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An exhibition from The University of Queensland Art Museum touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body. This project is assisted by the Australian Government’s Visions of Australia program.

UQ
ART MUSEUM

Museums
& Galleries
of NSW

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Australian Government

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for the Arts

Australian Government
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WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following document contains images and voices of deceased persons. Users are warned that there may be words and descriptions that may be culturally sensitive, and which might not normally be used in certain public or community contexts.

Terms and annotations that reflect the attitude of the author or the period in which the item was written, may be considered inappropriate today.

About this Mediation Handbook

This handbook is designed to assist tour venues, front-of-house staff, educators and volunteers to navigate the themes, ideas and issues in the exhibition *OCCURRENT AFFAIR*, showcasing the practice of the Aboriginal artist collective proppaNOW.

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) has been researching and providing training on the practices of Mediation (sometimes referred to as Cultural Mediation) with the aim to equip gallery and museum staff with the tools to implement this engagement strategy across the sector. Mediation is about deepening the engagement of audiences at a peer-to-peer level through personal opinions being shared, knowledge being discussed, and visitors being given the freedom to arrive at their own interpretations. You can read more about Mediation practice here: <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/programs/cultural-mediation/cultural-mediation/>

Volunteer and front-of-house staff are often the first people confronted with a wide range of questions from audiences. Outreach staff and educators engage their communities through public programming, enabling safe spaces for discussion, creativity and enquiry for all visitors. Through this handbook, M&G NSW aims to help gallery staff develop an inclusive and culturally sensitive vocabulary to talk about the themes and ideas in *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* to the local community, to simply provide starting points for conversation, and allow meaningful connections, stories, experiences and ideas to facilitate interactions between the exhibition, the gallery, and its public.

This handbook is designed to be used as a reference point throughout the exhibition presentation at your venue as well as provide some deeper background and starting points for conversation and engagement. It also aims to ensure First Nations cultural protocols and experiences are respected and prioritised.

This handbook was developed by M&G NSW in partnership with UQ Art Museum who collated much of this research to accompany their original presentation of *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* in 2021, with glossary contributions by Merindah Funnell, Emma Hicks and Nicole Barakat for FLENK Collective and Dr Megan R. Fizell.



Megan Cope admiring Jennifer Herd's work *Still War! Mother's Country*, 2021. Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021. Photo by Simon Woods.

For Visitors to the Exhibition

OCCURRENT AFFAIR includes proppaNOW artist Laurie Nilsen (1953 - 2020). Please be mindful of First Nations visitors and advise them in writing or verbally as follows:

First Nations visitors are advised that the following exhibition may contain images, names, and voices of people who have deceased. Permission has been granted from the family for all images and artwork to be shown.

About proppaNOW

One of Australia's leading Indigenous arts collectives, proppaNOW was set up in Brisbane in 2003 to give urban-based Aboriginal artists a voice. They present a unique and controversial perspective of black Australia which is sometimes confronting and always thought-provoking. proppaNOW create art that raises awareness of Aboriginal urban expression that depicts a contemporary story. They reinforce that Aboriginal Australia is a living culture that has evolved over time and dispel the notion that Indigenous art needs to be from a remote area to be 'authentic'.

Members Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Richard Bell, Megan Cope, Jennifer Herd, Gordon Hookey and Laurie Nilsen explore the politics of Aboriginal art and culture, re-thinking what it means to be a 'contemporary Aboriginal artist'. This will be proppaNOW's last exhibition as a collective.

The Tour

OCCURRENT AFFAIR is a major exhibition featuring new and recent works by Brisbane-established Aboriginal artist collective proppaNOW. Conceived as a collaborative activist gesture, *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* addresses current socio-political, economic and environmental issues, while celebrating the strength, resilience and continuity of Aboriginal culture. Engaging wordplay through its title, *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* references the sensational journalistic style of some television current affair programs. *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* embraces the slippage between language and its associated readings to probe and present new narratives. The exhibition will reflect on the ongoing state of affairs affecting Aboriginal communities – issues that are relevant to all Australians.

OCCURRENT AFFAIR was first presented at UQ Art Museum in early 2021 and is touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW to venues across Australia in 2023 and 2024. You can read more about the tour here: <https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/exhibitions/now-showing/occurrent-affair/>

Museums & Galleries of NSW

Museums & Galleries of NSW runs the largest regional touring program in NSW and is committed to touring exhibitions of contemporary visual art to communities throughout Australia. In the last three years, M&G NSW has reached half a million people through 16 exhibitions of contemporary art that toured to 51 separate galleries across six States and Territories. These exhibitions have presented the work of 410 living artists, primarily to regional audiences, nationwide. Our program features the leading names in Australian contemporary art including: Tracey Moffatt, Mel O'Callaghan, Fiona Foley, Kathy Cavaliere, Abdul Abdullah and Soda Jerk among others.

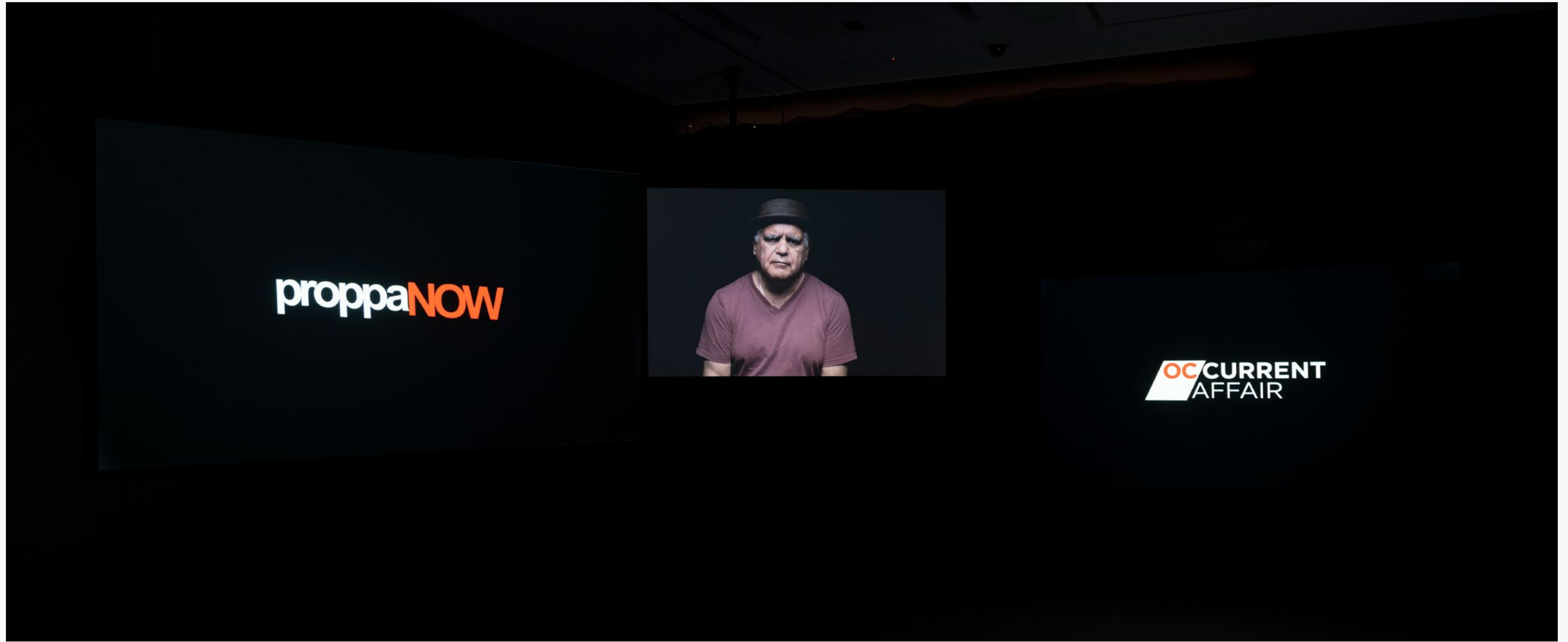
Touring Partner - UQ Art Museum

The University of Queensland (UQ) Art Museum was established in 1976 to house artworks collected by The University of Queensland since the 1940s. In 2004, the former graduation and music hall designed in 1973 was developed into an art museum to showcase the collection and contemporary art practice. With over 4,400 works, the University's Art Collection is one of Queensland's most significant public art collections.

UQ Art Museum is a site for progressive and contemporary creative inquiry. Their work speaks to the distinct context of the Art Museum's place within the University, aiming to connect each visitor with new ideas in creative practice, and with learning in its many forms.

UQ Art Museum collects and exhibits progressive works of art, which stimulate dialogue and debate. They are committed to opening up dialogue with the faculties, research institutes and centres of the University, and to place education at the core of their activities.

An exhibition from The University of Queensland Art Museum touring with Museums & Galleries of NSW. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body. This project is assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.



Vernon Ah Kee, proppaNOW video, 2021, video documentary, colour video with sound. Installation view at UQ Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Carl Warner.

The title *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* references the Australian television show 'A Current Affair', which presents advertising as editorial content and gives derogatory representations of minority groups. The title reflects the ongoing state of affairs affecting Aboriginal communities.

Starting Points

Know your exhibition

- Read collateral like labels and the introductory panel
- Refer to this mediation kit
- Read other exhibition support material such as the Education Kit
- Spend time with each of the works of art and reflect on how you feel and think in the moment
- Talk to other mediators in the Gallery such as staff and volunteers
- Exercise your mediation skills when talking with visitors. You may discover just as much from them as they do from you
- Aim to learn enough about each aspect of the exhibition, but accept that you may not know everything about every work. It's ok to say 'I don't know', in fact it could be an effective way to start a conversation.

Terminology

When discussing the *OCCURRENT AFFAIR* exhibition with visitors, it is important to use respectful language in reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Using respectful and inclusive language and terminology is a key component of the right to self determination and cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

When seeking best practice for terminology, language and communication, it is always best to ask the artist, individual or community for the preferred terminology.

Further resources

- UQ Reconciliation Action Plan Terminology Guide: https://www.uq.edu.au/about/files/1685/RAP_terminology%20guide.pdf
- UQ Guide to Using Inclusive Language: <https://staff.uq.edu.au/files/242/using-inclusive-language-guide.pdf>
- Talking Terminology for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOOhNNdHOYI>

Glossary of Terms

Colonisation	Colonisation is an exploitive practice driven by the prospect of increased power and wealth whereby an invading foreign state controls a people or territory through often violent political subjugation. Colonisation involves occupying the land with settlers, imposing cultural practices on First Nations populations like language or religion, and commandeering the region's resources to benefit the colonising settler-nation.
Decolonisation	Decolonisation is the process of reversing colonisation whereby the invading settler-nation withdraws, leaving the formerly colonised region independent to determine the form and structure of its statehood and government. In Australia, where First Nations peoples still do not have self-determination and the Eurocentric coloniser's sociocultural systems remain, decolonisation is still underway.
Institutional Racism	Institutional racism, also known as systemic racism or state racism , describes discriminatory treatment embedded in the policies and laws of a society against marginalised people based on their racial or ethnic identity.
Postcolonialism	Postcolonialism is a critical study of the continuing social, cultural, economic, and political ramifications of colonialism on the colonised peoples and lands. An important facet of postcolonialism is decentring Western ideologies in support of First Nations knowledge, culture, and ways of being.
Self-Determination	the entitlement of groups of peoples to have control over their destiny and be treated respectfully. An on-going process of choice to ensure that groups are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs.

Agency	the capacity of an individual and communities to have choices and resources to determine their own futures.
Stereotype	a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person, culture or thing. Stereotypes are harmful because they reduce the complexity of real people and erase individuality, agency and power. They can permeate our shared culture and feed into unconscious biases.
Terra Nullius	a Latin expression meaning “nobody’s land”. This legal concept was used by the British government to justify the invasion of Australia. In 1770, Captain Cook declared the east coast of Australia a British possession under the legal justification of ‘terra nullius’, arguing that Aboriginal people did not own the land but rather ‘roamed’ on it. The Australian High Court upheld this justification until the 1992 Mabo vs Queensland (No. 2) case. The principle of Terra Nullius essentially served to characterise Aboriginal people as being less than human, and in doing so, ignored the 500+ nations that existed across Australia prior to colonisation.
Sovereignty	a state or a governing body that has the full right and power to govern itself without any interference from outside sources or bodies.
1967 Referendum	The 1967 Referendum asked the Australian public to vote on amending two sections of the Australian Constitution, which declared that Aboriginal people were not to be counted in the Census. Over 90% of Australians voted to change the Constitution. For the first time, Aboriginal people were given equal constitutional rights to other Australians.

Stolen Generations	The Stolen Generations were children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent who were removed from their families by Australian federal and state government agencies and church missions in the period between approximately 1905 and 1967. Prevailing falsehoods of Aboriginal people being doomed to extinction, and fears that “mixed-race” [sic] (this is a derogatory term) people would overwhelm the European population, encouraged governments to enforce legislation that would allow the removal of Aboriginal children, particularly those with European heritage, from their families. Forbidden from maintaining contact with their families, these children were forced to train to assimilate into Anglo-Australian culture. Anywhere between 20,000 and 100,000 children were removed from their families.
Never Ceded	power or territory was never given up on this continent.
White Privilege	White privilege is a form of racial inequality that describes the hidden benefits and inherent advantages white-skinned or Caucasian individuals receive solely because of their race.

Read/Watch: an explanation of the significance of ‘terra nullius’
<https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/senior-secondary/cook-and-pacific/cook-legend-and-legacy/challenging-terra>

Explore: the AIATSIS Map of Aboriginal Australia
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

Read: a succinct resource on the Stolen Generations
<https://australianstogether.org.au/discover-and-learn/our-history/stolen-generations>

- **Proppa** comes from the Aboriginal colloquial expression ‘proper way’, meaning to do things with due regard to appropriate protocols and community respect.
- **Now** of the present time; modern.

“proppaNOW” – it’s about being proper; it’s about the protocol. And ‘now’ is about reacting to now. We don’t make art about what happened in the Dreaming. We don’t make art about what happened in the Creation Time. We make art about now.”

History of proppaNOW

- **1997** Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Jennifer Herd conceive the idea of proppaNOW.
- **2003** proppaNOW established: Richard, Jennifer and Vernon personally invited Laurie and Gordon to join (who were both out of Brisbane at the time) and Tony sometime later (who was graduating from a Fine Arts degree at Griffith University).
- **2004** proppaNOW is formalised in response to QLD Premier Peter Beattie establishing the Queensland Indigenous Marketing Export Agency (QIAMEA), which promotes and markets Aboriginal art from remote northern Queensland. proppaNOW saw this as a failure to support urban Aboriginal artists in favour of remote artists, and formalised proppaNOW as a way to support themselves.
- **2011** Megan invited to join proppaNOW after meeting them at Griffith University.
- **2015** proppaNOW artists all work on their individual practices, gathering occasionally to collaborate.

- "...[proppaNOW] has broken with expectations of what is proper ('proppa') in Aboriginal art; created a new sovereign space for First Nations artists internationally outside colonial stereotypes, desires for authenticity, and capitalist capitulations; and opened new political imaginaries"*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vera_List_Center_for_Art_and_Politics

"It [proppaNOW] had to be Aboriginal, we were making an all-Aboriginal group... I've been a member of Campfire Group for twenty years, and that was not an Aboriginal group, an Aboriginal-only group. It included our friends, non-white friends, and white friends. This one, we needed it to be all Aboriginal. We had to be like minded..."

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Exhibitions include: *There Goes the Neighbourhood*, Ambleside Street (Amersham) Studio (2006); *The Amersham Trophy*, Ambleside Street (Amersham) Studio (2007); *Friendly Fire*, George Petelin Gallery, Gold Coast (2007); *Putsch*, Adelaide Arts Festival, Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute (2010); *Jus' Drawn: The proppaNOW Collective*, touring with NETS Victoria (2010); *The Black See*, KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns (2011); *Existence Resistance*, Bega Regional Gallery, Bega (2012); *Touchy Fearly*, Fehily Contemporary, Collingwood (2012); *Insurgence*, Museum of Australian Democracy, Canberra (2013); *ProppaNOW*, Brisbane Powerhouse, Queensland (2014) and *OCCURRENT AFFAIR*, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (2021).

Read more

Gordon Hookey, *WAM / Ethics*, 2021. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021. Photo by Rhett Hammerton.

“Urban” and “Rural” Aboriginal art

“There was a belief in Australia, widely held still to this day, that all the real Aborigines live in the north of Australia, particularly the deserts in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, and that all the Aborigines died out in the eastern areas, where we had the best land and they [the British] settled the most. So, for us [proppaNOW], we were seen not as real Aborigines... and that our art wasn’t authentic because we weren’t real.”

Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020

In the late 20th century, the Australian art industry falsely conceived a harmful divide between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ Aboriginal artists: namely, that ‘rural’ Aboriginal artists were “truly” Aboriginal, while ‘urban’ Aboriginal artists were not. This has ramifications on the market, and what was, and wasn’t purchased. This schism came out of long-standing colonial prejudices of what “traditional” Aboriginal people were meant to be. The consequences of such stereotypes have been readily discussed by Aboriginal people and communities.

Rural Aboriginal Art

In 1971, the [Papunya Tula art movement](#) began in the rural Aboriginal town of Papunya in Central Australia. The movement has instigated a major surge of art making by Aboriginal people across the Central Western Desert, which is called the Central Western Desert art movement – some of this work is colloquially known as “dot painting”.

In response, Australia’s art industry created a stereotype of what “authentic” Aboriginal art should look like: namely, stylised shapes such as dots, lines and circles painted in warm ochre-like colours. This painting form has been falsely framed as an identifier of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art. As it doesn’t use the same elements of visual language found in Western art, it has been seen as different, and therefore, problematically, ‘pure’ and, ‘primitive’.

This stereotype plays into colonial power by foregrounding the Western narrative of “Aboriginality” and, again, taking away control from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their own narratives and identities. By conflating the Central Western Desert art movement with outdated and paternalistic ideas of primitivism and cultural/racial imperialism, artworks

became more digestible for Anglo-Australian buyers. Not only does this demean and infantilise rural Aboriginal artists, but it also hurts urban artists who have been ignored by the art industry for not conforming to the racist stereotype of Aboriginality.

These stereotypes, which pervaded Australian art institutions, heavily affected proppaNOW artists, who found their art practices and identities as Aboriginal people ignored and dismissed by others.

The Influence of proppaNOW

proppaNOW has made enormous ground on bringing due attention to Aboriginal art from urban areas. Its success has brought attention to the true diversity of Aboriginal art across Australia, and has taught many that antiquated, racist ideas of “authenticity” and “purity” are unfounded and destructive.

“I think urban artists are always put on the back burner so to speak. I’ve always felt that there are a number of urban artists, some of them from within our group, that have been overlooked, and deserve much more attention than they have received. You see some of these remote area artists ... get good representation, and a lot of attention...”

Jennifer Herd, quoted in Margo Neale, *Learning to be proppa*, 2010

Read more about the influence of proppaNOW in Margo Neale’s, *Learning to be proppa*, Artlink, 2010: <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3359/learning-to-be-proppa-aboriginal-artists-collecti/>

...We [proppaNOW] changed the way that Aboriginal art was seen in this country and therefore the rest of the world. And we drove that change... Aboriginal art is between five and ten percent bigger than the rest of Australian art combined... When you look at that, and look at the fact that we changed the perception of Aboriginal art... that’s really significant. So, we have been the most influential group of people on the Aboriginal art – on the Australian art – scene this century.”

Richard Bell, interviewed March 2020

proppaNOW's Mission Statement

In early 2005, the collective penned a Press Release for immediate distribution, via email. The press release entitled 'We have a dream' is a collectivist call to arms, in the style of American Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King Jr's famous 1963 speech "I have a dream" for the March on Washington.

The Press Release outlines the hopes for the Australian art world and its institutions that centres and celebrates both urban and rural Aboriginal artists through **autonomous Aboriginal Art Departments with separate acquisition budgets**. They call for equity in positions held by Aboriginal staff so that remuneration and support is equal and permanent to those of the non-Indigenous staff members.

Among other 'dreams' that they outline, the significant point is that many of the demands they laid out in 2005 still have not been realised fifteen years later. The mention of certain galleries, while controversial, was also to use examples of institutions in which the artists would like to see change.



Gordon Hookey, Jennifer Herd, Tony Albert, Megan Cope, Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee (left to right). Photo by Rhett Hammerton.

The Artists

Vernon Ah Kee

In the exhibition:

ifiamextremeist, 2002
acrylic on MDF board
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

austracism, 2003
ink on polypropylene board, satin laminated, edition 1/3
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2010

proppaNOW, 2021
video documentary, colour video with sound
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Scratch the surface, 2019/2021
acrylic riot shields, charcoal
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Collaborative work with Laurie Nilsen
Conversations I, II & III, 2022
barbed wire, aluminium, bronze and patina
Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

About the Artist

Vernon Ah Kee was born in Innisfail, North Queensland and belongs to the Kuku Yalanji, Waanyi, Yidinji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples. Ah Kee has risen in prominence as one of Australia's most dynamic artists, his multi-faceted practice ranges from large-scale drawings of his ancestors to hard-hitting text-based works and installations. Ah Kee investigates the mistreatment of our country's First Nations Peoples since colonisation, focusing on lived experiences and those of his ancestors.

- Interview with NAVA: <https://visualarts.net.au/artist-files/2020/vernon-ah-kee/>
- Artist's gallery page: <https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/vernon-ah-kee/>
- *Scratch the surface*, 2019/2021 was shown in the touring exhibition *Violent Salt*. Read about it on page 16 here: https://www.artspacemackay.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/243878/Violent_Salt_EdKit_ArtspaceMackay.pdf
- Watch Vernon Ah Kee describe the work *austracism*, 2003: <https://vimeo.com/215770500>

For *OCCURRENT AFFAIR*, Vernon Ah Kee made a new video interviewing each member of the proppaNOW collective, apart from Laurie Nilsen due to his passing. Ah Kee asks questions about the formation of proppaNOW, the significance of the collective, its early days, and individual memories of Nilsen as a key member and dear friend, with the video becoming a eulogy to him. This video documentary provides genuine insights into the artists and their various practices. The work emphasises that while some progress has been made in addressing issues related to Aboriginal inequality and mistreatment over the last 18 years, many remain unresolved.

Artwork focus - *Conversations I, II & III*, 2022
Collaborative work with Laurie Nilsen

The *Conversations* series are a new collaboration that culminated from conversations between fellow proppaNOW artists Vernon Ah Kee and the late Laurie Nilsen. Their ongoing dialogue revolved around redefining conceptual meaning and symbolism by combining critical components of their art practice, such as barbed wire and Nilsen's totem animal the emu. Nilsen incorporated barbed wire as the material had been used in rural Queensland to threaten native species such as emus. Such discussions together posed new sculptural ideas, however with Nilsen's failing health, these conversations continued on behalf of Nilsen, between Vernon Ah Kee and Nilsen's gallery dealer Michael Eather.



Laurie Nilsen & Vernon Ah Kee, *Conversations I* (detail), 2022 barbed wire, bronze & patina, 60 x 80 x 80cm
 Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Tony Albert

In the exhibition:

- Butterscotch tribesman*, 2009
synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2009
- Corroboree*, 2009
oil on canvas
Collection of The University of Queensland. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Danielle Milani in memory of Mona Dubois, 2018
- Brother (Our Past)*, from the series 'Brothers', 2013
reproduction on di-bond
Collection of The University of Queensland
- Brother (Our Present)*, from the series 'Brothers', 2013
reproduction on di-bond
Collection of The University of Queensland. Gift of Tony Albert through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014.
- Brother (Our Future)*, from the series 'Brothers', 2013
reproduction on di-bond
Collection of The University of Queensland
- Terra Nullius (with Scrooge)*, 2021
acrylic paint on wall; ephemeral installation
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney

About the Artist

Tony Albert was born in Townsville, Queensland and is a descendant of the Girramay, Yidinji and Kuku-Yalanji peoples. He works across a range of media, often recycling kitsch, mass-produced objects that feature stereotypical depictions of Indigenous people. Over the past 10 years Albert has achieved extraordinary visibility and much critical acclaim for his visual art practice. His multidisciplinary artmaking investigates contemporary legacies of colonialism, prompting audiences to contemplate the human condition.

Learn more

- Artist Website: <https://tonyalbert.com.au/>
- Interview: with the Art Gallery of New South Wales: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK8gZnbwVxI>
- Video Interview discussing his *Brothers* exhibition in Das Platforms: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt2zqeSP5VE>

Artwork focus - *Butterscotch tribesman*, 2009 and *Corroboree*, 2009

The images in *Butterscotch tribesman* and *Corroboree* have been sourced from Tony's Aboriginalia collection. 'Aboriginalia' are objects—often souvenirs and bric-a-brac such as ornaments, figurines, prints, stationery and biscuit tins—decorated with stereotyped Aboriginal cultural designs and figures. These often distorted or sentimental images of Aboriginal people were incredibly popular in the twentieth century. 'Aboriginalia' suggests that Aboriginality is trivial and decorative, intended only for the profit and enjoyment of non-Aboriginal consumers. It also nearly exclusively depicts Aboriginal people in a fantasised pre-colonial state rather than the post-colonial reality, thus ignoring and silencing the experiences of Aboriginal people who have survived colonisation.

- Interview: Tony discussing his interest in Aboriginalia: <https://vimeo.com/330403676>
- Read: QAGOMA describes Tony's interest in Aboriginalia: blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/tony-albert-uses-humour-to-render-visible-australias-history



Tony Albert, *Brother (Our Past)*; *Brother (Our Present)*; *Brother (Our Future)* (L-R), from the series 'Brothers', 2013, pigment print on paper, edition AP 1, 149 x 98.6cm each. Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2013 - 2014.
Brother (Our Present): Gift of Tony Albert through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014. Photo by Carl Warner.

- Read more: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/25/police-shooting-aboriginal-teenagers-sydney>



Tony Albert with University of Queensland students participating in the artist residency program to create the communal artwork mural *Terra Nullius (with Scrooge)*. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney. Photo by Simon Woods.

- Read about Albert's residency at UQ Art Museum and development of his work *Terra Nullius (with Scrooge)*: <https://art-museum.uq.edu.au/article/2021/09/tony-albert-artist-residency-sparks-big-ideas>
- Example of Aboriginal Cultural destruction: In May 2020, mining giant Rio Tinto destroyed several sacred 46,000-year-old rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge in Western Australia to gain \$135m of iron ore. This was done despite years of protest by the local Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura community and archaeologists who argued for the cultural and archaeological significance of the site. This example reveals the refusal of companies to recognise the significance of sacred Aboriginal sites.

In the exhibition:

Austika, 2018
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Embassy, 2013-ongoing
installation; tent marquee and hand-painted signage
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Little fish are sweet, 2021
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, archival paper, paper bag, Ryan
Presley's *Blood Money* banknotes
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Me, me dreaming, 2013
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Kessel Road Protest, 2022
acrylic on canvas
Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

About the artist

Richard Bell was born in Charleville, Queensland and is a member of the Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang communities. Bell grew out of a generation of Aboriginal activists and has remained committed to the politics of Aboriginal emancipation and self-determination. One of Australia's most significant artists, Bell's work explores the complex artistic and political problems of Western, colonial and Indigenous art production. In 2003 he was the recipient of the Telstra National Aboriginal Art Award, establishing him as an important Australian artistic figure. Bell is represented in most major National and State collections and has exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions at major institutions in Australia and America.

Must read

- Richard Bell, "*Bell's Theorem: ABORIGINAL ART - It's a white thing!*" provides a great background of Richard's practice and the Australian art industry: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html>

Learn more

- Interview: 'My Art is an Act of Protest' | Tate: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDXksMvx2gk>
- MCA Australia on Richard Bell <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/richard-bell/>

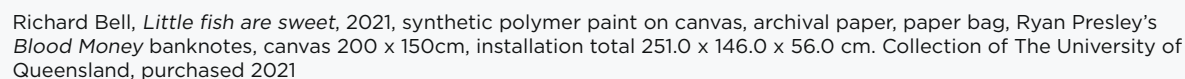
Artwork focus - *Little fish are sweet*, 2021

This work depicts the Premier of Queensland from 1968-1987, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. Nicknamed the 'Hillbilly Dictator', Bjelke-Petersen and his state government were notorious for their unrelenting conservatism, institutional corruption, liberal use of police violence, and discrimination towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQIA+ communities. Richard has appropriated a photograph showing Bjelke-Petersen holding a gun in 1986. He has also given the figure a red tie and shock of blonde hair that vaguely resembles former US president Donald Trump— perhaps he intended to draw similarities between the two political figures.

The title of the work, “Little fish are sweet,” refers to a book by Brisbane-born writer Matthew Condon entitled *Little Fish Are Sweet*, which interrogates decades of crime and corruption in the Queensland Police Force while Joh Bjelke-Petersen was Premier.

The following stories detail the extent of Bjelke-Petersen's racism:

- Wikipedia- Bjelke-Petersen on Aboriginal affairs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joh_Bjelke-Petersen#Aboriginal_people
- Bjelke-Petersen tried to stop Aboriginal people from being screened for HIV: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/sir-joh-bjelke-petersen-opposed-hiv-screening-for-indigenous-australians/ldgzx9qh8>
- Bjelke-Petersen gave a racist rant against the Labor party in 1984: <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/joh-bjelkepetersen-made-racist-nr-rant-cabinet-papers-reveal-20150101-12gn1s.html>



- Director of Aboriginal art at Sotheby's, Tim Klingender, states that Emily Kame Kngwarreye was relentlessly pursued by carpetbaggers towards the end of her career: <https://www.theage.com.au/national/aboriginal-works-and-artful-dodgers-20030920-gdwdga.html>



Megan Cope, *Deadwood*, 2021, paperbark, tissue paper, bees wax, ink, 218 x 132cm (condition report); 205 x 130cm (entry comments) 204 x 121cm (evictions notice). Installation view art UQ Art Museum, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Carl Warner.

In the exhibition:

Nyanba tahbiyilbanjara gnanany (He knew his saltwater country), 2019
lithograph on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Arsenal, 2021
glow mineral and acrylic on black slate
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Bated Breath, 2021
chrome-plated ceramics on steel support, fishing line and mirror
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Deadwood, 2021
paperbark, tissue paper, bees wax, ink
Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane

About the artist:

Megan Cope was born in Brisbane and is a Quandamooka (North Stradbroke Island in South East Queensland) artist. Her site-specific sculptural installations, video work and paintings investigate issues relating to identity, the environment and mapping practices. Cope's work often resists prescribed notions of Aboriginality and examines psychogeographies that challenge the grand narrative of 'Australia' and our sense of time and ownership in a settler colonial state. These explorations result in various material outcomes.

Learn more

- Artist Website: <https://www.megancope.com.au/>
- Watch: Megan discuss her childhood and art practice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBBaHvrA8eg>
- Interview discussing Megan's connection to Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island): <https://vimeo.com/240927840>
- Interview with NAVA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzqDgezlnRk>
- Read profile article on Megan Cope: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jun/19/death-is-birth-megan-cope-on-creating-art-out-of-catastrophe>

Artwork focus - Arsenal, 2021

Arsenal is a set of five text-based works with words written in the Warner Bros Loony Tunes font: *Dime a Dolezal* (Dime a Dozen), *Murdocracy* (Autocracy), *Influenzer* (Influencer), *Net Zero*, *trENDING*.

The fluorescent green words glowing upon black slate within a darkened room causes an illusioned afterimage on the retina, as if they are almost dangerously radioactive in nature. Their materiality correlates with the common saying and takes a cue from the reality that “words are weapons” and language is powerful.

In the broader sense, this work comments on the most important topics of our time: identity politics; climate change; and how the media manipulates, fatigues and creates derogatory language used in association with Aboriginal people, the environment and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly so in the Murdocracy (referencing Rupert Murdoch) that dominates news-reporting platforms. Sadly, such language is reiterated by peers within social media spaces and has become a common form of online violence and populism, thus reducing meaningful relationships and a focus on the topics and tasks at hand for our futures.

Artwork focus - *Bated Breath*, 2021

Megan Cope presents *Bated Breath* as a portrait of the present-day internet. The title is a play on words, a homonym of ‘bated breath’—a phrase first mentioned in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*—which infers to holding one’s breath in suspense, anxiety or fear. Using bait fish as a metaphor, Cope integrates her connection to Quandamooka waters and recurring themes involving sea management.

As an impressive installation of 1,300 shiny ceramic fish spiralling downward towards a mirrored reflection, the work presents a grand spectacle that draws parallels to the gleaming allure of mass participation in social media streams. In reality, however, the internet can be as harmful as it is helpful. *Bated Breath* largely comments on the psychology of the internet, including social media, racist online journalism, fake news and clickbait.

Often baited with racism, social media spaces have become a trap and a divisive tool that sanctions a common form of lateral violence within Aboriginal communities. The mirror symbolically refers to narcissism, involving self-centred, arrogant thinking and behaviour lacking empathy. Caught in such a vortex encourages mob mentality and prohibits autonomy.



Megan Cope, *Bated Breath*, 2021, chrome-plated ceramics on steel support, fishing line and mirror, total approx. 3m high; mirror 120cm diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photo by Simon Woods.

Jennifer Herd

In the exhibition:

In defence, 2021

vinyl

Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

In Defence I, II, III, 2017

pinholes in Arches paper

Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Resist, Rebel, Reclaim, 2021

screen print on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane

Mother's Country, 2022

archival ink on canvas with bullet casings

Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

Still War, 2021

digital print on 320gsm Sihl paper, pinholes

Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

Target, 2008

acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

About the artist

Jennifer Herd is from Eumundi, Queensland. Herd is a Mbarbarrum woman whose family roots lie in far North Queensland. Herd draws on her past experiences and knowledge in costume design, often incorporating stitching and pin holes in her installations, painting, drawing and sculptural works. She creates shield designs as a way of connecting to her heritage and culture. Herd's shield designs are presented as a reminder of speaking truth to power, frontier resistance and the aftermath of cultural identity stripped bare.



- FireWorks Gallery Website Artist Page: <https://fireworksgallery.com.au/artist/jennifer-herd>
- Must Watch: This Portrait of an Artist talk offers a unique insight into the life and work of Aboriginal artist Jennifer Herd: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gU16My4vTeQ>
- Read about Jennifer Herd's installation at UQ Art Museum of *In Defence*, 2021, <https://art-museum.uq.edu.au/article/2021/09/jennifer-herd-defence>

Jennifer Herd draws on her past experiences and knowledge in costume design, often incorporating stitching and pin holes in her installations, painting, drawing and sculptural works. In these works, Jennifer creates a minimalist style, often utilising the shield to reference her Aboriginal ancestry of Northern Queensland and to symbolise strength and defence. During her research, she noted words from early North Queensland explorer Christopher Palmerston (1850-1897), "Their shields may answer very well for the purposes of their wars, but my rifle drilled through these as if they were sheets of paper."

“This particular series of works pays tribute to the Bama warriors of the North Queensland rainforests in the Atherton Tableland region. These warriors fought valiantly over many generations to defend their ancestral lands from frontier expansion. These shields were not only objects of defence but also symbols of identity and conveyors of cultural knowledge and place.”

The geometrical designs in the work reference the traditional painted shields unique to the region. These shields were not only objects of defence but also symbols of identity and conveyors of cultural knowledge and place. Shields were used by Aboriginal people in Far North Queensland to ward off the intruder, enemies and invaders of the land. Shields were used as armour, weapons, cover and to safeguard in battle.

- Explanation of the role of North Queensland shields during the invasion of European colonists on Aboriginal Peoples' lands: <https://www.nma.gov.au/learn/encounters-education/community-stories/cairns>
- Watch SBS series on the frontier wars: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/tv-series/the-australian-wars>



Jennifer Herd, *Resist, Rebel, Reclaim*, 2021, screen print on paper, Courtesy of the artist and Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane.
image previous page: Jennifer Herd *In defence I* (detail) 2017, pinholes in Arches paper, 94 x 73.5 cm each. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021. Photo by Simon Woods.

In the exhibition

Austika / Australia, 2020
 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, wood dowels, traffic cones, castors
 Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Solidarity / You Are Here, 2021
 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, metal eyelets, on wood dowels, traffic
 cones and castors
 Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

WAM / *Ethics*, 2021
 canvas, synthetic polymer paint, wood dowels, traffic cones, castors
 Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Dundalli Banner, 2021
canvas, synthetic polymer paint, bamboo poles
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021

Kangaroo Point, 2011-2012
oil on canvas
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2012

Terraist Gloves, 2008
mixed media
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008

About the artist

Gordon Hookey was born in Cloncurry, Queensland and belongs to the Waanyi/Waanjiminjin peoples. One of Australia's most renowned contemporary Indigenous artists, Hookey's figurative paintings layer visual puns and linguistic wit to occupy a space where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures converge, in a style that is urgently political and often darkly humorous.

Learn more

- Artist page: <https://milanigallery.com.au/artists/gordon-hookey/>
- Read: <https://artistprofile.com.au/gordon-hookey/>



Installation view at UQ Art Museum, 2021 featuring Gordon Hookey, *Solidarity/You Are Here*, 2021; WAM / *Ethics*, 2021; and *Austika / Austrailya*, 2020. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2021.

In the exhibition:

Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2020

Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, Joanna Baillieu and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane

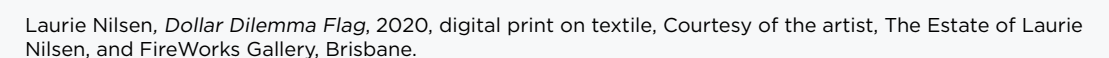
Courtesy of the artists, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Laurie Nilsen was born in Mandandandji country, also known as Roma, Queensland. Nilsen (1953-2020) was an artist who worked with drawing, painting and mixed media, and was best known for his barbed wire emu sculptures. Nilsen moved to Brisbane as a teenager in the late 1960s to become a jockey, although he soon found a love for art. In 1988, Nilsen became one of the first 'urban' Aboriginal artists to have work acquired by the National Gallery of Australia. He was been considered a paternal figure in the Brisbane Aboriginal art scene, and was a founding member of both Campfire Group and proppaNOW.

Learn more

- Engaging summation of Laurie's 40-year-long art practice: http://www.fireworksgallery.com.au/sites/default/files/Laurie%20Nilsen_Art%20practice%20over%2040%20years_February%202020.pdf
- Gallery artist page: <https://fireworksgallery.com.au/artist/laurie-nilsen>
- Must watch interview with Laurie Nilsen: <https://vimeo.com/132379036>

Artwork focus - *Dollar Dilemma Flag*, 2020



- Watch FireWorks Gallery Director Michael Eather discusses this work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvK20c3fZfA&t=38s>
- Read a timeline of the debate over the Aboriginal flag: <https://www.clothingthegaps.com.au/pages/aboriginal-flag-timeline>
- Read about the governments purchase of the copyright: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/24/australian-government-buys-copyright-to-aboriginal-flag-in-20m-deal>

Laurie Nilsen, *Spreading the word*, 2013, metal dingo traps, paint, MDF, Courtesy of the artist, The Estate of Laurie Nilsen, Joanna Baillieu and FireWorks Gallery, Brisbane.

