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Title: Dreaming Inside

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This paper is concerned with an alternative history of Aboriginal art. Until recently art historians, anthropologists and cultural commentators alike have completely disregarded the symbolic place of the prison in the collective cultural experience of Aboriginal people. While Aboriginal art and culture have long been of considerable interest to scholars, attention has generally focused on the meaning of Aboriginal art in its traditional context and its claim to status as unique art object. The distinctive contribution made by a history of Aboriginal prison art undercuts these conventional categories to focus instead on the art produced by Aboriginal prisoners ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’¹

My aim is to locate the study of Aboriginal prison art within a wider framework of settler colonial relations and a critique of contact history focused around a frontier ideology expressed through the systematic oppression and discrimination of Aboriginal people. I use the evidence from this study to examine several related issues. First, how Aboriginal representations within and without the regime of the prison form part of the political struggles of Aboriginal people against colonisation. Second I am concerned with the culturally distinctive meanings invested in the space and place of the prison, its powerful link with individuals through ‘the body as actor,

object and statement'² and its importance in the collective cultural memory of Aboriginal people as a locus of cultural heritage.

As far as Aboriginal people are concerned there is little difference between the levels of control and punishment mediated by police and other members of colonial society and the institutional structure of the prison. As a corollary Ann McGrath observes 'for Aboriginal people, the terms 'deaths in custody' does not just refer to deaths which occurred in police and prison custody.'³ As part of the colonising process Aborigines have been incorporated within systems of oppression including coercion and punishment. Concerned with women's experiences of prison, contemporary Murri artist Rea, argues that 'society traps black women as domestic, servant, slave and ... to be trapped you don't have to go to jail.'⁴ From an Indigenous perspective then 'all Aboriginal is prison art, at least in Aboriginal eyes.'⁵ Prison is a major part of Aboriginal people's experiences and it is a site of much cultural production through Aboriginal art, literature, music, theatre and film. Here I aim to survey the historical pattern of Aboriginal prison art from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary era, examining its subject matter, aesthetic forms and symbolic power as an expression of the historical agency of Aboriginal people and their political struggles for equality and recognition.

Criminalising Aboriginality

In recent years a great many inquiries and reports examining the relationship between Aboriginality race and crime have levelled criticism at the regular failure of government authorities to improve the standard of policing, correctional services and reduce the level of institutionalised racism. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal

Deaths in Custody established in 1987 to address the issue of deaths in custody, confirmed the extraordinary high representation of Aboriginal people in the prison system.⁶ In its findings the Royal Commission drew attention to the historical relations between the law enforcement agents and Aboriginal people as a central arena for racial prejudice: high rates of Aboriginal imprisonment and tragedy of deaths in custody reflect the anger, despair and resentment this breeds.

Black writers like Mudrooroo and Robert Sykes refer to the parallels between Australia's penal origins and the convict category in which so many Indigenous were categorised, where Aboriginality was, in effect, criminalised.⁷ It is the relationship between colonisation and criminalisation which is central to understanding the ongoing oppression of Australia's Indigenous people. Integral to that history Chris Cunneen argues 'is the policy of genocide in its various manifestations, including mass murder, the removal of children and the policy of assimilation.'⁸ Within the analytic framework adopted by Cunneen, Aborigines are likened to political prisoners, subject to continuing police surveillance and new forms of institutionalised racism. Such a situation, where Aborigines are denied participation in the 'imagined communities' of the nation state can only be resolved he argues, in terms of self determination and Aboriginal sovereignty.

Picturing the prison

My study begins in the late nineteenth century. With colonisation Aboriginal people are incorporated within the uneven power relations of a colonial regime. Aided by the colonial myth of terra nullius, British law dispossessed Aboriginal people: denied natural justice, Aborigines could be imprisoned for hunting, camping and gathering on their land even for maintaining their traditional methods of fire stick farming.

Given these historical circumstances it is not surprising that the earliest example of Aboriginal prison art is to be found in the Aboriginal cell at Albany Gaol from 1872-3.⁹ The figures of the rainbow serpent and various small lizards engraved into the wooden walls of the cell which relate to an Aboriginal world view grounded in the spiritual world of the Dreaming, would seem to be the most obvious response to incarceration. The designs inscribed on the surfaces of caves, artefacts, bodies and walls in many Aboriginal communities can be seen as related forms cultural inscription.

At Victoria Settlement, Port Essington, one of three military establishments off the coast of Northern Territory, Aborigines were similarly confined to individual cells. Observers noted that solitary confinement had the potential to create terror in Aboriginal prisoners, a factor that has continued to influence policies of policing and punishment with tragic results in our contemporary era.¹⁰ But already Aboriginal art had begun to attract the attention of Europeans: it is indicative of the exchange relationships which prevailed at Port Essington that the first bark paintings to be collected by Europeans came from this region. Painted by unknown Aboriginal artists from the Iwaidja group they were removed from bark shelters for preservation in the late 1870s before eventually finding their way into the collection of the Mcleay Museum in the University of Sydney.¹¹

It is remarkable to observe the striking parallels between the engravings in the Aboriginal cell in Albany and the group of murals and drawings produced by Larrakia artists in Fannie Bay Gaol in Darwin a decade later. The character, energy and symbolic power of these images attest to the imperative need of Aboriginal people to

coopt the place and space of the prison. In so doing they allayed anxiety by investing the site of their incarceration with culturally distinctive meanings emblematic of their spiritual connection to country.¹² In this particular instance it seems that the drawings produced by the five Larrakia artists, Davie, Paddy, Wandy Wandy, Jemmy Miller and Billiamook were commissioned by John George Knight, in his capacity as Deputy Sheriff with responsibility for Fannie Bay Gaol, for inclusion within the *Dawn of Art* exhibition shown at the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition of 1888. With his considerable reputation as a successful organiser of colonial exhibitions Knight well understood the value which Aboriginal art generated among the wider public and he was not surprised when the drawings drew many favourable comments, admired as much for their ethnographic information and the insights they provided into an Indigenous aesthetic as evidence of Aborigine's acquisition of the skills of civilisation.

The diversity of styles among Aboriginal drawings produced in custody will reflect particular historical experiences. The drawings by the boy Oscar, taken by police and given into the care of the Queensland pastoralist, Augustus H. Glissan in the 1890s and the artist Charlie Flannigan, another inmate of Fannie Bay Gaol, reflect their experiences working on cattle properties in northern Australia. Like Mickey of Ulladulla, Flannigan is an acute observer of everyday life. The drawings by Oscar however are noteworthy for providing some of the earliest depictions of race relations at the frontier. Drawings such as 'Police boys doing their duty (Lynch Law) and 'Dispersing the usual way' provide a tragic eye witness account of frontier life from an Aboriginal perspective.¹³

In effect, the system of reserves and missions established in the mid to late nineteenth century, kept Aborigines within a form of custody where they were subject to specific laws and restrictions designed to facilitate their subjugation and dispossession.

Incarcerated within institutions established for their protection and civilisation, Aboriginal people were, in effect, prisoners in their own land. In a letter to the *Argus* in 1882, during a series of protests demanding improved conditions and a greater degree of freedom on Coranderrk, artist William Barak wrote:

We have heard there is going to be very strict rules on the stations...it seems we are going to be treated like slaves, far as we heard of it. We wish to ask those Managers of the station. Did we steal anything out of the colony or murdered anyone or are we prisoners or convict. We should think we are all free as any white man of the colony.¹⁴

It is not surprising that the 1880s was the decade in which Barak was most productive: as a leader of his people Barak's depiction of corroborees can be seen to fulfil a powerful political purpose. The innovative water colour landscapes pioneered by the Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira, who was imprisoned for a time at Papunya, fulfil a similar role. In the early 1970s, the first Papunya artists, following the model established by their kinsman, Namatjira in his collaborative venture with Rex Battarbee, defied authorities to paint with the art teacher Geoffrey Bardon. The catalyst for this new contemporary Aboriginal art movement which would sweep through central desert communities lay as much in the ancestral myths that provided each artist with their own connection to the dreaming as in their political protest against the policies which incarcerated them at the government settlement of Papunya.

It is not surprising then that the prison provides the prehistory of urban Aboriginal art. Decades before a new generation of contemporary Koori artists gained critical

recognition, the first generation of urban Aborigines appeared—in prison. In the 1950s and 1960s as a result of dramatic changes associated with urbanisation and assimilation, Aboriginal rates of incarceration escalated.¹⁵ Historically the evidence reveals an accumulative process of racial discrimination, which begins with police, who generally view the lifestyle of young Aborigines as deviant and disorderly, and ends with incarceration. Living on the run, one step ahead of police and Welfare many Aboriginal artists found it easier to produce art inside rather outside prison a factor which continues to concern criminal justice systems. The extraordinary mural painted by Koori artist Ronald Bull in Pentridge in 1960s as a young man of nineteen or twenty ranks as the single most significant historical work from the south east to have survived from the dark days of assimilation.¹⁶ A member of stolen generation, twice removed from his family and the wider community at Lake Tyers, Bull's serial institutionalisation typifies the historical experiences of many urban Aborigines. Small wonder then that Bull would utilise his aesthetic skills by choosing to paint a classic tribal scene as a powerful affirmation of a pan-Aboriginality available to all..

Among the many other artists incarcerated at this time Kevin Gilbert, working in Long Bay Gaol, produced the first prints by an Aboriginal artist and the first written play *The Cherry Pickers* before going on to become one of the foremost writers, activists and political leaders of his era. Produced with 'old brittle lino off the prison floor' and his own tools made 'from a spoon, Gem [razor] blades and nails', the print *Wahlo Desert Soak* (1968) recreates the past in the present while *Massacre Mountain* (1968) mounts a bitter critique of colonial history.¹⁷ Painter and printmaker Gordon Syron also came to career in art through his time in prison. Typical of his stark, expressive style, *Judgement by his Peers* completed in 1978 in Sydney's Long Bay

Gaol and shown in the first major exhibition of urban Aboriginal art *Koori Art 84*, reverses race relations to place the white prisoner in dock before an all black court.

Much contemporary Aboriginal art produced by artists working outside prison is similarly motivated by political protest. Lin Onus's monumental series devoted to the little-known geurilla fighter *Mosquito*, (1979-82) seeks to retrieve recognition for Aboriginal figures of resistance. In the series, Onus represents himself as the eponymous Mosquito: born a Kuringgai man near Broken Bay in Sydney, Mosquito was imprisoned in Tasmania before he escaped to lead a Palawa resistance using techniques learned while fighting with Pemulwuy in the Sydney region some thirty years previously. Similarly in *Annihilation of the Blacks* 1986, Batchella artist Fiona Foley from Fraser Island Queensland draws inspiration from ceremonial life as a metaphor for the violence directed toward Aboriginal people by whites. More recently, contemporary Kimberley artists Rover Thomas, and Queenie McKenzie draw upon historical experiences relayed through oral history to depict stories of 'the killing times' which occurred between the 1890s and 1920s. -

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established to examine the increasing number of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Many artists chose to respond to this symbolic event, in the words of Joseph Reser, 'a historical moment that branded itself upon the national consciousness and conscience.'¹⁸ Mitch Dunnet's *Take the Pressure Down* (1987) was produced and exhibited whilst the artist was in prison. Among those artists who work outside prison in sympathy and solidarity were Trevor Nickolls, Robert Campbell Jnr, Rea plus the non-Aboriginal filmmakers Nicholas Adler and Caroline Sherwood, who produced *Who Killed Malcolm Smith?*

(1992). While Kempsey artist Robert Campbell Jnr's *Aboriginal History (The Facts)* (1988) represents hanging as a part of life, integral to contact history and the culmination of the individual life, Gamilaroi/ Wailwan artist Rea in the series *Definitions of Difference* (1994) uses the bound body of the woman and its connection with ropes, knots and oppression to remind us of the deaths of black women in custody. Research by Ernest Hunter et. al. reveals the symbolic importance of suicide to Aboriginal people internalised as a staged rebellion against injustice. But as one of predominant themes in media, literature and art their research raises questions concerning the negative power of imagery in respect to Aboriginal suicide.¹⁹

Against these negative forces, there is growing recognition for the cathartic role played by art in the reform and rehabilitation of prisoners as a way of productively deflecting despair and anger and rebuilding self esteem. Recent statistics from Queensland reveal that 87% of Indigenous prisoners are engaged in various art programs compared with 2% of non-Indigenous prisoners.²⁰ As one example, the contemporary Kimberley artist Jimmy Pike came to a career in art through the educational programs offered in Canning Vale and Fremantle Prison. In its subdued tonalities and traditional dot painting style *Prison Dining Room* of the 1980s is in stark contrast to Pike's later, more exuberant and colourful work. Until now the many exhibitions of prison art arising from these art programs have received little critical attention from the art elites. In this way European aesthetic categories supported and maintained by colonial discourses exclude recognition for the political nature of Aboriginal art. Yet the vitality and vigour of much contemporary prison art is exemplified in the new figurative style which has recently emerged from artists in Berrimah prison Darwin, as part of the prison's integrated vocational and professional

approach to educational programs. Alongside traditional X-ray styles from western Arnhem Land, this new form of cultural practice, seen in an acrylic painting by Lennie Naborhlorhl, engages in social commentary to address events of colonial history and contemporary issues of native title and reconciliation.

Outside prison many urban Aboriginal artists use installations to re-engage with the prison a locus of meaning and memory. Of 'My bLAK (h)ART, an installation using candles, photographs and sound in Old Melbourne Gaol, Rea writes:

(h)ART art, art of the heart.

Respect, paying respects.

Honour, honouring.

Sorrow

I light a candle in memory of the people who were often sent here. They thought that it was all over but in fact it had just begun.²¹

Rea's words are a reminder of the sensitivities raised by the site of the prison, its importance in the collective cultural memory of Indigenous people and the rights to remembrance it signifies.

Preservation of cultural heritage is pivotal to these sites of memory and history. The transformation of Victorian era prisons into places for cultural tourism serves to highlight the interconnection between the prison and museum as sites of power and knowledge in the modern world.²² With the growth in nationalism since the late 1960s, Steve Mickler argues, revisionist histories of prison sites have the potential to mask a brutal history of racial oppression by allowing the past to be appropriated and romantically incorporated within settler colonial narratives of the nation state.²³ Of course Aboriginal people are not passive victims in this process: installations by artists Rea, Gordon Bennett, Megan Evans and Ray Thomas in Melbourne, Nyungah

Robert Bropho's film *In the name of the Crow* (1983) protesting the fate of Rottneest Island and current exhibitions of historical and contemporary Aboriginal prison art in Fannie Bay Gaol, Darwin reclaim the right of Aboriginal people to actively intervene in the interpretation of their cultural heritage

In this brief overview I have tried to provide some idea of the scope of this project. *Dreaming Inside* will take the form of a small but substantial publication and a national touring exhibition tentatively planned for 2003. The exhibition will be comprised of several elements: a core travelling component of historical work reflecting a wide range of media: drawings, paintings, objects, photographs and installations and, at every interstate venue, an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art from the local region to complement the core historical component. Additionally I institutions will be assisted and encouraged to develop a related program of events in film, music, literature and theatre. Given the number of Victorian era prisons presently being demolished or decommissioned, a further crucial aim of the exhibition is to highlight the need for the preservation and restoration of Aboriginal prison art as sites of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Dreaming Inside will address a significant gap in the reception to Aboriginal art. It will be of direct relevance and practical purpose for Aboriginal people, criminal justice systems, academics and curators who are in a position to influence representations of Aboriginality. More broadly the project will contribute to knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal art and culture by drawing attention to the collective experience of 200 years of incarceration in the political struggles of Aboriginal people against colonisation.

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Biography

Sylvia Kleinert is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research at the ANU and co-editor (with Margo Neale) of *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (Melbourne 2000) winner of the Australia and New Zealand Art Association prize for 2001. Writing in the fields of art history and anthropology, her work is broadly focused on Aboriginal art in postcolonial contexts. She has a special interest in south eastern Australia, the Hermannsburg School and tourist art and is currently working on a history of Aboriginal prison art.

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³ Ann McGrath, 'Colonialism, Crime and Civilisation,' *Australian Cultural History*, 1: 23 1993. pp. 100-114, p. 102.

⁴ Rea Saunders interviewed by Sandra Phillips (1992) 'A Change is Gonna Come,' in *Racism Representation and Photography* (ed.), Sandra Phillips. Sydney: Inner City Education Centre, 1994, pp. 101-110, p. 109.

⁵ Greg Dening, 'Listening and Seeing,' Review of *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* (eds.) S. Kleinert & M Neale, (Melbourne 2000) in *The Australian Review of Books*, March 2001, p. 7.

⁶ Commonwealth Government, *National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 5 vols. AGPS Canberra 1991

⁷ Roberta Sykes, *Black Majority*, Melbourne: Hudson, 1989.

⁸ Chris Cunneen, *Conflict, Politics and Crime: Aboriginal Communities and the Police*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001, p. 3.

⁹ In 1872 the existing Convict Depot at Albany was closed and the building handed over to the West Australian Government. In 1873-4 a new gaol with an Aboriginal cell was built on the site.

¹⁰ Anita Angel, 'Art of the Insider: Northern Territory Gaol Art in the Late Nineteenth Century and Since,' Paper presented at the Criminal Lawyers Association of the Northern Territory, Bali Conference 22-30 June 2001, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ A further group of 5 bark paintings collected by Captain Carrington from Field Island, 80 km from Oenpelli predate the first major collection of bark paintings amassed by Baldwin Spencer for National Museum of Victoria in the early decades of the twentieth century.

¹² Anita Angel, 'Art of the Insider; Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹³ Kim McKenzie and Carol Cooper, 'Eyewitness?: Drawings by Oscar of Cooktown,' in *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia*, (eds.), Iain MacCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 157-163.

¹⁴ Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000, p.165.

¹⁵ McGrath, 'Colonialism, Crime and Civilisation,' p. 106.

¹⁶ For a more detailed analysis of this work see Sylvia Kleinert. ' "Blood from a Stone": Ronald Bull's Mural in Pentridge Prison,' in *Australian Journal of Art*, 14: 2. 1999, pp. 93-110.

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¹⁹ Ernest Hunter, et. al., *An Analysis of Suicide in Indigenous Communities of North Queensland*, 1999, pp. 26-56.

²⁰ Charity Spedding, correspondence with the author, 1 October 2001.

²¹ Rea quoted in *Remanence*, RMIT Melbourne 1988, p. 28.

²² See for example, Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London, 1995

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