – an artist’s studio and a renowned gathering place.³ As a cultural matriarch, she, through her art, strategically reclaims the knowledge of her Ancestors, often through intensive research into collections housed in museums and galleries throughout the world. Maree’s art-making is culture-making, entwined in Aboriginal ‘ways of knowing, being and doing’ things⁴– there is no separation between the two. As Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson acknowledges, Aboriginal culture is informed by an ontological relationality with the land – by interconnections between humans and non-humans, living and non-living things, all based on ‘blood lines’ to Country. These relationships were not destroyed by colonisation.⁵ Maree’s art practice reflects her connections and lived experiences as an Aboriginal woman. This chapter discusses her early work as a young artist, her role as a curator, and more recent work following archival research, all of which reveal her ambition to tell her story through art.

Early jewellery

In 1987, Maree Clarke, along with her brother, Peter Clarke (deceased), and sister, Karen Clarke-Edwards, helped establish the Aboriginal arts enterprise Kiah Kraits in her home town of Mildura. This small business, associated with the Mildura Aboriginal Cooperative, provided an outlet for local and national Aboriginal arts and crafts. It also provided Maree and her siblings with opportunities to explore their cultural heritage, specifically through making jewellery. As a young emerging artist, Maree, with her brother as her art mentor, experimented with material sourced from the local bushland including echidna quills, and gumnut and quandong seeds, alongside working with mulga wood (a hard wood that grows in Australia’s arid regions) to make earrings decorated with designs that visually articulated totemic and kinship connections.⁶ These intricately designed echidna quill necklaces and finely crafted earrings drew the attention of Uncle Jim Berg (Gunditjmara), who purchased a number of items for the then newly founded Koorie Heritage Trust.⁷ Soon after, in 1988, she, along with Peter and Karen, was commissioned by the Trust to hand-paint the first green and gold tram with a Koorie design. Since those days, Maree Clarke and her family have remained connected to the Trust.





Early photography

By 1990, after moving to Melbourne, Maree was already expanding her visual art practice. That year, Maree and Kim Kruger (a Muroona and South Sea Islander woman with longstanding connections to the Victorian Aboriginal community), became the first Aboriginal women awarded traineeships in photography through the Victorian Women's Trust, mentored by Viva (Jillian) Gibb.⁸ Together, Kim and Maree visited Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria, taking pictures of everyday events, from people working in offices to life on missions. Along with Maree's sister-in-law, Sonja Hodge (Lardil), they became part of a growing collective of Aboriginal women in Victoria intent on showcasing Aboriginal and Indigenous culture in south-east Australia as vibrant and dynamic, while demonstrating ongoing connections to Country and kin.⁹ The photographs not only connect people with places, but also record significant events, including NAIDOC marches along the main streets of Melbourne throughout the 1990s. These images are a reminder of Aboriginal peoples' ongoing demands for self-determination and equal rights, which resonate today, especially when considered alongside the recent Black Lives Matter movement, a global response to injustice and racism experienced by Indigenous people and people of colour, and particularly relevant in Australia given the high rates of Aboriginal incarceration and deaths in custody.¹⁰

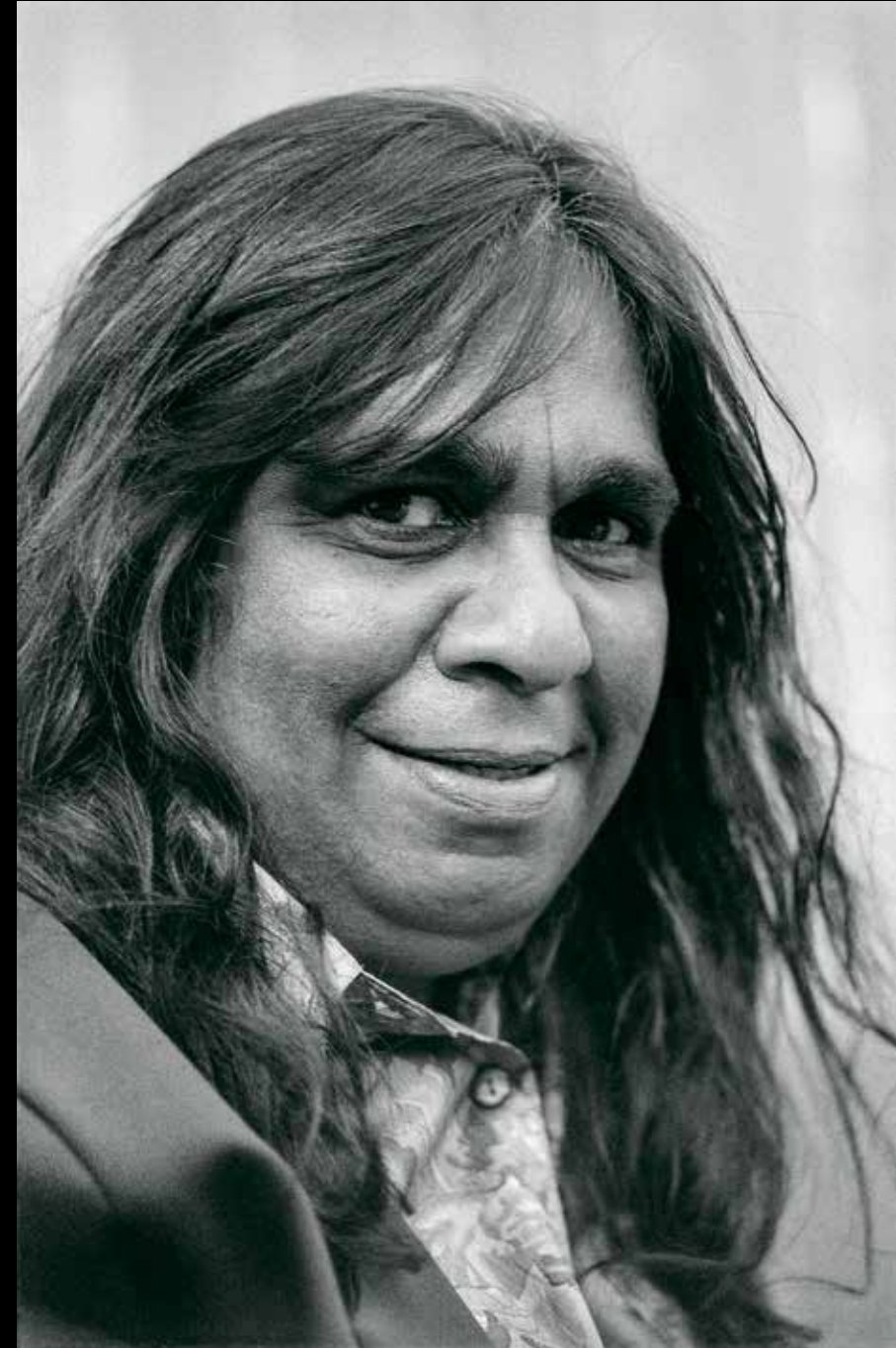
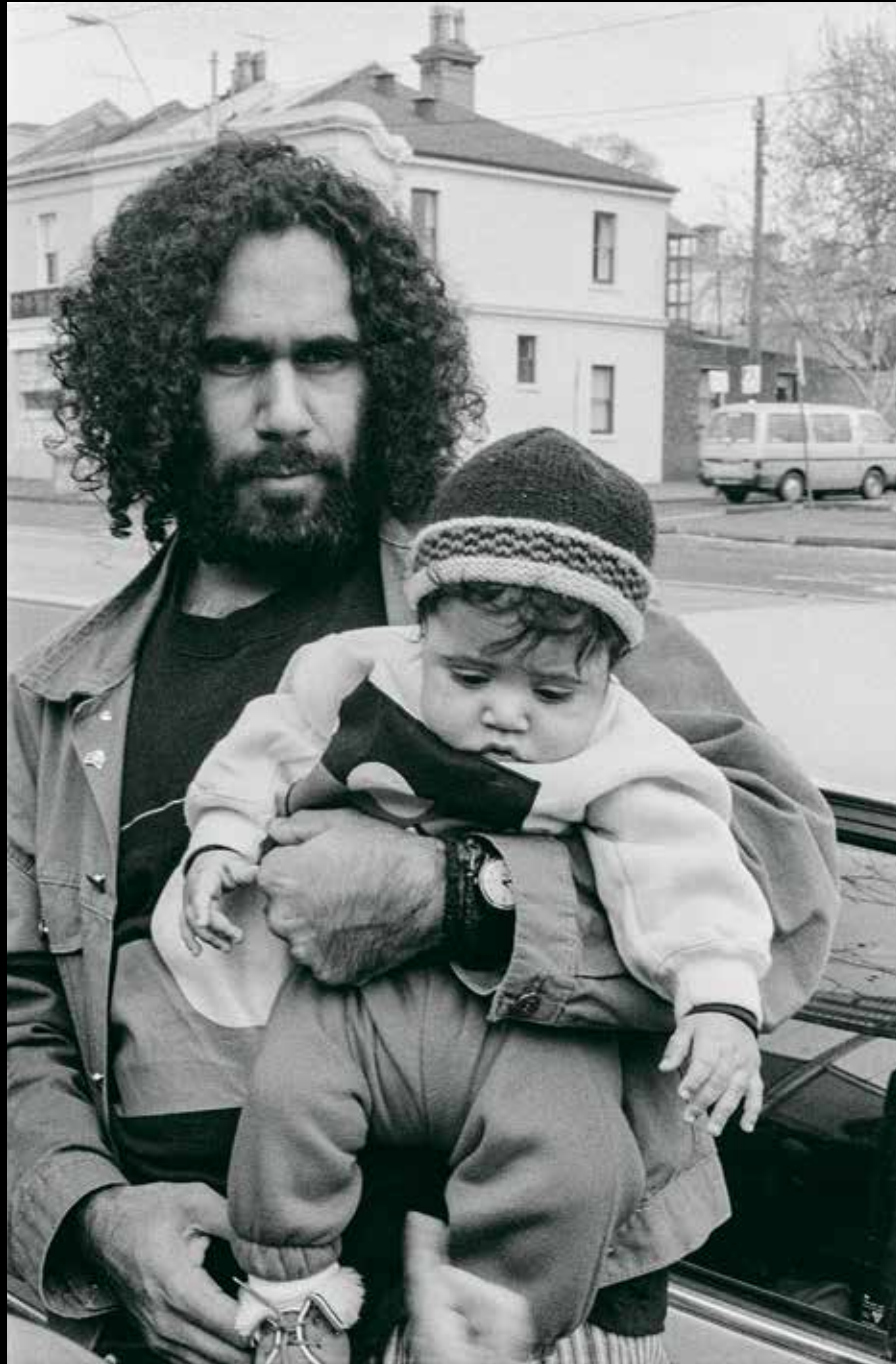
Maree's artwork has benefited from her training as a photographer: recent work includes the use of new and emerging digital technologies to create holograms and moving images.¹¹ She continues to view photography as an extension of herself; it enables her to rigorously document her art practice. This is a living archive, one continuously in the making – a process she says will take the rest of her life.¹²

Curating

Alongside progressing her art-making practice, Maree forged a career as a curator of Aboriginal art, often supporting emerging south-east Australian Aboriginal artists. The Latin word for 'care' is 'curae', from which the word 'curate' emerges.¹³ Maree's curatorial roles have focused not only on 'caring' for artists and their artwork, alongside meticulously designed exhibitions, but are also an expression of care as a cultural responsibility that progresses the knowledge and stories of Aboriginal people in the South East. Her work as a curator has always been more than a 'job'.













In 1993, Maree, with her brother, Peter, and a team of artists and writers, delivered an exhibition with an accompanying catalogue called *Can't See for Lookin: Koori Women Artists Educating*.¹⁴ This exhibition showcased twelve Aboriginal women in Victoria and reflected the diversity of the Aboriginal community across the region. In an interview at the time Maree stated: '[The exhibition] started off Victorian Koori women artists, but then of course a lot of your Koori [First Nations] women artists based in Victoria aren't necessarily from Victoria, so it ended up just being Koori women artists'.¹⁵ It was one of the first Aboriginal women's only exhibitions and marked a concerted effort by the curators to have Aboriginal people articulating their own stories from their perspectives. It also provided an education resource kit that included practical strategies for cross-cultural learning, including slides of the art.

That same year, Maree became the first Koorie arts officer employed by the City of Port Phillip, and in this position she embarked on a prolific program to showcase Aboriginal art from around Victoria. In 1996, with curator and multimedia artist Kimba Thompson (Waradgerie) – who in 2011 established Blak Dot Gallery in Brunswick (a space that continues to advocate for the promotion and advancement of art / art practices by Indigenous groups and people of colour) – and long-time soulmate and art collaborator, the late Len Tregonning (Gunnai), they initiated the largest exhibition of south-east Aboriginal art to date. They travelled across the state in a three-tonne truck collecting work from people's sheds and wardrobes and from under beds. Across five sites in central Melbourne, including the National Gallery of Victoria, the *We Iri* – *We Homeborn* exhibition was held during NAIDOC week in July 1996 and helped launch the career of many Aboriginal artists from the South East, including Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta / Mutti Mutti / Trawlwoolway) and Vicki Couzens (Gunditjmara / Keeray Woorroong). Further, the exhibition was instrumental in persuading the NGV to begin collecting south-east Australian Aboriginal artwork.¹⁶

By 2001 Maree had become the exhibition manager at the Koorie Heritage Trust (2001–12), where for more than a decade she was key to establishing and promoting south-east Australian Aboriginal artists and their work as a legitimate and vibrant art movement. Aboriginal art in the South East had struggled to be considered authentic when compared to the Central Desert or Top End art movement that gained traction in the 1970s. During her time at the Trust, Maree nurtured the careers of many emerging and early-career artists who lived in the region, including Peter Waples-Crowe (Ngarigo), Lorraine Connelly Northey (Waradgerie) and Reko Rennie (Kamilaroi),

who had their first solo shows at the Koorie Heritage Trust. Along with a supportive collections team, led by Nerissa Broben, Maree was also crucial in building the Trust's collection of contemporary south-east Australian Aboriginal art.¹⁷ Maree's legacy continues, alongside the Trust's philosophy to care for and showcase south-east Australian Aboriginal art and culture.

Maree later worked as a curator at the Wyndham Art Gallery (2015–19), located in Melbourne's outer west. Wyndham municipality has among the highest numbers of refugees and migrants in the state. Working at the gallery enabled Maree, alongside her friend, colleague and fellow artist, Dr Megan Evans, to encourage artists/performers from the African community, First Nations people and other diverse communities to participate in the space. This aspect of Maree's curatorial work reflects her generosity, where relationship-building across communities and cultures, as academic Rimi Khan writes, 'resists existing art world disciplines, categories, and hierarchies, and instead emphasizes the community-based collaborative production of cultural meaning'.¹⁸

Research

Maree's curatorial work, photography and art-making also paralleled her expanding archival research into the material culture of her Ancestors, allowing her to find new ways of revivifying 'traditional' practices as contemporary, culturally significant works of art. Maree was among the first group of young Koorie artists to visit Museums Victoria (then Museum of Victoria) in the late 1980s/early 1990s, intent on exploring the museum's collections of her Ancestral cultural heritage.¹⁹ Before the Koorie Heritage Trust had its own long-term/permanent home (in King Street, now at Federation Square, Melbourne), it was located at the old museum housed at the State Library of Victoria, where Uncle Jim Berg and others shared a space with the museum's collections team. Maree's research, supported by Uncle Jim and others, began to address the museum's ambition to provide additional information about the provenance of south-east Australian Aboriginal material culture in the museum's collection, and in particular they sought out knowledge from Aboriginal perspectives. This is a process that Maree, her contemporaries and younger generations continue today.²⁰ By 2011 Maree had embarked on a worldwide campaign to recover as much information as possible about her Ancestors' material culture, with the intention of one day taking groups of young artists, family members and others to visit the collections in

order to revive the objects' stories. Among the institutions Maree has visited are the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford and the British Museum, London; the Ethnological Museum, Berlin; and the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography, Rome, as well as others in Geneva, Switzerland; Canada; and elsewhere. In these places she has been able to touch, feel and record through photographs items including (but not limited to) possum skin pelts/cloaks, kangaroo-teeth necklaces and kopi mourning caps. Many items had previously been 'locked away'; however, as Maree has said:

to know about those objects and items and then to go [to international museums] and physically see them, touch them and handle them is really emotional ... when you are there and you see all those pieces it makes you feel not so disconnected or so far away from home.²¹

Reclaiming the archive: art-making as culture-making

Possum-skin cloaks

Researching objects from local and international museums has become the catalyst for dynamic and new art-making practices by Koorie artists, perhaps reflected most powerfully in the possum-skin cloak projects that emerged to critical acclaim in the early 2000s. Following the sighting in 1999 of the two extant nineteenth-century possum-skin cloaks in Museums Victoria's collection – the Maiden's Punt cloak (Yorta Yorta) and the Lake Condah cloak (Gunditjmara) – Lee Darroch, Vicki Couzens, Vicki's sister Debra and Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta) were inspired to re-create the original cloaks, alongside their own contemporary cloak designs.²² In 2006, Maree, as one of the leaders in art-making for cultural reclamation, joined Vicki Couzens, Lee and Treahna in a cloak-making project (initiated by Couzens) that involved thirty-five of the thirty-eight Aboriginal communities/language groups in Victoria. It saw the women work with local community artists and Elders to create cloaks that were representative of the community's



Installation view of a possum-skin cloak produced for Maree Clarke by her family and friends, 2018, on display as part of *Translating Tradition*, Canberra Glassworks, 2019



Installation view of Maree Clarke and Mitch Mahoney's *Thun-ung Coorang (Kangaroo teeth necklace)* 2019, on display as part of *Translating Tradition*, Canberra Glassworks, 2019

stories. Each community made a cloak that was then worn by an Elder or community representative at the closing ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. This was the first time in 150 years that cloaks had been worn for ceremonial purposes, sparking ongoing cloak-making initiatives across south-east Australia.²³ By 2010, Vicki, Lee and Maree, along with former National Gallery of Australia curator and long-time collaborator Amanda Reynolds, established Banmirra Arts, an organisation funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation that enabled the women to actively progress the cloak-making tradition through community-based workshops to support cultural reconnection and wellbeing.²⁴

Today, cloak-making follows the process developed by the women, in which new designs are burnt onto the skin side of the possum pelts using poker-work, then coloured by ochre mixed with gum-tree resin to ensure it adheres to the soft possum skin. These methods are based on 'traditional' techniques but have been adapted to incorporate modern-day technologies, such as electric poker burners and wax thread instead of sinew to sew the pelts. The pelts are imported from New Zealand as possums are protected in Australia. Maree continues the cloak-making tradition, passing this knowledge on to people – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – and is renowned for the cloak-making that occurs in her backyard, where her nieces and nephews are encouraged to participate in the process.²⁵

Thun-ung Coorang: kangaroo-teeth necklaces

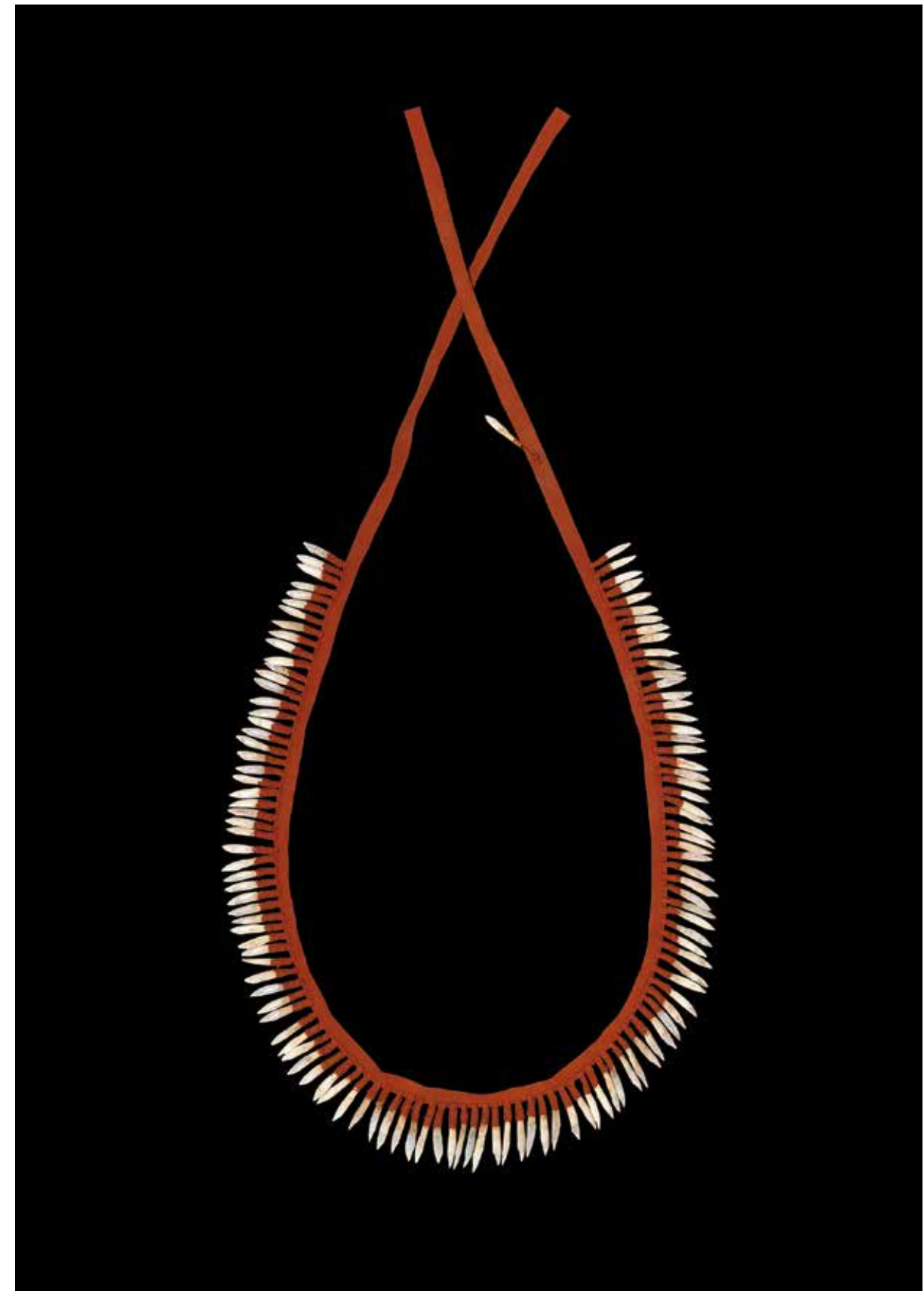
Developing alongside the possum-skin cloak work and research was Maree's exploration of kangaroo-teeth necklaces. As an artist with a background in jewellery-making, her ambition to create a kangaroo-teeth necklace was triggered after viewing the nineteenth-century necklace, and a reproduction of a photograph of Yarruun Parpur Tarneen (Victorious), Chiefess of the Mooporr Tribe, in Museums Victoria's collection. Maree was inspired to gather family and friends together in her backyard to start the making process. As a committed vegan and animal rights advocate, Maree was intent that no animals were to be harmed in the necklace making, so the roo teeth were collected from the jaws of dead kangaroos, often roadkill. In 2008, alongside Len Tregonning and many others, Maree experimented and trialled various techniques in her backyard, first making a relatively small twenty-five tooth necklace.²⁶ Along the way, through practice-based ways of doing things, Maree found that:

With the kangaroo teeth necklace, there is a real men's and women's business involved in the making of all of those things. So it's not ever any one person, any one artist, it becomes a group of people, a community. With the kangaroo teeth necklace it's not any one person who 200 years ago would have gone out and got 36 kangaroos, eaten them all, removed the roo's teeth and cleaned off the skin. It would just be beyond you. But as a clan, as a tribe, as a group you would utilise every bit of that animal.²⁷

By 2014, the initial experiments had developed to such a level that Len Tregonning and Maree were able to make a spectacular 123-tooth necklace, which was acquired by the NGV. Maree's kangaroo-teeth necklaces are remarkable not only for their aesthetic beauty, but for the collective experimentation/adaptation that goes into their making. Most recently, in 2019, this included experimenting and collaborating with Canberra Glassworks to make cast crystal/glass kangaroo teeth,²⁸ while other projects involved working with her great nephew Mitch Mahoney and others to make an organic, 76-tooth necklace, into which they incorporated one gold-plated, 3D-printed tooth as a centrepiece.²⁹ The use of 3D-printed teeth, along with echidna quills and feathers, are part of Maree's foray into new technologies, undertaken to revitalise items used in customary body adornments as contemporary jewellery/design pieces. These necklaces, which consist of combinations of real kangaroo teeth and various native bush seeds, alongside 3D-printed kangaroo teeth, echidna quills and feathers, were commissioned by the NGV in 2018 for the NGV design store and comprise the Thung-ung Coorang jewellery collection.³⁰

Kopi (mourning) caps

Inspired by the nineteenth-century kopi mourning caps in the Museums Victoria and British Museum collections, and the images of women wearing the caps in an 1860 encyclopaedia by the explorer and zoologist William Blandowski,³¹ Maree began a process of remaking the caps and researching mourning practices. Originally, the caps were made of white gypsum and worn by the mourner for some months; mourners also applied a white ochre mask around their eyes. Maree revived the process, working with thirty-eight Aboriginal women, representative of the thirty-eight language groups in Victoria, to create contemporary caps from plaster of Paris. The plaster was moulded to the shape of each woman's head to make a new cap. Along with the caps, Maree created a series of individual photographs of the women, with white ochre



Maree Clarke, Leonard Tregonning *Thung-ung Coorang (Kangaroo teeth necklace)* 2013, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



(above – p. 51) Magnolia Maymuru wearing Maree Clarke's sculptural neckpieces and Lyn-Al Young's silk garments. Photographed by Saskia Wilson and styled by Jillian Davison for *Vogue Australia's* 60th Anniversary edition, December 2019

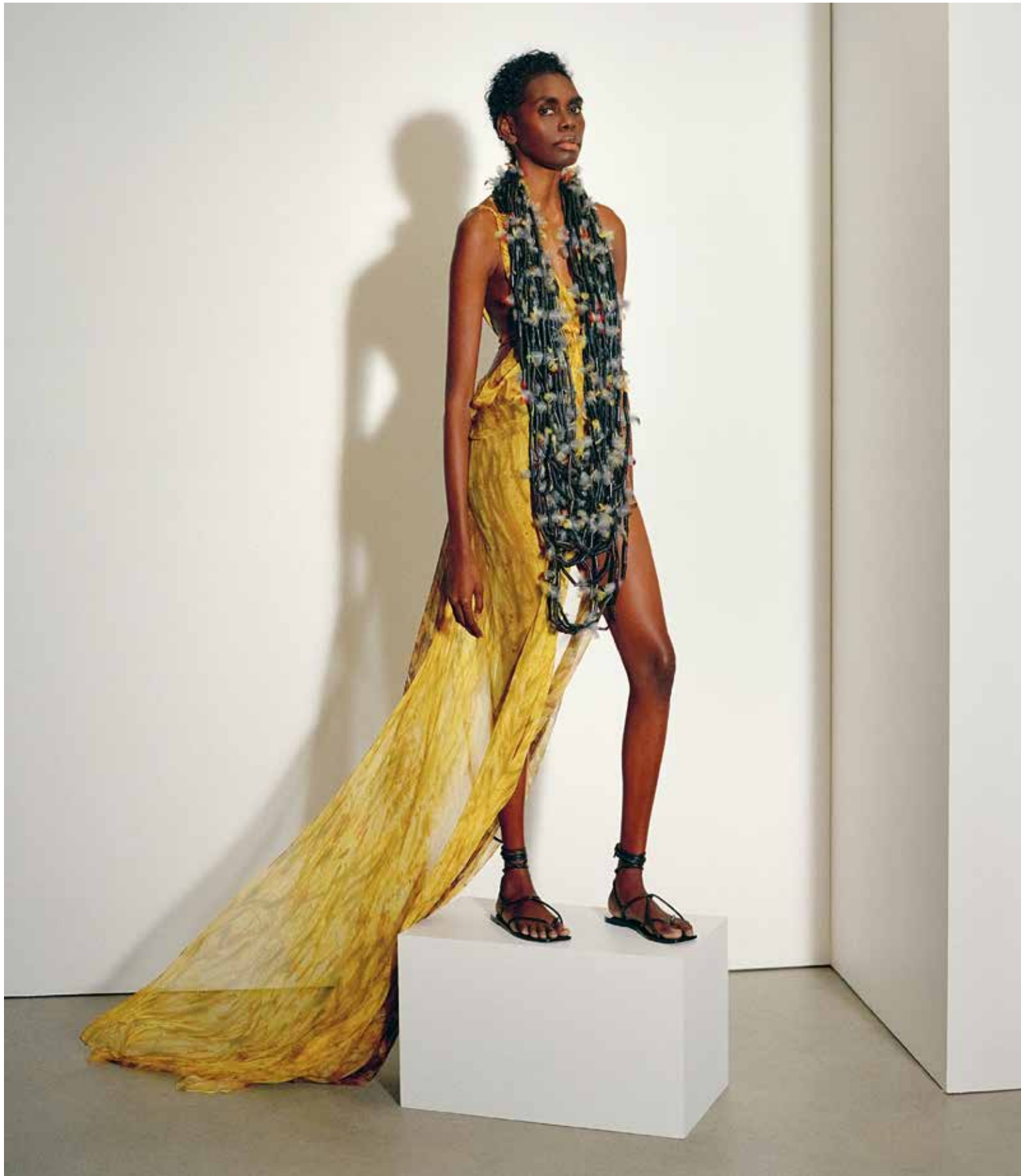
eye masks and dressed in black. These were accompanied by images of forty-five men attired in black T-shirts with 'tribal' scarification designs, and men's kopi caps drizzled with red ochre symbolising ritual bloodletting during mourning. Maree's first solo exhibition, *Ritual and Ceremony*, focused on the kopi caps as a collective symbol of mourning for lost people, languages, land and culture, and was held at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, in 2011. The haunting installation of the new kopis was juxtaposed against the nineteenth-century caps from Museums Victoria's collection, along with the photographs of men and women and their accompanying stories of grief. A permanent exhibition of Maree's kopis with images of people in mourning resides at Bunjilaka.

Additionally, Maree, along with artist/potter Robyne Latham (Yamatji), initiated a series of kopi healing workshops beginning in 2012, in which people were encouraged to make and mark designs on their own kopis. In recent years, these workshops have extended to Maree sharing kopi cap-making with Australian and international audiences, engaging broad publics with art as a method for working through trauma and grief by sharing and acknowledging stories in relation to the mourning process.³² Additional exhibitions and artworks have developed, arising from the initial theme of mourning and loss. For instance, Maree's deeply personal and dark photographic self-portrait of her in mourning was shown at the Ballarat International Foto Biennale in 2017. It was made specifically to grieve the death of Len Tregonning in 2016. Her widely acclaimed video installation 'Born of the Land', 2014, from which Maree emerges from the red earth, again dressed in mourning, has been exhibited across multiple sites over the years, including in Sovereignty at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2016–17). As Aboriginal writer and academic Tony Birch declares, Maree's work:

pays respect to the mourning practices of Indigenous women ... The power of [her] work is evident in its ability to recognise, with due dignity, the losses that women have experienced, while also celebrating the potential for re-emergence, the rebirth of Indigenous life.³³

Maree's engagement with archives critiques the colonial record, speaking back to its silences while simultaneously using archives/collections as a source of inspiration for art. As Jessyca Hutchens (Palyku) argues, this process creates 'new archives', where the archive is more than just a site of intervention for Indigenous artists.³⁴ Maree's work allows for an opening of the archive to her community, while providing new stories about her culture and heritage, based on her knowledge and experiences.









Conclusion

Maree Clarke is a multimedia artist in the truest sense. Her work is interconnected with ‘caring’ for kin, Country and culture; the work is never-ending and a fundamental part of her. As she says, ‘I live, eat and breathe art and culture every day’.³⁵

Throughout 2020, as the world endured a pandemic on an unforeseen scale, exacerbated by a series of coalescing crises – the reality of climate change witnessed in the devastating 2019–20 summer bushfires along Australia’s south-eastern coast; ongoing systemic racism and the resultant Black Lives Matter movement; and broadening issues of social inequality within which the impacts of colonisation continue to be felt – it is perhaps salient that we stop and reflect on Maree’s ‘ways of doing things’ (including her responses to dealing with ongoing grief and trauma), where generosity, collaboration and deep connection with Country and community support processes that have enabled people to survive and thrive on this land for millennia.



Installation view of Maree Clarke's *River reed necklace with cockatoo feathers* 2014; *Seed necklace* 2015; *River reed necklace with galah feathers* 2016; and *Born of the Land* 2014 on display as part of *Sovereignty* 2016–17, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

- 1 Maree Clarke, interview with Fran Edmonds, 21 Jan. 2018.
- 2 From European occupation in 1834, various policies sought to eliminate Aboriginal people from their traditional lands. From the 1860s, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines paved the way for Australia's 'absorbing' of the Aboriginal population into the mainstream. The 1886 *Aborigines Protection Act*, known as the 'half-caste' act, actively labelled people according to their degree of 'white blood' and segregated families depending on people's biological make-up. Throughout the twentieth century, policies continued to endorse the dispossession of people from their Country, banning practice of culture, including speaking languages and ceremonial performances. See Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2005.
- 3 Sabra Thorner et al., 'Maree's backyard: intercultural collaborations for Indigenous sovereignty in Melbourne', *Oceania*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2018, pp. 269–91.
- 4 K. Martin & B. Mirraboopa, 'Ways of knowing, being and doing: a theoretical framework and methods for indigenous and indigenist re-search', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 76, 2003.
- 5 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Towards an Australian Indigenous women's standpoint theory', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 28, no. 78, 2013, pp. 331–47.
- 6 Maree Clarke, 'Maree Clarke: reflections on creative practice, place and identity', MA thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne, 2009.
- 7 Uncle Jim Berg established the Koorie Heritage Trust in 1985, with lawyers Ron Castan AM QC and Ron Merkel QC. 'Koori(e)' refers to Aboriginal people whose family groups originate in south-eastern Australia. See Shannon Faulkhead & Jim Berg, *Power and the Passion: Our Ancestors Return Home*, Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., Melbourne, 2010.
- 8 For more information on Maree's photography traineeship see Sabra Thorner et al., 'The living archive of Aboriginal art: Maree Clarke and the circulation of photographs as culture-making', in Nat Castañeda, Karina Aguilera Skvirsky & Trudi Lynn Smith (eds), *Mapping Meaning, the Journal*, no. 3, 2019. Available at <<http://www.mappingmeaning.org/the-journal-issues>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 9 This included Destiny Deacon and Lisa Belleair, with whom Maree and Kim Kruger exhibited in *Pitcha Mi Koori*, September 1990, as part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival.
- 10 For more on Maree Clarke's early 1990s NAIDOC photographs and her more recent images of the Black Lives Matter protest in Melbourne, June 2020, please see the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art online exhibition at <<https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/livingarchivenaidoc/>>, accessed 29 March 2021. For more on Maree Clarke's early 1990s NAIDOC photographs and her more recent images of the Black Lives Matter protest in Melbourne, June 2020, please see the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art online exhibition at <<https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/livingarchivenaidoc/>>, accessed 29 March 2021. For a recent response to the continuing injustice of Indigenous incarceration and deaths in custody, see Marcia Langton, 'Why the Black Lives Matter protests must continue: an urgent appeal by Marcia Langton', 5 Aug. 2020, *The Conversation*, <<https://theconversation.com/why-the-black-lives-matter-protests-must-continue-an-urgent-appeal-by-marcia-langton-143914>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 11 See, for instance, her photographic hologram called *Made from memory (Nani's house)* for the *Defying Empire* exhibition, National Gallery of Australia, 26 May – 10 September 2017.
- 12 Thorner et al. in Castañeda, Skvirsky & Smith.
- 13 Paola Balla describes curating as an expression of 'care' in the *Affirmation* catalogue; see 'Affirmation', *Koorie Heritage Trust*, <<https://koorieheritagetrust.com.au/whats-on/exhibitions/affirmation/>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 14 Kate Harvey et al., *Can't See for Lookin': Koori Women Artists Educating*, Women's Art Register, Melbourne, 1993.
- 15 Virginia Fraser, 'Can't See for Lookin', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 62, 1993, p. 23.
- 16 Fran Edmonds & Maree Clarke, *'Sort of Like Reading a Map': A Community Report on the Survival of South-East Australian Aboriginal Art since 1834*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, 2009.
- 17 For more information on the KHT's collection, see Chris Keeler & Vicki Couzens, *Meerreeeng-an: This is my Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told Through Art*, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, 2010.
- 18 Thorner et al. in Castañeda, Skvirsky & Smith, p. 54.
- 19 Others included Ray Thomas (Gunnai), who is renowned for studying the lineal design work of his ancestors found on wooden artefacts collected from the Gippsland region in the nineteenth century. He uses the designs in his contemporary acrylic landscape paintings. See Edmonds & Clarke.
- 20 Maree Clarke and Lindy Allen (former senior curator at Museums Victoria) in conversation with Fran Edmonds, 15 Feb. 2020, for the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art (LAAA) project. For more information on the LAAA go to <<https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/the-living-archive-of-aboriginal-art>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 21 Maree Clarke, interview with Fran Edmonds, transcript in possession of Fran Edmonds, 25 Nov. 2011.
- 22 Amanda Jane Reynolds et al., *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay Collection in the National Museum of Australia*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2005.
- 23 Vicki Couzens, 'Kooramook yakeen: possum dreaming', 2011, *Culture Victoria*, <<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/kooramook-yakeen-possum-dreaming-by-vicki-couzens/>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 24 Fran Edmonds et al., 'Ancestral Memory: out of the shadows', *Artlink*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2012, pp. 34–9.
- 25 See Thorner et al., 2018, and Thorner et al. in Castañeda, Skvirsky & Smith, 2019.
- 26 Sabra Thorner, 'The photograph as archive: crafting contemporary Koorie culture', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–26.
- 27 Maree Clarke, interview with Fran Edmonds, 25 Nov. 2011. For more information and a short film about the making of a kangaroo teeth necklace, go to <<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/meerreeeng-an-here-is-my-country/thung-ung-coorang-kangaroo-teeth/>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 28 Canberra Glassworks, *Translating Tradition*, 4 July – 25 Aug. 2019, see <<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/62751640/translating-tradition>>, accessed 2 Feb. 2021.
- 29 This necklace was shown at the exhibition *Maree Clarke: Reimagining Culture; Contemporary Connections to Country*, Mildura Arts Centre, 9 March – 12 May 2019.
- 30 Eugenia Flynn, 'Maree Clarke's 'Thung-ung Coorang' jewellery', 22 March 2018, *The Design Files*, <<https://thedesigntfiles.net/2018/03/maree-clarke/>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 31 See Harry Allen (ed.), *Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2010.
- 32 For example, in 2019 Maree was invited by the Menzies Australia Institute at Kings College, London to conduct a workshop at the Border Crossings' Origins Festival; see <<https://richmix.org.uk/events/kopi-workshop-with-maree-clarke/>>, accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- 33 Tony Birch, 'Our red sands dug and sifted': sovereignty and the act of being, in Paola Balla & Max Delany (eds), *Sovereignty*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2016, Melbourne, p. 21.
- 34 Jessyca Hutchens, 'Losing the archive: Julie Gough at the MAA, Cambridge and Christian Thompson at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford', in Darren Jorgensen & Ian McLean (eds), *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2017, p. 301.
- 35 Maree Clarke, interview with Fran Edmonds, 25 Nov. 2011.

Restoring the spirit of the possum-skin cloak

Kimberley Moulton, Yorta Yorta





Dreaming of Biganga

Watching bright eyes above, nulla nulla hunts
a gift of life from animal kin
fire and heat, we scrape with freshwater mussel
pulling sinew and bone.
smoke dances around furry flesh pegged to
board, we wait
looking to the sky and across waters watching
our old people's spirits in the birds
gather eat sit
stitched together by many hands, muscle
memory guided by two thousand generations
in out
in out
carved into skin, fatty surface reflecting sun
making smooth lines sing
country and kin
Biganga¹
this is my map, it leads me home
when the last moon falls
shroud me in my life's journey.²

To be wrapped in a possum-skin cloak is to be held by Country and culture. Its warm embrace is soft but its energy carries the strength of a thousand warriors.

The invasion of First Peoples' sovereign lands was the catalyst for a monumental shift in cultural practice in the South East of Australia. It is, however, a myth that cultural practice was 'lost'. The colonial project caused a disruption in the multiverse of First Peoples' time, our old ways of making and being were waiting to be regenerated when it was safe and the right moment to do so. They were not asleep or forgotten, but holding still for when the descendants could come back to them and listen deeply. For nearly a century, transformative new cultural ways have emerged, influenced and guided by the hands of our old people and manifested by descendants in the here and now.

The restoration of spirit is at the core of the revival of possum-skin cloaks. It is not as simple as researching the archive or reclaiming our representation in museums and galleries but a holistic, all-encompassing approach to listening and learning, understanding materials and method and transforming them into a practice that translates for today – one that is not only about renewal and strengthening of our cultural identities, but a generous sharing in Victorian First Peoples' culture for all.

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) writes,

Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes. It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events but a very powerful need to restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying.³

It is this concept of restoration of spirit and bringing back into existence that is at the foundation of the possum-skin cloak practice of Maree Clarke and her significant role in the history of possum-skin cloak making in Australia.

All the work that I do is connected to country, culture and place.⁴

– Maree Clarke

The resurgence of possum-skin cloaks across the South East of Australia has been led predominantly by Victorian Aboriginal (Koorie) artists over the past four decades. In the 1980s and 1990s Koorie artists, including Kelly Koumalatsos and Uncle Wally Cooper, played an important role in the resurgence of cultural heritage and reviving the possum cloaks, inspired by the collections of the museums and cultural centres they worked in. In the late 1990s a new wave of revival emerged, which was driven by artists Maree Clarke, Dr Vicki Couzens, Dr Treahna Hamm, Lee Darroch and Debra Couzens and ignited by access to the two nineteenth-century possum-skin cloaks in the Museums Victoria collection at Melbourne Museum. Bearing witness to the belongings made by their Ancestors opened a space for contemporary cloak-making that provided cultural continuity and connection for First Peoples. Having worked collectively on cloaks, each artist has gone on to carve out an individual journey of revival of various forms of making and transformed it into contemporary art practices, inspiring many First Peoples artists within Australia.

To be able to pass the knowledge and skill onto the next generations, to me, is just the most important thing.⁵

– Maree Clarke

Maree's practice acts as a conduit between the Ancestors and today, which was 2000 generations in the making. Hers is a practice guided by her Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba and Boonwurrung old people. Prior to British colonisation, possum-skin cloaks held many uses and layers of meaning. A small cloak would be made for an infant, with pelts added as the person grew. The whole clan had cloaks that they carried through life. To make the cloaks, possums were gathered, knocked down by the fierce blow of a club or boomerang made for hunting. All parts of the possum were used – the pelt for the cloak itself; the fur for the head and armbands, and also rolled on the leg into twine; the jaw for incising and marking wooden cultural materials; the flesh roasted on the fire and eaten.



To prepare the pelt for cloak-making, the skins were scraped clean using a sharp object, often a freshwater mussel shell. It would be then pegged onto board using several sharpened bone awls or wooden pegs. The boards would be laid in the sun to dry and sometimes smoked near the fire. Animal fat was rubbed into the skins to protect them and make them softer. Along the edges of the pelt, fine, precise holes were made so that a bone needle could be used, with the sinew pulled from the tail of the kangaroo made into a twine that would stitch the pelts together. The pelts were incised using the sharp tools at hand – a mussel shell or perhaps an engraver made by binding the jaw of the possum or teeth from the kangaroo onto a small piece of wood to create an implement that could carve with ease into the tough, tanned skins. These processes have been relearnt by Maree and her family of collaborators through extensive research in collections in Australia and across the world, and by trial and error. Maree states: ‘I tend to do a lot of research in museums collections in Australia and around the world; whatever it is I’m doing I like to take my family and community on that journey with me’.⁶

One of the most comprehensive early colonial accounts of possum-skin cloak-making is from Robert Brough Smyth in his book *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878). Brough Smyth was a colonist and civil servant who lived on Aboriginal land in the early colony of Victoria and spent sixteen years from around 1860 as secretary of the Board for the Protection of the ‘Aborigines’. His book was a study of the society and customs of First Peoples in Victoria; Brough Smyth also collected many cultural materials that continue to be housed at Melbourne Museum today. In Brough Smyth’s notes he details the making of cloaks and references language; much of his time was spent in Melbourne on Kulin country.

The opossum rug, called Waller-wal-lert. It hung loosely about the body, had a knot at each upper corner, and was fastened by a small stick thrust through holes made by the bone-needle – Min-der-min. It could be cast off in a moment. It was carried or worn when travelling, but in the camp it was usually kept in the miam [shelter]. In making an opossum rug some skill and knowledge are employed. In the first place, it is necessary to select good, sound, well-clothed skins. These, as they are obtained, are stretched on a piece of bark, and fastened down by wooden or bone pegs, and kept there until they are dry. They are then well scraped with a mussel-shell or a chip of basalt, dressed into proper shape, and sewn together. In sewing them the natives worked from the left to the right – not as

Europeans do – and the holes were made with the bone awl or needle, and instead of thread they used the sinews of some animal – most often the sinews of the tail of the kangaroo. The rug was usually ornamented on the inside. Lines straight, of herring-bone pattern, or sometimes representing men and animals, were drawn with a sharp bone-needle, and filled in with colour.⁷

Possum-skin cloaks were not merely clothing or ornamentation – they served many practical and spiritual purposes. They kept you warm in the colder months and could be worn skin side on hot days as protection from the sun. They would be used as blankets to sit on and were also used in ceremony, with women stretching them over their laps and beating on them as a drum. The patterns and designs were markers of identity and clan; maps of country; the patterns in the trees; the scales of snakes; and animal totems. They had a deep significance to the owner and to place. These patterns connect to the markings on shields and other weapons, and the carved trees on Country that mark out borders and the graves of warriors. Nineteenth-century anthropologist Alfred Howitt wrote in 1904,

Each man’s rug is particularly marked to signify its particular ownership. A man’s designs from his Possum-skin rug were put onto trees around the site of his burial. Passing references by others note individual designs on each pelt could represent rivers, camps, animals like grub, snakes and lizards, and plants.⁸

The cloaks were so much a part of First Peoples’ lives that they were carried into the next world once people passed; the deceased were shrouded in the cloak and laid to rest in Country.

Cloaks were abundant until the mid nineteenth century, and there was an intercultural trade. First Peoples knew the worth of the cloaks to colonists, and the trade allowed an element of self-determination and economy in a time when their rights were increasingly being limited and controlled. The cloaks for sale may not have featured such significant designs; however, the cloaks became an object of trade and power due to their practical use. As academic Fred Chair explains,

Eugène von Guérard, a renowned artist on the Victorian goldfields, documented an inter-cultural transaction in 1854. His oil painting, *Aborigines on the road to diggings* or *The barter*, now in the Geelong Gallery, depicts Wathawur-rung people offering possum rugs for sale to white miners on their way to the goldfields.⁹



Possum-skin cloak-making went into decline for several reasons. It gradually became harder to hunt for possums due to the dispossession of land by the white colonists, which led to an increase in poor health among Aboriginal people. Additionally, Aboriginal people were forced onto missions and reserves where cultural practice was forbidden. Woollen blankets were given to First Peoples, meaning there was a pause in the practice of possum-skin cloak-making for nearly a century.

A central aspect of Maree's work has been re-searching collecting institutions to form deep knowledge around cultural material in order to revive it. Through her work in connecting to collections and investigating archives, Maree has paved the way for many Aboriginal people to obtain access to these places. When we look to historical collections for clues from the Ancestors, the cloaks and associated materials are often present. In Melbourne Museum rest two historic cloaks: the Gunditjmara Lake Condah cloak from 1872 and the Yorta Yorta cloak collected from Maiden's Punt in Echuca from 1853. These Ancestral belongings carry the maps of Country: there are designs on the Gunditjmara cloak that communities today can trace to sites and land formations on Country. The Yorta Yorta cloak, which is made up of more than seventy possums, has designs that Elders believe to be a map of the river systems and old Dungala, the Murray River.

We see representation of cloaks and cloak-making in dynamic settings: senior Wurundjeri man, ngurungaeta William Barak, painted his people in possum-skin cloaks in ceremony. There are many works of art by Barak that feature the brightly coloured and highly decorated cloaks; the work in the NGV Collection from 1898, *Figures in possum skin cloaks*, is a spectacular example showing a clan dressed for ceremony. We see cloaks appear in the work of Captain Harrison, an early Wergaia artist whose *Corroboree at Coranderrk*, 1890, is a ceremonial scene with figures in the background wearing cloaks. In one of the earliest illustrations by colonist John Helder Wedge, *Women harvesting yam*, 1835, we see women harvesting murnong draped in their cloaks.

Along with the presence of actual cloaks in museum collections, and their depiction in many hundreds of nineteenth and early twentieth-century photographs, there are also examples of the tools used to make the cloaks. Melbourne Museum holds bone awls and wooden pegs collected as early as 1838, bundles of sinew and twine, and mussel-shell scrapers and kangaroo teeth engravers. Previously housed at the Ethnological Museum, Berlin, and now at the Humboldt Forum, there are individual tanned skins with the holes poked through and bearing soft etchings.

The skins were collected in 1857 by the first scientist appointed by Governor La Trobe to the Victorian Museum, William Blandowski, from the Murray River around Gunbower Island. He donated them to the museum, which also has a small cloak of eight pelts with designs that feature a deep red ochre.

The British Museum in London has one lone pelt which, although ornately designed, does not have holes, suggesting that it served another purpose or was made for a museum collection. Among hundreds of other significant items at the British Museum, there is a Victorian spearthrower, c. 1867, that depicts a couple in their cloaks.¹⁰ In the United States, at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, there is a cloak that was collected around 1840 attributed to the Hunter Valley region of NSW. This, the earliest historic cloak known, has magnificent etchings of diamonds and dancing figures with deep red and yellow ochre pressed into the pelts, layers of story yet to be revealed.

There are also cloaks lost to history. They have shown up in catalogue records in Rome and rural England, but they are nowhere to be found in collections. These examples are few of many hundreds, if not thousands in existence: there are an estimated 25,000 cultural objects in international collections.

These objects and documents of history tell us a fragment of the story, but the rest comes from the thriving and living First Peoples of today. It comes from the oral histories and Community cultural memory that have been passed down for generations around campfires and kitchen tables. It is also through the work of artists like Maree Clarke that all the pieces come together, bringing back into existence the practices of our Ancestors with a focus on the future. As Maree explains, 'It is always very rewarding to bring people together to share their skills, knowledge and stories to pass down to the next generation. That's how you keep culture alive'.¹¹

While today cloaks are made for the contemporary art space to creatively express culture, most importantly they are used in everyday ways by Community. Families make cloaks to wrap their new babies entering the world in, and also use them to wrap loved ones leaving the world. Cloak workshops are creating healing spaces for cultural strengthening and have become a part of ceremony again; for example, smoking and cultural business. They are worn in new ways in parliament, and in teaching and performing.

In 2000, Maree Clarke, as a member of a Koorie artistic team, was tasked with creating possum-skin cloaks for the 2006 Commonwealth Games. Along with Dr Vicki Couzens, Dr Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch, Maree led workshops with thirty-five Victorian Aboriginal language groups, creating cloaks for



Elders or community representatives from the groups to wear at the opening of the games. This monumental project not only brought back possum-skin cloak-making and knowledge to Community, it also shared the strength of Victorian Aboriginal culture with the world. Says Maree, 'We each took a region in Victoria and took back pelts, needle and thread and designs from their traditional areas. Taking back to Community something that had not been practised for a long long time was just incredible'.¹²

Maree's work ranges from conducting intimate workshops with communities and organisations including the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, to sharing knowledge, to being involved in international partnerships and connections. Recently, she worked on an intercultural exchange between Australian cloak-makers and First Nations Canadian robe-makers in a project titled *Wrapped in culture*, 2017. Led by Maree and Métis artist Rosalie Favell, the project brought artists together with the intent to reclaim their respective practices in these areas of making. With the aim of sharing knowledge and community engagement, Maree brought her family of cloak-makers to the project, and the outcome was a touring exhibition with a photographic series and two extraordinary cloaks that display a shared history of strength, survival and a deep knowing between cultures.

The regenerative practice of cloak-making by Maree Clarke is sovereignty in action. Her revival of cultural making has contributed to an increased respect for and understanding of Victorian First Peoples' culture in museums, which have long held onto our past but have not seen our present. She has changed the landscape of art in the South East and through her generosity, her work has created a space of intergenerational healing and knowledge our Ancestors could only dream of. The community at the core of Maree's practice takes her work beyond contemporary art: she is a change agent, and her legacy will continue for countless generations to come. Her possum-skin cloaks will continue to speak to the spirit of all people: 'We are really strong in our culture, identity and knowledge. We haven't lost anything'.¹³

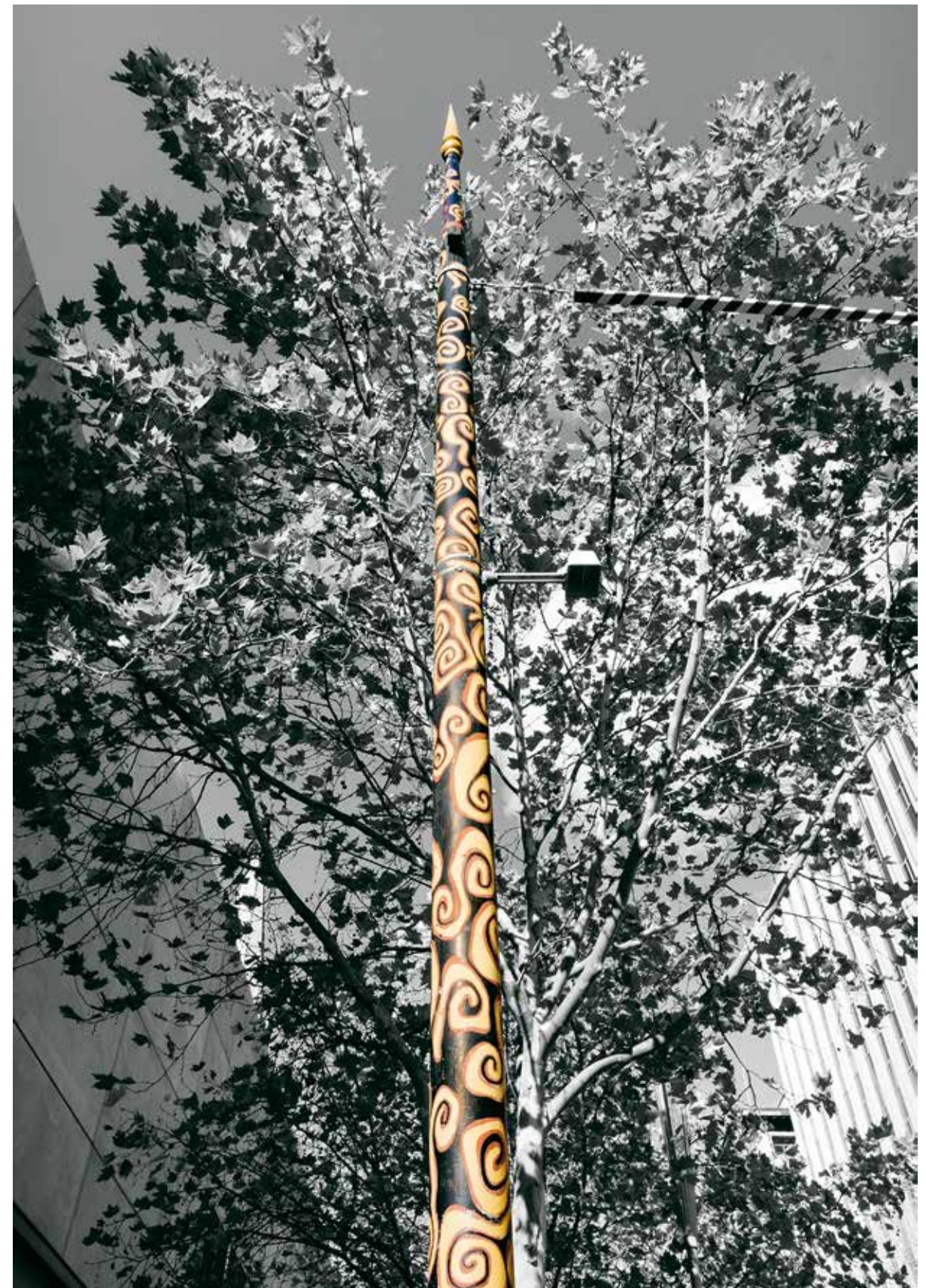
Notes

- 1 Biganga is a Yorta Yorta word for possum-skin cloak.
- 2 'Dreaming of Biganga', poem by Kimberley Moulton, 2020.
- 3 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books, London and New York, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 1999, p. 28.
- 4 'Maree Clarke, Art Forum', 14 Sep. 2020, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ish-aJ4rF10&feature=youtu.be>>, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.
- 5 'Ancestral Memory: film interview with Maree Clarke', 2019, *Cultural Commons*, University of Melbourne, <<https://culturalcommons.edu.au/ancestral-memory-film-interview-with-maree-clarke/>>, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Robert Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria: With Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*, vol. 1, Government of Victoria, 1876, p. 271.
- 8 Fabri Blacklock, 'Aboriginal skin cloaks', *National Quilt Register*, <<https://www.nationalquiltregister.org.au/aboriginal-skin-cloaks/>>, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.
- 9 Fred Cahir, 'Dallong – possum skin rugs: a study of an inter-cultural trade item in Victoria', *The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, no. 4, 2005.
- 10 'Spear thrower', *British Museum*, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc-8067>, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.
- 11 'A cross-cultural cloak of many colours', 23 April 2012, *Monash University*, <<https://www.monash.edu/news/articles/a-cross-cultural-cloak-of-many-colours>>, accessed 3 Feb. 2020.
- 12 'Maree Clarke, Art Forum', 14 Sep. 2020.
- 13 'Defying Empire: Artist: Maree Clarke', 2018, *National Gallery of Australia*, <<https://nga.gov.au/defyingempire/artists.cfm?artistid=42174>>, accessed 3 Feb. 2021.



Maree Clarke: making art public

Charlotte Day





Maree Clarke, Sonja Hodge *Painted poles 2* 1992 (detail), Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria

Maree Clarke's desire to situate her work in the public realm is premised on strengthening our connection to place and derived from her great and unwavering commitment to bringing community together and to enriching our intercultural understanding of each other through art.

From her seemingly humble beginnings in jewellery-making, Clarke has become increasingly involved in large-scale projects across a broad range of media.¹ Making public art has been part of her practice for more than thirty years, and has prepared her well for the major commissions she is increasingly undertaking inside and outside of galleries, including a forthcoming multi-station project for the Metro Tunnel in Melbourne, a Victorian Government rail initiative that creates a new end-to-end rail line from the west to the south-east of Melbourne, and which includes the building of five new underground stations. Clarke is well suited to public art, with her strength as a collaborator and communicator most evident in her extensive body of work with Gunditj-mara Keerray Woorroong woman and artist Vicki Couzens and artist and fabricator Jeph Neale. Together, they have become a formidable team.

In 2020, through the prism of the international Black Lives Matter movement, increased critical attention has been placed on art in public, including the monuments that commemorate the explorers and conquerors who were the perpetrators, and are the lingering symbols, of colonisation across the world and at home in Australia. There have been calls to remove many statues and memorials and the action of removal itself has become a form of public art expression. Against this backdrop, there has also been a renewed focus on Australia's colonial public monuments and art legacy and counter movements to it. As well as attention to the most obvious and controversial figure of Captain James Cook, there has been a revived focus on *Aboriginal memorial*, 1988 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), conceived by curator, activist, writer and Bandjalung man Djon Mundine OAM. *Aboriginal memorial* was one of a number of projects by Indigenous artists produced to coincide with the fraught 1988 bicentenary celebrations of European settlement in Australia. The continuing cultural and political significance of this project reinforces the importance of public artworks that connect us to place and that provide alternative narratives to the ones perpetuated by the colonial markers in our cities and towns.²

Clarke's influential public works and those of other Indigenous artists in Victoria, including Couzens, deserve renewed attention and recognition, too. While the majority of Australians continued to ignore our brutal colonial history and were too little

engaged with the contemporary life of Aboriginal people, Clarke and fellow Koorie (southern NSW or Victorian Indigenous) artists working since the 1980s have continued to engage with political and cultural purpose across Melbourne and Victoria. Embedding Indigenous culture into our public realm, they make space for Koorie stories and their deep understanding of and connection to this Country.

Clarke's decision in 1988 to move from Mildura to Melbourne and to make a full-time commitment to art was no doubt spurred by her being one of a number of artists commissioned to paint a Melbourne tram. The Koorie Heritage Trust commissioned Clarke – along with her sister Karen, brother Peter, and Peter Campbell – to paint the first green and gold tram to hit the streets of Melbourne. Produced in the same year as the bicentenary, this painted tram was a catalyst for giving Koorie people a public voice in the predominantly non-Indigenous focused cultural context of Melbourne at that time, as well as beyond it. Clarke speaks fondly of one of the tram's maiden trips down Gertrude and Smith Streets in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy (important local places for Indigenous people to meet up), and how the tram became a moving platform with which Indigenous people could proudly identify and associate.³

One of Clarke's earliest public artworks was a commission completed in 1992 with Lardil woman Sonja Hodge – two painted poles in front of Melbourne's City Square. The two artists had been recommended by Goernpil woman Lisa Belleair, an influential activist, photographer and broadcaster, to Suzie Attiwill, who worked at Melbourne City Council at the time. True to Clarke's indefatigable spirit, not only did she create the design, which features rainbow serpents and native animals, but she also obtained a cherry-picker licence so she could complete the work herself up the ten-metre poles. Reflecting on this early public work, Clarke notes that while it was important to situate Koorie art and knowledge in the centre of the city, it was the publicness of its making that was so vital. Watched on silently by the statue of 'the failed explorers' Burke and Wills, which was at the time located close by, Clarke provided the public with the sight of two Aboriginal women up on machinery, painting: this physical act of reclamation of the heart of city was critical to the work itself.⁴ As far as I have been able to ascertain, this appears to be the first public artwork by a Koorie artist in the City of Melbourne. It was followed two years later by an Indigenous walking trail in the city called *Another View*, which featured an artwork by Ray Thomas and Megan Evans titled *Another view site 1*, 1994, among works by other artists, and in 2001 by the major installation involving a number of artists



(including Clarke), *Scar – a stolen vision*, made for Enterprize Park on the Yarra River and marking 100 years since Federation.⁵

In the same year, in collaboration with her dearest friend and colleague, the late Lenny Tregonning, Clarke designed a path along Kooyongkoot Creek (also known as Gardiners Creek) that encouraged people to walk the length and appreciate the 60,000-year-old story of Aboriginal people here (in contrast to the relatively brief period of white occupation of Australia). It also recognised the importance of the location to Wurundjeri-baluk people, for whom it was a camp site for thousands of years. Now part of Gardiners Creek Trail, the path is embedded with burnt, stained, reclaimed ironbark and Gympie messmate (a type of eucalyptus endemic to Queensland) railway sleepers, which are carved in the shape of serpents that appear to wriggle along the path, unimpeded by the concrete in which they are inserted. I can't help but think about the thousands of magnificent trees that were cut down to build the railway track network while also being impressed with the strength and beauty of the wood itself. The reclamation of the sleepers honours the life of these trees, and the winding movement of the serpents along the four-kilometre stretch of the path continues to delight visitors today.

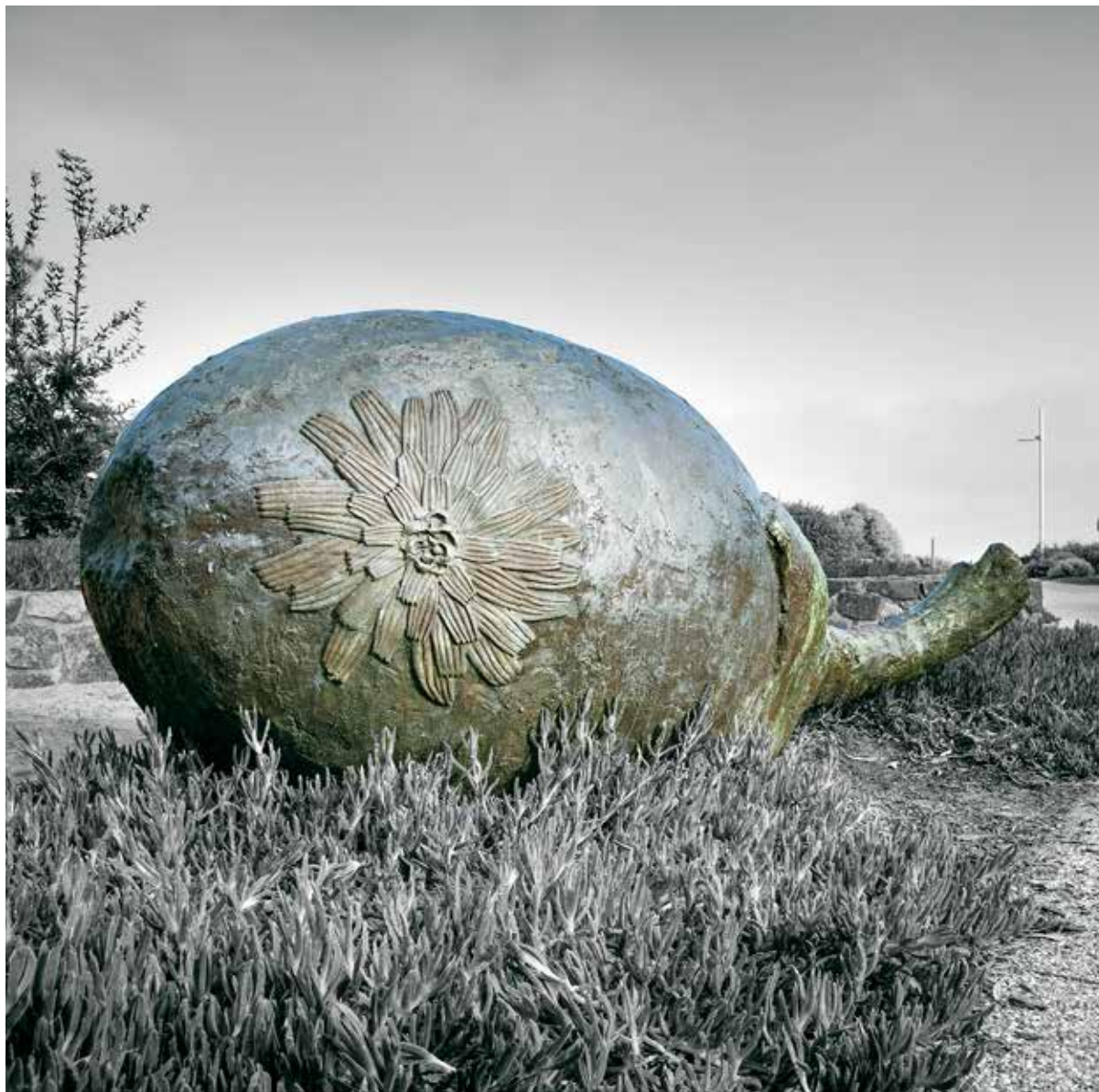
These early public artworks were followed by a number of commissions – often made in collaboration with Couzens and Neale – that spoke both to Clarke's growing reputation in the public arena and the critical importance of recognising the Aboriginal people of Melbourne and the broader Kulin nation in the public realm. Perhaps the most visible of these is *The spirit of the land*, 2010 (pp. 86–7), located in J. W. Hurst Reserve at the intersection of Ferntree Gully Road and Dandenong Road/Princes Highway, Oakleigh. On this project, the three artists worked with an at the time emerging Koorie artist, Megan Cadd. A difficult site due to its position at a major intersection, the J. W. Hurst Reserve is believed to be close to a culturally important area where corroborees took place well into the late nineteenth century.⁶ I have frequently travelled past this work on my drive between Monash campuses and what is distinctive about it is how lightly it rests on its site – all the more impressive for a sculpture nine metres long and weighing around 2.5 tonnes. *The spirit of the land* is a representation of one of Bunjil the Creator's feathers, depicted as if it has lightly fallen from the sky to the earth. The work itself is horizontal and installed closely to the ground; in this sense, it's not monumental or commanding in the way many public artworks are – think, for example, of Bruce Armstrong's imposing twenty-five-metre-high *Bunjil*, 2002, in Melbourne's Docklands (since removed). But for the artists, this shift from the vertical to the horizontal

plane was done purposely, highlighting the space we occupy as being between the sky and the earth, and connecting us more closely to the spiritual significance and omnipresence of Bunjil the Creator.

Another notable public artwork by Clarke, again working with Couzens and Neale, is *Frog dreaming*, 2011 (pp. 90–1), located at the edge of the Boardwalk Boulevard Wetlands, Point Cook, in proximity to Point Cook Library. The Point Cook area, twenty-two kilometres south-west of Melbourne's city centre, is recognised as being the location of a very large camp site for Yalukut Weelam (river people of Port Phillip) and Marpeang Bulluk (a clan that lived on the western margin of the river through Wyndham) into the period of colonisation.⁷ *Frog dreaming* also connects to a creation story, this time the cautionary story of the thirsty frog Tiddalick, who drinks too much of the water from the creeks, lakes and rivers, not leaving enough for all other living things and endangering the environment. The Boardwalk Boulevard Wetlands had been created only a few years prior to this commission but had already become an important habitat for many birds and animals, including the endangered growling grass frog.⁸ The artists' response to the site is a large-scale sculpture made from sandblasted steel that represents a cluster of the frog's eggs as they would appear just under the surface of the water. As with *The spirit of the land*, this sculpture's scale and relationship to its site is notable: we view the cluster from the perspective of being underwater, as if we were moving among the reeds. In enlarging and making solid something that is inherently small and delicate, the artists also draw attention to the precarious state of the environment and the urgency of protecting it. These wetlands are important habitats for flora and fauna in an increasingly urbanised Melbourne, and in viewing the sculpture and looking to the waters of the wetlands, we can appreciate that there is much more going on in and around them than meets the eye.

There does not appear to be a geographic limit to where Clarke and her colleagues have worked; in fact, they have undertaken projects across much of what is now called greater Melbourne – a testament to their creative drive and knowledge of place. Clarke and Couzens's *Kangaroo apple*, 2010 (p. 92), is proximate to Frankston Beach, south-east of Melbourne, located at the entry to Frankston Waterfront Reserve and close to Kananook Creek. This creek and its surrounds were an important source of food and life for the local Boonwurrung peoples, and the story of the creek post occupation in the early 1800s, like so many other stories of occupation, is one of reckless and thoughtless re-engineering of the waterway for industry and agriculture, to disastrous effect. Fortunately, a local program of rehabilitation of the





creek that commenced in the 1970s has restored a degree of the native flora and fauna to the area and it is now a popular nature trail.⁹ For this project, the artists turned their attention to bush foods. The resulting bronze sculpture is a representation of a meakitch (kangaroo apple) – a fruit that can be poisonous if eaten before it is fully ripened – in the season of gatherings and renewal (spring). As Clarke notes,

When the kangaroo apple came out, there would be a big corroboree by the water. Women would sit with possum pelts across their knees, weave a head piece of murnong daisy for their hair and drum on the possum pelts while the men danced, celebrating the return of the eels from the Coral seas up Kananook Creek.¹⁰

The meakitch is also well known as a traditional medicine, as it has both anti-inflammatory and contraceptive properties; more recently, it has been used by pharmaceutical companies for the latter purpose.¹¹ Again, the placement of *Kangaroo apple* has been carefully considered, with the artists wanting the fruit to appear as if it has been casually placed to the side of the path, waiting for its owner to return and collect it. In this way, *Kangaroo apple* directs us to the Boonwurrung people as they went about their day-to-day business of fishing, gathering food, and living intimately connected to this place and its surroundings.

Wominjeka Tarnuk Yooroom, 2013 (pp. 94–5), located at the corner of Nicholson and Paisley Streets in the heart of Footscray (at one end of a busy pedestrian mall), marks a departure from previous works cast in steel or bronze involving Clarke, Couzens and Neale. Spread across the four corners, it is defined by large bluestone boulders brought in from the Western District of Victoria. The tarnuk of the title is a bowl used for storing food and water. While appreciated as a carrying vessel, the tarnuk is also a carrier of significant cultural and spiritual knowledge, and is used in welcoming and cleansing ceremonies that connect to family, Community, the journey of life and the responsibility to respect being on Country. The impressive boulders bring a new register to their location – that of deep geological time and the strata of history and life that may not be visible, but which is intrinsic to this place and its connection to the magnificent volcanic plains of Victoria, believed to have been active as recently as 10,000 years ago. The boulders also connect to the colonial history of Footscray as one of Melbourne's first suburbs and the banks of the Maribyrnong River as the site of some of the earliest quarrying in Melbourne, with the bluestone taken from there becoming the defining



material of the city's buildings, roads and paths.¹² *Wominjeka Tarnuk Yooroom* skilfully references these various histories as well contemporary Footscray, a high-density urban area populated by waves of migrants who have made it their home. The boulders are accompanied by jets of mist, an element loved by children and a welcome respite on hot days. Evoking the elements and seasons, as well as ritual and ceremony, this work makes a powerful statement about connection and belonging, and the invitation to all visitors and new inhabitants to come with purpose and to respect each other.

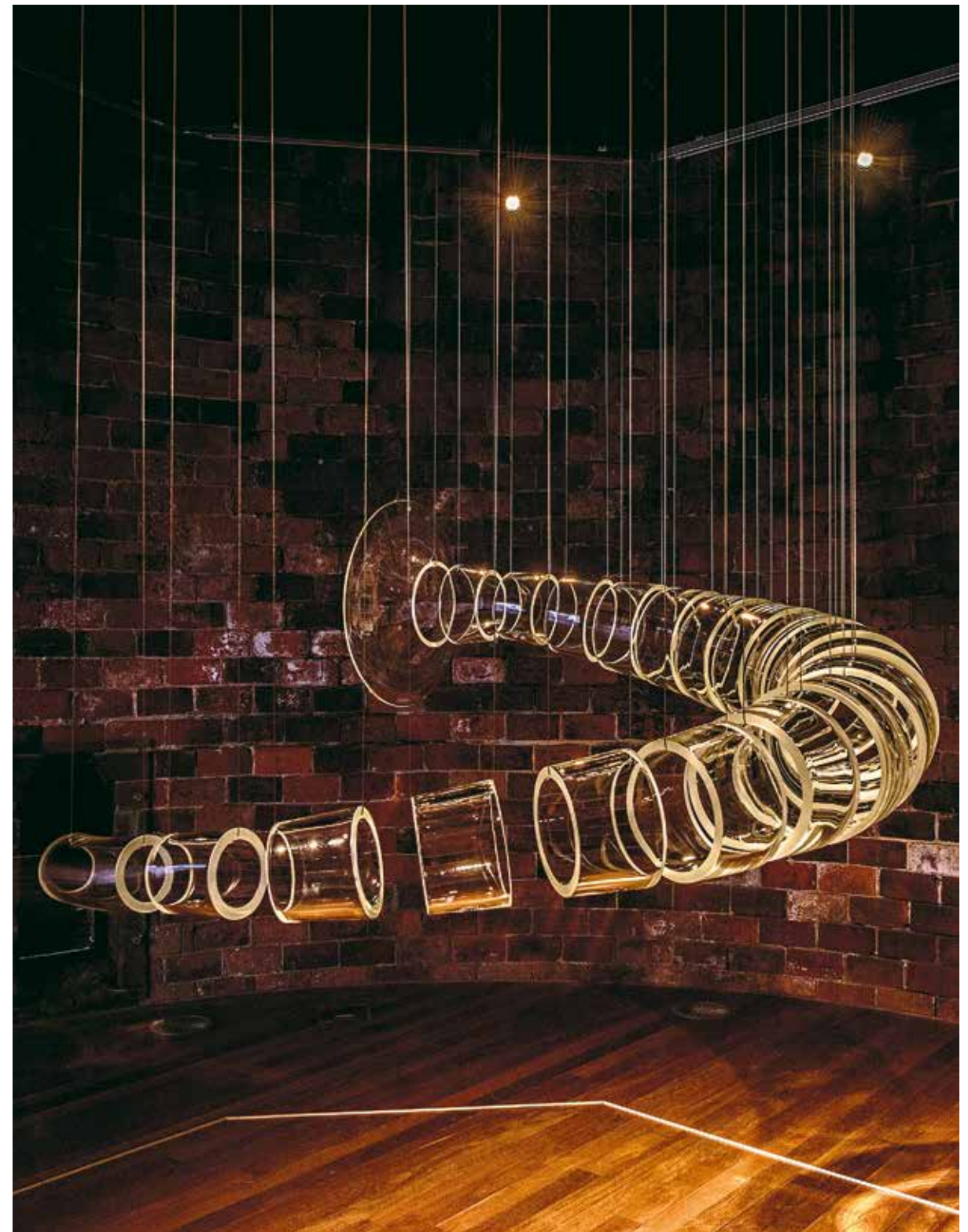
Making public art is complex, as it requires artists to respond to site and place, history and present conditions, as well as to engage with viewers/users in ways that are very different from engaging inside a gallery or museum. The most successful public artworks achieve a multifaceted response, and while the projects that Clarke and her collaborators have made aren't necessarily physically monumental – and are often purposely not – they do acknowledge monumental concepts: the vastness of time and embodied knowledge. They also negotiate much else, including a careful consideration of each site and how people will experience the work. Clarke, Couzens and Neale have been trailblazers in Victoria by embedding Aboriginal knowledge and ways of being into our built environment, revealing histories and connecting us to place. At the same time, their work encourages us all to acknowledge and respect the unceded Country of the peoples of the Kulin nation, their rich spiritual life, guiding principles and ingenuity, and their innate commitment to always thinking ecologically and treading carefully.

Notes

- 1 Key concerns for Maree around knowledge and ritual, including body adornment, connect her jewellery practice with the work that has followed, and in recent years Maree has again incorporated jewellery in her practice. See, for example, her commissions for the National Gallery of Victoria.
- 2 Djon Mundine, OAM, 'Defining moments: the Aboriginal Memorial at the Biennale of Sydney', lecture, 27 July 2020, *Australian Centre for Contemporary Art*, <<https://acca.melbourne/program/defining-moments-the-aboriginal-memorial/>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2020.
- 3 'Maree Clarke on maintaining cultural practices', 8 July 2020, *The Art Show with Namila Benson*, ABC Radio National, <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-art-show/maree-clarke-kait-james-emi-yoshitome/12433454>>, accessed 15 Oct. 2020.
- 4 Maree Clarke, conversation with the author, 21 Aug. 2020.
- 5 *Scar – a stolen vision* includes artwork by Kimba Thompson (Wiradjuri, co-ordinator), Ray Thomas (Gunnai), Glenn Romanis, Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta), Ricardo Idigi (Meriam Mir), Maree Clarke, Karen Casey, Craig Charles (Yorta Yorta / Mhutti Mhutti), Lou Bennett (Yorta Yorta / Dja Dja Wurrung, soundscape). Thank you to Eddie Butler-Bowdon at the City of Melbourne for information on the City's public art collection, emailed 27 August 2020. In the past twenty years, many more public artworks by Indigenous artists have been commissioned, including a number for Birrarung Marr, along with Brook Andrew and Trent Walter's *Standing by Turnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner*, 2016. At the time of writing, new commissions recognising important sites are also in development.
- 6 Alfred Kruijshoop, 'Aboriginal links with the City of Monash', 2017, *City of Monash*, Victorian Government, <<https://www.monash.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/our-services/directory/monash-reconciliation-group/aboriginal-links-with-the-city-of-monash-area.pdf>>, accessed 9 Oct. 2020.
- 7 Gary Presland, 'Wyndham's Aboriginal past', *Wyndham History*, <<http://www.wyndhamhistory.net.au/items/show/1528>>, accessed 27 Sep. 2020.
- 8 A number of wetlands created in the area are attached to suburban developments and function both as sites to process storm water and as regenerative native habitats.
- 9 'Geological history', *Kananook Creek Association*, <<https://kananookcreekassociation.org/home/history/>>, accessed 9 October 2020.
- 10 Maree Clarke, email to the author, 29 Oct. 2020.
- 11 Beth Gott, 'The art of healing: five medicinal plants used by Aboriginal Australians', 5 June 2018, *The Conversation*, <<https://theconversation.com/the-art-of-healing-five-medicinal-plants-used-by-aboriginal-australians-97249>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2020.
- 12 'Footscray wharves and environs', *Melbourne's Living Museum of the West*, <https://www.livingmuseum.org.au/projects/stories_places/warves/FW_industries_bluestone.html>, accessed 18 Oct. 2020.

As slippery as an eel

Claire G. Coleman



Installation view of Maree Clarke's *Ancestral memory II* 2019 on display as part of *Translating Tradition*, Canberra Glassworks, 2019

I

My hands chafed on the fibres of an eel trap as I extracted it from the cool water.

I can remember it.

I am trapped within memories and they are not mine. Nothing in the memories themselves will tell me where they came from, whose they are; they will not speak to me, put themselves in a time and place.

All I know for certain is they are not mine.

For how can someone born on the ship dream of eels and water and unfiltered air?

They don't feel like imaginings; they have a different smell, the light is too real. I am struck by how like memories they are, but I have never pulled a reed fish trap from a stream, from the mud of a swamp; I have never tasted eels, although my mouth remembers that tasty fatty flesh, my hands are familiar with the feel of the slime on their skin.

Perhaps they are not memories but waking dreams, though they have always lacked that quality that separates life from dream.

Or maybe instead I am losing my mind.

The stainless-steel spanner gripped hard in my hand does not feel like an eel at all. As cold and slick as it is, it is motionless. Though it is as wet as a fish, the condensing humidity from the repeated failures in life support has been settling on everything. I cough moisture and phlegm from my lungs. They are getting worse, some truth from deep in my soul, something like a memory, tells me this is not the place for me and mine.

Outside, I am told, the stars are scattered across the heavens like diamonds; I have never seen a star or a diamond, and I somehow know even that perspective is wrong. There are no heavens, no

up or down, the ship is floating in the stars, they are all around us, their light the proof of the finite nature of the universe. I had never quite understood that theory but again, I am told, darkness is proof that the universe is finite. That was what my mother told me; I don't know if she had learned it or if she had remembered it.

We are in the stars like a fish is in water.

If they ever give me access to the obs deck and its bay windows, or if I earned a pass by some miracle, I could see the stars in their infinite darkness, but I am unlikely to ever have that opportunity. There are too many people, from the captain down through the officers, to the scientists and administrators, down through the paying passengers, then the engineers, and finally crew. I am the lowliest of the crew, my wait for obs-deck access will be interminable.

I am working for my passage, have been from as far back as I can remember.

My mother was an astro-navigator. She would have had access to see the stars whenever she wanted, she would have taken me, I would have seen it but she has been gone years. I cannot remember any of it. I can't help but think it was my fault; I didn't do well in school, didn't make it to university, ended up here, in the guts of the ship. Mum, when she transferred to another ship that needed a navigator, was not permitted to take me.

I can't remember having seen space from the obs deck. I can't remember mum's face.

I don't even know how many jumps away my mum was, how many jumps she had made in her new ship or how many jumps my ship had made, or even if we had jumped. 'My ship', what a joke, I was cargo at best, a slave at worst. I checked the time on my phone, it was pretty late, I had stayed overtime, even knowing I would get no appreciation for it. Time for bed if I wanted to have any sort of chance in the aptitude exams in the morning.



Installation view of Marree Clarke's *Ancestral memory II* 2019 on display as part of *Translating Tradition*, Canberra Glassworks, 2019

II

The smell of dirt, of engine grease, of the exudates from the bioengineered bacteria in the life-support system combined into a discomforting miasma overwhelming the room. I could see no neat hair, no clean uniforms except on the examiner; the rest of us were low-level techs and bonded labourers desperate for a better job or entry to education or an apprenticeship.

Ways to move from the bowels of the ship to anywhere else were few.

I sat down at the screen, tried to ignore the sensors in my seat, the cameras I knew were watching me, the devices that would be measuring the air, counting my breaths and heartbeat, that would somehow be scanning my brain activity even from a distance. From what they had bothered to explain to me, the questions would rewrite themselves, the computers would scan me, they would calculate, they would try and define where I belong – if I belonged on the ship at all.

I hoped my fear of being evicted from the ship was not showing up on the sensors.

Where else did I belong if not on the ship? I had been born there, my mother was crew, my father was, I am told, a ship's officer. My father who didn't want to know me. I doubt I will ever know who he was; my mother who had been moved to another ship against her wishes.

I couldn't imagine being more alone.

I tried desperately to calm my mind, to still my heart.

In my mind I could feel cold fresh water on my hands, could feel the rough wet fibre of a woven eel trap. It vibrated in my hands like a living thing and I knew there must be eels trapped inside, twisting their snake-like bodies in desperation to escape; more than one, the trap was heavy. My family would eat that night, the thought was in my mind as clear as glass, as was the knowledge that the thought was not mine.

The screen before me, the room around me, all the people disappeared and I could feel the fibres in my hand and the cold water on my knuckles. The river was before me, a black ribbon reflecting the stars, then bush beyond it. I could not see the stars in the sky but I could feel them with the muscles of my shoulders, I could feel the starlight like pinpricks of warmth on my skin.

It was comforting then it started to hurt and forced me to hold back a scream.

I was not in the examination room. I was not on Earth in the cool water.

I realised abruptly I didn't know where I was.

III

I woke in a room I did not recognise with a head that felt too big to be mine and was not attached on my neck correctly.

'Where am I?' spilled from my lips before I could stop it.

'You are in the infirmary', said a voice I did not recognise and wasn't sure I liked; I couldn't see a speaker.

I looked around again, observed the colours and light of an infirmary, the light too bright, the walls too white. It was a cold sterile place but too big, a space bigger than a four-crew dorm and the only bed in there was the too-comfortable one I was lying on. There were more machines and different equipment than that in the infirmary.

'I've been in the infirmary before', I said. 'This is not the infirmary.'

The voice sounded annoyed: 'This is another infirmary, not the one you woke up in after that brawl two weeks ago'.

They left me there, I don't know how long for. I slept for a time and dreamed of rivers I have never seen but in dreams; I was, as always, alone. When I woke up my skin was damp like I had been sweating but I felt neither feverish nor cold, I was comfortable despite being damp enough to have soaked through my sheets.

There was a tray of food on a table by my bed; things that looked like pastries but better made than I had seen before. I didn't want to trust it but I was starving; I shoved a pastry in my mouth. Missing was the unmistakable taste of vat-grown protein, the familiar plastic texture of synthetic pastry. I didn't know what the filling was, it tasted vaguely like savoury protein but had a different texture, less like paste, more like fibres.

A part of me, a part I didn't know existed, or had perhaps forgotten, said, 'That's meat, that's real meat', to the rest of me, who didn't know how I knew that.

Maybe it was the part of me that dreams that knew the taste of meat.

I ate the entire contents of the tray.

I don't know how long I was alone. I lay awake, trying to fathom where I was and, most importantly, why I was there. I slept, dreaming of cool water, of eels, of rough wet fibre, of freshwater crayfish and the taste of meat. I woke, more strange food on the table, I wondered if I was still on the familiar ship; wondered how I could have left a ship without knowing.

More sleep, to dream of water.

Then I woke and there was someone in the room with me, someone I didn't recognise. Pale and thin, too clean to have worked below decks. He might have been a pilot or a member of the flight crew, someone who was used to soft living but spent some time in reduced or even no gravity. He seemed to have nothing to say.

I was beyond caring about hierarchy and decorum and spoke first. 'Who are you?'

'I am the X.O.'

I must have looked bewildered because he continued, 'The ship's executive officer. I am responsible for making sure the captain's orders are executed.'

I didn't like that word 'executed'. I flinched involuntarily.

'We will be sending in someone in a moment to talk to you about your dreams and about what happened in the examination.'

My face must have asked an unspeakable question because he said, 'Don't worry, we will look after you, there's nothing to fear'.

I didn't believe him. There is always something to fear.

Without volition I returned to my dream; the water in my dream tasted of rocks.

IV

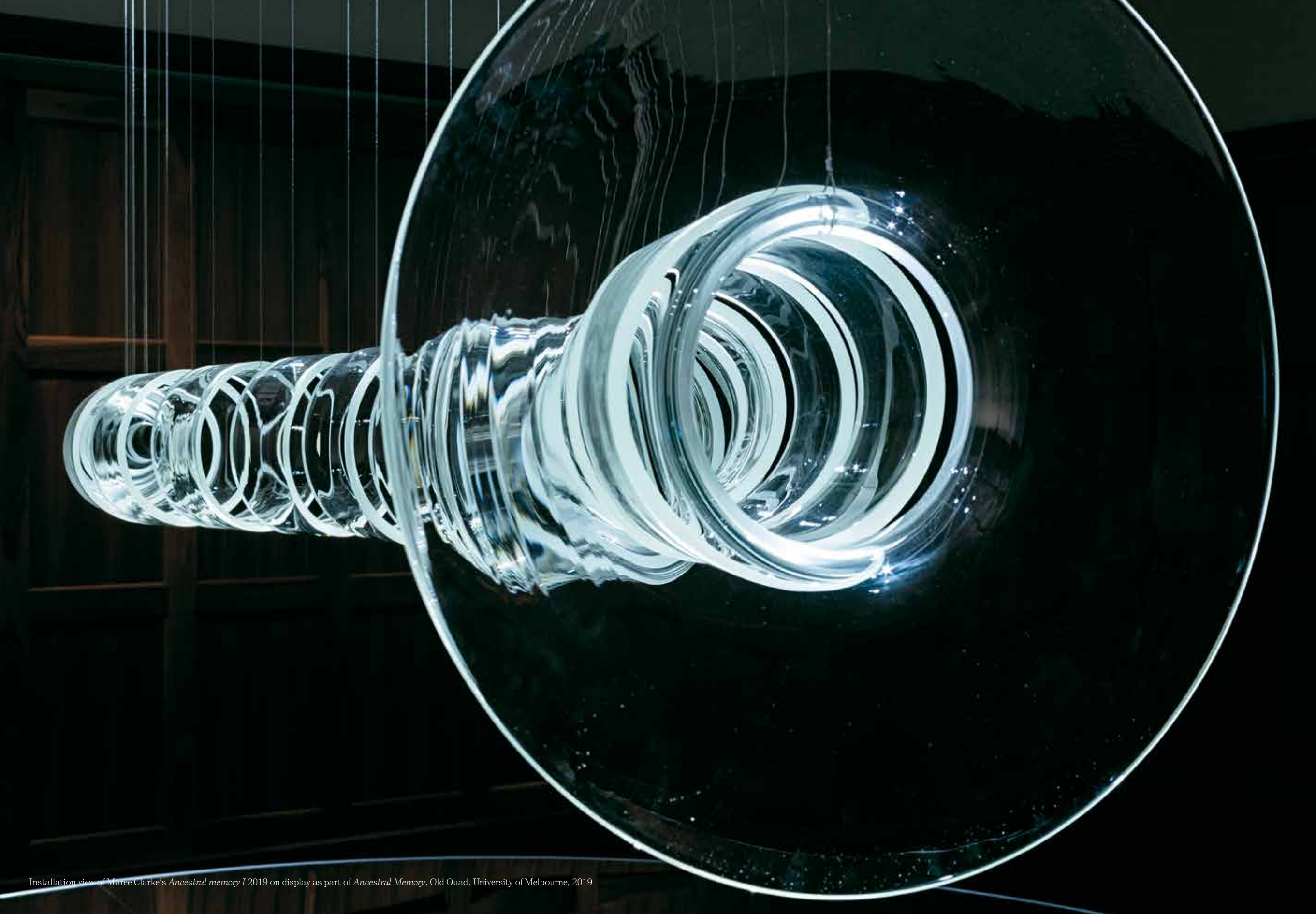
'Water', I said. 'I dream of water, and fishing, and eels, and the sky over a place I have never been. I can feel it, and when I dream, even when I dream awake it seems more real than this room right now. It's too real.'

'Can you see the stars in your dream?' The questioner was old, as wrinkled as a passionfruit, genderless.

'Not always, but I feel like I know where every star in the universe is, I can feel them on the soul of my skin. It's like they want me to know they are there, they reach out with their gravity and sing for me.'

There was a moment of silence while I listened to the stars.

'I know of your dreams.' The speaker, old one, sounded thoughtful. 'I have heard them described before.' Something in his tone made me think of hunger.



Installation view of Maree Clarke's *Ancestral memory I* 2019 on display as part of *Ancestral Memory*, Old Quad, University of Melbourne, 2019

‘What is going on?’ The fear in my own voice scared me. ‘Why am I here and not at work? If I don’t get the work done I will be punished.’

‘Nobody is going to punish you. It’s your dreams’, the old one told me with broken breath. ‘The eel traps, the water, the feel of the stars, your hands in the water and the sky at night. Your mother had those dreams.’

‘Did she?’ I knew I sounded irritated, hoping there was some point we were meandering towards.

‘We are not sure why some people carry ancestral memories of water eels and the stars, some of you who have never seen running water, have never set foot on the land, who barely see the stars because you live in the bowels of the ship’, he breathed. ‘People with those dreams, memories, can sense the gravity waves of the cosmos.’

There was a pause in which the air scrubbers were loud enough to unhinge my mind; the light of the stars burned through the bulkhead and even there, in an infirmary deep in the ship, I could feel their warmth on my skin. I half wanted it to leave me alone, half basked in the galaxy’s loving embrace.

I knew, deep down, that the stars would never leave me.

Suddenly I realised that old man was talking. ‘We don’t know why it’s only people descended from the Aboriginal Australian people who can navigate. We, of course, collected everybody once we knew, we couldn’t allow even one member of the race who produces navigators to die in the global warming apocalypse. Our investors, who built this ship, would never allow it.’

‘What?’ It burst from my mouth before I could stop it.

‘You are a navigator.’

‘I don’t want to be a navigator.’

‘You don’t have a choice; even if we didn’t make you the ship’s navigator you would still be a navigator.’

He left me with nothing but my thoughts and the stars for company.

V

‘Your mother was the only navigator on this ship, when she left nearly a decade ago’, said the captain. I didn’t know it had been that long. ‘We have been stuck in this section of space since the CEO’s ship sent a shuttle for her. You know what to do.’

I was shocked we had not moved through a wormhole for a decade, but not surprised. Down in the bowels of the ship nobody would have bothered to tell us. Somehow, deep inside, I always knew.

‘Navigator has the bridge’, the X.O. hollered.

I was in the navigator’s chair, the only chair without a glowing console before it. My eyes were closed and I knew all eyes were on my outstretched arm. Helm were steering, I knew, to wherever in space I pointed.

Relentlessly, slower than the gravity tides in space, we slid towards the wormhole. I could see it in my mind. I was there because I was the only one on the bridge who could. The shape of an eel trap, as clear and bright as the water, gravity waves and distortions like rings of glass floating in space. It would take us further towards our destination; further from my ancestral home.

I was afraid but I knew, in the end, the stars would lead me back home; there, too, they would lead my mother.

There the stars would lead all of us.

Art and family

Hannah Presley



Maree is the favourite aunty we all wish we had. She is generous, funny and warm; her home is welcoming, with her four-legged babies barking; and there is always a good story to be shared. She is also an outspoken rebel who only wears black and will stand up for what she knows is right. And if you ever need a random power tool, you know where to go.

Art is at the centre of Maree's world. You know this because her eyes light up as she shares snippets of her new projects. The joy radiates out of her as she describes the new materials she has found or the recent travels she's been on. She takes you to Rome and the cold European winters she adores, and by the end of the story you're back out bush as she explains where she found the new batch of teeth or bones. There are always big ideas, talk of the future and new technologies being explored. It is not uncommon for a story to start with, 'Well, I was talking with my friend the physicist...'. The thread that connects it all, the force that drives her, is family and the new generation – the hope she has for her nieces and nephews and her pride in their success.

Maree was born in Swan Hill in 1961. Her first few years were spent living in a suitcase, her family living in tents and a corrugated iron lean-to along the Murrumbidgee River. The Murrumbidgee is the second-longest river in the country, and flows down from the Snowy Mountains to empty into the mighty Murray River. Maree's grandparents were drovers, living on the fringes, working hard and raising their family. Maree's father was a shearer, and her mother was sometimes a shearer's cook. Maree is one of eleven siblings and growing up, family was always the most important part of her world.

Maree's grandmother was stolen as a child and taken to the Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls, which was established as a training facility for girls who had been forcibly removed from their families under the *Aborigines Protection Act* of 1909, which was in place until 1969. The 'inmates', as they were called, would stay at the facility until they reached the age of fourteen or fifteen, when they would then be forced into servitude, working for white families across the country. Maree's grandmother was spared this experience because her father, Maree's great-grandfather, took his horse and buggy to the girl's home and negotiated her release. Town was not a safe place for Aboriginal people and family had to look out for family.

By the time Maree was four or five years old, the family had moved into Mildura with her nan, who had been offered a house in town. They were the first black family in the neighbourhood not confined to the Namatjira mission, and for a while they were the only black family in the township. Maree explains,

We had lots of cousins living with us, we all lived at Nan's. Then a few years later, Mum got a house directly across the road from my grandmother's place. They could just yell out the window and say, 'Turn the TV down' or 'Turn the music down'; there were always Aunts and Uncles around, lots of family in and out.

Living in town meant going to school, and as part of the only black family in the neighbourhood, Maree was also the only black student. During this time, her older brothers doubled as her bodyguards:

I was the blackest kid at the school. You could imagine ... all the crap that I got called, you know, like nigger, boong, whatever it was. My brothers would have to walk down and pick me up and then walk me home every day from school. And I'd be standing at the gate crying because you know, the kids were calling me nigger, it was just terrible.

The racism and bullying followed her into high school and it quickly became a place she avoided. Sticking close to the few Aboriginal students who by then attended, Maree would leave school and head down to the channel, hollow out a saltbush, and together they would pool their money and buy chips and cool drinks. Maree laughs as she remembers,

We always had somebody looking out for us ... either welfare or family coming looking for us. And this one day, all the Aunties and Uncles came down looking for us, and us black kids just cut it through the scrub. There was a little bridge, just two planks wide – a pretty skinny bridge – us kids are running across and one of the Uncles was on his hands and knees crawling across the bridge, trying to get to us ... We had a community, we all sort of knew each other, and grew up together, hung out on weekends and all that sort of stuff.

Maree's first job found her back in the environment she had spent so much time avoiding – the library at her old high school. She started out cataloguing books and learning how to touch type, and this is when she first picked up a camera and began photographing the Aboriginal students. She would take their portraits and encourage them to share their stories of who they were, talking with them about their Indigenous identity and making little books with their photos and stories.



Later, Maree began working with her little brother Peter, setting up an Indigenous craft shop at the Mildura co-op. Together, they would paint and make jewellery at home, taking over the dining-room table, a part of her practice she has never changed.

Lots of times people say, ‘Oh, wouldn’t you be better off with a studio, have something away from the house?’ It’s like, no. This is who I am. I’ve always done this. I’m not saying it’s right or wrong or whatever, but it works for me. When you’re from such a big family, and you want to show them what you’re doing, or teach the younger ones, it’s all here. We don’t have to jump in the car and drive five or ten kilometres to a studio. Everything’s here.

It was around this time that she met Len, her long-time partner and collaborator, and together they made the move from Mildura to Melbourne. It was the first time Maree focused on art-making full time, and her family supported her new venture into art. After she made the move her mother would send her feathers and seeds she’d collected from home, to make sure Maree was maintaining her connection to Country. Sharing her journey with family was always a priority, as Maree explains:

When the kids would come down for holidays, and I had that new space with all the bits, all the seeds, all the paint, whatever it was, the kids would get up and half of the table would be permanently set up like a little studio space. If the kids got up and they wanted to paint before breakfast, so be it. There it is you know, it’s ochre or charcoal or acrylic. My niece woke up one day and she wanted to paint, and I had these tiny, weeny canvases. I said, ‘Well, you know how to mix up the paint’. She says, ‘No. I want to use ochre today.’ So, then we had to grind up all the ochre. You know? It’s sharing those processes from a really young age, it’s just fantastic.

Recent projects have seen Maree collaborate with her great-nephew Mitch Mahoney, who has embraced his own artistic practice with Maree’s encouragement and guidance. Together they have travelled overseas to make possum-skin cloaks, connecting with global First Nations artists, and more recently they came together to create a huge woven eel trap, which was launched into the Maribyrnong River. With every opportunity to exhibit and each new project, Maree’s kin are there with her, whether collecting feathers for her as her mother once did, or jumping in the car and heading out bush in search of roadkill.

I was fortunate to make a connection with Maree when I moved back to Melbourne after many years living and working in Alice Springs. Maree had recently moved on from a significant, long-term role as senior curator at the Koorie Heritage Trust, and I was stepping into a new curatorial role in her absence. I was inspired by her knowledge of the local community and her passion for art. Maree took me under her wing as an emerging curator and our relationship over the years has inspired the way I curate and the way I think about art. The old phrase ‘all hands on deck’ is forever relevant when you are in Maree’s circle. A quick drop-in can easily turn into an afternoon of activity, stitching together possum pelts or organising river reeds by size. These days, the conversations continue, the passion never wanes and the big ideas keep coming.



‘Steeped in the now’: Maree Clarke’s photography

Helen Ennis





Maree Clarke began exhibiting her photographic work in 1991 and received widespread attention following the creation of her powerful series *Ritual and Ceremony*, 2011–12. The exhibition *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories* makes it possible to consider her photography in relation to her entire oeuvre, and to First Nations art photography more generally. We can see that Clarke's art photography deals with common themes of history, memory and Indigenous knowledge, but it also incorporates an unusual material dimension through the inclusion of objects, often those Clarke makes herself.

Art photography by First Nations people emerged in the mid 1980s and quickly moved to the forefront of contemporary art in exhibitions in Australia and internationally. Remarkably, given all the flux in the art world, it has retained its place in the thirty-five years since, constantly being replenished with the work of new practitioners. Clarke is part of this ongoing effervescence of activity.

The photographic work of First Nations artists in the 1980s did not form in isolation; it was dependent on the coalescence of myriad factors.¹ It originated at a time when the campaigns for land rights and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were beginning to achieve major successes, culminating in the Mabo Case of 1992, when the High Court of Australia recognised that Australia was not *terra nullius* at the time of the European invasion. Culturally, an extraordinary foment of activity was occurring across different areas of creative practice including dance, film, theatre, music and literature. In the visual arts and crafts, those working in painting, print, textiles and ceramics were starting to gain unprecedented levels of prominence. In the years before Clarke took up photography, groundbreaking developments included the exhibition *Koori Art '84*, which highlighted the emerging phenomenon of urban Indigenous contemporary art, and the establishment of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in Sydney in 1987, which spearheaded a 'militant identity discourse'.² Four of Boomalli's ten founding members worked in photography at the time – Brenda L. Croft, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt and the late Michael Riley – and are now rightfully lauded as progenitors of First Nations art photography.³ Another important initiative was The After 200 Years Photographic Project of 1988, which employed several Aboriginal photographers and saw the creation of an archive of 50,000 photographs that aimed to document contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life.⁴

The initial phase of First Nations art photography also went hand in hand with historical research into Australian photography, including into the

recent past. In 1991, Tracey Moffatt curated *In Dreams*, which recognised Mervyn Bishop as the first Indigenous professional photographer.⁵ Maree Clarke acknowledged Bishop's importance and influence when she and co-curator Megan Evans included his photographs in their exhibition *Black on White* in 2005. In the accompanying catalogue, writer Tony Birch commented that as an Aboriginal man and a photographer Bishop could not 'avoid being revered as an inspiration and role model by young aspiring photographers who also happen to be Aboriginal'.⁶

Historical research into nineteenth and early twentieth-century photography brought about another paradigm shift relevant to Clarke's practice. Until the 1980s it was mostly assumed that Indigenous people did not have an active involvement with photography, but the combined efforts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, curators, academics and others have decisively proved otherwise. We now know that Indigenous people have long been participants in photography – as subjects, consumers and as photographers themselves – and that their engagement with European photographers and the medium of photography is highly complex. The exhibition *Portraits of our Elders*, curated by Michael Aird for the Queensland Museum in 1993, presented studio photographs from the early twentieth century that Aboriginal people had commissioned, and which Aird argued demonstrated the subjects' desire to assert control of their own lives. Aird wrote that 'Aborigines [obs.] felt a very real need to state their successes in the European community to ensure protection from the oppressive "protection" policies' that were then in force.⁷ Aboriginal perspectives were explored in Jane Lydon's book *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians* (2005) and her edited volume *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies* (2014). Such publications have shown how Aboriginal people have deployed photography 'by and for ... themselves',⁸ especially, as Lydon points out, in relation to culture, identity and political claims.⁹

Although I have used the term 'First Nations art photography' very liberally, it must be emphasised that its reality is limited, comprising an extremely loose grouping of artists who identify as First Nations people across Australia. It may be a convenient category but it does not constitute a 'school', and there is no uniform approach or style. In fact, First Nations art photography is characterised by its diversity. Some artists, such as Ricky Maynard, are interested in photography's specific characteristics and are dedicated to its craft, while others, like Destiny Deacon, reject or subvert art photography's conventions and traditions. However, by the time Maree Clarke began exhibiting her photographs in





the early 1990s some patterns had become apparent. Practitioners were invariably urban-based, often had art-school training and exhibited together with artist peers working in other media. They were conversant with postmodernism and postcolonialism and frequently used constructed imagery, series and installation. Portraiture was a particularly strong thread, and sometimes incorporated a performative dimension that involved the photographer herself. Recurring themes dealt with identity and the body.¹⁰

Although Clarke is known primarily as a multi-media artist, rather than a photographer, most of the features outlined above are pertinent to her photographic work. But the strongest point of connection is Clarke's historical consciousness, which centres on her interest in the archive. For many First Nations art photographers it is colonial photographs of Aboriginal people that have been of greatest interest, and they have frequently referred to or appropriated them in their work. Clarke's archival research is, however, very specific, and not confined to photography. It involves objects, stories and memories pertaining to the South East, to her Country in north-western Victoria. Her immersion in the archive and use of different kinds of items is directed towards establishing cultural continuity and identity that could otherwise be lost.

Another significant aspect of First Nations art photography from the mid 1980s onwards relevant to Clarke is its close ties to political and cultural activism. Artists often assume multiple roles as curators, writers, advocates and mentors. Brenda L. Croft and Brook Andrew are two such examples, with careers as artists, curators and writers, and in Croft's case as an academic as well.¹¹ Clarke writes extensively and is a curator and mentor to other Aboriginal people. The book *Sort of Like Reading a Map* (2009), written by Fran Edmonds and Clarke, is the first to examine south-east Australian Aboriginal art practices since colonisation and demonstrates the survival of Aboriginal culture.¹²

Maree Clarke began taking photographs during the early 1990s and received informal training from Viva (originally Jillian) Gibb, a black-and-white documentary photographer who worked in a humanist tradition. On visits to South Africa between 1987 and 1989 Gibb had been impressed with a training scheme for black photographers, and on her return to Melbourne secured funding to implement a similar program known as the Victorian Women's Trust Koori Women's Photography project.¹³ The two Indigenous photographers she trained were Maree Clarke and Kim Kruger. Both women worked with Gibb over a two-year period, during which they photographed people, events and landscapes in Victoria

and spent time in Gibb's studio in Port Melbourne processing their negatives and developing their darkroom skills. Clarke and Kruger held a joint photography exhibition called *We Two Are Watching* at the Victorian Women's Trust in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne in 1991.

The social documentation Clarke started with Gibb's guidance has continued over the past three decades and now constitutes thousands of negatives showing gatherings of Indigenous people in social, cultural and protest settings (the negatives are part of The living archive of Aboriginal art at the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne). Clarke's art photography has been produced concurrently and includes studio portraiture and self-portraiture, the *Ritual and Ceremony* series, lenticular lightboxes and the hologram *Made from memory (Nan's house)*, 2017, for which Clarke recreated her childhood memories of her grandmother's lounge room.

The knowledge of black-and-white photography Clarke gained early in her career is fundamental to the success of *Ritual and Ceremony*, her most ambitious photographic work to date. But this series also built on her well-established working methods in jewellery and other media. Clarke always begins with research into historical sources related to her ancestors and a commitment to revivifying historical practices that may have been forgotten, but which are dormant rather than lost.¹⁴ It is for this reason that she re-imagines and re-creates specific traditional objects. The impetus for *Ritual and Ceremony* was the kopi, a traditional cap worn by Aboriginal men and women during mourning which Clarke originally saw in the collection of the Melbourne Museum in 2010. Additional information was sourced from William Blandowski's account of traditional burial practices carried out by Aboriginal people living on the Murray and Darling Rivers, published in 1862. In Clarke's own words:

The Kopi mourning cap represents loss, sorrow and grief. Aboriginal women would cut off their hair, weave a net of emu sinew and place the sinew on their head. They'd then cover it with several layers of gypsum, a white river clay, forming the Kopi. These Kopi could weigh up to 7kg and were a signifier of the wearer being in a state of grief. There is documentation of men also wearing the Kopi mourning cap. Women wore the Kopi from two weeks to six months depending on their relationship to the deceased. At the end of their mourning period the Kopi was taken off and placed on the grave of their deceased loved one.¹⁵



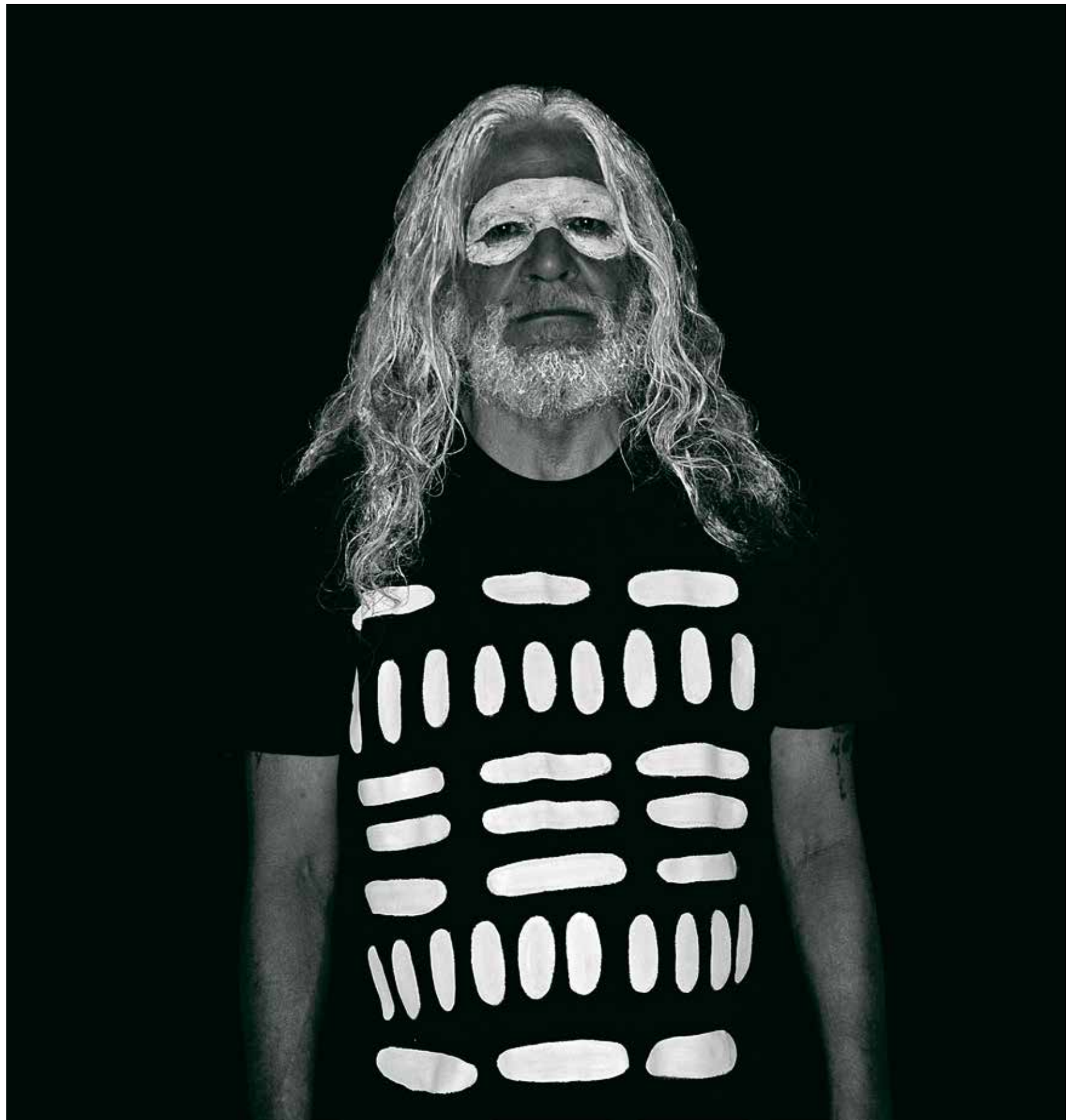


Ritual and Ceremony involved extended collaboration, much of it conducted ahead of the actual photography session. First, Clarke obtained the permission of the Elders to work with thirty-eight Aboriginal women (representing the thirty-eight tribes in Victoria) and forty-five Aboriginal men. Then, once an individual had agreed to participate, they attended the studio, where Clarke was assisted by Koorie woman Shannon Faulkhead (due to the time-consuming nature of the process they usually photographed only two people a day). The preparations participants undertook were both emotional and physical in nature. Clarke asked each person to think about their own experience of mourning and loss, to make their kopi caps and mark their faces with white ochre. She has explained that the women donned 'black dresses as an acknowledgment of contemporary practices while the men wore black t-shirts with renderings of a range of body scarification patterns'.¹⁶

The photographic exposure was made at the culminating point of the process – immediately after the subject lifted the heavy kopi off their head and the weight of their grief was symbolically lightened. Participants found the whole experience to be extraordinarily intimate and intensely felt; Myles Russell-Cook, who appears in the series, described it as 'cathartic'.

Although each subject was photographed separately – immersed in their own private grief – the series communicates a much larger phenomenon, that of communal or collective grief. As Maree Clarke has poignantly commented: 'We want to stop mourning, but our faces show the continued sadness that our families and our communities continue to carry'.¹⁷ This relationship between the individual and the group is conveyed through Clarke's strategies of standardisation and repetition. Every person has white markings on their faces and kopi residues in their hair, every person appears against a black background and is photographed in a three-quarter body view. These uniform, repeated elements do more than create a compelling visual rhythm across the series – they help establish the 'facts' in Clarke's narrative. The consistency of the imagery takes on the status of 'evidence', 'proof' of the painful history of colonisation. The photographs can thus be understood as representations of 'the legacy of invisible violence'¹⁸ that has resulted from European invasion and Frontier Wars. This violence, knowledge of which has been repressed in mainstream Australian history, is re-inscribed in the clay residues on the bodies of the people Clarke photographed, in their grave expressions and in the preponderance of black in every image, which in European traditions is associated with loss, grief and mourning.













For me, viewing *Ritual and Ceremony* is a confronting and unsettling experience. The subjects appear fantastical, spectral, mythical, as if conjured up out of the darkness and out of another time. However, the women and men who are pictured also look very contemporary. I think I recognise one or two of them – the playwright Jack Charles, for example, but not naming anyone in the accompanying labels is a reminder that individual identity is not the issue here. And, although the works are resoundingly contemporary, the past resonates in them. The subjects' profoundly sorrowful expressions hark back to the deeply disturbing photographs of Aboriginal subjects taken by colonial photographers such as Douglas T. Kilburn, Henry Frith, J. W. Lindt and many others between the 1850s and 1880s.

The way Clarke's series deals with seemingly contradictory states of being – especially the past and present, and the corporeal and spiritual – is a major achievement. Curator Clothilde Bullen has written insightfully about the objects Clarke creates, discussing her necklaces as 'timeless objects, quite literally as things "without time", whose very being sits in a space that is both ancient and dynamically modern'.¹⁹ This applies equally to the photographs in *Ritual and Ceremony*. The past isn't held back; its energy is propelled forwards to reach us, the viewers. And the figures, with their ancient white, mask-like markings, illuminate and animate the internal space of the images they occupy.²⁰

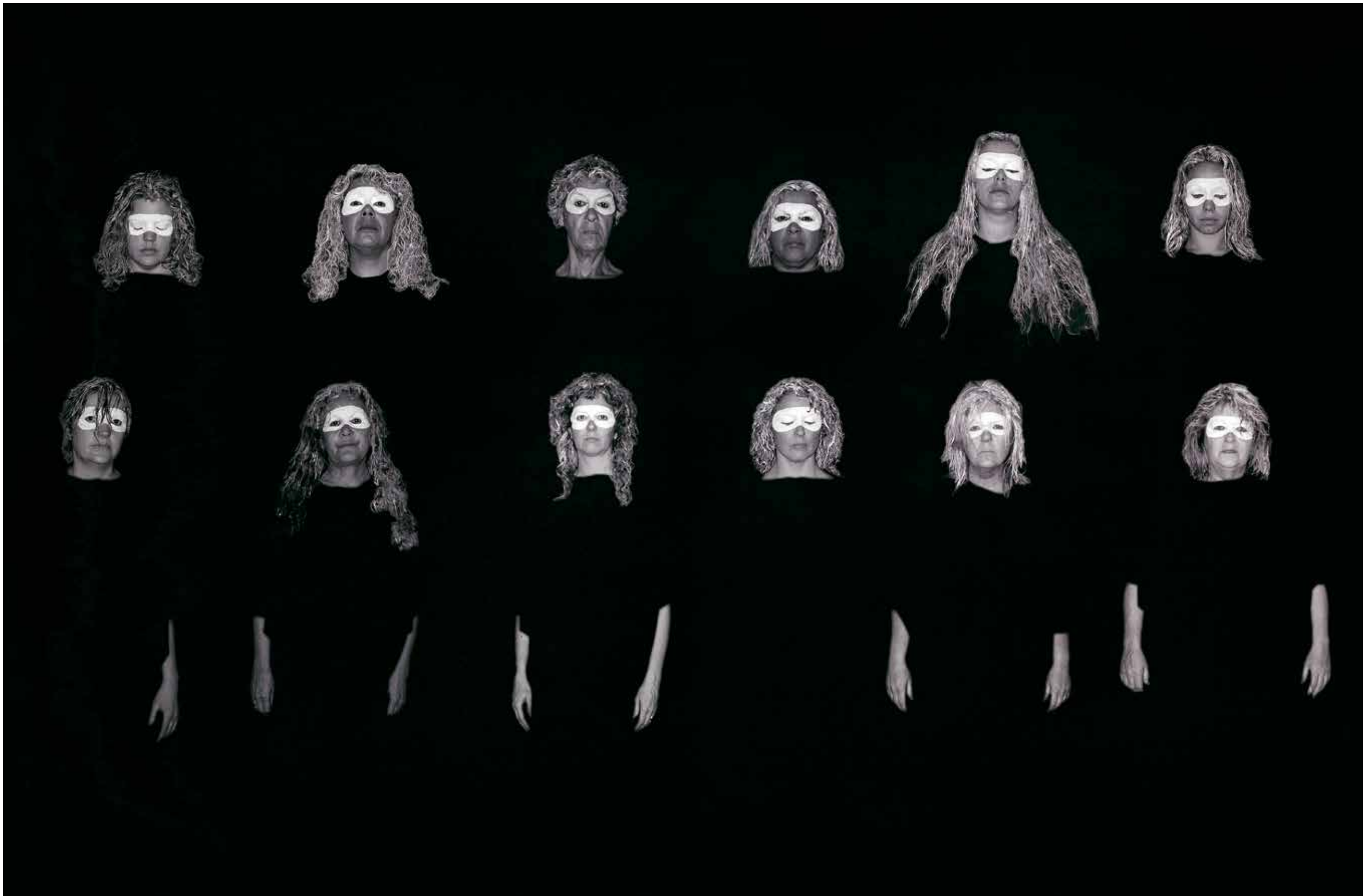
The co-existence of historical and contemporary references common to Clarke's work is abundantly clear in *Ritual and Ceremony*. The frontal poses, direct address to the camera and neutral backdrops have multiple references that encompass anthropological, documentary and studio photography, and colonial and contemporary practices. They include late nineteenth-century anthropological photography (for example, by Paul Foelsche), twentieth-century studio photography (by Richard Avedon and others) and the work of a range of contemporary Indigenous photographers such as Ricky Maynard, Brenda L. Croft, Darren Siwes, Brook Andrew, Genevieve Grieves and Christian Thompson. It must be stressed, however, that despite some of the formal strategies Indigenous artists have in common they draw on a great variety of documentary and conceptual practices.²¹ Clarke's photographic work, even when staged, is underpinned by her quest for history and lived experience that is authentic, whether materially verifiable or imagined.

In *Ritual and Ceremony* the intensity of the subjects' gaze is also critical, moving it beyond emotional, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions into an overtly political domain. The series represents an



Jack Jack Doyle
Muralist
A mural of a man with long white hair and a beard, wearing a white mask and a black shirt with white stripes, mounted on a wall.

GOTOO
HOUSE



(previous) Installation view of Maree Clarke's *Uncle Jack Charles* from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012, on display as part of PHOTO2021, Scott Alley, Melbourne, 2021 (above) Maree Clarke *Women in mourning* 2012, printed 2014, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

important addition to ‘a counter-archive’²² of photographs of Indigenous people in which the coloniser’s gaze is turned on itself and the traditions of Western art are critiqued and corrected. But the photographs also reflect the entrenched situation recently outlined by Tony Birch:

White Australia has attempted to avoid the Aboriginal eye in so many ways, including incarceration and the imposition of various forms and categories of caste legislation, designed to subjugate the autonomous Aboriginal voice and identity in all manners possible.²³

In *Ritual and Ceremony* the processes of avoidance and subjugation are not only exposed, they’re overturned. The subjects in the photographs assert their autonomy in deeply moving terms but in their profoundly private and collective grief they are ultimately inaccessible and unassimilable.

Ritual and Ceremony has had several iterations since first being exhibited at the Melbourne Museum in 2011. This is an important point because the form of the work is not fixed and can change depending on the setting and context. Photographs from it can be presented singly, in groups, and in conjunction with other elements of an installation, such as a display of kopis. When shown at the NGV’s *Melbourne Now* exhibition in 2013, for example, it incorporated a sound piece in which subjects of the photographs talked about their own experiences of mourning and loss. Maree Clarke has further extended the reach of Indigenous rituals of mourning – from the particular to the universal – by running healing workshops in Australia and overseas.

The lenticular lightbox works *On the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, I, II and III* look very different from the black-and-white photographs in *Ritual and Ceremony*, but there are some fundamental connections. The most conspicuous of these are the engagement with different temporal and material states. *On the banks of the Murrumbidgee River* is embedded in both a specific place and personal memory. The site made visible in the images is the land behind Balranald Mission, New South Wales, where Maree Clarke’s family lived in a tent. Clarke was a baby at the time and slept in the suitcase that can be seen in the right-hand panel. The thumbprint overlaying and partially obscuring the landscape signifies the connection to Country. The memories which underpin the narrative are not Maree’s (though she is part of them), but those of her older brother, who relayed them to her.

On the banks of the Murrumbidgee River has a mesmeric quality, its imagery more suggestive than definitive. Blue sky and white clouds and river water





Maree Clarke *Made from memory – on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River II (Army tent and suitcase)* 2019, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Maree Clarke *Made from memory – on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River III* 2019, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

fill the compositions. The expansiveness of the landscape scene – a memory site that is both described and imagined – recalls the work of Michael Riley and Nici Cumpston. Clarke’s use of the lenticular process introduces an unfixed viewing position: as you move past the image it changes and becomes less solid.

In other recent works Clarke has explored re-enactment strategies often favoured by First Nations art photographers, including Michael Cook. Members of her family have taken on roles in images that are filmic, almost dreamlike. The narratives are ambiguous as it isn’t possible to know where the photographs were taken, when, or even exactly what is happening in them. Once again an object – in *A long journey home II*, 2018, a canoe – made by Clarke has been pivotal in her imaginative conceptualisation of an image.

* * *

Ancestral Memories reveals that at times in Maree Clarke’s career photography has assumed particular importance and has related closely to the ongoing concerns of First Nations art photographers. But the exhibition also makes it clear that Clarke does not define herself as a photographer or indeed as an artist specialising in any particular medium. What her photography shares with her other work is a recuperative agenda, providing a way of establishing cultural continuity and asserting the significance of Indigenous knowledge and creativity. As Clarke has said, she loves looking at historic objects and

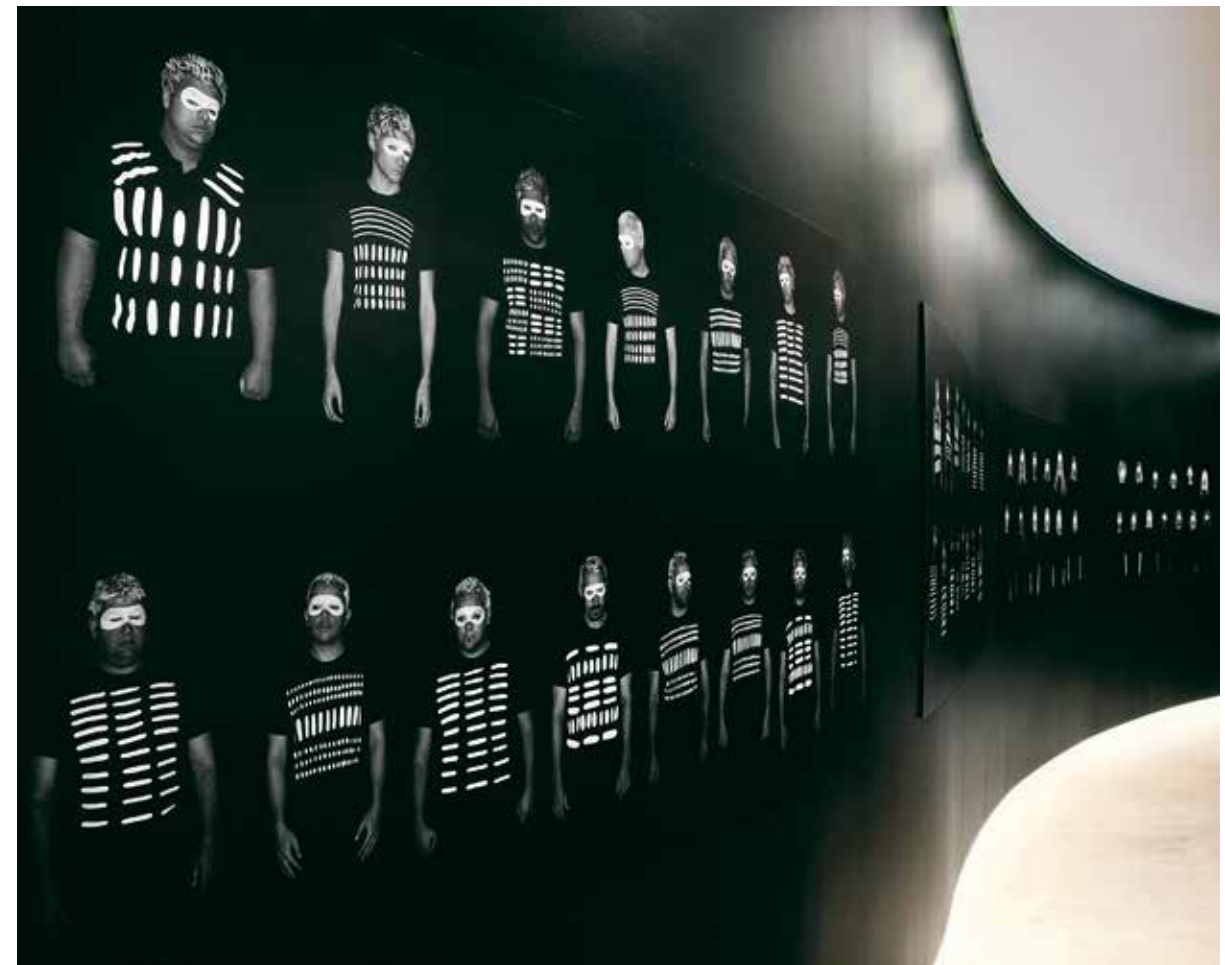
turns] that research into art – it provides me with a connection to the traditional material practices of my ancestors, yet my practice remains firmly steeped in the now.²⁴

Notes

- 1 See the chapter ‘Black to Blak’ in Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2007, pp. 31–51.
- 2 Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, Reaktion Books, London, 2016, p. 209.
- 3 Other founding members of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative were Jeffrey Samuels, Bronwyn Bancroft, Avril Quail, Fern Martens, Arone Meeks and Euphemia Bostock.
- 4 See the resultant book by Penny Taylor (ed.), *After 200 Years: Photographic Essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia Today*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988.
- 5 Tracey Moffatt, *In Dreams: Mervyn Bishop: Thirty Years of Photography 1960–1990*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 1991.
- 6 Tony Birch, ‘Black on White’ in Maree Clarke & Megan Evans, *Black on White: An Exhibition of Photographs by Aboriginal Artists Representing Non-Aboriginality*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, Victoria, 2005.
- 7 Michael Aird, *Portraits of our Elders*, Queensland Museum, Brisbane, 1993, p. vii.
- 8 Jane Lydon (ed.), *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2014, p. 1.
- 9 Jane Lydon, ‘Invasion and redemption: the camera in colonial Australia’, in Cathy Leahy, Judith Ryan, Isobel Crombie & Megan Patty (eds), *Colony: Australia 1770–1861 / Frontier Wars*, National Gallery of Victoria and Thames & Hudson Australia, Melbourne, 2019, p. 251.
- 10 See Hetti Perkins & Jonathan Jones (eds), *Half-Light: Portraits from Black Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2008. See, for example, Michael Riley, Brenda L. Croft, Fiona Foley, Brook Andrew, Ricky Maynard and Tracey Moffatt. Darren Siwes and Genevieve Grieves are more recent exponents.
- 11 Croft’s most recent exhibition and publication is *Still in My Mind: Gurindji Location, Experience and Visuality*, University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 2017. Andrew was curator of the 2020 Biennale of Sydney.
- 12 Fran Edmonds with Maree Clarke, *Sort of Like Reading a Map: A Community Report on the Survival of South-East Australian Aboriginal Art Since 1834*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Casuarina, Northern Territory, 2009.
- 13 See Jillian (Viva) Gibb, *The Long and Lonely Road: Township photographs from South Africa 1987, 1988, 1989*, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1991.
- 14 Clothilde Bullen in Tina Baum, *Defying Empire: Third National Indigenous Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2017, p. 38.
- 15 ‘Kopi Workshop – building an understanding of grief from an Indigenous cultural perspective’, MAAS, <<https://maas.museum/event/kopi/>>, accessed 19 October 2020.
- 16 ‘Linear artists: Maree Clarke’, 15 Nov. 2019, MAAS, <<https://maas.museum/linear-artists-maree-clarke/>>, accessed 19 Oct. 2020.
- 17 Maree Clarke, artist statement, in Leahy et al., p. 240.
- 18 Lydon in Leahy et al., p. 252.
- 19 Bullen in Baum, p. 38.
- 20 For an extended exploration of Indigenous concepts of time see Stephen Gilchrist (ed.), *Everywhen: The Eternal Present in Indigenous Art from Australia*, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA, 2016.
- 21 Ian McLean makes a useful distinction between the essentialism of identity politics and a cosmopolitan subjectivity that makes transcultural connections in *Rattling Spears*, p. 233.
- 22 Ian McLean writes of Ricky Maynard’s efforts to create ‘his own counter-archive of Indigenous Australians, not as objects of the ethnographic gaze but as subjects owning their future’. *ibid.* p. 219.
- 23 Birch in Clarke & Evans.
- 24 Maree Clarke in Sarah Thomas, *Colonial Afterlives*, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, Tasmania, 2015, p. 21.

Kopi: art of reclamation and healing

Judith Ryan AM





Almost without exception, perfunctory acknowledgments, disclaimers and warnings precede any engagement with matters pertaining to public discourse or imagery that references a deceased Indigenous person. The Indigenous dead, whether represented by images, voices or names in publications or on video, on websites or social media platforms, is a subject that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people commonly care not to discuss, make public or share.

These cautions exist because for many First Peoples, strict cultural protocols prohibit them from seeing, displaying an image of, or saying the name of a deceased person. Moreover, drawing attention to a deceased person may cause deep distress and sadness for close or extended family members and communities associated with the deceased. Indigenous academic Tyson Yunkaporta hints at some of the cosmology that underpins these abiding cultural protocols:

We really need to understand the power of names, words and images in this reality. These are very powerful things ... if you look at the cosmology of the universe: the sky camp and earth camp are mirroring each other. The sky camp is that realm of spirit and the intangible, the abstract, that kind of dreaming side while the earth and people are your tangible reality. But these two are in constant communication with each other so where you have your story places or sacred sites, those are sites of overlap between those two worlds, constant overlap, which is why you need to be careful when you enter those places and follow all the right protocols. They can make you sick.

Those sites of overlap can occur through ritual ... but also through the intentional use of metaphors. The most powerful metaphors are words and images. Names are very powerful because a name, it's a metaphor, the name is not the person, but the name is patterned from that person. That name represents that person. It's the metaphor that goes across between the worlds that calls that person's spirit.¹

'Death' and 'Indigenous Australia' are words which, regrettably, seem too often associated. In media coverage both in Australia and internationally, Indigenous Australia appears as a space of death. Endemic disease, youth suicide, domestic violence, deaths in custody and premature deaths brought about by substance abuse, poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare services dominate representations of First Peoples and give rise to agonised debates about how such losses might be countered, as Wiradjuri activist Jenny Munro has stated:

We are suffering from so many and continuing deaths brought about by injustice – deaths in custody, youth suicide, inequality in health-care provision and the like, and each death compounds with another one and another one so we don't have a chance to grieve each loss individually. You get to a point where you can't take any more and many of our people withdraw from interacting with other members of their community because it's too heart-breaking to watch the deaths that are happening now in such large numbers. The deaths are a result of the oppression we are facing under this system. In 227 years we have gone from the healthiest people on the planet to the sickest people on the planet.²

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, Jenny Munro's 2015 statement is a compendium of the Indigenous experience of inherited trauma. Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones observes that this accumulation of grief has compelled First Nations artists to make art of emboldened resistance and political consequence:

Since invasion, death has dogged us. The combination of this nation's history, founded on death and suffering, and the creativity of Aboriginal communities in dealing with grief and loss has created a deep seam of inspiration.³

Prior to invasion, individual Indigenous nations across Australia developed specific mourning practices for overseeing, ceremonially burying and memorialising loved ones lost. Each of these communal tasks entailed abstract symbolism, elaborate protocols and processes of making and ritual embellishment. As a consequence of colonisation, which affected Indigenous nations unequally, many of these practices continue to evolve in response to social change. Others are being re-imagined and reclaimed as a form of healing by contemporary Black artists in prodigiously colonised parts of Indigenous Australia that have borne the brunt of introduced diseases, dispossession, dislocation, linguicide and massacre.

Through innovative re-enactments of past practices and palpable memorials to massacre, by contemporary artists such as Maree Clarke, Julie Gough and Yhonnie Scarce, mourning becomes a decolonising healing space of absence/presence, through which we can feel the weight of Indigenous death that scars the unfinished business of our shared history. Clarke's research-based art practice, however, is exceptional because it is animated by her desire to give birth to what has been extinguished, stolen or abandoned.⁴

Moreover, she privileges as contemporary art, and shares with others, processes of making cultural objects that connect her to Country and Ancestors lost. In Clarke's *Kopi: connected to Country*, 2011, the art objects become both an allegory for and an insight into tradition and disappearance.

Indigenous ritual practices of caring for and mourning the deceased in south-east Australia are the earliest in human history. The complex ceremonial burials of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man have been carbon dated such that they are considered to be around 42,000 years old.⁵

In March 1969, geologist Jim Bowler and a team of archaeologists salvaged the remains of Mungo Lady, which comprised a deposit of charred and fragmented bones. Paleoanthropologist Alan Thorne identified the remains, which included fragments from each part of the skeleton, as those of a very lightly built young woman of small stature, no more than nineteen years old. The manner of her interment suggests a considered funerary process, implying 'spiritual meaning and abstract thought'.⁶ Her body had been cremated on the beach and her bones crushed into fragments before being buried in a shallow conical pit.⁷



Maree Clarke *Road to Warrakoo* 2011, Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

In February 1974, Bowler located a second human burial half a kilometre to the east, an essentially complete skeleton. Mungo Man had been laid to rest in a shallow grave with hands clasped together and knees slightly flexed; ochre daubed generously on the body had stained the sand of the grave fill pink. Since deposits of that ochre are not found locally – the nearest source being about 200 kilometres away – considerable energy must have been expended to procure and transport the ochre used to anoint the body of the deceased ceremonially and ensure that correct cultural protocols were fulfilled.⁸

Near these sanctified burial sites, archaeologists have since discovered numerous tools, animal remains and hearths, suggesting that Lake Mungo, when fed by the Lachlan River, supported a thriving community living from wild game, plants and seeds, but mostly fish and shellfish caught in the freshwater lake.

Subsequent to repatriation of Mungo Lady in 1992 and Mungo Man in 2017, Bowler stated:

The anointing of the body ... is the sort of ritual that would be acceptable in any cathedral today. And there you've got the fire – think the smoke and the incense ... so to have that in our backyard 40,000 years ago, there's nowhere else in the world that happens ... think of it in the context of cultural continuity of the present Aboriginal people. Not even ... the Indigenous people of Africa ... have that connection to anything like that continuity of culture. So we are sitting on an extraordinarily privileged place in humanity.

The story of humanity is in the story of those Mungo people ... We are connected to the cosmos. This is what you find in that situation – that ritual, these were people of the sun and the stars and the very landscape they lived in.

Indigenous belief in an animated Earth and solar system, whereby totemic animals and other beings made everything – and in so doing became part of its story – are inextricably linked to the ancients of this continent. Mungo Man and Lady are central to that human beginning. They and their contemporaries are in the songlines that criss-cross the lakes. In Indigenous cosmology, they are the closest humans to Australia's – and the world's – beginnings.

I think we can say ... that was the end of cranial profiling ... that business of Darwin and Huxley and Murray Black and all those bloody others had been involved in.⁹

Substantially later than these ancient ritual practices of cremation and burial, detailed ethnographic accounts were made of Indigenous mourning practices that are absent from archaeological excavations and analyses of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man.

As part of prolonged mourning rites, recorded in detail by anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, a Western Arrernte widow from Central Australia, on the death of her husband, would cover her face and body with white pipe clay and become 'the whitened one', marking the symbolic erasure of the woman's personal identity at a critical moment in the mourning process.¹⁰ The widow was expected to remain silent for as long as twelve months and live in a secluded women's camp. When the widow wished to remove the ban of silence she would again smear herself with white ochre and would fill a *tirna* (wooden vessel) full of edible seeds or tubers. The widow would sit down with other women, who would wail loudly in an encampment midway between the two sections of the community. Men would join her here, take the *tirna* from her and shout loudly, joined by other women, while the widow continued to wail until she quietly joined in the men's shouts, and the men struck the ground heavily with their shields. The gathering of seeds and tubers subsequently consumed by the men signified that the widow could resume her customary role and return to the community. These actions were performed to ensure that the spirit of the deceased would see that his wife had mourned him respectfully and expressed her deep sorrow at his passing.

Some twelve to eighteen months later, the widow would make a *tyemurrelye* (headdress) for herself and her sisters to wear, from the small marsupial bones she had been saving, and attach them with resin to human-hair head-rings commonly worn by women. During the final part of the mourning ritual, the widow would remove the headdress, break it up and throw it into the grave of the husband, thereby burying her sorrow and that of her relatives and friends. This was not only meant to symbolise the end of the burial process, but to remind the spirit of the husband not to return and injure his wife and relatives or make them sick.¹¹

Such practices, in modified form, continue in Western Desert communities into the present. In 1999, during an extended period of sorry business some two years after the death of her son, Warlpiri artist Yulyurlu Lorna Napurrurla Fencer made special preparations for the funeral ceremony. The artist cut her hair and made and wore a contemporary mourning headdress of bone-shaped pieces of softwood painted with white, yellow and blue acrylic pigments, which obscured most of her face. This powerful expression of



grief could be inferred as a contemporary reiteration of the tyemurrelye collected by Baldwin Spencer a century earlier. Napurrurla also painted a canvas, entitled *Grief*, 1997, in which all of the kuruwarri (signs or marks of Ancestral beings in a cultural landscape) and colours were covered with white acrylic paint, a manifestation of her deep sorrow at the loss of her son.

Significant mourning practices are deeply embedded in Indigenous cultures in south-east Australia, but elaborate details of these procedures do not survive in the oral history or in the ethnographic record, owing to the destructive impact of colonisation in these southern colonies. Significantly, Jonathan Jones has noted that the deaths from exposure to smallpox occurred at such a precipitous rate that afflicted peoples such as the Ngarrindjeri were denied the time needed to perform the cultural protocols necessary to sanctify their honoured dead.¹² After a protracted Ngarrindjeri funeral practice in the lower Murray, the bones of the deceased would be placed in a burial basket woven from sedge rushes gathered, dried and processed by women. This specialised practice continues to this day, notably in the weaving of burial baskets by Ngarrindjeri artists such as Aunty Yvonne Koolmatrie, who acknowledges the restorative power of continuing to weave, an immersive practice that revitalises her connections to Country and to many generations of weavers in the Riverland. The rhythmic practice of weaving releases cultural knowledge embodied in the coil bundle technique and the woven baskets associated with mortuary rites.

Another important mourning practice belonging to women largely from the South East, but possibly extending into Queensland and Western Australia, is that of making and wearing kopi (mourning caps), as Maree Clarke explains:

Women would cut their hair off, make a net of emu sinew, place it on their head, and then plaster their head with gypsum, weighing up to seven kilograms and wearing it anywhere from two weeks to six months, depending on the person's closeness to the deceased.¹³

The gypsum formed a paste, which set and cured bone white, creating a visible symbol of mourning, a weight of unimaginable grief borne on the crown. The kopi may disintegrate in time or be embellished with more layers of gypsum. Its whiteness associated the kopi with white ochre, a cultural signifier of sorrow and of deep and enduring connections to Country and Community that is worn on the face and body for mortuary ceremonies. At the end of the woman's period of bereavement, the kopi would be placed on a person's grave and left to the elements as a tangible

memorial and a lasting embodiment of the woman's connection to the deceased entombed below.

In 2010, the *Power and the Passion: Our Ancestors Return Home*, a moving account by Uncle Jim Berg and others of the 1985 reburial and return to Country in Kings Domain, Melbourne, of stolen Victorian Aboriginal ancestral remains, was published.¹⁴ Barkindji/Paakantyi artist Kent Morris shared with Clarke an integral resource – Frederic Bonney's photographs and detailed accounts of ritual practices of the people of this region.¹⁵ Working with these empathetic photographs, Clarke discovered that kopi were worn by women for extended periods until they disintegrated, and that men wore them on the death of a senior female; the latter practice is not noted in other historical sources. Clarke also made a detailed study of eighty-five kopi gathered by amateur collector George Murray Black from the Darling River region during the 1940s and 1950s that are in the collection of Museums Victoria. Fortuitously, Clarke's first investigative visit coincided with that of Kent Morris, who was authorised to permit and oversee Clarke's examination of these Barkindji/Paakantyi ritual objects.¹⁶

The kopi at Museums Victoria have a tendentious association with Murray Black's notorious collection of the skeletal remains of 804 Ancestors. Operating at a time when cranial profiling was critical to the racial stereotyping of Indigenous people in Australia, Black systematically plundered five sacred cemeteries at Chowilla; Rufus River / Lake Victoria; Lake Benanee, Euston; Poon Boon; and Nacurrie / Coobool, representing Country of the Maraura, Kureinji, Tati Tati and Wati Wati peoples, located south of Barkindji lands.¹⁷ Black documented neither the surrounds nor the positions of these individuals' remains, which were disarticulated and fragmented and languished for forty years or more, numbered but unconsidered, in metal storage boxes at the University of Melbourne before their transfer to Museums Victoria. In delivering this bounty of curiosities separating figure and context in furtherance of the theories of cultural phrenology that designated Indigenous people as mere instruments of biological determination, Murray had violated Indigenous law and a sanctified mortuary tradition. In 1985, in response to Indigenous outrage, led by Uncle Jim Berg and supported by a legal team of Ron Merkel QC and Ron Castan QC, both foundation members of the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the stolen Ancestral remains were reverently returned to Country and reburied with care and ceremony.¹⁸

Clarke explained that the kopi that form part of the same collection were plundered from grave sites, losing their association with the sanctified burials of the deceased, without the express consent of any of the

Traditional Owners of Country on which Murray Black was operating – an act of unspeakable sacrilege. In handling these historical objects, which brought Clarke in direct communion with Ancestral women and the deceased Ancestors they were mourning, she was consumed with a sadness and compelled to ponder that:

With invasion, Indigenous Australians experienced loss of family, of land, of languages, of cultural practices, of the right to tell our history without guilt or blame, of self-identity without being questioned and being proud of who we are, without shame.¹⁹

She also reflected on the absence of these ritual mourning practices from current Victorian Indigenous culture and sought to revitalise and celebrate kopi in an immersive installation work as a form of healing and reanimation.

The artist researched kopi in the South Australian Museum collection and in international museums, discovering another kopi collected by Black in the British Museum and examples in the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.²⁰ Clarke's concept was augmented when she came upon a historical etching of women wearing kopi in the lower Murray River region from William Blandowski's illustrated encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, which bears the description:

A common mourning ritual of the women is to singe off their hair and replace it with a heavy headpiece made of gypsum, like a cap. They visit their husband's grave daily, expressing their sadness with melancholic lamentations.²¹

In 2010, Clarke's curiosity to discover more about lost cultural practices motivated her participation in *Life, Death and Spirituality*, an exhibition curated by artist Bindi Cole Chocka for Arts Centre Melbourne and the Melbourne International Arts Festival. Clarke created plaster casts of thirty-eight contemporary Koorie women's skulls for the exhibition. These thirty-eight kopi honoured the thirty-eight Aboriginal nations of the territory now known as Victoria. The following year, Clarke expanded this collection of kopi by creating plaster casts of forty-six contemporary Koorie men's skulls for *Ritual and Ceremony*, her first solo exhibition, held at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum. Since ritual bloodletting was an important part of this mourning practice, the men's kopi were infused with red ochre. The installation gained added resonance through the inclusion of several kopi collected by Murray Black, bringing the past into the present, a cornerstone of the artist's practice.

The exhibits were dramatically lit in a black-walled exhibition space of ambient darkness. Clarke laid the kopi in red dirt on a low plinth emblematic of Country where this mourning ritual is practised, symbolism reinforced by the presence of white eucalypt sticks among the kopi. Behind the formal positioning of circular white caps and vertical sticks on a rectangular plinth, Clarke exhibited *Ritual and Ceremony*, her photographic series of eighty-four black-and-white portraits of Koorie women and men. The women were dressed in black contemporary mourning dress with white-ochre painted eye masks reminiscent of customary ritual body adornment, connecting Koorie women from the Victorian community to their kopi. The men wore white ochre painted eye masks and black T-shirts bearing white linear designs that allude to ritual scarification markings. Personal stories of loss and despair, survival, resilience, estrangement and cultural pride told by Koorie women and men were projected across the floor in front of the installation. Anthropologist Filip De Boeck likens such an outpouring of voices to 'an autopsy of crisis': a postcolonial post mortem.²²

For Clarke and academic Shannon Faulkhead, this form of truth-telling connects with their lived reality:

We want to stop mourning, but our faces show the continued sadness that our families and our communities continue to carry. Mourning involves sitting or crouched at the grave with the women wailing. We stand proud, facing the sadness and pain we experience through the continued loss. We continue to live, survive, fight, mourn and celebrate our people and culture.²³

In 2012, Clarke's kopi installation occupied an important place in the *First Peoples* exhibition at Museums Victoria. The importance for Clarke of the process of working with gypsum or plaster, its contemporary equivalent, was underlined by the presence of a video presentation of hands modelling plaster.

In her 2021 retrospective at the NGV, *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories*, Clarke reinforces the connections of kopi to her homeland and to her personal journey by suspending 500 eucalypt sticks gathered from terrain around Mildura in the space. As the artist states:

The process of making this installation has been an emotional roller coaster of a journey. It has also been a continuing healing process for the loss my own family has experienced. Because of this loss, it was vital that my family be a part of this work, and to take this journey with me.²⁴

Clarke's performative kopi project extends beyond the 2011 installation and the confines of the museum and into the broader community. The artist has conducted numerous kopi-making workshops in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants alike have been invited to model and wear a kopi, keep it for six months or so and place it on the grave of a deceased loved one as a reanimation of the healing process, a deliberate universalising of each individual's need to come to terms with death. Through the making of the kopi, the pain that an individual accumulates and internalises is absorbed by the clay, which materialises this sorrow, as Clarke states:

I know from the last one I did at Footscray Arts Centre, people actually rang me on their way home and said 'Maree, I feel lighter, I feel like I'm able to move on with my life now', because it felt like all of that grief and loss and things that they were carrying, that energy had gone into the cap that they then put back into the earth as a bit of a release ... free to move on without carrying the weight of that grief. Because the kopi, depending on how thick you make your clay, is quite heavy, sitting on the head, so you can feel the weight of your grief.²⁵

The performative process of making kopi effects an inexplicable transference between how things once were and how they are today and also functions as a reclamation of customary mourning practices, undertaken by Indigenous women and men as a form of healing and prolonged sorrowful remembrance. Each kopi represents a deceased person being appropriately mourned and therefore re-humanised in accord with customary tradition. Moreover, in these shared workshops, Clarke 'builds an intercultural exploration of mourning', opening up a safe space for acceptance and protection, where grief can be worked collectively and relationships built.²⁶

In viewing Clarke's *Kopi: connected to Country*, we note that the kopi are imbued with cultural mnemonics of another time and place, and the viewer may be unsettled or saddened. The objects expand to appropriate and apprehend power, blood, beauty, spirit, dangerous law and mourning protocols from which they have been displaced. Such works of celebration and memorial made in a postcolonial context venerate objects and designs that are no longer part of the fabric of Victorian Indigenous society, yet remain integral to Clarke's expression of her individual and cultural identity. Clarke's kopi project attests to the cultural responsibility that continues to be practised by Victorian Indigenous people.



Installation view of Maree Clarke's *Me in mourning* 2019 on display as part of *Reimagining Culture – Contemporary Connections to Country*, Mildura Arts Centre, 2019

Art is inexorably a story levied on selected art and artefacts by an artist who consciously or unconsciously has partialities and incentives. Ideally for the viewer and the artist, an account, an appreciation, an enlightenment, an animation flourish from the art objects. Cross-cultural encounters can be messy experiences to navigate both practically and intellectually: the understandings of cultures in space and time are almost inevitably narrated from the perspective of a subjective culture. The other culture is seen as refracted through the prism of our culture, of our perception, construction and understanding. Clarke invites us into her reconstructed world and allows us to grapple with the Kantian question: is objective knowledge and consideration possible (in the sense of independence from our cognitive approaches and operations)? But the canon has never been static. Every culture has an intrinsic value, an internal wealth accumulated in language, myth, religion, art, objects of material culture, and in their usage in the life of the bearers of culture. Clarke permits us a glimpse into this internal wealth and persuades us to consider both the Kantian and the art-historical questions.

I thank Maree Clarke, Kent Morris, Amélie Ward, Shannon Faulkhead, Lynette Russell, Carol Cooper, Philip Batty and Judith Gorr for their assistance in my researching and developing this essay.

Notes

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- 18 As discussed in Faulkhead & Berg.
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- 25 Maree Clarke, quoted in Ward, 'An Aboriginal jigsaw puzzle, a study of a contemporary Aboriginal art exhibition'.
- 26 See Ward, 'An Aboriginal jigsaw puzzle, a study of a contemporary Aboriginal art exhibition'.



List of illustrations

*in order of appearance

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Born of the Land 2014 (still)
video
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne

Viva Gibb
Australian 1945–2017
Maree Clarke c. 1985
gelatin silver photograph
34.9 × 27.5 cm (image)
37.4 × 29.3 cm (sheet)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Gift of Sybil Gibb and Rupert Duffy in
memory of Viva Gibb through the Australian
Government’s Cultural Gifts Program, 2019
(2019.78)

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Maree Clarke 2012 from the *Ritual and
Ceremony* series 2012, printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 × 58.0 cm (image)
70.0 × 70.0 cm (sheet)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018 (2018.511.78)

Necklace c. 1998
echidna quill, Melaleuca seed, wood, string
26.5 x 17.5 x 1.4 cm
Courtesy of Koorie Heritage Trust,
Melbourne (AH 01611)

Necklace c. 1987
echidna quill, Melaleuca seed, Bottlebrush
seed, other seeds, wood, line, metal
28.2 x 8.5 x 2.0 cm
Courtesy of Koorie Heritage Trust,
Melbourne (AH 00100)

Necklace (Mimmirtuung) early 1990s
echidna quills, nylon
22.0 x 22.0 4.5 cm
Museums Victoria, Melbourne (X 88689)

*Personal possum-skin cloak produced for
Maree Clarke by her family and friends* 2018
possum skins, leather dye, waxed threads
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Mitch Mahoney
Boon Wurrung/Barkindji
Thun-ung Coorang (Kangaroo teeth necklace)
2019
cast crystal, leather, sinew, kangaroo tooth
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Leonard Tregonning
Gunai/Kurnai 1954–2017
Thung-ung Coorang (Kangaroo teeth necklace)
2013
kangaroo teeth, leather, sinew, earth pigment
66.5 x 39.0 x 1.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2014 (2014.660)

Magnolia Maymuru wearing Maree Clarke’s
sculptural neckpieces and Lyn-Al Young’s
silk garments. Photographed by Saskia
Wilson and styled by Jillian Davison for
Vogue Australia’s 60th Anniversary edition,
December 2019. Hair by Lok Lau, makeup by
Ashleigh Carpenter.

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Self-portrait in mourning necklace 2017
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne

Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Sonja Hodge
Lardil born 1969
Painted poles 2 1992
metal
10 m (overall) (approx.)
City of Melbourne Art and Heritage
Collection
Commissioned for the Swanston Street Walk
Public Art Project, 1992 (1088148)

Megan Cadd
Yorta Yorta/Wiradjuri born 1975
Maree Clarke
Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/
Boon Wurrung born 1961
Vicki Couzens
Kirrae Wurrong born 1960
Jeph Neale
The spirit of the land 2010
metal
1.0 x 9.0 m (approx.)
City of Monash, Victoria
Commissioned by the City of Monash to
develop artwork for the JW Hurst Reserve

Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 Vicki Couzens Kirrae Wurrong born 1960 Jeph Neale <i>Frog dreaming</i> 2011 Wyndham City Council, Victoria	(clockwise from top left) Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 <i>Tim Church</i> <i>Andrea James</i> <i>Mick Harding</i> <i>Doris Paton</i> <i>Jade Johnson</i> <i>Helen Morris</i> from the <i>Ritual and Ceremony</i> series 2012, printed 2018 inkjet print, ed. 1/10 58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each) 70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2018
Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 Vicki Couzens Kirrae Wurrong born 1960 <i>Kangaroo apple</i> 2010 bronze Frankston City Council, Victoria	(clockwise from top left) <i>Lionel Bamblett</i> <i>Marlikka Perdrisat</i> <i>Dixon Patten</i> <i>Caroline Martin</i> <i>Kent Morris</i> <i>Megan Cadd-Van den berg</i> from the <i>Ritual and Ceremony</i> series 2012, printed 2018 inkjet print, ed. 1/10 58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each) (1-84) 70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2018
Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 Vicki Couzens Kirrae Wurrong born 1960 Jeph Neale <i>Wominjeka Tarnuk Yooroom (Welcome Bowl)</i> 2013 dimensions variable Maribyrnong City Council, Victoria	(clockwise from top left) <i>Kevin Murray</i> <i>Dee Stanton</i> <i>Damien Bell</i> <i>Karen Clarke-Edwards</i> <i>Dan Young</i> <i>Jenny Murray-Jones</i> from the <i>Ritual and Ceremony</i> series 2012, printed 2018 inkjet print, ed. 1/10 58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each) 70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each) National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2018
Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 <i>Ancestral memory I</i> 2019 glass, steel, wires dimensions variable National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2020 (2020.142)	
<i>Ancestral memory II</i> 2019 glass, steel, wires dimensions variable National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2020 (2020.143)	
<i>River reed necklace with</i> feathers 2017 plain and dyed river reed, parrot, cockatoo and galah feathers, twine dimensions variable Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne	
<i>A Long journey home II</i> 2018 Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne	
Maree Clarke Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/ Boon Wurrung born 1961 Mitch Mahoney Boon Wurrung/Barkindji <i>Eel trap</i> 2019 Maribyrnong River, Melbourne, Victoria Partnership between FCAC and Science Gallery Melbourne	

(clockwise from top left)
Darren Smith
Lee Darroch
Matt Jakobi
Antoinette Smith
Peter Waples-Crowe
Kylie Clarke
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Thomas Kinchela
Shannon Faulkhead
Tim Stares
Genevieve Grieves
Carl Clarke
Jackie Harney
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(top to bottom)
Aaron Clarke
Kerri Clarke
Keiran Santour
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Bryan Andy
Desiree Clarke
Jack Charles
Pamela Croft
Wade Mahoney
Catherine Lake
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

Jirra Harvey
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Rueben Berg
Lisa Maza
Harry Harradine
Rachel Maza
Adrian Baxter
Elizabeth Liddle
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Rondon D'Antonie
Robyne Latham
Jason Eades
Kimba Thompson
Luke Murray
Anna Liebzzeit
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

Larry Walsh
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Ben McKeown
Bindi Cole
Myles Russell-Cook
Michelle Smith
Ian Anderson
Karen Adams
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Josef Egger
Vicki Clarke
Steve Rhall
Carolyn Briggs
Peter Ellis
Paola Balla
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

Frances Bond
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Rob Hyatt
Lee Alice Clarke
Brian Stevens
Vicki Couzens
Sidney John Clarke Jnr
Maree Clarke
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Kamahi Djordon King
Siobhan Morgan
Gregory Phillips
Craig Jones
Ben McKeown
Marita Atkinson
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018

(clockwise from top left)
Cienan Muir
Indi Clarke
Stephen Tregonning
Daryl Rose
Sidney John Clarke
Leonard Tregonning
from the *Ritual and Ceremony* series 2012,
printed 2018
inkjet print, ed. 1/10
58.0 x 58.0 cm (image) (each)
70.0 x 70.0 cm (sheet) (each)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2018 (2018.511.1-84)

Women in mourning 2012, printed 2014
gelatin silver photograph
119.7 x 190.0 cm (image and sheet)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2014 (2014.659)

*Made from memory – on the banks of the
Murrumbidgee River* 2019
lenticular print lightbox
120.0 x 120.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2019 (2019.837)

*Made from memory – on the banks of the
Murrumbidgee River II (Army tent and
suitcase)* 2019
lenticular print lightbox
120.0 x 120.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2019 (2019.838)

*Made from memory – on the banks of the
Murrumbidgee River III* 2019
lenticular print lightbox
120.0 x 120.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Road to Warrakoo 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne

Me in mourning 2019
sticks, tulle, video projection
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson
Gallery, Melbourne



View a complete list of works for
Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories
on the NGV website

Contributors

Claire G. Coleman is a Melbourne-based writer of fiction, essays and poetry. She is a Noongar woman whose family has belonged to the south coast of Western Australia for millennia. She has published two novels with Hachette Australia: *Terra Nullius* (2017), which was shortlisted for the Stella Prize and for which she won a black&write! writing fellowship and the Norma K. Hemming Award, and *The Old Lie* (2019).

Charlotte Day is Director at the Monash University Museum of Art (2013–). She was formerly an associate curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (2005–13) and has more than twenty-five years of experience curating exhibitions of contemporary art, leading collection development and commissioning public art.

Dr Fran Edmonds is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne. She is an interdisciplinary scholar, focusing on collaborative/community-based research methods. For almost twenty years she has worked closely with Maree Clarke, and together they have published broadly on south-east Australian Aboriginal art. Edmonds’s current research is focused on the ‘Living Archive’, where Indigenous storytelling, inclusive of art practices, supports processes for reclaiming the institutional archive by centring Indigenous perspectives about their histories and culture.

Helen Ennis is Emeritus Professor, Australian National University School of Art & Design. She was formerly director of the ANU’s Centre for Art History and Art Theory and the Sir William Dobell Chair of Art History. She has curated numerous exhibitions for national cultural institutions and has written extensively on photography in Australia. Her most recent book is *Olive Cotton: A Life in Photography* (2019).

Kimberley Moulton is a Yorta Yorta woman, curator and writer who works at the intersection of First Peoples’ historical cultural material and contemporary art. Her practice centres First Peoples’ anti-colonial curatorial methodologies and works to extend the paradigm of what exhibition, collections and research can be with First Peoples communities, both inside and outside institutions. Moulton has been published extensively in art and museum publications and has led research across North America, Europe and the UK on south-eastern cultural material and First Peoples’ art. She is currently Senior Curator, South-Eastern Aboriginal Collections at Museums Victoria and Artistic Associate for Rising festival, Melbourne.

Hannah Presley is Curator of Indigenous Art at the NGV. Her father’s family are Marri Ngarr from the Moyle River region in the Northern Territory. Presley works closely with artists to respectfully represent the cultural connections that inform their work. Presley was the inaugural Yalingwa curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, where she curated *A Lightness of Spirit is the Measure of Happiness* (2018), and was First Nations assistant curator for Tracey Moffatt at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

Myles Russell-Cook is Curator of Indigenous Art at the NGV. Much of his influence and inspiration come from his maternal Aboriginal heritage in Western Victoria with connections into Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands. His passion is for First Nations contemporary art. He has published on Indigenous art, design and fashion, and recently curated *DESTINY* (2020), a retrospective exhibition of the work of Destiny Deacon at the NGV.

Judith Ryan AM was Senior Curator of Indigenous Art at the NGV from September 1977 until March 2021. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Fine Arts and English Literature from the University of Melbourne, and a Certificate in Education from Oxford University. Ryan has curated around fifty exhibitions of Indigenous art and has published widely in the field. In 2017, she was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia in the General Division ‘for significant service to the visual arts, particularly to the museums and galleries sector, as a curator of Indigenous exhibitions and as an author’.

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Notes to the reader

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that this publication may contain mentions and images of people who are deceased.

The National Gallery of Victoria acknowledges the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin nation, the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways upon which the NGV is located.

(cover)
Graphic representation of designs from Maree Clarke's
Ritual and Ceremony series 2012

(pp. x–xi and 178–9)
Maree Clarke
Born of the Land 2014 (still)
Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

