

Reclaiming the Centre: Art, Technology, and Community in Outback South Australia and the Northern Territory

Friday 19th September 2008

9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.

Bradley Forum, Level 5, Hawke Building, 50-60 North Terrace, Adelaide

University of South Australia, City West Campus



The painting above is a reproduction of an untitled work by the Kudanji elder Gordon Landsen (Milindirri), which shows Gordon's ancestral Frog Dreaming country, near Borroloola in the Northern Territory. It shows Old Man Frog hiding in the scrub from the devil, which is represented by the double-lane bitumen highway that cuts a swathe through the Frog Dreaming country. The road was built for the ore trucks that shuttle between the huge McArthur River zinc and lead mines and the ships at Bing Bong Port.

Landsen once described his paintings as 'telling about the country'. This and similar phrases are often used by Indigenous artists to characterise their work.

The usual well-meaning whitefella response to such comments also follows a common pattern:

- It is assumed that Aboriginal artists from remote communities are striving to tell other Australians about their homelands. The challenge therefore is seen to be overcoming the ‘tyranny of distance’ in order to ‘shore up’ these remote communities and connect them to mainstream Australia.
- This way of thinking translates into efforts to provide infrastructure as a platform for basic wellbeing in remote settlements.
- It is also expressed in initiatives to put remote communities into better communication with the Australian mainstream, by encouraging networking, building local capacities, and underpinning sustainable community enterprises.

These responses have much to commend them. They attempt to counteract negative stereotypes that circulate in the big towns and cities about community remoteness, marginality, dysfunction, and technological ineptness. However there is an undercurrent of anxiety that all these efforts may insulate or cocoon remote communities from social and public policy trends that are undercutting the long-term viability of such communities.

People living in remote Aboriginal settlements across South Australia and the Northern Territory share elements of this whitefella thinking. They express pride in country, and are generous in sharing some of their local storylines with outsiders. They are keen to build sustainable businesses and communities. They are concerned about issues of governance and local democracy in the wake of outside interventions. They strive to provide brighter futures for their children and young people.

But Aboriginal priorities are not dependent upon, nor do they wholly coincide with, whitefella assumptions. For example:

- Their thinking about art and technology has been less concerned with communicating to others and accommodating their activities to others’ agendas than with sustaining local culture for their own communities. Their most pressing concerns have to do with local wellbeing and with bridging the generations within their communities.
- This necessary insularity of purpose has increasingly combined with a willingness to apply both art and technology in order to engage with other Aboriginal homelands, and with the wider Australian society, but on their own terms.
- ‘On their own terms’ does not mean clinging nostalgically to memories of land and culture in the past. It means combining the separateness of customary practices with the connections that other pathways offer to new knowledge, in order to develop better strategies for achieving sustainable futures for desert communities.

Thus current thinking about art and technology attempts to resolve how to respect customary knowledge while devising effective strategies to turn around declining measures of health, education, participation, and wellbeing in remote communities. This one-day symposium provides an opportunity to reappraise the positive associations that exist between culture and technology in desert Australia, to reflect upon the development of these links past and present, to distinguish between dead ends and viable tracks into the future, and most of all to flag strategies that translate into wellbeing and sustainable futures for remote Aboriginal communities. These issues highlight the core of the symposium’s programme, with the day’s discussions focusing on the central corridor of Aboriginal homelands that runs through South Australia and the Northern Territory.

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Symposium Program

- 9.00am Introduction and welcome to country.
- 9.15am Welcome to the University of South Australia
Professor Peter Høj, Vice Chancellor and President.
- 9.30am The Mulka Project (Yirrkala, Northern Territory)
Wukun Wanambi and Randin Graves.
- 10.30am *Morning tea.*
- 11.00am Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands
Hilary Furlong and Deirdre Tedmanson (UniSA).
- 12.00pm Regional and remote South Australia
*Mary Brennan (Mt Gambier), Regina McKenzie (Hawker/ Port Augusta), and
Felicity Wright (Pt Lincoln).*
- 1.00pm *Lunch break.*
- 2.00pm Better World Arts
Carolyn Wilson.
- 3.00pm Waralungku Arts (Borrooloola, Northern Territory)
Allan Baker, Miriam Charlie, and Peter Callinan.
- 4.00pm *Afternoon tea.*
Includes the exhibition launch of 'Waralungku Crossing': cross-generational art
from Australia's 'remotest' community in the Kerry Packer Civic Gallery.
- 4.30pm Centre for Appropriate Technology, Alice Springs
Jim Bray, Jenny Kroker, and Bruce Walker.

Registration is free.

Bookings essential:

To reserve your place, please RSVP to Laura Fuss, laura.fuss@unisa.edu.au / (08) 8302 4369.

For further information:

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