The Invisible Sleeper

Bronwyn Bancroft

Bronwyn Bancroft's work is held in major Australian collections; the National Gallery of Australia, Macquarie University, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Australian Museum and Artbank, as well as in overseas collections. She has been involved heavily in the protection of artist's rights over the past two decades and is an Independent Director to the Copyright Agency Limited. Bronwyn has recently been awarded the Yarramundi Scholarship at the University of Western Sydney where she is currently completing her Doctorate.

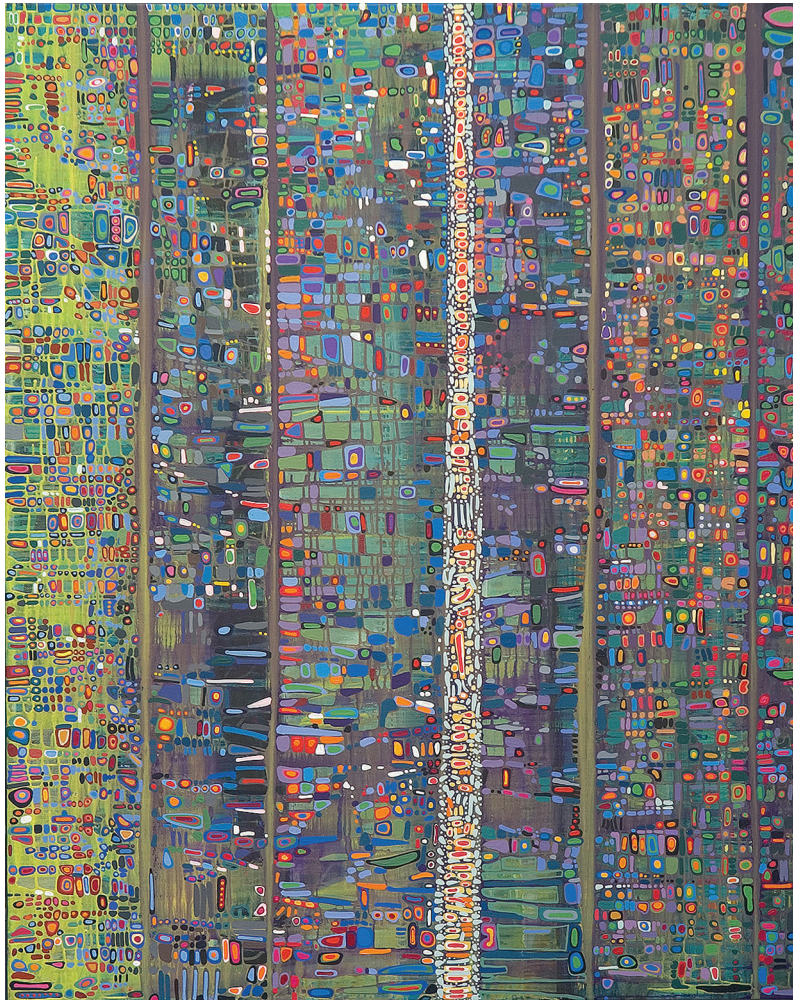
My life as an artist has been a multiplicity of journeys: the layering of any person's life is intriguing and the twists and turns of fate is the journey of evolution.

Making art has always been an integral part of my life and I have never stopped creating. My mind is chaotic with explosive ideas about new creations.

I am constantly excited by the challenge of making another personal visual statement and this propels my artistic journey.

I grew up in Tenterfield, a small country town of 3,000 people. My dad, Bill Bancroft, an Aboriginal man, was a sleeper-cutter and bushman. My mother, Dorothy, is Polish and Scottish, and a dressmaker.

I am the youngest of seven children and feel that this has been a blessing. I was free of responsibility and very lucky to have more time



Bronwyn Bancroft, 'A Little Ray of Sunshine', acrylic on canvas (1.5m x 1.2m)

with my parents. I swam in creeks, played sport and generally had a pretty good life apart from incidents that occurred that were out of my hands.

Life had presented some moral dilemmas for me that would generally affect me until late in my 30s. These acted as a significant connection for my work as I wanted to prove my worth. When trust has been eroded by people whom you love, the idea of truth is far removed from the reality you exist in. To be made to feel worthless at a very small age then becomes unremarkable.

I moved from Tenterfield with my teacher in 1975 and went to the Canberra School of Art. This was terrifying as I had never been away from home and used to sleep with a crowbar under my bed.

When I ponder about my life, I always remind myself that I am an Aboriginal sleeper-cutter's daughter and I thank Dad for his unselfish and significant contribution to my life.

I cannot fathom how hard life must have been for Dad. His journey became my journey and this is why I am astounded when people question my Aboriginality. This is my family we are talking about, not up for someone's judgement.

As I have said, on too many occasions for years we were judged for being too black. Now it appears we are not black enough.

Who would ever consider that they can recognise and create acceptance for Aboriginal people? Some non-Aboriginal people consider they can. Is it because they aided in the destruction and debilitation of Aboriginal communities, sanctioned slavery, rape and murder? When I come across people using this form of degrading manoeuvre my advice to them is to keep judgements to yourselves and superiority in your cold heart, and remember that all negativity can be returned for the atrocities and effects of colonisation, triple-fold if you ignore them.

I will not be moved about like a political, social and artistic chess piece. I am a human being. I value my family and will not be diminished by any outsider's ignorant opinion of who I should be.

The very source of my being stems from this innate sense of injustice

that has prevailed in our country. I am very connected to my people's land and have spent a large part of my life learning there. I have a very special connection with my Uncle Pat who has taught me a great deal, including the story of the country of our ancestors murdered by un-settlers. This only adds to the resolve to keep our 'secret place' safe. Last year, at the New Year celebrations, we were discussing other people attempting to claim our land. Uncle Pat stated to me that it has always been 'a secret place locked between mountain ranges with fresh water in abundance' and it had always been our family's.

My art resides in a collection of themes, such as politics, family, struggle, native title, recognition of family and land and the beauty of nature. All of these elements make up who I am as a human being.

I have painted in these themes for over three decades and have never been drawn to the cosmetic art that is dictated by powerbrokers. I just want to let my art evolve with my development as an Aboriginal person, mother and artist.

Being prompted to write about the synthesis of ideas that is connected to my creativity is fantastic. I love what I do and I do what I love.

As with all journeys, there are negative incidents where people attempt to wound you. These attempts at destruction only add to the impetus of defiance and this is largely why I have continued to grow.

The powerbrokers, or gatekeepers as they refer to themselves, consider that they are the controllers of Aboriginal art. How can such a free concept of cultural awareness and life be put into a 2009 mind/bureaucratic/conformist jail?

These controllers or gatekeepers keep me busy. They prompt me to create, agitate, cogitate. They instil a deep sense of resolution and political affirmation in me, and I will defend my people's rights to be free with their art, to develop, to grow, to evolve without the obstructionist policies of the star system and government acclamation that creates pathways that distract you from your pursuit.

The desire to see Aboriginal people, who are descended by genealogical lines existing in NSW, gain recognition has been an enduring aim of mine.

I have had my work dismissed by Indigenous curators, with one telling me, 'I should stick to children's books as that was my strength.' It was a putdown by her but as I have characteristically always been a creator over many areas of expertise and love the challenge of new mediums, I was not concerned. This incident occurred over 20 years ago and the same curator last year was witnessed by a staff member saying my work would never be displayed while she was in charge.

It is alarming to see the places that have been fought for being used and abused by some Indigenous people.

Now I have had my chance to indicate to you that all is not well in the Aboriginal art scene this probably leaves more questions than answers, but I think this will always be the case.

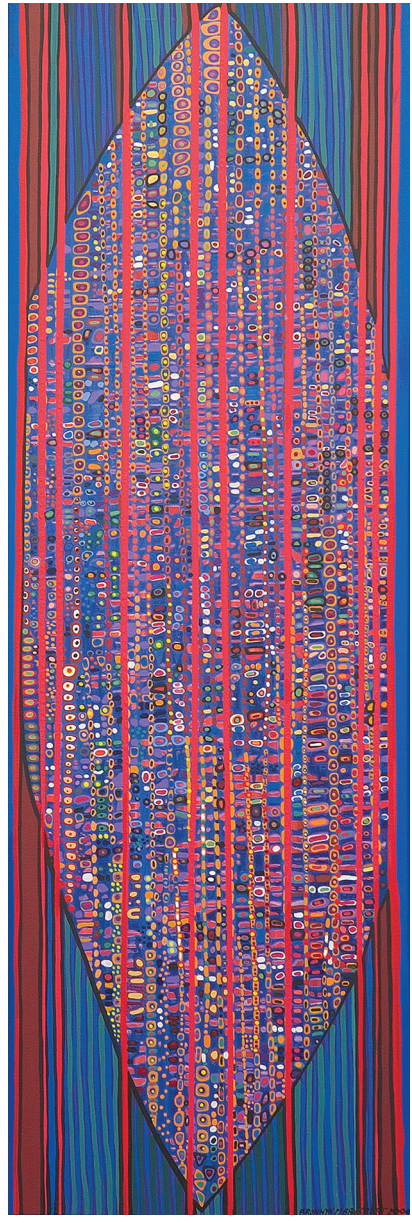
The love of art and that initial moment when an idea springs into your mind is one of the most satisfying emotions. People often ask me if I ever have 'creator's block'—no, never! If I lived to be 200, I could never complete all of the projects that I have thought of.

Creativity has always been my soul's source. It is the way I communicate and the way I express my innermost feelings that is the best therapy in the world. Creating and the process of creation is a delight for the artist. Existing in my work are themes that run parallel with my life as an Aboriginal woman, artist and family member.

History is an essential part of my work. The intermingling of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives has given me a vastness of topics to explore.

To have the courage to explore ideas and expose your innermost forensic moments of creativity takes a lot to getting accustomed to. When I was younger just starting an artistic career through exhibitions, I was terrified that my work would never be good enough. This moment quickly disappeared as I came to the realisation that my work and my art were unique. The story of 'your voice' in art is always about re-affirming and connecting with what you believe in.

I have been in situations where I have been invited to be a part of major survey shows overseas, met with curators, discussed the form of the work and then been dropped. This can happen for a variety of



Bronwyn Bancroft, 'Fragile World', acrylic on canvas (1.5m x 700cm)

reasons but still makes you question why people make the effort to ask you.

One particular show, in Washington, describing itself as a survey of Aboriginal women's art from all of Australia ended up only exhibiting traditional artists (and Judy Watson and Julie Dowling). This indicates a domestic and international immaturity that has been allowed to prevail into other institutions world-wide and the consciousness of the art world.

We, the original people, are all Aboriginal. We all have connection to family and country, and we are real. To be dismissed summarily by a lack of intellectual rigour and debate on Aboriginal issues has always indicated to me that the colonialist concept of 'Divide and Rule' prevails.

I write about such issues because this is a part of the whole. Creating art is not just about making pictures—it is about challenging the stereotypical that attempts to contain our visions as Aboriginal people. I have been constantly challenged by ignorance—that anyone can allow themselves to pass judgement on others is beyond belief. It creates a division in our society that is 'us' or 'them'. It is not right that anyone feels or asserts that they are superior to another human being—we are all just different.

During the evolution of my art, where I pushed the boundaries of my creativity, I have loved that pursuit. It is not always about the end product, the finished work and can often just be about the connection to self through art.

Many people make comments about the development of your work.

'I liked your old work.' 'I liked your earlier work'…and so on.

It is unlikely that if you were in scientific field that people would expect no evolvement in technical advancement. This can be a trap for any artist to rest on the complacency of others.

Art, as any other vocation, is a process of determined development.

In Year 9, I was a naughty girl and my grades slipped. Dad came

home from the bush and told me I would be working in a bank because he was not going to support me when I was unaware of his commitment and hard work. I threw myself at his knees and begged, 'Dad, I promise I will work and study hard, but please do not put me in a bank. I will die there!'

He agreed to keep me at school. I learnt a major lesson that day. Do not expect others, anyone, to cover for your laziness, attitude and approach to life and this moment became my bedrock.

When I had graduated with my Higher School Certificate from Tenterfield High School, I had already been recommended by my principal, Mr Ray Curry, for early acceptance based upon my work to Armidale University and the Australian National University. Even though I was having a clandestine relationship with my teacher, whom I married and with whom I had two beautiful children, I was a good student and I studied hard. The promise I made to my Dad was intact.

I was always a creative kid and even though we were poor, I would always try and make things to improve my life and have fun. I wanted to do art so I went to the Canberra School of Art. I had been doing first level art in Year 12 by correspondence, as only two students were doing it. I really had no portfolio but they could see I was enthusiastic. I was the first 'Goori' to go to this art school in 1976 and it was interesting and challenging to be so far from home and initially with strangers who soon became my friends.

I had a raw experience at this school. I had always wanted to paint, learnt it and love it. I had done a painting at home. It was in sepia tones, Aboriginal people behind concrete, skyscrapers and in the shape of a large 'Binging' (turtle).

I was really proud of it, being all of 18. I took it to school and the painting instructor told me it was shit and we don't do stuff like that in this school. I was shocked, humiliated, hurt. I decided to leave the school and go to ANU but thankfully I missed the cut-off date (thank God for bureaucracy, sometimes) and I had to go back to the art school. I was determined to stay away from the negativity of this person and

so the next year I started a new course 'Visual Communications'. It added an extra year to my degree but I was so astounded by this degrading moment that I didn't care.

I completed this degree. My husband, who was an aspiring actor, wanted to move to Sydney to pit his skills. I really did not want to move as I was playing water polo. (I had started the women's water polo in Canberra with the assistance of Mr Alf Tye, and went on to captain the side and play representative sport for the NSW country.) I was also in a part-time position at the school in the photographic lab. I was pretty secure in Canberra and knew no one in Sydney—but I went and became invisible in a huge city.

I was now 21 and terrified. I got some jobs waitressing at Noonan's Café in the Strand Arcade and at the Palisade Restaurant. I also applied to Alexander Mackie to commence a Masters in Photography. I was accepted—ironic, considering they had rejected me when I first applied in 1976.

My son was six weeks old and my husband had a lead role in a movie. I was up the street in my friend's shop in Rozelle and he said he was leaving, so I asked if I could take it over. In Canberra I had been doing fashion design with a friend, Joanne Chappel. We had a label called Magarra, which means 'bright and happy'. I had a lot of stock that Joanne and I had made, so with $3,000 and a Bankcard, I opened my shop, Designer Aboriginals, and my company, Designer Aboriginal Pty Ltd.

Again, this was a steep learning curve. Elsa Dixon, who worked for an employment agency, provided a lot of support in helping to employ the young women whom I trained. She was a marvellous and majestic Aboriginal woman. We worked hard and put up with a lot of ignorant taunts, for example, people put up signs on my window 'Nigger go home—KKK'. It was pretty kooky stuff.

I worked all through my marriage, even though I found out that my husband came from a wealthy family. He had never shed a lot of light on his wealth and I had never written a cheque in 17 years or had a transparent understanding of the money. He just paid cash

Bronwyn Bancroft, 'Paradox of Inequality 2007', synthetic polymer paint on canvas (1.5m x 1.5m). Courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne.

for everything—a house, a new car—so I suppose you could say the marriage was never laid on a foundation of truth and trust.

This marriage restrained my art and contained me. When I finally summoned the courage to leave with the two small children aged five and two years, it was the beginning of my life. I was 32 and this had now become the biggest challenge of my life. In 1991 I closed the shop, dissolved my marriage, bought my totally run-down house in Balmain and started living there with my children, Jack and Ella.

I closed the shop as I found that I wanted to concentrate on my own work. I had joined an artists' co-operative called Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative with nine other people, namely, Euphemia Bostock, Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Fernanda Martens, Arone Raymond Meeks, Tracey Moffat, Avril Quaill, Michael Riley and Jeffrey Samuels. The Boomalli group created great energy amongst themselves and the wider public in exploring urban Aboriginal art.

It is pertinent to alert you to the fact that art had always been driving me. It was how I was making a living and supporting my small family. It is fair to say that I have always put the children first. I am proud of my achievements as an Aboriginal woman, mum, artist, teacher and friend.

I never believed that I was not going to survive, but I did have moments when I felt my spirit had been beaten. These flat, dull, gut wrenching moments do not last long but they end up defining who you are because it is how you make your way from difficult circumstances that becomes your essence and the foundation of your philosophy of life. Since I moved into my house, I had to work really hard. I have never reneged on 17-hour days and there have been plenty.

In 1992, I was asked to illustrate a book by HarperCollins Publishers, titled *Stradbroke Dreamtime* by Oodgeroo Nunukul. It was a great honour and it is a book I love. I was an illustrator. It was another feather in my cap and I pursued this path intently. The first book I ever did was *The Fat and Juicy Place* by Diana Kidd. Since these initial books, I have illustrated 20 titles. This year, I will be completing three, *Sam's Journey* written by Sally Morgan and Ezekial

Kwaymullina, *A Journey to a Secret Place*, about our country near Grafton, NSW, and another book titled *Why I Love Australia.*

Illustrating these books is a passion of mine because when I grew up there were never any books by Aboriginal people and I am personally determined to close this gap.

I have been exhibiting since 1981, and have been involved in over 200 exhibitions, solo and group shows. This has been exhausting but essential as I have always had a view that I would never be a good artist until I was 50 and I have looked upon my artistic challenges as an apprenticeship. I have never believed that you can have a depth of maturity in your personal story if you have not excavated the recesses of your mind, heart, history and family stories. This all takes time and we are often pressured to perform. My only real lesson from all of my life experiences is never give up on your dream. It is your life and yours alone, and as such, you are the maker of your destiny.

As my children grew up, Jack attended Sydney Boys High (a selective public school), Ella was in St Scholastica's College, and my youngest, Rubyrose, was born in 1999. I decided to pursue some additional learning so I enrolled in a Master of Studio Practice at Sydney College of the Arts.

I want to thank Janet Mooney, the Director of the Koori Centre at Sydney University for awarding me a scholarship that assisted me in going back for further education.

The last time I had written an essay was when I was 17, as the degree I had done was largely based on the 'practice' of art. It was a challenging experience to be back at Art School. I was awarded my second degree in 2003. Two years later, I commenced my Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts. I completed that and had written a 15,000-word thesis which assisted me to understand that I could write. It was titled 'A Journey in Colour'.

I have recently been awarded the Yarramundi Scholarship at University of Western Sydney to complete my Doctorate of Creative Arts. The title of my thesis is 'Passion, Power, Politics of Aboriginal Art: Does equality exist for NSW Aboriginal women artists today?'

Doing this additional education has allowed me to collect my understanding of issues and collate them. It has become an integral part of my life and I love it. It also makes me remember my time at Tenterfield High School when I had been marked as having an IQ of 90 and also told in all of my vocational guidance reports that I could become a secretary with a lot of hard work.

Ironically enough, it was my future husband who challenged the status quo and had me moved from the lower classes to the higher ones, where I flourished.

In my journey of life and artistic maturation, I have always put my hand up to help others and it has never been just about my own individual success. I curate exhibitions on behalf of many Aboriginal women who would otherwise be ignored, and this is very satisfying.

I have taught art and cultural workshops, created murals, taught all over Australia and have always been inspired by the joy that the love of art can bring.

In conclusion, my father worked as a sleeper-cutter. He was the invisible Aboriginal man who left home early and came home late, spending a month at a time in the bush alone. He was the invisible sleeper.

In many ways I feel invisible in the art world as well. Many people play games of power and exclude you from major shows and change history and convert the truth to have it portrayed as all about them.

I challenge this mediocrity of historical and social representation and this has not made me a friend to these powerbrokers. It is time to be as visible as we can be and not allow the misrepresentation of our art and culture. I do not want to create quirky, kitsch moments about my Aboriginal life. I just want to create art and share it.