

COMMENT IS FREE

Conversation with Judy Watson

Marysia Lewandowska: Can you tell me more about your practice at the time when you first arrived in Brisbane and began working with the Institute of Modern Art (IMA)?

Judy Watson: I had been living in Townsville between 1983 and 1988 teaching printmaking at the Townsville College of TAFE. Prior to that, in 1986, I had studied art at the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education (now Monash University in Gippsland), and the University of Tasmania from 1980–1982, and before that at Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (DDIAE) in Toowoomba in the late 1970s. My interests were focused on environmental, feminist, and cultural concerns, informed by my identity as an Aboriginal woman whose matrilineal Country is from North West Queensland, Waanyi language group. As an artist based in Townsville, I was also aware of my regional identity, being outside of the cities where mainstream art appreciation was concentrated. In Hobart, Tasmania, I went to early meetings of Chameleon, which became an artists' organisation there. When I moved to North Queensland, I was one of a group of artists who set up Umbrella Studio in Townsville. We applied and received the William Buttner Scholarship from the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) and with that money purchased an etching press and printmaking equipment. Umbrella Studio became an incorporated body and is still active today as an artists' organisation with a gallery. The PressNorth Printmakers studios are also housed in their basement at their current address in Townsville.

In 1989 I was artist-in-residence at Griffith Artworks in Brisbane. The residency provided me with money for materials and living expenses. This was the first time I felt I could really call myself an artist as I was making a living from my art practice. Before this my other jobs had subsidised my artwork. I was able to be experimental in approach to my work, pushing it in directions and using different mediums because I had the luxury of time, studio space, money, and the support of Griffith Artworks' staff. I met local artists and connected with the Brisbane Aboriginal community, I went to meetings of the Murri Arts Steering Committee (MASC) at Jagera Cultural Centre in Musgrave Park. I attended

CONVERSATION

Date: 2–10 May 2016

Location: Skype and email

meetings about the Balance exhibition, which was a combination of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, eventually shown at the Queensland Art Gallery. I was opposed to non-Aboriginal artists using Aboriginal motifs in their work and did not participate in this exhibition. It was an important moment in art history having Aboriginal artists show at QAG alongside their contemporaries.

The next year, in 1990, I had a regional artist residency at the McWhirters' Building in the Fortitude Valley Mall. There I had a studio and made a body of work titled *groundwork* that was shown at the IMA. I shared a house in Arthur Street, Fortitude Valley, with Michele Helmrich who worked at the IMA. Through Michele and Nick Tsoutas (then director at the IMA), I met local Brisbane artists. I remember going to see Judith Wright's exhibition at Michael Milburn Galleries on my 30th birthday, which was an absolute pleasure for me. I was also involved in a local community theatre production of *Jalalu Jalu: Land law and lies*, which was about the Aboriginal history of Brisbane and included Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal performers and producers with Street Arts Community Theatre Company at the Paint Factory in West End.

Earlier, in 1990, I had a visual arts grant through the Australia Council to go back to my Country in North West Queensland with my family, including my parents, Joyce and Don Watson, my grandmother, Grace Isaacson, my uncle, Ken Isaacson and initially, my uncle Kit and his wife Fay Isaacson. We went fishing on the Georgina River and the Gregory River and then went to Riversleigh Station, where my grandmother was born in 1912 and to Boodjamulla, Lawn Hill Gorge, and other significant sites. This journey back to our Country was the impetus for the work that was made for the IMA exhibition. There were a series of six canvases made from pigment which contained visual motifs from this journey, these were laid onto the ground on which I had painted a long black form with white dots along both long edges. I saw this as a sprocket of photographic film with coloured images within it, or a runway. Leaning against the wall was a large plywood sheet with a drawing in charcoal on the outer edge and oil and pigment on the inside. There was also an image of stone tool cutting attached to the wall, sheltered by the overhang of the pigmented plywood board. Later this body of work, *groundwork*, was selected by Tim Morrrell for the *Unfamiliar Territory* exhibition at the 1992 Adelaide Biennale; and was included by Sally Couacaud from Artspace, Sydney, in *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970–1990* (1994).

ML: Who were the others you were exhibiting alongside, as an Aboriginal artist were you given special attention? Was there a theme connecting all of the invited artists?

JW: My work at the IMA was exhibited alongside Robert Kinder, a local Brisbane artist. I'm not sure that there was a theme connecting our artwork. You would need to ask Nick Tsoutas about that.

I met Gordon Bennett in 1989 and his work was shown at the IMA. Gordon and I spoke about our histories growing up as Aboriginal people in the suburbs but not being really 'seen'. We joked that we were like secret agents. We would hear all the racism, the jokes directed at and about Aboriginal people, and hear the statements denigrating our people by non-Aboriginal people who didn't know our identities. We then had the choice of calling out this racism or depending on the circumstances, swallowing this poison, creating an internal wound that would manifest itself in our artwork.

In 2004, after I had moved back to Brisbane from Darwin, Michael Snelling, the then director of the IMA, asked me to show my body of work *sacred ground beating heart* at the IMA. This followed on from an exhibition at the John Curtin Gallery in 2003 and later some of this work toured South East Asia.

The IMA has continued to show Indigenous Australian artists and I think this is a very important part of their work as a contemporary art space. It is good exposure for the work and for the artists to the contemporary art world.

ML: Did you belong to any Indigenous groups or collectives who shared your interests in visual culture?

JW: In 1987 I travelled to Sydney and showed my work to Gabriella Roy, Ace Bourke, and Hetti Perkins who were working at the Aboriginal Art Gallery in Sydney. I also met members of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Group and later, in 1990, was part of one of their exhibitions in Sydney and another show that went to the UK. I had a solo show at the Aboriginal Art Gallery in Sydney and later became a member of Boomalli. In Brisbane I had been a member of MASC, the Murri Arts Steering Committee. Lafe Charlton, Vanessa Fisher, Phyllis Harrison-Ugle, Marlene Cummins, Billy McPherson, Marshall Bell were a part of this group.

ML: Do you speak the Indigenous language and if not how would you describe the process of enforced colonial forgetting?

JW: I do not speak my Aboriginal Waanyi language. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is an organisation in Canberra that holds recordings of our language. I have used these recordings, for example in a video *bones + crosses*, 1993, and I try to remember words from

our language when I am reading documents about our history. My grandmother, Grace Isaacson, remembered some words and passed these onto me. In Brisbane and Sydney and Townsville and other places, when I would meet up with other Aboriginal people there would be certain words that we would use that are part of a collective Aboriginal generic culture and understood by a wide range of people.

Our language and culture were taken from our families but have been retrieved and used in different ways by contemporary cultural practitioners across different media. The colonial erasure and whitewash has been and is still being exposed. As a visual artist I am interested in concealed histories and bringing these up to the surface so that we can look at them more closely. I want to remember the past and engage with this along with contemporary events that are affecting all of us.

ML: What precisely are you thinking about here? How do you see this ‘retrieval’ or ‘re-use’ as part of what could become the cultural commons? What conditions need to be created for such commons to represent what your practice stands for?

JW: My artworks and those of other Indigenous artists from Australia sometimes use what was used against us to re-make artworks. It is like a reflection back at us from our ancestors and their lives. We are carrying those stories into the future. They are life lessons for our children and are an educational process for all of Australia to know what was in the past and how it affected our people. In my case I have used documents located in the Queensland State Archives to layer over the top of other imagery to dissect for example how Aboriginal people were discriminated against when it came to their voting rights. Marcia Langton AM, an Aboriginal anthropologist and academic from the University of Melbourne, has described Queensland Aboriginal people as some of the most documented Indigenous people in the world. This historical paper burden is also a rich resource for artists wanting to mine the archive.

ML: What hopes do you have for creating a collective voice for issues such as ownership of land, and ownership of cultural heritage? How strongly do you feel about them?

JW: I don’t personally have an engagement with any one body of people in terms of ownership of land. However, I totally support the Land Rights Movement and admire the people who have fought long and hard for recognition and legal access to their land. My Country in North West Queensland is Waanyi Country, which I have visited and I know people up there. However, I live in Brisbane and travel back to my Country when I can, which is difficult because it is a long distance away and expensive to get there. My dream is to go back there for another visit in the next few years.

ML: Let's return to your engagement with the IMA. How would you describe the changes occurring between the two exhibitions you held there fourteen years apart? How would those changes fit in the political climate of the different government policies at the time?

JW: The difference between my first exhibition at the IMA in 1990 and my second exhibition in 2004 was mostly my maturation as an artist and the fact that the exhibition showed different stages of my process. Many of the works reacted to contemporary or historical events, so in a way they are a map of my consciousness. The second exhibition occupied the whole gallery, that was a very significant show to have in the space.

ML: Would you prefer to be identified as an Aboriginal artist or an Indigenous Australian artist? Do these two points of reference offer a significant difference in how your work might be approached?

And following from that, do you think the public institutions in Queensland have adequately contributed to creating a context for understanding the roots of your art practice? And if yes, how?

JW: I am an Aboriginal artist, as distinct from being an artist from the Torres Strait Islands. The term 'Indigenous Australian' can apply to both groups of people.

Certainly if somebody knows I am Aboriginal then it might give them a slightly different insight into my work. However, I don't mind if I am described as an artist who is a woman, from Queensland, from Australia, who is a mother, who is interested in the environment, who is a printmaker etc. All of these descriptions are valid.

ML: How do artists and the art institutions you have worked with contribute to setting up an agenda for addressing the violations of the past?

JW: It depends on the artists and the art institutions. I think the institutions who have a respect for and interest in Indigenous Australian people and culture will probably reach out to these communities and these artists and be supportive of the ideas the artists might want to work with. Violations of the past cover many other subjects apart from just those that connect with Indigenous Australia.

ML: How do you see the role of archival practices in recounting the 'missing voice' of the Indigenous people? Can you name places involved in such projects that you consider are relevant to your endeavours?

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A project by Marysia Lewandowska

JW: I answered this question earlier when I talked about mining the archive. I am currently working on a project called the *names of places* that is about massacre sites around Australia, where Aboriginal people and sometimes Torres Strait Islander people were massacred.

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