Declaration

Title: Maree Clarke: Reflections on Creative Practice, Place & Identity

Candidate’s name: Maree Clarke

Name of School: School of Education RMIT University

Date submitted: November 2009

Declaration by the Candidate:

I certify that:
This thesis is entirely my own work, and due acknowledgement have been made where appropriate. 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. Any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party has been acknowledged.

Candidate’s signature:
Maree Clarke:

Reflections on Creative Practice, Place & Identity
A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Maree Clarke
Master of Arts (Education)
School of Education
Design & Social Context Portfolio
RMIT University Melbourne
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Project Proposal
Title
Maree Clarke: Reflections on Creative Practice, Place & Identity
Summary - Artist Bio
I am a practicing artist and also the Senior Curator and Exhibitions Manager at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne. I exhibit widely across a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture and traditional jewellery making. While I have had no formal training as an artist, everything I know has been taught to me by my brother who has since passed away. Quite often when I’m painting I think about my younger brother because he was the one that started me off painting.

I collect materials from places I have a blood connection to. Whether this is the skin of a carpet snake or the feathers of a black cockatoo, I need to go upcountry to get the material. When I visit country, the places I go to I always have a connection to otherwise they have no relevance. I am always thinking about country and family with every painting that I do. I’m from up around the Murray area, which is fairly hot, deserty country and the beautiful colours up that way inspire me. The artwork I produce incorporates paintings on canvas using acrylic paints that consist of rich, earthy colours. I also gather and use a lot of natural material, such as gumnuts, bottlebrush, acacia, and any other natural material I can find. I also combine natural fibres, such as string and sinew, to make some of my sculptural pieces. In my jewellery designs I combine a lot of natural things.

Most of my work is based on collaborative practice because the significance of passing on cultural knowledge is important to me. The practice of sharing knowledge and working collaboratively is an inherent part of how I work. I like my family to be around when I’m working so that I can pass that knowledge on.

My work experience has included working as an Aboriginal educator in Mildura for about nine and a half years. At the time, a job came up at the Mildura Aboriginal Art Co-op to set up an art and craft shop in the main street. I had never painted before, but my younger brother was a fantastic
painter and dancer. I remembered the first pair of earrings I made. I must have wiped the design off about 15 times. I just wasn’t happy with them and then I finally finished this one pair of earrings, which I think sold for about $15 or $20. This was in 1987/88. I went on to make a pure white quill necklace which is now in the Museum of Victoria. I have made two black quilled necklaces since then and a whole range of different jewellery out of wood and natural material like the gumnut.

From painting tiny bits of jewellery, I went on to paint the first green and gold tram for the Koorie Heritage Trust in 1988. That was supposed to be on the tracks for a couple of months advertising the new Koorie Heritage Trust (then called the Koorie Cultural Centre). I went on to paint large scale billboards and public arts projects.
Brief Description

The Significance of Totem

Totems govern life in Koori tribal language groups. For example, they dictate who you can talk to and marry, and govern rights for making art, including men’s business and women’s business. This translates as ‘Lore’ in Koori culture. Lore is a Koori term meaning a way of being that encompasses kinship systems, responsibilities, and beliefs, as they interconnect with a particular area of country.

I am connected to the Yorta Yorta, Wamba Wamba, Mutti Mutti and Boonurong people through my heritage. My connection to these four language groups provides the framework for my arts practice research project.

Totems are an important component of my work. I’ve never seen information collated anywhere about the totems of Victoria. I don’t even know all of the totems from my own tribe. I would like to gather as much information as I can, and give that to my nieces and nephews. I know there are a lot of other kids out there who have no idea, so it might give them a little bit of grounding, a little bit of something to hold on to from their own country.

In the past, when the Museum acquired Aboriginal artefacts, they sometimes didn’t record all of the details. This meant that there was then a break in the knowledge. We have our own collection of artefacts at the Koorie Heritage Trust, but we don’t have that layer of information about what the designs were about.

I think it would be very empowering to know all of the totems, including the male and the female totems.

The totems aren’t necessarily in the designs on the shields and artefacts. They are generally designs relating to those different areas. Gunnai/Kurnai
can be quite different to Latje Latje, for example. Some of the designs on the
banners may represent the totems. It’s like having an artist’s interpretation.
You wouldn’t necessarily have a blue wren on a shield, but you could have
markings of a blue wren.

I am interested in both male and female totems. Sometimes people overlook
the female totem and focus only on the male totem. I’ve been told that they
exist, it’s just a matter of finding them. If you look at the Gunnai totem, it’s a
Booran (pelican) which is huge, but the female totem is the blue wren, which
is really tiny. That’s the only one that I’ve seen with a female totem. I would
like to find out about other tribes and what their female totems are.
**Research Question**
What has been my experience of identity development as an Indigenous South Eastern Australian artist?

**Methodology**
The methodological approach I take is a combination of Historical Research (Black & MacRaild 2000; Tierney 2000; Hodder 2000) and the Indigenous approach to research of Dadirri (Atkinson 2001). Miriam Rose Ungummer describes Dadirri as an inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness which recognises the deep spring that is inside us (Ungummer 2000). This combination of methodologies has allowed me to undertake historical research from an Indigenous perspective which recognises and respects multiple voices and stances in a culturally sensitive way, using conversation, story-telling and deep listening as the basis for data gathering.

This project draws on and integrates resources which currently exist in a number of different forms and locations. To gather data for my research, I looked at historical documents and made field trips to country. The collected data included geographical locations, landscapes of area, designs, totems and stories. I sourced historical documents from the Rare Book Collection at the Koorie Heritage Trust. The Trust keeps a comprehensive collection of rare books and documents.

My work was also drawn from many different stories passed onto me by elders and other people in my family. In the last trip I did to Balranald, we lived on the mission down by the river and my aunt, my mum’s first cousin, took us out to the mission and started telling us stories from around that area. She now thinks we’re of age now where she can pass on certain stories. I’ll go up again and hear more of those stories and come back and start making some work.
This process of returning to country to hear the stories is in line with the practice of deep and respectful listening inherent in *Dadirri*, which underpins my research. The concept *Dadirri* appears in many Aboriginal languages and describes a process of listening deeply in ways which build community. As a research methodology, Deep Listening offers an approach which facilitates cultural awareness and enables cross-cultural knowledge transference. It is the process not just of listening to the elders, but looking at country and seeing what is there. It’s something you do unconsciously.

As part of my research project, I have had the opportunity to participate in Deep Listening events, collaborating in artistic improvisations across different art forms. In 2008, I attended a conference in Banff in Canada with members of the Koori Cohort and met with many First Nations people in Canada. In this cross-cultural exchange opportunity I participated in performances that enabled me as an artist to paint my response to research methodologies (in particular Deep Listening). These performances worked to strengthen cultural awareness and built cross-cultural relationships to produce a range of creative works.
Deep Listening
Blackfellas have been doing it for hundreds and hundreds of generations
Deep Listening is what we are doing here

Just listening to each other
Listening to the country
Listening to each other
And understanding each other’s journey.

Our performances show Deep Listening in the most amazing way
We had audiences in tears and we cried too
It was moving
It is powerful

In this urban environment we’re still doing it
We’ll continue to do it
And we’ll keep passing that on to our kids
That’s what it’s about

Continuing culture
We practice it every day
We don’t have to talk about it
We just do it
Rationale for Project
The rationale of the project is aligned with the vision of the Koorie Heritage Trust, where I work as the Senior Curatorial and Exhibitions Manager. The outcomes of this project are a gift to future generations, as well as to the current mob. It demonstrates a commitment to protecting, preserving and promoting the living culture of the Indigenous peoples of Southeast Australia. It provides a resource for Victorian artists and members of the Koorie community to learn about, recognise and value the rich cultural heritage of Victorian designs.

This research is important because it has not been done before and it needs to be done. The further down the track we get, the less information there is out there.
My Development as an Artist

During the 1990s, I worked to document the work of contemporary Southeastern Australian Indigenous artists. During this period, I worked for the City of Port Phillip as their first Indigenous Arts Officer. This work involved travelling around Victoria to collect the work of Aboriginal artists from different communities. These works were eventually exhibited in a series of five large exhibitions and represented the first public exhibition of Southeastern Indigenous artists works in Australia. The collection of works by these artists demonstrated the ways in which Southeastern Indigenous art is distinct to artwork produced in other parts of Australia, such as the Top End and Central Desert art. It reflected the existence of a strong and established Koori cultural identity and art making practice in the late 1990s. This whole period of my life was documented on film along with a series of interviews with the artists involved in the exhibition.

The period of the 1990s was important to me and my research because it highlighted the fact there was a unique and diverse Koori arts practice in existence. My work during the time was about bringing Koori art to the forefront of public awareness, because Aboriginal art from the Top End tended to be privileged and more recognised in the public arts domain. Koori arts practice was not getting any recognition and there was the misconception that Koori art did not exist, which translated to this idea that Koori people also did not exist in Victoria.

This was an important period for me for other reasons related to my own experience and development as an artist. I began painting in the late 1980s, a decade before I started collecting the work of Aboriginal artists around Victoria. I came to recognise just how significant the work of Victorian Aboriginal artists was in helping to develop and influence my own identity as a Koori artist. I also became much more interested in the idea of totem and the significance of this within my own family language group.
Projects

My visual art practice has included developing a large body of creative works as part of my Masters research. I have been involved in several exhibitions, including two in 2008, which were connected to my research project. This included the exhibition, *Ng woka, woka nganin: I am the Land and the Land is Me* (Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum from 24 October – 30 November, 2008) and the *Gulpa ngawul* exhibition (Koorie Heritage Trust December 2008).

I made a kangaroo tooth necklace for the exhibition *Ng woka, woka nganin: I am the Land and the Land is Me*. The exhibition showcased a range of two-dimensional and three-dimensional artworks from Victorian women artists, including myself (Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/Boonurong), Debra Couzens (Keeray Wurrong/Gunditjmara), Vicki Couzens (Keeray Wurrong/Gunditjmara) and Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta/Trawlwoolway/Mutti Mutti).

For this exhibition, I made a series of necklaces and headpieces. The exhibition was based on our connection to country and to each other as Aboriginal women. It demonstrated cultural continuity and the ways we continue our cultural traditions of making kangaroo tooth necklaces and headpieces – artefacts that have not been made for more than 200 years. This exhibition represented a reinterpretation of traditional art-making practices within the Koorie community.

Other work I have produced as part of my research includes a series of five shields; two were based on a river theme and three were based on my interpretation of Yorta Yorta, Wamba Wamba and Mutti Mutti. One looked like a basket weaving design and there was another based on Mutti Mutti with kangaroo skin fur across the front and another one was a huge diamond shaped on the shield – strong and striking and just using the ochre colours. Even though I use acrylic painting on canvas, I also do a lot of work on the
canoe shape or the shield shape. This shape can be interpreted as a shield, the canoe, a water carrier or a baby carrier. It’s a really nice shape to work with other than a rectangle or square canvas.
Conclusion

This study has been interested in the ways contemporary cultural knowledge and practices of Koori people from Southeastern Australia continue to thrive, develop and strengthen. These artists’ works have influenced me in significant ways in my own practice. My work demonstrates the ways in which Koori cultural identity and arts practice is distinct to Aboriginal people in other parts of Australia. When people think of Aboriginal art, they think of Top End and Central Desert art. People have often not heard of Victorian Aboriginal art. They often look at the dot paintings and Top End art. My work in the past of bringing the different works around Victoria together was to showcase Victorian regional artists. They were given an opportunity to exhibit their work. It was about breaking down stereotypes. The work of these artists helped to significantly influence my own thinking and arts practice. There are many photographers and artists who use different forms, contemporary forms. While this might not look like Aboriginal art, if you read the stories behind them, they are inherently Aboriginal. Many people think there are no Aboriginal people left in Victoria, that our cultural practices have gone. My work has been about shifting these perceptions and demonstrating our deep and continuing relationship to totem and country.
Bibliography


Brough Smyth, R. 1878, *The Aborigines of Victoria with Notes Relating to the habits of other parts of Australia and Tasmania*, Vols 1 & 2, John Ferres Government Printer, Melbourne, Australia


Appendix

Curriculum Vitae
Maree Clarke

Selected projects

Postal Address
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Employment
2010  Invited to New Zealand with Vicki Couzens for the 4TH WĀNANGA OF INDIGENOUS VISUAL ARTISTS ROTORUA – NEW ZEALAND
2009  Frankston Foreshore Public Art Project Kangaroo Apple with Vicki Couzens
2009  Possum Skin Cloak Workshop – Lake Macquarie Art Gallery NSW with Lee Darroch
2009  Public Art Project-Growling Grassland Frog Eggs-Point Cook with Vicki Couzens
2009  Invited by Monash City Council to tender for a Public Art Commission with Vicki Couzens
2009  Invited by City of Maribyrong to tender for a Public Art Commission with Vicki Couzens
2008  Cultural exchange-Canada
2008  Cloak making with Lee Darroch at the Pacific Arts Festival-America Samoa
2001  Senior Curator/Curator/Practicing Artist -present Koorie Heritage Trust
In my role as Exhibition Manager/Curator at the Koorie Heritage Trust I manage and organise the exhibition programs for our 4 Galleries, manage travelling exhibitions, organise artworks for the Sydney and
Melbourne Art Shows, develop Artists workshops and source interstate Galleries for Koorie artists to exhibit.

As a practicing artist I constantly have works on the go at home weather it be jewellery, paintings or an installation or jotting down ideas for projects

2007
Art workshop with Koorie Women with Cancer Hepburn Springs
an exhibition will be developed for 2008

2007
Invited to South Africa as part of Craft Victoria’s The South Project

2007
Counihan Gallery Old Messages New Media Brunswick

2007
1 of 47 Aboriginal delegation to travel to Europe and the USA as part of showcasing Aboriginal Business with Aboriginal Tourism Australia overseas. London, Paris, Berlin, Eutrek, Milan, LA & New York

2007
1 of three artists who designed 2000 x 1800mm glass panels for Oxfam’s new building. Melbourne

Board Game for Aboriginal Catholic Ministry

2005
‘SOIL’ installation at the Treasury Building as part of Melbourne Fringe with Kimba Thompson, Ricardo Idagi & Bernardo

2005
Co-curated the Exhibition Black on White Centre of Contemporary Photography with Megan Evans

2005
Artists with the Moomba Festival at Art Play

2004
Awakening’ Conservations with our Ancestors Cultural Exchange Exhibition with ‘Koorie and Maori Women Koorie Heritage Trust

2004
Exhibited in the NAIDOC Exhibition at the Incinerator Footscray

2004
Co-curated the Exhibition “Urbaninity #1’ Parliament House with Kimba Thompson Melbourne

2003
Project Co-ordinator with the Brotherhood of St Laurence Frankston

2001
Co-curated the Exhibition “Lost & Found’ Jan-May Immigration Museum

2001
“SCAR a Stolen Vision” Feb-May 1 of 6 artists involved in the creation of 30 poles ranging from 4 – 7 metres installed into the City Square Melbourne. Sistagirl Productions

2001
Curated “Lost & Found in your Neighbourhood”
Jun-Aug
A series of 6 exhibitions at the Adult Multicultural Education Service Melbourne city, Preston, Box Hill, Springvale, St Albans and Footscray
Also as part of the AMES 50th Birthday Celebrations I coordinated 6 artists of other cultures to come together to paint a tram

2001
*Artists and Curator of ‘The Other View of Another View’*
Melbourne

2001
Designed 3 Mosaic Poles for the Christian Brothers Garden
Parkville

2001
Relief work and Artist at a Koorie Women’s Refuge for Domestic Violence and relief work at a Homeless Women’s Hostel Melbourne

1999-2000
*Koorie Support Teacher*
Sunraysia Institute of TAFE
Mildura

2000
Designed and installed ‘Scar’ fountain for Preston Community Arts Centre Preston

1994-1998
*Koorie Arts Officer*
City of Port Phillip St Kilda

1992
*Course Co-ordinator*
Feelen Boordup Ngwala Wilumbong

1992
*Koorie Liaison Officer*
Adult Community & Further Education Melbourne

1989-1991
*Trainee Photographer*
Aborigines Advancement League Thornbury

1988
*Painted Tram*
Koorie Heritage Trust Melbourne

1987-1988
*Manager*
Kiah Krafts Aboriginal Retail Shop Mildura

1996
Projects Co-ordinator and Curator of five major exhibition through the City of Port Phillip under the umbrella title “We Iri We Homeborn” , also incorporating NAIDOC Week Exhibitions and a concert at the Great Hall at the National Gallery of Victoria
OTHER PROJECTS
Reconciliation Art Project
Koorie Cultural Arts Advisor
Principal Artist – Fiona Foley
City of Melbourne
Consultation with LEAP Team
Design for a mosaic project with the Living Museum of the West
12sq metres
Painted 3 tram poles in the City Square
Melbourne City Council
International Indigenous People’s Education Ceremony
Commissioned to make a ceremonial belt
Victorian Aboriginal Education Association
Designed, built and painted a wooden barrier for an Indigenous garden
St Kilda City Council
Designed, built and painted 11 snakes/serpents made from railway sleepers ranging from 3 – 5 metres installed into 40 metres of footpath
Box Hill City Council
Painted Billboard 6 x 12 metres
Melbourne City Council
Designed two book covers for
Catholic Education Aboriginal Perspectives Education Resource Book
Melbourne
Fire Sculpture
Cape Conran
Design Workshop with Gippsland Artists
Gippsland Aboriginal Artists Co-operative
Raymond Island
Palimpsest #1 #2 #3
Mildura
List of Illustrations
Slide 1

BLOODLINES

Maree Clarke: Masters of arts presentation, RMIT 2009
• Connection to Country, Culture and Family
Passing on cultural knowledge and creative art practices.
Slide 5
Slide 6
Slide 11
Slide 12

![Image of earrings]
Acacia seed necklace
Acacia seed and echidna quill necklace
Gum nuts
Slide 15
Role models the key for Koori women

Photographs highlight a new focus

Most Australians do care about refugees
You are invited to the opening of

WE TWO WATCHING
photography by
MAREE CLARKE, KIM KEUSSER,
SONJA MUDGE, HILLIAN VIDA GIRO
Opening 6pm Thursday 12th June 1991
ARTMOVES AT THE TRUST
VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST
207 Lurline Street. Melbourne
Exhibition current 14th June-30th August
Dress: Mon-Fri 10am-7pm
Also paintings and jewellery by
Sonja and Maree.

The photography to be shown is from the Victorian
Women's Trust Archive
Women's photography
printed in 1890.
Pitcha Mi Koori

Maybe a little bit too soon time... BUT it's urban Koori women wanted 2 take pitcha and SHOW 'EM!
Slide 22

![Image of two children in a natural setting with their arms raised.]
Slide 24

[Image of a book cover titled "Can't See for Lookin' Koori Women Artists Educating"]

[Text box with information and artwork]
Artists in Schools

The Artists-in-Schools Program

Our Place: Valuing Identity, Place, Land and Culture.
Slide 45
Slide 47
Slide 53
Slide 56
Slide 58