Telling the Stories: Art Making as a Process of Recovery, Healing and Celebration

Craig Charles

Mhutti Mhutti / Yorta Yorta / Skin Place Latje Latje

Master of Arts Exegesis

School of Education
RMIT University
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Candidate’s name: Craig Charles

Name of School: School of Education
   RMIT University

Date submitted: 3 October 2006

Declaration by the candidate

I certify that:

- This thesis is entirely my own work, where due acknowledgement has been made
- The work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award
- The content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program
- Sam Kerr played didgeridoo on the Digital Story
   Mike Jordan played drums on the audio tracks
   Shamus Hoare assisted with the editing of the Digital Story and Film

Candidate’s signature:
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   The River
   The Sea
   Mother Earth
   Father Spirit

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Abstract

I am a Latje Latje man born and raised in Mildura. I am a contemporary artist, a dancer and a father. I began dancing with the Latje Latje dance group when I was four. I come from river country. I spent the first six years of my life on the banks of the Murray River. The river runs right through my work.

During the course of my Masters, I have been spending time in the north of Victoria, in central Victoria and in South Gippsland by the sea in Boonerwrung country. I a man of the river, but since the birth of my son, I have been developing a relationship with the sea. My relationship to the sea changed when my son moved to the sea. My spiritual connection to the sea has grown the more time I have spent there and the more spiritual knowledge I have gained of my ancestral country of the Boonerwrung.

Within this research project, I explore the question:
How can art-making generate a process of recovery, healing and celebration?

In my Masters I have developed two series of paintings, one from the river and one from the sea. The first group of paintings were shown in a nine-month solo exhibition, ‘City Style – Country Youth’ at Bunjilaka, the Aboriginal Section of the Melbourne Museum. The second group were shown at another solo exhibition called ‘Mungo Stories’ held at the Australia Dreaming Art gallery in Fitzroy, Melbourne.
Artefacts

My Master of Arts includes the following artefacts:

- An **Exhibition of Paintings** selected from the 63 artworks I have undertaken during the course of my Masters
- An **Exegesis** in which I tell the story of my paintings and my research and in which I give an overview of the paintings I have done during my research degree
- A **Digital Story** which combines didgeridoo music with a selection of my images
- Two **Audio Tracks**, ‘Paintings Talk’ and ‘Grinding the Ochre’
- A **Short Film** in which I describe my experience as a contemporary Indigenous artist.
Preface

My name's Craig Allan Charles and I'm Yorta Yorta man born in Latje, from Latje country, Mildura. I'm the crow. My totem is the long neck turtle from Yorta Yorta which is Echuca.

Painting to me was something that was inherited but a lot of people thought that meant that I gifted with that ability to paint. But I discovered over the years that just wasn’t the case. I had to work hard and I had to listen to the stories of my Elders, of my Mum, and my Aunt, and of my Great grandmother and Great grandfather and try to capture the stories from my Aunties and my Uncles on my father's side, so that I could make sense of who I was as a Koorie person who became an artist.

Sometimes I used to think that you were born into certain things in your life. You were born to be a dancer or you were born to be a painter but it doesn't happen straight away. It takes years. As with everything you put the effort in and you learn the technique and the style and you go with the ability and use your essence. Definitely listen to your family, when it comes to Koorie culture or when it comes to any culture. You can as an artist put yourself as an Aboriginal artist or you can put yourself as an artist, or you can do both and I always wanted to be both.

What I think I have been trying to do with my paintings was share with other people and let them have a piece of my story for them to take home or look at or appreciate to sit down for five minutes and reflect. My great grandmother, Betty Charles, raised me from when I was nine months old, she and Pop, Ron Murray. One of the things she always said to me was, “Craig, whenever you're upset or
sad, or you lose someone, or you lose something and you’re feeling hurt, it’s best that you get that out. Never ever bottle it up, never keep it inside yourself, because you’ll end up sick.”

In my community and in my family, so many family members have been taken away in the Stolen Generation and Uncles and Fathers and Mothers dying through drugs or alcohol or other reasons.

I just wanted to try and put it out there to the wider community to recognise the plight of Indigenous Victorian Koories as to how special we are as a people and as a clan. I wanted to let other people know about my family and how special they are but I also wanted to let them know that I think they are really special as well. My younger brothers and sisters mean the world to me and my brothers and sisters that I never got to meet are really important to me.

I am really proud of my culture, I am proud of my ancestors, I am proud of my heritage. I am proud to be alive today with mother earth and with father spirit and sharing it with the family that I’ve got left, my brothers and sisters that are still around today. I am still sharing the stories that were passed on by our great grandmothers and our great grandfathers who had it hard, really hard, having so much taken away from them.

That’s what us younger fellas today still carry. You learn that from an early age as a Koorie kid and you grow up having to work out that your grandparents were right, your Elders are right. You’ve got to not let that get bottled up, you’ve got to let it out. You go and cry or you go and scream in the bush. Or you yell, and you let it all out, let that pain out because the more you keep it to yourself the harder it is and the more hurtful it is.

Healing through stories, painting and dance, and through the didge is just an amazing form of medicine. My healing process was definitely to get into painting
because painting was my form of expression to let the secrets, that inner pain out, but also that inner happiness.

Dance was always there first for me but painting was more of a personal thing where I got to share my stories passed on to me and place it out there for other people to see a closer perspective of who Craig was, where Craig was coming from and who Craig was becoming. So painting for me allowed me to heal and recognise who I was and where I came from. I got to overcome a lot of personal depression eventually because I got everything out of my system. I became Craig again, I found Craig. I found the person that I lost for a while.

Sambo, my brother, plays the didge, and that is medicine that is special. That's his tool. He's the instrument for that. That didge wouldn't be playing without him. There are paintings that I did that wouldn't be painted without me. Emily's, or Ginger's or Karen Casey, Maree Clarke Treahna Hamm, Buster (Ray Thomas), Ginger Riley, none of their works would be done without the tools, without them stories, without them special elements and energies to be there to create them. They come from very strong people. We've survived this long, I mean, it's going to keep going. I'm not going to quit until the crow stops crying, I reckon! Yeah, that'll be me.

(Transcript from DVD)

Transcript from Director's Cut of DVD
For years as a teenager we’d lost so many Uncles and Aunties, I’d lost my Nan and my father, I’d listen to what she said but growing up as teenage boy you sometimes don’t listen, especially to your grandmother sometimes you won’t listen, so sometimes you have to find out the hard way. As the years went by, we’d lose a family member every four to six months, someone would pass away. You’d know of someone. You became accustomed to the phone ringing with
news of another death. You became used to going to funerals and to the
cemetery. The hymns that had to be sung at church and the saying goodbye and
the picking up of the earth and the throwing it onto the coffin as a form of respect.
Mother Earth saying goodbye to your brother, your Uncle, your Nanna, your Pop.
You learn that from an early age as a Koorie kid.

I think after the years of the funerals and the years of losing people, my healing
process was definitely to get into painting because painting was my form of
expression to let the secrets, that pain and also the happiness out. Sometimes
people would tell me too that Aboriginal culture was too sad and upsetting and we
dwelled on the past too much. But we had the best of times too, the happy times,
the barbeques, the parties, the hunting, the gathering. Especially the fishing, the
stories, the different ways of carving an Emu egg, or how to catch a goanna, or
how go get the bogeye and what the bogeye would do to you.

Having that inside an Indigenous man's heart and then putting it out on a canvas
for someone to see in an exhibition and make them smile. It makes me happy
that my painting can help people realise whose country this really is, whose it was
first, and whose it always was. We can share the understanding that Koorie
culture is really unique and really special. It's the oldest culture in the world, and
I'm really proud of being able to say that that's my people.

I've been painting now since 1996, so that's ten years. At university, at TAFE, I
started doing acrylic and really sort of child like images. They're bizarre and I've
got a shed full of them that I hide from everybody. One day I'll get them out and
I'll show people but at the moment they're my son's, and he can have a look at
them.
I use gold leaf in my paintings out of respect to Aunty Nola and traditional owners and to also to represent the richness of mother earth and the land and how we should not take the treatment of the land for granted and we should pay much more respect. We should even sometimes just even go and sit in the land and just listen to what we're doing right now, and listen to the birds. I also scrape my paintings. I guess the one thing too about the paintings is that I put layer and layer of shellac and oil and drag them through the earth of where I went with the permission of the Elders so I captured the spirit of the land.

(Transcript from Director's Cut of DVD)

How I Became an Artist

My family and I used to sit around the kitchen table drawing with charcoal or a grey-lead pencil, whatever was available, so that we could copy, trace and sketch from each other. I think I was about four years old when I began drawing. The whole family would become involved. My brothers, sisters, cousins and I would always sit still listening to my Aunty Nola, Nana, Mum or Elders to tell us stories whilst we drew our pictures. They kept us entertained and gave us enough patience to sit still for long enough to draw something. All around, our mob had fun practicing this part of our culture, plus the Elders got some peace and quiet for a while.

The practice of sitting around the kitchen table has continued through many cultures and is carried on today from my generation, (early 30s), down to my younger brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews, to my own son Mungo.

Through primary and secondary schooling I did not practice Visual Art as much as what I could have. In these years, dance was my main focus. When I was also four years old I became involved in a Koori Dance Group, along with other family members. The group was the Latje-Latje Dancers from Mildura, where I was
born. Dancing became a major part of my life. Being a traditional practice in our culture, these songs and dances allowed me to carry on an age-old tradition of passing on invaluable stories carried on through Ancestry.

It was not until my late teenage years that I decided to enrol in an Aboriginal Arts and Design course at Sunraysia Institute of TAFE (1998). The decision was made because of my need to stay with my Great Grandparents, who had raised me from when I was a baby. I also had a strong yearning to learn more from my own people who had originated from different nations.

At first I was not sure about the course of the actual practice of Visual Art. I looked at it as a source of information about my people and history, our future and our blood-lines. The time an art lecturer told me about my ability to raise awareness of the “Koori” plight, through art, really came as a shock. I started to look at art in a very different way. I became more serious about painting a good picture, something that stood out in people’s minds, not necessarily something just hanging on a wall.

I transferred into an Associate Diploma of Visual Arts, which was a two year course at the time, meaning a third year in Bendigo LaTrobe University. (I still had time with my Grandparents in Mildura).

During my two years I learnt to really understand and appreciate various aspects of art as its own – not just Koori Art but the history of both Indigenous and European Art in many forms. I became enthralled with “behind the scenes”.

I enjoyed going to art camps, festivals, exhibitions, workshops and lectures. I felt inspired witnessing artists from all nationalities speak. Talking, sharing and
interacting with other people who were keen on listening, exploring, sharing and expressing one journey. I felt healing...I felt breathing...carrying on.

Some of my favourite artists who have inspired me on my artistic journey are William Barak (Victorian Koori artist), Rover Thomas (Fitzroy Crossing), Ginger Riley, Albert Namatjira, Clifford Possum, Emily Kngwarreye, Peggy Napingari, Ray Thomas, Treahna Hamm, Ginny Firebrace (cousin), Maree Clarke, Kimba Thompson, Gayle Madigan, Clinton Naine (T.S.I), Turbo-Trevor Brown. The list goes on and I should also mention my brother Sam Kerr, the best didgeridoo playe, and his mother, my Aunt Nola Kerr (now passed away).

These people have inspired me and lead the way for more talented Koories to walk forward...I am truly blessed by Mother Earth and Father Spirit.

**Where is My Art Going?**

I love working with kids and listening to the Elders, all Elders. I want to help kids gain strength in themselves. I want to help them understand that they can tell many stories themselves by being in tune with their families and with their surroundings.

Story-telling is a great gift that has been passed on by their families whether Indigenous or not. We all have special stories passed on through our mobs. I love listening to innocent stories. Our children today and kids of tomorrow are the ones that get to carry that special gift.

I want kids to understand that if I can paint stories from my ancestry then they certainly can do that as well. It takes time and patience. It takes deep listening and learning and paying respect. I would like children to be able to take pride in themselves so they can move forward in their daily life without negativity and self-
doubt. Art for me has been a journey of self-expression that has allowed me to think, reflect and heal.

In the future I would like to work with young Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in the role of an artist in residence. In this capacity I will teach various art styles and techniques. I will encourage them to tell their own stories without judgement. I would like to bring youth and Elders together so they share each others stories, ask each other questions and give each other answers.
1. **Introduction**

This project is about my life, my history with my family, friends and my son. In my work I paint from the heart and let people see particular places and times. There are so many special, sacred sites to Aboriginal people as a mob, but these are my special sites. Each of my paintings is a special site that I've created from my own stories. The paintings have come from a spirit that we can't see, but which can be felt and heard.

My hope is that through my work people can sense what I've felt, heard and seen as I've grown up and become who I am becoming today. I talk as an Aboriginal man about the environment, about people I have known and about the mob. I'm talking about respect for our history.

2. **Overview of Research**

The paintings in my Masters are about my journey. It's about river, flow and change and the continuity of life. It's about the river flowing to the sea. In my life, things needed to change and that's come out through my work. It has come out through spirit. I know that the work comes from within. It's been sitting there the whole time. I've never tried to make an ugly picture. My message is that life is beautiful, but it changes all the time.

In the first series of paintings, I show my connection with my great-grandmother. I show the connection between her and the cultural significance of the earth and the river. I show the richness of the earth and what it contains and holds. I want to express the emotional and spiritual appreciation of it.

The second body of work reveals my journey from my origins from Lake Mungo. The paintings describe how I've travelled that distance from the river to the sea.
The journey has been about holding onto the stories from my place of birth to the development of a relationship with a new land. The second body of paintings are a present from me to my son.

3. Research Approach

Within this research project, I take an Indigenous arts-based autobiographical approach to explore my research question. What I do is Aboriginal and it comes from ages old. Through the creation of art works, this project creates opportunities for old stories to be recognised and new stories to be recorded. My artwork uses colours and techniques that are new.

**Origin**

*The central source*
*Is Mother Earth*

*It's where we come from*
*And what's been said*

*For us to pass on*
*To the ones who follow*

When I begin a painting, I have an image or an idea of what it's going to be like. I like the uncertainty of the materials. Working with the elements can alter the outcome my art-works. I use paints and glues that are exposed to the coldness and mixed with the earth. I enjoy the unpredictability. This connects my work more with the universe and with the spirit of the land.

Some images are created by chance. I believe that if they should exist they will. There is a cause and effect and an underlying message. I believe that everything happens for a reason. It's for me just to work it out and play with what I've got.
One night the coldness moved in on the oil sealer of a painting like a frost. It looked like water and it was beautiful. Sometimes the earth I use might cover up the image a bit but it’s saying other things as well. That elusiveness allows me to explore my imagination.

I sometimes rub the paintings in the earth to appreciate that physical connection between the image and the land. There are so many layers, not just in the materials, but in the Spirit. I use pigment which has that relationship with ochre, between people and the earth. I put ochres and pigment into my paintings to show that relationship.

My grand-grandmother was the backbone and the heart of the family. She held us close together. She was so strong and beautiful. She passed her stories on to me to make me strong and keep me going. She helps me to follow my dreams and the things that I wanted to achieve – God bless her.

When I paint I try to capture images of life. These images tell the stories about people and animals. Embodied in the painting is the spirit of these images which talks about who they are, where they come from and where they are going. They talk about the connection between the earth and their being.

Paintings Talk

My paintings talk about what I've seen
and what I've experienced
and how my life has been

They show what I understand
and what I've seen
Painting gives me a stronger identity

It holds a great sense of power
as myself
as something that I am doing and that only I can do
This gift is part of a whole circle of beautiful things

I’m having a lot of fun with my painting
I’m feeling more confident
My paintings are my creations

They’re special and unique in their own ways
The more I make the happier I become
They’re out there existing

4. The Spirit of Dance

The practice of placing earth on our bodies allows us to become something larger than ourselves. It completes the connection. Dancing has been my tradition. It’s an age-old tradition. I’ve been dancing since I was four. I’ve been carrying that respect not only for myself but for my ancestors and for all my cousins.

When you dance, you paint up with the ochre and pay respect to the earth, It takes you to a different place, somewhere spiritual. Once you start dancing, you take on a different body. You’re not looking at the people or the crowd. There is no face. You’re in a different reality. I do that and I feel that.

Grinding the Ochre

we’ve been using ochre for so long
we’ve had grinding stones
that’s history and that’s us now

there’s magic in grinding the ochre
mixing the water with the ochre
seeing how fine you can get it
you’re mixing it up and it’s just like magic
putting it on your body
it’s freezing cold

and you put it on and it makes you wake up
and it gives you that warm sensation
and then it’s on your body

and you can’t see it because it’s wet
and then it dries
there’s this beautiful whiteness

different patterns and designs
traditional designs sometimes
or else you just the slap it on

covering your body
to pay respect

there’s a sense of transformation
in following the procedures
of collecting the ochre
grinding the ochre

placing it on your body
performing with the ochre on your body
on the earth

stamping your feet
and raising the dust

while you’re doing corroboree or dancing
the stronger and the harder the thuds
the greater the respect to Mother Earth
showing that connection
all the earth kicking up around you
you’ve got the earth on

we come from earth
and we go back to earth
It’s a strong practice
After the dance
you’re on a spiritual high
you can still smell it – you’ve become it…

It’s always around
5. The First Exhibition

City Style – Country Youth

Set One

Sun-Sky Nana Clarke
Wet to Dry Murray River
Whistling River Nantiloc
Hornsey Park Play
Me and Sam
Water Spiders
Walking the Travel
Untitled

5.1 Each piece in this set represents a site and a place in time.

The title of these works is Stories, Listening, Music, Dance, and there are eight pieces that intertwine and connect, even though they're separate. What inspired me were the stories, and memories of dancing and listening to my Elders, my Nan and my Pop on the riverbank, outside of Mildura.

I worked fast with this set of paintings. I wanted them to be spontaneous, like the feeling of music. The gold leaf in the river represents how rich the water is and how we should treasure it. It also reminds me of the notes of written music. The stripes remind me of a stringed instrument like a guitar. Sound and the water both flow.
As I painted this series, all the frames were stuck together. I painted the river first which was done with impasto, which I squished around with an upside down brush and palette. I wanted to change the top three, to reflect the sunset that occurs around Mildura. I separated the canvas after I was finished. The sides have been painted black to represent masculine power and strength. The white on the side represents ceremony and respect to Elders. We always use white in dance, for any ceremony. The paintings are about healing and encouragement. I hope they bring back memories for other people, of when they were kids, and remind them about their grandparents, and about listening, and about music, and about the noise in the bush along the river. Something to make us all feel better.
5.2 These paintings portray my own personal journey.

‘Swept Away’ is about the river. It’s about having emotions and feelings and a sense of anxiety. It’s about not knowing. The feeling of being swept away is part of my own journey at the moment. It reflects the movement of my life on to another bend in the river.

Aesthetically I have tried to change the look of the Murray. In ‘Swept Away’ it’s gold and there are lots of scratch marks. In ‘Murray Mi Mi’, it’s black with a golden sunset and a light blue sky. You can see a burst of sun coming over the camp. That’s what the sites of the Latje Latje people along the Murray are like, when the sun is going down. The colours in the river remind me of the sunset and the beautiful pinks and blues and yellows that shimmer across the top of the water.
I love the feeling of being a tool for the spirit, not just my spirit, but the Greater Spirit and Mother Earth.

Sometimes after I've finished a painting, I see colours in it that I don't even recognise. In many of my works I've painted a lot about sky, which to Koorie people is like Father Spirit. I also paint Mother Earth, so the two entities come together. There is the Creative Spirit Sky and Mother Earth and in the middle is the river. The river is like the child between mother and father. It continues on. That sort of knowledge and understanding reveals itself in my paintings even when I may not be consciously aware of it.

I've always said that red is the female colour, traditionally, but when us boys are dancing, we wear a red lap lap, so it's representative of the female and the male as well. This colour is of great significance.

In the green forest that I've painted, I've incorporated the pattern of Aboriginal cross-hatching, the traditional markings of South Eastern Australia. This is our bush and our land. This is traditional. It also represents what Europeans have done to the land, and how they've fenced it, planted crops and irrigated it. There are many layers of meaning and layer upon layer of paint.

I work quickly and I work with the materials while they are still wet. While the paint is still drying, I like to put oil over powder pigment. The powder pigment is flicked on, but it's got a haze to it as well. Then I put an oil sealer over the top and then shellac after that. While it's still wet, I put it out in the sun and let it dry, and it sort of bubbles. I like to rub the paintings in the dirt, or just like to leave them outside for the night, to let them be out in the environment, because they're always going to be inside afterwards. They're like children, like dancers. A dance group.
5.3 It’s all experimentation and just waiting for an answer. Taking a risk and seeing what happens. Sometimes when I’m doing a group of paintings, they look good at the start, and I get the feeling that it’s all coming too easily. Then I’ll just stuff it up and there’s a big mistake or it all goes white. Then I start panicking and my heart’s just racing and I’m running around trying to work out which materials to grab to try and fix it, because the look I like is disappearing on me.

That happened with these works. I put another coat on and all of them just lost it, four days worth of work. I had a matter of minutes, because the wind was picking up and I was working outside. And then something magical kicked in and they came good by themselves. It’s an amazing experience to watch paintings fix themselves up. I just let go and I remembered that I’d been there before many other times. I love that whole experience of not knowing what’s going to happen and the adrenalin of that experience and then coming through to an outcome that you’re happy with. It’s so beautiful. The paintings are not the same as they were but they’re still good.

5.3 I locked myself away to do these paintings. I was staying with my family, a house full of ten to twelve people at a time. I was painting out the back and my brother Sam was yelling at the kids, ‘Don’t you go near Uncle Craig, you leave him alone!’ I appreciated that. Even Buster the dog wouldn’t come near me. He’d just sniff at me and then take off. It gave me the time and space I needed to think. There was a lot going on in my life at the time, and I just painted, from sunup to sundown, through the early hours of the morning. I’d get a couple of hours sleep and then I was just up and at it again.
A lot was going through my head. I was thinking about home, thinking about Koorie, thinking about family, thinking about the river, thinking about Nan and Pop, thinking about my son, thinking about my life, and my journey and where I was at.

5.4 The river is always flowing, it is never the same.

Each painting shows a different part of the river. There’s a lot of gold leaf on the river bank of ‘River Flowers’. That’s the treasures of the rich earth. There are hints of red which is indicative of the red earth of Mildura. The name Mildura means sore eyes in Aboriginal to the Latje people, from the dust and the flies. In this painting, it’s bush springtime up there, with all the purples, yellows, blues and pinks. There are lots of beautiful bush plants up there that Nan used to love. She’d never, ever pick them because she believed it was taking a life to pick a flower. If we were killing ants or even digging in the earth as kids, we were told off by our Elders, ‘It’s Mother Earth, you’re hurting her.’

Everything you did had to be done for a reason, and there were repercussions for what you did as well. So you take, but you give back. This painting is dedicated to my Great Grandma, because I loved her so much. I still love her so much. I loved holding her hands and walking through all the river flowers. It’s a special one.

This is summer time in Mildura, stinking hot, It reminds me of dancing as well, and us kids with lap laps on. One time when a red dust storm that came out of nowhere. We had just finished performing for a group of tourists which used to happen sometimes. Tourists used to meet us out there, and we would dance and tell stories and sit around and have dinner with them. That was great because we’d hear stories from all over the world like Germany, America and England.
I’ve painted some dots, and even though we’re traditionally not dot painters, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with just a bit of dot here and there. The dots aren’t used traditionally. These dots are like dancers on either side of the river. That’s what it represents to me. I don’t believe in us doing traditional dot paintings because that’s not us, but if you’ve got a different reason for it, then you should be allowed to do it.

What I do is contemporary Aboriginal art, it’s urban art but it’s Craig Charles’ art. First and foremost I’m Craig, but you know, I’m Koori, and the two go hand in hand.

Traditionally, some people say the whirly whirly is good, but my Nana and Pop used to say it’s bad luck, and if you saw a whirly whirly you had to look away. It was a story passed on to me so I wanted to pass it on. The painting ‘Whirly Whirly’ shows a special ceremonial place for Koories to dance to tell stories and listen to Elders. Sometimes when you paint you just need to get something off your chest.

‘Morning Walk’ shows a hot summer’s morning after breakfast, a cup of tea, vegemite on toast and porridge. We used to go for walks, me and Nan, to get more wood because you’d always have the camp-fire going. In the painting, the white line along the river represents my Nan walking with me along the river. There is a burst of sun, like in the mornings in the bush, or at the river, and it’s shining beautiful gold through the trees.
5.5 The painting ‘Elders Path’ is homage to Elders from all nations.

The river this time is a white line, a fine line but a strong one. The Elders have been around for so long and they’ve known and seen so much, from different people and places. That’s exactly what the river is, too. The very fine lines represent a tribe of people going toward the river, towards the Elders. They meet at the river and listen to the Elders. The red symbolises the head bands and lap laps of the dancers. The gold shows how rich the river is and how rich our Elders are. There is spirit and energy in the stars in the sky.

‘Travel Time’ has a fine white line along the river, representing the Elders at the forefront of our people. The river is dark here, coated in shellac, with a darker line in the middle representing power and strength. The painting represents me, my brother, my other brother Nathan and my sister Bonny. It depicts our travel time in the dance group, and travelling throughout Victoria, Australia and overseas. Regardless of where we went, we never forgot where we came from, Mildura and the river. We always carried our Elders' stories with us, and paid that respect when we went overseas.

‘Nana's Place’ shows a swirl of emotions, fun times and memories. My Nana holds a very special place in my heart and she is the middle of the swirl. There’s a lot of gold, black and red. Nana was very into the colours of the flag as a representation of our people, culture and struggle.

5.6 A morning cup of tea on the Murray River is so special.

Nan and Pop and Art and Sam and Linda and Hank and Brenda and Crocket and David, Sharon and Leone – we all lived out on the river. We had a tree on the
riverbank, and it was our tea bag tree. When you finished with the tea bag you’d swing it and it would land in the tree. It was a tradition we had to do every morning. They’d just be hanging all around, all these tea bags. There were thousands of them.

The rest of the family lived in tents but Nan and Pop and I were a bit flasher because we had a caravan. I think we were one of the first blackfellas up that way to have a caravan. We were there for about six years before welfare come out and told Nan that we had to get a house because they had to send me to school. In ‘Morning Cuppa’ you can see the morning sun coming up and the burst of beautiful energy. If you look closely enough you can see actual particles of light.
Set Three

Mimi Spirit Dance
Special Sky
Bush Night Time
What's That Pop?
Someone Listening
Yarra Walk
Golden Yarra
Which Way Nite?

The river is silver in 'Mimi Spirit Dance' and there are a lot of blue and green pigments, which have a flowing look. The Mimi Spirit is the spirit that used to dance around the dead body, around the dying person. In the Mimi Spirit Dance, we used to lay the younger boys down on the ground and we would dance around them. That was one of the first dances that I learnt and it has stayed with me. Some people say the Mimi Spirit can be bad, but some people say he's good. He's definitely not one to be messed around with.

In 'Special Sky' we can see a sun shower just on dusk. It's early evening in the bush. We can see a couple of sacred sites on either side of the river. I've tried to capture the flow of the rain coming down. The river has moved too and the earth has broken away and revealed the sacred sites. They could be burial grounds or middens. There are lots of burial grounds in the Perry Sandhills. It's at the back of Wentworth, outside of Mildura heading towards Broken Hill. There are big red mounds there and they shift with the wind. They are forever changing. Near the river, the ground is white clay and then all of a sudden you'll see mounds of bright red. Us Latje kids used to go out there a lot and do our dance practice.
We would take the kids out there and run amuck, and we’d learn about the animal tracks that were there, kangaroo, lizard and goanna tracks and we would follow them. There used to be a music festival up there and they’d have the dancers out there at night under the bright stars. All of us kids would sit up on the top of the hills and slide down on a piece of cardboard, because they were really steep. That was bush night time.

There are layers of gold leaf in the painting which is my Pop, with layer upon layer of knowledge, compassion, generosity and strength. He’s an amazing man who has done a lot in his life. He’s a very tolerant man. He would do anything for anybody within the family. To me the painting of the wide mouth of the Murray is very masculine. The big red bend has a lot of spirit. Pop used to take me out on the boat or take me to different parts of the river fishing. It’s dedicated to the spirit of someone listening. You can’t put a name on it, but you know that someone is around you and that they are listening. The people who are dotted in the middle have actually passed away. This painting also reminds me of the smell of the Murray River.

5.7 When I’ve needed time to think, I would go walking.

I would often find myself at the river. ‘Yarra Walk’ represents my time here in Melbourne. Even if there are buildings and skyscrapers around the place, it’s still built on beautiful Mother Earth. And no matter where we are, we’ve always got to remember that. We’ve still got the Elders listening along the Yarra.

‘Golden Yarra’ is about me in the city. You can see the dirt in the air and there’s paper that is visible through the paint, like newspapers. This is a city and there is paper blowing around. ‘Which Way Note’ shows the Yarra River as well. I didn’t
paint these works in Melbourne, so I had to remember and imagine them. ‘Which Way?’ is a question we ask a lot in the city.
Set Four

Latje Birth Place
Balun (river) Listening
Elders Touch
Boori’s (child) Tracks
Birwain’s (boys) Tracks
One Travel

These set of six paintings are really special to me. Out of the whole exhibition I think that these are the most important and significant. ‘Latje Birth Place’ is where I come from and where my people come from. It’s like you are walking into a temple at the time and the place of your birth. It’s to be done by no-one else but you. It starts off as a dot in the middle, and it’s just so rich and beautiful, the years as a baby, of being nurtured, and growing and discovering, Around the central dot is a protective shield. It reminds me of a shield that my Uncle made that I’ve got at home. He burnt the wood in such a way that it had fine little crackles and patterns on it, and that was manhood.

He was such a strong cultural man, Uncle Henry Johnson from Gippsland. I grew up with him and he used to always scare the hell out of me if I was in the kitchen. ‘What are you doing in there boy?’
So I’d just be pscchhhew out of there with the door slapping behind me. Nan and Pop and I lived in a caravan at the side of the house, and I’d be flying in there and jumping under the doona.
Nan would say:
‘What were you doing?’
‘Nothing!’
‘You was in that kitchen again, wasn’t ya?’
'No.'

'Yes you was.'

In this set of six paintings, there's a continuum flow, so I've joined the whole thing together with the gold leaf. This is the start of my journey, where I was born. It's such a rich and important time. And then you grow into who you are and into manhood. It's still rich but in a different way so then it's back into gold again. This is my journey.

5.8 The river flows through it all.

I've coated it all in shellac and an oil sealer. With these works I actually put them outside in the sun, so they dried like that, and they bubbled, which reminds me of the sap in the gum trees in summer. I got that effect from heating and cooling, heating and cooling, staying up for days and nights on end getting these done, because they were such large pieces. Once again, I've included the tradition of crosshatching which here looks like a forest of trees. The colours are just like sand, which is like the river but also pays homage to the trees and the bush.

You don't have to speak, and you can just think The land and the bush listen to you. It's like the deep listening of 'Dadirri' (Atkinson 2001; Ungunmerr 1999). The river is a living thing. It carries living things. It is a living thing, to us, and so it hears everything that you don't speak out aloud. You can actually immerse yourself in the river, and be completely covered by the water. There's total contact between one living object and another. Water is special. It's a really unique thing to be amongst all the living things. You don't have to talk, you just know. You know it, but there are all the ancestors before, too, so it's carrying all that. The water flows, it keeps on travelling and the roots of the trees on the riverbank are implanted in the soil which the river feeds. It's all interconnected
energy, passing on, one big interconnected organism that we all live in and are part of.

There's a lot of gold leaf in the 'Elders Touch'. I really wanted to highlight the flow of this. My Aunty Nola was talking to me when I did this particular work. She is my Elder, and I had to claim her with this. Each panel represents a different part of my life, starting from my birth.

You can see me growing up as a child, listening to Elders. Then you can see my son coming into my life, but it's also about me as a child on the river and there are actual footprints on the painting because Mungo, my son ran across it. He had no shoes on and you can see his toes. My son will carry on in these paintings. And maybe follow in his father's footsteps!

‘One Travel’, shows the journey from this life onto the next life. It's got all the beautiful colours when the sun goes down, purples and greens.
Set Five

River Bay...City Sea
Country Bush – City Park
Around the Sacred Fire
After Fire Came Growth
Bush Style...City I.D.
All About Country

This set are quite different to the other ones. I have used a lot of impasto on the back, which is a medium like a gluey clay. You put it on and squish it around and it forms a chunky texture. You can make all different sorts of designs with it. I've also used a lot of powder pigment and gold leaf and then I've tipped oil all over the works, like syrup. The powder pigment has actually joined together and floated out into the crevices. In ‘After Fire Came Growth’ it has formed the shape of a bush. It’s rich golden country that the fires have been through and with the regrowth of the bush after the fire. In ‘Bush Style...City I.D.’ that’s my handprint. Traditionally that was our identification – a bit of ‘tongue-in-cheek’.

I am a river boy and then I came to the city and it took me ages to adjust. In ‘River Boy...City Sea’, I've tried to capture the waves in the ocean and the turbulence of water and of emotions. I never liked the sea, it was always freezing. It was just too rough and there are sharks. Lots of people are like that though. Us lads from Mildura and Robinvale would go up to Nowra, or the South Coast, and we would tell the fellas up there that we ate kangaroo and emu, and they would just freak out. They just don't eat it. They're into seafood and the way they eat it freaks us out. So it's the differences between us that I tried to capture in these paintings. This encapsulates our relationships.
I love taking Mungo to the park, so there are memories there. In ‘Country Bush - City Park’ I am trying out a new medium and exploring a different technique. I’m also thinking about old times and sacred times, like around the sacred fire. So many stories from all different cultures have been told around the fire. It’s such a special energy and such a special place. It feeds us, warms us, makes us happy and looks after us. There’s that connection between bush, earth and spirit, because you’re burning it and it’s passing on to the skies.

‘All About Country’ is what these works have been all about. There are pools of water from when the river floods. When the floods came up, we’d have to move the caravan back, and pack up our tents, and we’d go up into the paddocks and camp. We used to take our canoe and go through the bush, and the water was half way up the trees. It was amazing as a kid to see. I love living in the bush.
6. The Second Exhibition

‘Mungo Stories’

Three Brothers in Flight
Me and my two brothers travelled away from Country to deliver our mob’s culture
– From Djarra country (Bendigo).

A Mungo Site
I have a special place for my son and later we will travel to both..

Biami Mask
Father spirit travels to Earth to pay respect…many people dance after story-telling.

Boomerang Place
Gubbas (whitefellas) didn't pronounce 'Boomerang' properly…I, as well as my
family thought it was funny.

Boondi Splash
The Boondi was used in different ways…some as studious, but some just funny.

Canoe Sacred Fires Bunarong – Look over there!
When I walked down the bay chasing the Mungo lad we could feel ancestors
around in the scar tree canoes..

Great Spirit
Elders are there to pay respect…white/black. Nanna Bett.
Mimi Spirit
If you look at the back of the $1 note you can see the Mimi Spirit. He is the special spirit dancing around the dying victim.

Missing Magic Clapstick
Latje Latje dancers…we travelled, we painted, we sang and danced but we couldn't find that other clapstick.

Moon Glow Hill Top
When I watched my son he made me laugh and sometimes travelled when the moon glowed, at the Boonerwrung hill-tops

Mungo Story
Craig Allen Charles and son Mungo Bill Atherton Charles talking

Night Time Whale Watching
I travelled to Catalina Island off the south coast LA – Cherokee people call it Pemu – place of whale birth. Thank you Aunty Helen – Cherokee.

One Last Coolamon
The painting is about the stolen generation missing from their Mums' Coolamon.

River Serpent to the Sea (1)
I come from the Latje Latje river and travelled to the sea where my son lives with his Mum to do special things

River Serpent to the Sea (2)
I come from the Latje Latje river and travelled to the sea where my son lives with his Mum to do special things
River Serpent to the Sea (3)
I come from the Latje Latje river and travelled to the sea where my son lives with his Mum to do special things

Sacred Sea Horse
I called him Uncle Slab...he looked like he was dancing.

Salt Lake Playground
I come from the salt lake playground. One day I will take my son back there.

Scar Tree Canoes
The painting pays respect to Mother Earth and Father Spirit and the clever ways of my ancestors.

Significance
There are a lot of special places and sometimes we forget the significance of what we are standing on...who it is.

Sting Ray Jetty
Myself and my nieces jumped off a jetty at San Remo while Mungo watched over large stingrays

Whale Spirit
The Whalers came on boats. My family are Briggs

Yorta Turtle Births
My father's tribe is Yorta Yorta from Echuca / Moama - these paintings talk about my respect for my Ancestral Privilege.
Yorta Turtle Travelling

I am a Yorta man still travelling..........
6.1 To me, the river is the source of healing.

The river has always been a meeting place for Koori people. My mother’s people come from the river, my father’s people come from the river and they’re totally different tribes. The river is a place where you can sit and reflect and watch the water move. If you’ve got a problem, or you’re stuck somewhere in your life, the feeling of movement of the river is a reminder that it will pass and everything will be alright. Whatever else is happening, the river is going to keep flowing on and on. There are so many things you can do at the side of the river, in the river, on the river. If you’re hot, you can go for a swim in the water and it will cool you down and make you feel good.

6.2 We lived on the river bank until I was six.

I would dance while they told me stories and sang songs. A lot of the stories were about small things that were practical but meaningful. They’d say ‘See this leaf…’, or ‘See that tree there…that’s what you can make flour out of…’, or ‘This is what you can put in your tea and make it taste different.’ Nan would tell me stories about her mother, that were passed on from her mother, stories about the river when they were growing up themselves.

There were lots of times fishing with my Pop. In my paintings, I don’t depict them as detailed images in each piece, like me sitting on the river with a fishing rod. They are just memories. Memories for me, but maybe memories for other people as well. I like to try and connect with whoever is looking at the work as well. I don’t want to have the painting just about me. It’s also about the viewer. At exhibition openings or at a gallery, you see your works up on the wall. Sometimes I stand next to people when they’re looking at my work, just to listen in to what they are saying. It makes me happy when I hear that they are picking up on the experiences that I wanted to share. Mind you, I listened to one boy one time, he
said ‘Mum, it looks like vegemite on toast!’ And when I looked at it, it did actually. It made me hungry. If something reminds the viewer about their own experience, then the painting has done its job. It makes me happy.

I miss the river when I’m away from it. I miss the animals, the insects and the sense of freedom. Going back to the river always makes me feel good. There’s a sense of belonging, of coming back, of returning home. That’s where I come from, and when I pass on, that’s where I will go back to.

6.3 Since my son was born there is a new dimension to my work.

A different level of myself is emerging. My son is my best creation. He has brought a lot of happiness out in my paintings. Visually and physically this has allowed me to accept the mistakes in my paintings and in my life. I realise that there’s a solution and that it always corrects itself. There’s a way around mistakes. The relationship between my son and my painting has made me much more tolerant and patient.

My work is always rushed. I like working fast. I like working on a whole group of small paintings simultaneously. These days I’m not so worried about whether it turns out properly the first time because I can get back to it later. It means I am understanding my paintings at a different level emotionally and spiritually.

A painting is a reflection for other people. Some image or colour of earth might trigger off a memory for them of their childhood or their grandmother or grandfather. It’s something that they can go off and explore for themselves.
6.4 You can make choices in your life and it can alter your destiny.

Eventually though something brings you back. You’ve got to get back to where you were going, no matter what. It might take that bit longer, but I think everything happens for a reason. We can change the course of things for a while, but eventually it will go back to what it’s supposed to be, which is all good. I’ve been taking my time lately, getting my sense of direction. I believe it’s all meant to be good for people. With some people it just takes a bit longer.

Even though I sometimes feel alone, I always have the feeling that there’s a guardian spirit around me, watching over me. It’s always with me, and in the painting, you can see this spirit. My feeling is that there is spirit all around and beautiful colours too.

I believe that as we pass over, we are all beautiful colours.

The world is made of colours.
7. Conclusion

I wonder
I realise
I question my art

This research project demonstrates a different form of Koori Art. It’s not just about painting pictures. It’s about using images and stories as the basis of communication. It’s about becoming strong again for the kids. It’s about being a role model for them.

Art-making is a form of recovery
Through individualised self-styled expression
Everybody’s art is their own

The work has come from Latje, from me dancing, from Mildura and from me becoming a father. It comes from the whole flow of it all, from the river to the sea.

In my painting, I try to capture the movement of the dance, of the brolga, the kangaroo and the emu. The essence of the Latje is in my work. The dancers are there, the respect to Elders and the strength of the spirit. I’m taking a look back from where I’ve come from in order to see the bigger picture.

Art-making generates
Strength, individuality, style
Comfort, beauty, happiness, longing

Making art makes me who I am
It creates the questions
That surround me

How high?
Which way?
Where from?

I long for belonging

There is a healing dimension to this project. There have been many profound losses in the Latje Latje community over the last five years. My hope is that the project will help restore a sense of joy to the members of the community who live in the Latje Latje area.

I did not realise that making art
Could and would
Come to mean so much more

This journey of painting the river with its continual flow has helped me a lot. I have realised that I need to move on in my life and that everything will be alright. I believe in ancestor spirit, and the guardianship of my Nan and my Dad and, even beyond, to our creator spirits.

Past and present
Respecting life
Beginnings and endings
Placing my stories from the past and present
Into my own form of way
Mungo my son is from the sea. These paintings are for him. I hope they will help him look back and reflect on the journeys that we have both taken from the river to the sea. They echo the stories from the ancestors and their land. They reflect the on-going cultural practices that have been passed on to him and to many other Aboriginal people.

**Relax**

*Be happy*

*Surrender yourself*

*Making art brings celebration*

This project is about inspiration and lifting the spirit. That’s the journey… Let us walk it.

**Surrender is**

*Relaxation, belief, trust*

*Surrender says*

*I give me*

*Handing myself over to Father Spirit*

*Coming from Mother Earth*

*Falling freely to the earth*

*Knowing that I will be caught*
8. References


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Appendices

The Artworks

Grinding the Ochre

Murray River
The Artworks

Craig Charles
Wet to Dry Murray River
Me and Sam
Walking the Travel
Nana’s Place
Travel Time
Swept Away
Mimi Spirit Dance
Bush Night Time
What’s That Pop?
Which Way Nite?
Latje Birth Place
Balun (river)
Listening
Boori’s (child)
Tracks
Birwain’s (boys) Tracks
After Fire Came Growth
Boondi Splash
3 Brothers in Flight
Missing
Magic
Clapstick
River Serpent to the Sea (1)
River Serpent to the Sea (4)
A Mungo Site x 2
All About Country

Significance
Yorta Turtle Births
Whale Spirit
Scar Tree Canoes
Yorta Turtle Travels
Night Time Whale Watching
Mungo Emu
One Last Coolamon
Grinding the Ochre

Craig Charles
The central source is Mother Earth

It’s where we come from and what’s been said

For us to pass on to the ones who follow
When I begin painting I have an image or an idea of what it’s going to be like. I like the uncertainty of the materials.

Working with the elements can alter the outcome of my works. I enjoy the unpredictability. It connects my piece with the universe and with the Spirit of the land.

I use paints and glues that are exposed to the coldness and mixed with the earth. Some images are created by chance. I believe that if they should exist they will.

I believe that everything happens for a reason. It’s for me just to work it out and play with what I’ve got.
Paintings Talk

My paintings talk about what I’ve seen
And what I’ve experienced
And how my life has been

They show what I understand
And what I’ve seen
Painting gives me a stronger identity

They hold a great sense of power
As something that only I can do
This gift is part of a whole circle of beautiful things

I’m having a lot of fun with my painting
I’m feeling more confident
My paintings are my creations

They’re special and unique in their own ways
The more I make the happier I become
They’re out there existing
A painting is a reflection for other people
One night

The coldness moved in
On the oil sealer of a painting
Like a frost

It looked like water
It was beautiful

Sometimes

The earth I use might cover up the image
But it’s saying other things as well

That elusiveness allows you
To explore your imagination
My work is always rushed
But it’s good to slow down sometimes

I like working fast
I like working on a group of small paintings simultaneously

These days

I’m not so worried about it turning out the first time
Because I can get back to it

I’m understanding my paintings
At a different level emotionally
Tradition

The practice of placing earth on our bodies allows us to become something larger than ourselves. It completes the connection.

Dancing has been my tradition. It’s an age-old tradition. I’ve been dancing since I was four.

I’ve been carrying that respect not only for myself but for my ancestors and for all my cousins.
Images of Life

When I paint I capture images of life
These images tell the stories
about people and animals

Embodied in the painting
is the Spirit of these images
which talks about

Who they are
where they come from
and where they are going

They talk about the connection
between the earth
and their being
I want to show my connection with my grandmother the connection between her and the cultural significance of the earth the richness of the earth and what it contains and holds the emotional and spiritual appreciation of it 

I rub the paintings in the earth to have that physical connection between the image and the land It shows the layers there’s so many layers not just in the materials but in the spirit

My grandmother was the backbone the heart of the family that held us close together so strong and beautiful

She passed herself on to me to make me strong and keep me going to follow my dreams and the things that I wanted to achieve

I use pigment which has that relationship with ochre between people and the earth I put ochres and pigment into my paintings to show that relationship
Somewhere Different

When you dance
you paint up with the ochre
and pay respect
to the earth

It takes you to a different level
somewhere spiritual
once you start dancing
you take on a different body

You’re not looking at the people
or the crowd
there is no face
you’re in a different reality

I do that
I feel that
Grinding the Ochre

we’ve been using ochre for so long
we’ve had grinding stones
that’s history and that’s us now

there’s magic in grinding the ochre
mixing the water with the ochre
seeing how fine you can get it

you’re mixing it up and it’s just like magic
putting it on your body
it’s freezing cold

and you put it on and it makes you wake up
and it gives you that warm sensation
and then it’s on your body

and you can’t see it because it’s wet
and then it dries
there’s this beautiful whiteness

different patterns and designs
traditional designs sometimes
or else you just the slap it on

covering your body
to pay respect

there’s a sense of transformation
in following the procedures
of collecting the ochre
grinding the ochre

placing it on your body
performing with the ochre on your body
on the earth

 stamping your feet
and raising the dust

while you’re doing corroboree or dancing
the stronger and the harder the thuds
the greater the respect to Mother Earth

showing that connection
all the earth kicking up around you
you’ve got the earth on

we come from earth
and we go back to earth
It’s a strong practice

After the dance
you’re on a spiritual high
you can still smell it

It’s always around
I wonder
I realise
I question my art
Since my son was born
There is a new dimension to my work

A different level of myself
Is emerging

My son is my best creation
He’s brought happiness out in my paintings

Visually and physically this has allowed me
To accept the mistakes in my paintings

I realise that there’s a solution
And that it always corrects itself

There’s a way around mistakes
I’m happy about that

The relationship between my son and my painting
Has made me more tolerant and patient
Art-making is a form of recovery
Through individualised self-styled expression

Everybody’s art is their own
Art-making generates
Strength, individuality, style
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Respecting life

Beginnings and endings
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Into my own form of way
Surrender is…
Relaxation, belief, trust

Surrender says…
I give me

Handing myself over to Father Spirit…
Coming from Mother Earth

Falling freely to the Earth…
Knowing that I will be caught
Everything

Everything that Nana taught me
I want Mungo to know about
Relax
Be happy
Surrender yourself
Making art
Brings celebration
The Murray River

Photographs    Terry Melvin
Titles         Craig Charles
Strength
Water walking
Regrowth
Sacred Scar: Aunty Nola
Sunset Reflections
Where is the goanna?
River spiderweb
Reflection
Old man
Skimming Travel
Silver Thoughts
Trees River Dreaming
Early Days of the Murray River
Lawrence GV & Kinross Smith G. (Eds.) 1975, *The Book of the Murray*, Graeme, Rigby Ltd, Melbourne Australia
Early Days of the Murray River
Lawrence GV & Kinross Smith G. (Eds.) 1975, The Book of the Murray,
Graeme, Rigby Ltd, Melbourne Australia
Early Days of the Murray River

Lawrence GV & Kinross Smith G. (Eds.) 1975, *The Book of the Murray*, Graeme, Rigby Ltd, Melbourne Australia

*Left: Some of the Aborigines who roamed the Murray area in the early days.*