TRANSMISSION

Billy and Lulu Cooley · Jason Coulthard · Ruby Djikarra Alderton · Cherie Johnson · Nicole Monks · David Leha · Steaphan Paton · Vicki West

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Transmission, as the word suggests, is about passing on, sharing down the line and renewing culture wherever people find themselves living today. Reconnecting to traditional knowledge and practices, the influence of traditional culture on contemporary artists, the rising interest in contemporary Indigenous artmaking in the wider community, and the move to repatriate objects to their traditional owners, are all factors that inform the ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are approaching their respective practices.

Transmission explores the ways contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists are responding to the resurgence in traditional practices and their place within the contemporary cultural context. Within this dialogue Transmission, through the exhibition and associated Transmission Symposium, poses three key questions:

– What is culturally appropriate?
– What is cultural appropriation?
– Who has authority to determine the answers to these questions?

Transmission aims to bring awareness to and stimulate discussion around the complexity of issues that surround contemporary Indigenous artmaking and production. The exhibition includes the work of artists who use a variety of materials and practices and, importantly, whose artmaking is informed by tradition, culture, knowledge, beliefs, understandings and connections.
Cherie Johnson

Wrapture 2014
Photograph
42 x 29.7 cm
Image courtesy of the artist
For too long in our country, cultural traditions were inaccessible, locked away, told only in whispers or hidden altogether. Enforced through colonisation, the systematic and often brutal action of erasure was mandated by the deluge of policies governing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, such as the Assimilation and the White Australia policies. On an estimated 400 countries throughout Australia it was forbidden to talk language, pass on cultural knowledges or practise traditional customs.

Fortunately, that is now changing as people recognise the richness and agency of Aboriginal people and culture. Social and political changes are driving this, including the indigenisation of curriculum throughout all levels of education. The championing of freedom of speech, equal rights, and cultural diversity is gradually creating awareness, empathy and equality.

In conversation with this broader shift in attitudes and awareness, there is a growing wave of cultural revival across the nation. We are witnessing renewed interest in learning and transmitting cultural knowledge across many fields. In Transmission, we see this in contemporary works that utilise language and performance and in those that use more physical materials and techniques such as kelp, possum skin cloaks, weaving and burning.

Equally important as the physical manifestations of culture, are the ways artists’ works are informed by their personal understandings, knowledge, beliefs and connections to family and country.

This show is a celebration of these movements and an opportunity to explore the complexities surrounding these journeys.

Like many Aboriginal people, I too have been swept up in the cultural revival movement. I am a Wailwen women, daughter of Dawn Conlan (née Townsend) and granddaughter of Rachel Darcy.

As an artist who is Aboriginal, I create works inspired by my world, underpinned by my Aboriginality. While my Nan Rachel Darcy knew her language, was born on country and was a woman in her own right, I do not paint my grandmother’s country; I do not recreate my grandmother’s stories, because these knowledges were not passed to me to do so. Being Aboriginal does not automatically give me the right to duplicate or create Aboriginal art. I clearly remember Nan wanting to teach me, but just like every young person, it just didn’t interest me at the time. Then when she was gone I felt an enormous empty space and felt completely alone. It was during this time that some in the community saw this hunger in me and began sharing their knowledge. At 16 I was taught dilly bag and rope making from a Birpi woman on the North Coast. In the late 1990’s after a two-year stint with NAISDA (National Aboriginal Islander Skills...
Nicole Monks

*in up* from the series *all in one time* 2016
Photograph taken on Barkindji Country
Photo Nicole Monks
Image courtesy of the artist
Development Association), I was taught coiling by Aunty Ellen Trevorrow of the Ngarrindjeri people.

In 2010, I meet Aunty Vicki Couzens of the Gunditjmara Keeray Woorrong people and Aunty Lee Durraoch of the Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti and Trawlwoolway people, who taught me about possum skin cloaks and today continue to guide me. Through learning these cultural knowledges and in creating these objects, my life has been made richer and like many artists, including Nicole Monks, I feel the presence of my ancestors and am guided by an internal knowing, feeling the winds of change.

Many Aboriginal artists are reclaiming this cultural space. The artists in this show have all been selected as culturally appropriate practitioners. But deciding on what is culturally appropriate is
Billy and Lulu Cooley
Walka Mukata - Design on Hat 2017
(installation detail)
Hot wire on felt
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy of the artists
strange and to this end, as curator, my discussions with artists have revealed many different ways of reclaiming and finding personal expression of cultural traditions. This exhibition is made up of artists who broadly fall into two categories: those who have uninterrupted knowledge of their bloodlines and traditional narratives and those who, like myself, have been taught by adopted Aunties and Sistas, learning the old knowledge for the first time. Whatever their journey and individual experiences, all the artists share and transmit culture through contemporary means.

Husband and wife team, Billy and Lulu Cooley are long term directors at Maraku Arts, working closely together to create this newly commissioned series involving burnings on the classic Australian icon, symbol of cowboy culture and pastoralism: the Akuba hat. Aboriginal wood burning is an age-old tradition, yet one that has been misappropriated for the souvenir market. In using the burning technique on Akubras, the artists provide a revisioning of authentic art that speaks to the practice of cross-cultural artistic dialogue. This revisioning thereby challenges the audience to view this traditional practice through an Aboriginal lens.
Vicki West

in country water carrier and landscape 2017
Photograph, 1 x 1.5 m
Image courtesy of the artist
Photography by Andrew Leigh Green
Here we see deep history and modernity in traditional narratives that are now also taught to the children by the Anangu people, with both Billy and Lulu taking pride in teaching their practices to their children and grandchildren.

Vicki West, a Pakana woman of lutruwita (Tasmania), of the Trawlwoolway clans people, uses kelp to create sculptures and installations inspired by objects such as water-carriers. Vicki’s practice is a celebration of the surviving knowledge around kelp harvesting, which is being passed onto the new generations of custodians. The creation of these objects has been taught for countless generations. They are utilitarian objects that are now known and celebrated as important traditional artefacts. Vicki’s works create and reimagine the beauty found in simplicity.
Ruby Djikarra Alderton of the Yolngu people creates skilfully hand-crafted etchings using the water cross-hatching design of her mother’s clan, the Rirratjingu. From a young age Ruby learnt from her mother, Banduk Marika, a leading Aboriginal print-maker, who helped pioneer the early movement of print-makers from remote communities. Ruby first fell in love with the print-making process at the remote print-making station in Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, where she would spend her school holidays and weekends. Now living in Newcastle, away from her own country, Ruby continues her artmaking, exploring the ways that traditional bark flat narratives can be respectfully expressed with modern technologies.

Through constant communication with family and guided by a solid foundation of having been taught the correct ways by family on country, Ruby is developing an exciting new print-making style and her own approach to storytelling.

Sydney-based trans-disciplinary artist, Nicole Monks is of Yamatji Wajarri, Dutch and English heritage. Informed by her cross-cultural identity and working across multiple artforms, Nicole’s works seek to combine past, present and future. The video work Belonging not belonging, created from the performance We are all animals, shot on a dry riverbed on a sheep station, is an example of weaving together Aboriginal history and cultural understanding with personal research and conceptual contemporary approaches to artmaking. Nicole’s
works navigate and explore connecting to culture and finding one’s way in a modern landscape and discovering new ground.

A newly commissioned cultural practice work created by three generations of women led by Nicole Monks, forms the centrepiece of the main gallery. Working with her mother and niece, all descendants of the Yamatji Wajarri people, Nicole seeks to encapsulate presence, relationships and connection. Here we see three generations connecting to country, the ancestors and each other in response to The Lock-Up’s spaces and in consultation with the local Aboriginal community. The remnants of the action including locally harvested materials such as pebbles, flowers and earth, will remain in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition.

Likewise, through connection with community and country, David Leha has written a piece in Gamilaraay, his mother’s language, titled Yanaya, meaning “Return”. This work is about returning to culture, and returning to self. This is the first time as a singer, songwriter and musician that David has written in Gamilaraay. This work is important because spoken language is the cornerstone of culture revival. Without language, revival would be essentially impossible, as the secrets and details are held within language.
Steaphan Paton is a Melbourne based interdisciplinary artists of the Gunai Nation. His 2013 video work *Cloaked Combat #3*, is a moving installation based on a performance in which the artist, dressed in camouflage, shoots at an Aboriginal shield with high-tech archery equipment. While the work suggests both traditional craftsmanship and masculinity, it is most strongly a commentary on the brutality of colonisation. Filmed in East Gippsland, a site of particularly brutal invasion, colonial conflict and dispossession, the work is a painful history lesson.

Included alongside the video work are a number of the shields from the series *Cloaked Combat #4*, that also feature in the video work. Incised with diamond designs representing the five confederate Gunai clans, five broad shields are pierced with carbon-fibre hunting arrows and hung like colonial trophies.

Perhaps the most politically charged of the works included in *Transmission*, both of Paton’s works reference traditional culture, technology and materiality against contemporary technology and weaponry. The works speak of the Gunai people and the assault on their country and Aboriginal Australia at large, but more importantly they represent the continued resistance of Aboriginal people in defense of their country, culture and community.
Steaphan Paton
Cloaked Combat #3, installation view in Sovereignty Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2016
Image courtesy of the artist
Jason Coulthard
Vulka 2017
Digital print
120 x 200 cm
Image courtesy of the artist
Newcastle based Jason Coulthard is from the Adnyamathanha nation of South Australia. His drawings and digital media works are inspired by his ancestors’ connections to the land and by the land itself, particularly the Flinders Ranges.

A newly commissioned work by Coulthard, *Vulka* meaning “Elder” in the Adnynamathna language – encapsulates that ‘look’, which all Aboriginal men, women and children know and respect: the look that holds the knowledge of the Lore and Law, cultural strength and integrity. It is the look you get when you step out of line, within the learning of your specific codes of conduct.

A number of my own works and projects are also presented as part of *Transmission*. In 2014, over 150 Aboriginal women from the Hunter Region participated in the *Wrapture* project. This work is a collection of eighty photographs taken of women wearing possum skins for the first time. These images capture the women’s emotional responses. For years I had watched people wear possum skins for the first time and was captivated by their profound and varied responses. I wanted to capture these responses ... somehow. Some women felt immense pride, some felt a great sadness and emptiness at having missed out on so much cultural knowledge. This series is purposely shown with several empty spaces, as some of the women didn’t wear the skins. Withholding is as
Turtle created by Singleton High School as part of the Resurgence project. Image courtesy of Robert Viture.
culturally important as participating. Many chose not to wear the skins as they wanted to talk with family first to check if it was part of ancestral tradition, while others knew it was not a practice they participated in due to locale and other cultural responsibilities.

The new work Wrapture’d, 2017, is a collection of baby blankets made from possum skins by pregnant Aboriginal women of the Hunter for their babies. While the previous project, Wrapture gave women the opportunity to learn about and wear possum skins for the first time, Wrapture’d is giving community the opportunity to put this knowledge into practice.

These ideas of community development are further explored in Resurgence, a regional Aboriginal education project that has enabled hundreds of members of the community, including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and students, to learn Aboriginal weaving for the first time. The series features ten large water-based animal sculptures, nine of which were made in schools by staff and students from Cessnock High, Glendale High, Kotara High, Lake Munmorah High, Singleton High, Newcastle High, Maitland Grossmann High, Warners Bay High and West Wallsend High.

Participating in this project has enabled the staff and students to learn localised forms of cultural knowledge. Educators have been enabled to embed cultural content into the school programs and develop cultural competence. Students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have been empowered with new cultural knowledge, understanding and respect throughout the project.

The tenth of these sculptures, the Jellyfish was created with over 55 Aboriginal women in the Hunter Region during a four-week period. Eight workshops were hosted in four locations across Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. Over 90 per cent of the women who attended had never had the opportunity to learn cultural weaving before. This project has been more about connecting than weaving, with the outcomes still evolving.

As part of my PhD research some of the works in Transmission also provide a platform for bigger, broader discussions around cultural revival and cultural protocols in 21st-century Australia.

Finally, it is fitting to show this body of work in a former police station and lockup, where many local Aboriginal people would have been incarcerated. The building is a symbol of the colonised land of the Hunter peoples, which we have now reappropriated, causing a new Transmission. A misappropriation and reclamation of the colonial landscape.

Cherie Johnson
Transmission Curator
The building of the Newcastle police station and lockup, and its neighbouring buildings, marked the transition of colonised Newcastle from a convict settlement to a “free town”, requiring the infrastructure of government buildings and the mechanisms to detain and punish those who opposed the authority of the State.

In its 120-year history of operation, from 1861 to 1982, many Awabakal and Worimi people as well as Aboriginal people from further afield would have been detained within The Lock-Up’s spaces. For this reason, and everything that a police station and lockup represents in the past and current experience of Aboriginal people in this country – the building is a potent reminder of the brutal effects of colonisation that continue to this day.

The Lock-Up acknowledges that the building is an extremely difficult space for Aboriginal people to encounter, experience and spend time within.

However, through projects such as Transmission and through the increasing network of Aboriginal organisations and individuals who we are working with, who we seek advice from, and who have thrown their support behind what we do, we hope the building – as it stands now as a site of contemporary creative endeavour – can be used to subvert historical narratives, alter perspectives, provoke dialogue and build new understandings.

The exhibition Transmission and its associated programs – the Transmission Symposium in partnership with the Wollotuka Institute, and the contemporary dance project New Translations, in partnership with Catapult Dance and the Flipside Project – is a significant project that puts Indigenous contemporary art practice and experience at the forefront of our artistic and public programs.

Some of the most exciting, dynamic and powerful contemporary creative practice being produced
today is that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and cultural producers. Influenced and informed by their cultural heritage, knowledge, understandings and experiences, Indigenous artists are utilising the full range of creative tools and mediums available to them to produce works that speak to the past, present and future.

*Transmission* aims to give Hunter audiences a taste of the diversity of practice being undertaken by contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, and to demonstrate that the transmission of cultural knowledge is a strong and growing force that influences these artists on many levels.

The *Transmission Symposium* will explore and give further insight into the complexity of issues that surround Indigenous artmaking and its presentation, and create a forum for open dialogue and increased understanding.

The Lock-Up and its board of management, Newcastle Historic Reserve Trust, acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land The Lock-Up occupies, the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, and pay our respects to elders past, present and future. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continuing relationship with the land, and that they are the proud survivors of more than two hundred years of dispossession. We thank the community for their friendship and greatly value the relationships we are building together.

We sincerely thank artist, educator and curator of *Transmission*, Cherie Johnson, for all her hard work to deliver the many facets of this project and for her passion and commitment to build understanding and cultural awareness.

Thank you to the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, for their support, advice and partnership in delivering the *Transmission Symposium*. In particular thanks to Director Leah Armstrong and her colleagues Associate Professor Maree Grupetta, Associate Professor Marguerite Johnson and Alisa Duff for their personal contributions. The Wollotuka Institute is an internationally recognised leader in Indigenous education, research and advocacy.

Thanks to Cadi McCarthy of Catapult Dance, and choreographers Jo Clancy, Natasha Rogers and Skip Wilcox for their work with a fabulous group of young people in developing and presenting the dance work *New Translations*, as a dynamic means of sharing and developing Aboriginal cultural awareness and cross-cultural connections.

And thank you especially to all the participating artists, Symposium participants, students, teachers and community members who have contributed over an extended period of time to this project and the many projects that are presented under its umbrella.

*Jessi England*  
Director, The Lock-Up