

On First Nations agency in our European-based cultural institutions

Léuli Eshraghi interviews First Nations curators and artists **Tess Allas** (UNSW Art and Design), **Bruce McLean** (QAGOMA), **Kimberley Moulton** (Museum Victoria) and **Rosanna Raymond** (SaVAge K'lub for APT8).



Art, performance, and spoken or now written text, all belong to the same register of cultural practice in the First Nations I am familiar with or belong to: ceremony. This ceremonial register takes place in a set of spaces created to enact cultural responsibilities to place, people and balance. Galleries and museums, as sites of cultural production and presentation, have the potential to nurture new ceremonies and new working methods.

But there is currently a lack of agency and deeper representation of First Nations peoples and knowledges in cultural institutions in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. This is apparent when you compare employment figures and governance structures in public art museums with aspirations for self-determination over ceremonial practices, such as welcomes to country, activation of works, and ceremonies for healing and mourning. As sites of visual cultural experiences designed for, and reflective of the genealogy of the majority European diaspora, public art museums are indicative of socio-political progression or regression in Australia. Increased curatorial programming space has been given to Asian, Aboriginal, Zenadh-Kes/Torres Strait Islander, and Moananui/Pacific art practices and perspectives since the late 1980s. But, alarmingly, in the last five years, there has been a stagnation and even a decline in the representation of First Nations curators in our public institutions, including the National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, and interestingly also Auckland Art Gallery

Toi o Tāmaki and Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand.

The dominant European art-historical framework and political system for public art has not advanced the agency of First Nations peoples. The significant but momentary exceptions to the rule here include the two Indigenous Art Triennials at the National Gallery of Australia, the 2000 Adelaide Biennial (*Beyond the Pale* curated by Brenda L. Croft) and, most recently, the biennial-scale Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art (2015–16) held at the Art Gallery of South Australia and a number of satellite spaces across Tarnthanyangga Adelaide with over 300 artists.

The reality of European-dominated cultural and collecting institutions around the world makes the clear case for more active decolonisation strategies and policies on cultural diversity. In Australia, where social and political leaders failed to bring substantial land rights treaties into being in the 1980s and 1990s, the postcolonial transformation of the settler colony has not yet occurred. This is not the case internationally where truth and reconciliation commissions have led to new constitutions, social compacts, and to reasserting and applying treaties between First Nations peoples and settler colonial states in at least Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and Kanaky New Caledonia. Reflecting on these broad concerns, I asked a number of leading First Nations curators and artists to discuss their role and strategies for working within European-dominated institutions and cultural spaces.



Rosanna Raymond *SaVAge K'lub*, 2010–ongoing ActiVAtions for the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 21–22 November 2015. This project was realised with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa and Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust, Auckland, Brisbane. SaVAge K'lub Developed for APT8. Photo courtesy QAGOMA

How has working in a European-derived art space impacted on your curatorial interests?

Tess Allas___ As an independent curator I believe you get maximum impact if you create a show in a place that is up for a challenge and accepting of a different approach. That could be a regional gallery, a community centre, or a corridor in a university. You will find those smaller places more accommodating of people of all stripes, backgrounds, sexualities, etc. They all have one thing in common – to do the best they can for the proposal they've accepted.

Bruce McLean___ The basic understanding has been that Indigenous art in these galleries is what they will let in, as validated by the relationship to the work of a European artist or art history. Obviously, that can also give a space to agitate, expand those definitions and break their rules. GOMA is a place where you can do fairly challenging shows. But it's an exhibition or a moment in time that may or may not lead to any sort of change. I've felt that happen sometimes where a show has pushed the institution's boundaries but then you find the boundaries shift back with the next collection display.

Kimberley Moulton___ There has been a huge shift in curatorial practice within museums over the past twenty years, particularly with the award-winning First Peoples exhibition in 2013 at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum. However, I work within a system that has, for the majority of its existence, viewed and presented Australia through the lens of its settler colonial history. First Peoples' place has been as the "other", to be housed in the vitrine in various ways as body, blade, basket, shield or bone. Our presence as Indigenous peoples has been studied and presented in these spaces outside our control for over a century. The shift in Indigenous peoples' representation, repatriation and narrative in museum and gallery spaces has been led by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander change agents dedicated to creating new ways of working together alongside non-Indigenous peers.

Rosanna Raymond___ Everything has to be put in some sort of context. There is very little experience of lived Indigenous cultures. The nuances of many of the issues other artists or myself explore are often lost on audiences, as they have preconceived views about what should be Indigenous, often concentrated on ruptures in culture rather than framed as developments in practice. The gallery spaces and the way art education is taught perpetuate the well-

trodden Western conception of art. This is often not helpful in enabling First Nations' views to flourish unless they fit into Western art historical frames. My work has suffered for years, as many curators have not understood that I am working outside Western art terminologies. It has been my community that has allowed my art practice to grow while the Western art spaces catch up slowly.

How do you navigate First Nations communities' expectations of you?

Tess Allas___ Through *Shimmer* (an exhibition I co-curated that was shown recently at the Wollongong Art Gallery) I am returning to the community where I come from, where I grew up. I know those people. I've worked with them, they've been my bosses, I've been their bosses. I visited them, and explained to them what I was doing. I navigate their expectations by constantly keeping them in the loop. When I'm doing a show within a smaller Aboriginal community, going to visit them, especially on days of communal activity, is of the utmost importance.

Bruce McLean___ Many engaged members of the Aboriginal community would rightly like to see a lot more things done in this space. But a lot of that comes back to where agency lies in the gallery, and it never lies with Indigenous peoples. Responding to those concerns is difficult when you don't have the agency to respond in a structural or an institutional way. If Indigenous agency is funnelled through the white Australian art department, as is the case in many art institutions, there is no meaningful direct dialogue between Indigenous peoples and the decision-making executive, and the overall culture of the institution really cannot change.

In terms of my curatorial work in the institution I always try to make Kurilpa, the Water Rat ancestor's place that we occupy, the first point of reference for our engagement with the outside art world. The historical, social, political and cultural lens of this place and its communities should shape our engagement with the outside world as much as possible.

Kimberley Moulton___ My role as Senior Curator is at the meeting point between the community and the museum collections. Foremost, to provide access, collaborate and develop relationships with community and our cultural material while providing opportunities to share history and contemporary lived stories. My vision is to have a wholly inclusive curatorial methodology in collaboration, first person voice and narrative wherever possible. It is



Rosanna Raymond *Whakawatea Te Ara (Clearing the Path)* for the SaVAge K'lub, The 8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Thursday 19 November 2015. This project was realised with the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa and Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust, Auckland. Brisbane SaVAge K'lub developed for APT8. Courtesy QAGOMA

difficult as one of few Aboriginal people in these institutions to ensure the needs of the community are met, aware that your cultural and community obligations must be met whilst also those of your employer. Cultural safety is also a key aspect within this. Many First Peoples working within these spaces seek mentorship and support outside of the Western art museum because of the deep lack of First Peoples in management positions, let alone Human Resources.

Rosanna Raymond___ Back in the day our own community was pretty perplexed by what we were doing, but we were somehow compelled to do it. It took me a long time to acknowledge myself as an artist, supported by the artistic community I hung out with, which helped push our debates on what and who belonged. In the end, it was self-determination that enabled me to navigate through it all. Our own Indigenous spaces are highly contested and fraught, and a postcard from the time put out by Tame Iti was the tipping point for me in contested times:

“I asked myself, and myself said yes.” I learnt I could do anything if I had the grounding and gave educated responses to what I was doing in terms of my art practice. And why.

How do you hold institutions accountable?

Tess Allas___ I find that works in the permanent collections of universities and regional galleries can be where the exciting stuff is, and where access to these works is much easier than in major institutions. You can easily borrow objects for a show from smaller institutions. I find the smaller spaces are locally accountable because of where they are placed. Big city institutions don't see themselves wholly within a community context, but regional institutions certainly have that focus.

Bruce McLean___ QAGOMA assembled a small Indigenous advisory group in the lead up to the current Asia Pacific Triennial, which is perhaps a small step in the right direction. Long-term, if there are specific constituencies, specified positions on the board and clear terms of reference,



Clockwise from top:
 Corrie Fullard's shell-strung necklaces in *Shimmer*,
 Wollongong Art Gallery,
 December 2015. Necklaces,
 courtesy of Brigid Ikin.
 Photo: Tess Allas

Garry Sibosado adjusts his pearl shell etchings as
 part of the *Shimmer* installation,
 Wollongong Art Gallery, December, 2015.
 Photo: Tess Allas



First Peoples exhibition, Bunjilaka Aboriginal
 Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, 2013.
 Courtesy Museum Victoria

such a committee could become powerful in terms of advocacy, agency and responsiveness. The gallery is also on a slow path to developing a Reconciliation Action Plan, which will make key indicators reportable, at least. We also have an incredible artist community in Queensland who hold the Gallery to account on key issues, and their commitment to ensuring the Gallery hears these community concerns is invaluable.

Kimberley Moulton___ The reality of the institution is that the material that they hold is owned by the State – by the people for the people – not by curators. Our cultural material is for the Indigenous community it comes from. It is the institutions’ moral and legal responsibility to provide access, research and collaborate with communities. As one person it is difficult to hold the institution accountable. But with the community behind you and the museum or gallery sharing the vision to work together towards Indigenous self-determination, the way our cultural material and stories are shared improves. But there is a long way to go in moving away from past dictatorship and non-Indigenous people having authority over Indigenous collections.

Rosanna Raymond___ If an institution holds taonga [treasured object or being] of any sort, then they have a responsibility to the living culture of the present (humans and non-humans included here in reference to culture), as we live through them and they live through us. A living dynamic relationship actively looks after the conservation of the physical and intangible aspects of the taonga. The rupture of a living relationship with the communities that belong to the taonga is a crime in my view. It is unbalanced in so many forms and has allowed the estrangement of the “other” to develop, as it is the institutions that write about and display the things they “own”. When the relationship is maintained the legacy of the colonial past has the potential to keep growing and developing, and not to be locked in the colonial past. From these living relationships, we can move forward and work together to benefit all aspects of the taonga and the communities that are connected to them. Institutions have to acknowledge that they are not the owners of the holdings in their institutions but the kaitiaki (guardians), and this comes with responsibilities that only have integrity through the sharing of power and knowledge with the communities that the taonga comes from. They need to see that it is a beneficial relationship that can enhance all. The same can be said of schools and universities who need to acknowledge that they don’t hold all the knowledge.

What would a First Nations-determined public cultural space look and/or feel like?

Tess Allas___ I think it would feel like how you [Léuli] told me you felt like when you visited *Shimmer*, where you have a space for smart Indigenous curators who know their stuff. To be able to present things from different collections or from their communities (arts or familial) in a way that’s challenging and exciting and hasn’t been seen before. If we could have that across every major institution, that would be awesome as an imperative, as a standard.

Bruce McLean___ It’s hard to imagine a space that is led by Indigenous people, that gives peoples the freedom to present what they want. It could also be a challenging and exciting space because you are a lot more accountable to community. A public Indigenous agency, distinct from community cultural trusts that have public funding such as Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute and Koorie Heritage Trust, would have to answer to government. Ideally, it would be a collections-based institution as well. It is something that has frightened the hell out of the existing collections-based institutions here including QAGOMA. There was a proposal for one to be built at Kurilpa Point, as part of the big twenty-year redevelopment of Southbank. There was a lot of backlash from some of the institutions because they felt that they were already “covering” Indigenous art. But underlying that was a fear of what would happen to their collections, and whether Indigenous collections would be pulled out.

Kimberley Moulton___ I think it would be a space where our cultural material is kept and shared, where contemporary visual art, dance, music and writing comes together, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people manage and have creative control over the space. It would be where collaborations and cultural exchanges on plants and ecologies can happen across our Nations in Australia, and also with our Indigenous brothers and sister across the world in sharing culture, and where long-term loans of cultural material from places like the British Museum, Musée du quai Branly, Oxford and Cambridge can be seen, giving communities access through workshops and learning spaces. It could be a positive space of culture, creative expression and agency.

Rosanna Raymond___ I feel we need to work alongside the institutions of today, but be educated and confident enough to know where we need to push against the well-ingrained systems of old. We also need to offer

solutions, not just moan about what is not happening, but they need to let us in and trust us to do this.

SaVAge K'lub [in APT8] is a place to investigate and explore these issues. It moves and flows in a very open space depending on what is needed and who is involved. It is a space where I try to decolonise the mind, body and soul. Sometimes we need to push against the system imposed on us, sometimes the institution gives us the space to do this but it is on their terms. APT8 is a good example of this. We can come in but only on their terms. We are constantly monitored, and if we don't live up to their standards, we are not asked back and chastised for any behaviour or cultural practices not considered within their norms.

Would First Nations-identified positions in curation, collections management and public programming work in your context?

Tess Allas___ If there were Indigenous people in positions right across the sector, access for independent curators, writers and researchers to these places would be so very much easier. Getting things happening would be quicker. They understand and move fast for you, enabling you to get that information to the community. Institutions can at times make things difficult, from my perspective. There appears to be fewer Aboriginal people working in

these places nowadays. It makes independent curating, when you want to get access to objects and fine art, incredibly hard and time-consuming. Thankfully, people like Tina, Matt, Bruce and Brett are still there.

Bruce McLean___ There are all sorts of opportunities to improve the health of the Indigenous art sector. There should be space for more people to rise, to go beyond or alongside a base-level curator position. Those pathways need to develop throughout the industry. The ownership of Indigenous art by Indigenous people is important as a question across the board. That's what I'd really like to see develop and antagonise a bit. I enjoy curating but I don't enjoy the idea that there is no Indigenous curatorial manager in the institution. There is no pathway for people to do more things, unless they step completely outside Indigenous art to work through Australian, International or Asian art, and go through that direction into a higher level within a public institution in Australia.

Kimberley Moulton___ Yes, absolutely, there are identified positions in the museum. However, across the museum and gallery sector we need to look at why non-Indigenous people are hired over Indigenous people who have the qualifications as well as the cultural knowledge and authority. This is evident across all the major cultural institutions in Australia when you count how many



Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people are working in these spaces. More understanding is needed in institutions to support a serious commitment to Indigenous employment and development pathways. I believe there should only be Indigenous people in curatorial and collection management positions in Aboriginal cultural heritage and contemporary art, although I also strongly believe in collaboration with non-Indigenous peers on exhibition and collection research. It is important that we as First Peoples drive the vision for the future of our cultures in these spaces.

Rosanna Raymond___ This is so hard as I am of mixed race and my own position as a First Nations person is framed within living on the land of another in Aotearoa. We are different. To acknowledge this and not be acculturated, we end up being the brown skins using the white models. I've seen this too many times before. We need to keep our differences, we need to privilege them but not at the expense of any other culture. So, yes, we need positions that allow us to concentrate on the differences. The term used in Europe "intercultural" allows for sharing rather than just concentrating on one nation as the world is so mixed now. We can't push the hands of time back but we can empower people through ensuring that all histories are told and have equal mana (presence and power).



Fa'amālō to Peter Johnson and Sarah Werkmeister for their assistance in developing this piece.

Tess Allas (Wiradjuri) is Director of Indigenous Programs at UNSW Art and Design. She recently co-curated *Shimmer (2015–16)* with Darrel Sibosado and Tahjee Moar for the Wollongong Art Gallery.

Bruce McLean (Wierdi of the Birri Gubba) is Curator of Indigenous Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and recently worked in the curatorial team for the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial (2015–16) and GOMA Q: Contemporary Queensland Art (2015).

Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta) is Senior Curator, Southeastern Aboriginal Australian Cultures, at Museum Victoria. She recently curated *Call from the West: The continuing Legacy of Mr William Cooper in the Wominjeka Festival* at Footscray Community Arts Centre (2016).

Rosanna Raymond (S moan) works across performance, poetry, installation, costume and fashion design and created the purpose-built *SaVAge K'lub* ceremonial space for the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial (2015–16). | tautai.org/artist/rosanna-raymond/

Léuli Eshraghi (Samoan, Persian) is an artist, curator and PhD candidate at MADA, Monash University, focussing on indigeneity, language, body sovereignty and queer possibility. Recent projects include *Vai Niu Wai Niu Coconut Water* at Kabul-dja Caboolture Regional Art Gallery (2015–16) and *Ua numi le fau* at Gertrude Contemporary (Next Wave Festival May 2016). | leulieshraghi.com

Opposite: **Rosanna Raymond**
SaVAge K'lub, 2015, mixed media, installation view,
Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. This project was realised with
the support of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa and Tautai
Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust, Auckland.
Brisbane SaVAge K'lub developed for APT8. Courtesy QAGOMA

