



Tuesday, 4 October 2011, 1:30 pm.

Roundtable 1: Indigenous Wisdom of Place

Speakers

Treahna Hamm, Artist, of Yorta Yorta and Wadi Wadi peoples, Australia

Vernon Ah Kee, Artist, born in North Queensland of the Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji and Gugu Yimithirr peoples, Australia

Tainui Stephens, independent film and television producer, Te Rara, New Zealand

Moderator

Louise Profeit-Leblanc, Aboriginal Arts Coordinator, Canada Council for the Arts, from the Nacho Nyak Dun First Nation of the Yukon Territory in Northern Canada

Rapporteur

Karilyn Brown, General Manager, International Federation of Art Council and Culture Agencies (IFACCA)

Description of the session

This session focused on the Indigenous connection to country, to place, noting that the particular relationship of Indigenous artists to their sense of place is not only important for their own art, but offers vital pathways for all the arts.

The moderator **Louise Profeit-Leblanc** commenced the session by noting that the three Indigenous artists could be seen to be '*wisdom keepers*', carrying on the tradition and the duty of telling the stories of their peoples. She acknowledged the need to respect that more than 40,000 years of wisdom could not be covered in a two-hour session, but that this would be a valuable opportunity to share some of the experiences and perspectives of the speakers.

Tainui Stephens expressed that from the point of discovering his Maori heritage from a young age, he has come to understand the power of the cycle of life and death, the knowledge of ancestry and the knowledge of the land that you come from. He sees himself more as a storyteller than any individual term, such as artist, filmmaker or writer. The role of art is to explore the big questions of who am I,

what am I doing, where do I come from, and believes it is a privilege to be able to explore these questions.

It is about engaging with life and death, knowing that your sense of place is the place of your people and the land that you come from. That the mountain or the shoreline of your land also represents the broader, universal experience of others – the mountain/the rock of ages, the ocean/the tide of humanity.

Genealogy is very important for the Maori as it not just a list of names, but a true family tree, with the stories of all the ancestors passed on through generations. Maori genealogy is thickly layered, with blood, time, experience and memories. In this context, you are small, but there is security in knowing that you are part of this family tree. He looks for the Maori paradigm in all aspects of his life, for addressing challenges, using the concept of a genealogy as a way to make sense of life.

As a member of the Stolen Generation, **Treahna Hamm** discussed the process of finding heritage, her people and her land. She had known from a very young age that she needed to find her place, but was too young to find the words to describe the feeling.

'We were told that the Aboriginal race would die out, but it hasn't'. She gave examples of working as an artist and as an academic, to learn from her elders and to then put their stories into words, to reflect her people and her land, to pass on the oral histories.

Vernon Ah Kee's life and his work is located within the context of his family – how they find him, how they describe him, how they know who he is. His work is made to be read by his family – they need to see themselves in his work that is how they are able to locate him, describe him, how his family sees him. If they can't, then there is something wrong with the work. He quoted artist Richard Bell has said that "Aboriginal art is a white idea". Many Aboriginal artists cannot really live their lives through the art – for example, there is no art about dialysis dreaming, kidney machines – diseases that should not be in the communities anyway. No one talks about this or makes works about these issues.

He described a process in which he created a work of art with his young son. Vernon selected the colours, the materials, the size and the structure, for the work, sat down in the backyard with his son and encouraged him to engage with the project and suggested he add various elements/content to the work, and then paid his son \$20 for it so that Vernon fully owned the work. The work is titled "Intervention Invention" and was used as a provocative example of Vernon's view on how Aboriginal art works.

Creative intersections discussed in the session

- Artists are a conduit – it is a privileged position, the passing on of gifts, and carries the responsibility of sharing the knowledge and teaching the young ones. (Treahna Hamm)
- In terms of the young ones, the passing on of knowledge, of stories and of experience is not done in a Q&A format. Treahna Hamm gave the analogy of fishing – feed the young fish a little bit at a time, and they will find their place in the long story, the stories that belong to the land.

Identified problems

- In Australia, the description/representation of Indigenous peoples has been constructed by non-Indigenous people – it is not how the Indigenous people would describe themselves. (Vernon Ah Kee)
- The statement that Indigenous Australia is 40,000 old is false – that timeframe is cited because the carbon dating technology only goes back that far. (Vernon Ah Kee)
- Aboriginal art is commoditised and has a language applied to it by non-Indigenous peoples – gallerists, collectors, curators – and not by Aboriginals themselves. It's about money and control, and it positions Aboriginal people romantically, ideally. (Vernon Ah Kee)
- It's impossible for Aboriginal people to live up to this highly constructed Utopian ideal, and when they try, they fail – many try to escape this by saying they're not an Aboriginal artist, just an artist; not an Aboriginal writer, just a writer. (Vernon Ah Kee)
- Art is supposed to be about people, not a cultural by-product. But it's a story that has been constructed for how they believe Aboriginal people and Aboriginal art should be read.
- Most Aboriginal practitioners do not know what it is to be an artist – they are called that by gallerists – and they are open to exploitation
- Aboriginal arts is mired in false premises
- There is also the responsibility to speak up – all too often, bad art is positioned as good art, even described as masterful art
- There are too many ways to categorise Indigenous peoples and Indigenous art – layers of labelling like pancakes

Recommendations for future actions

- There are enormous responsibilities in being an artist and if you are going to be an artist, you need to take on those responsibilities
- Be guided by what you are trying to say and who you are trying to say it to.
- Enormous challenges of handing down and maintaining traditions but critically important to pass on what knowledge you can
- Copyright issues, IP issues, authenticity issues – topics for another Summit!
- Identification and preservation of heritage cultural objects

Other additional comments

- *'Wisdom of place is in knowing your place in the world'*
- Family, knowledge, humility and respect
- *Wisdom of Place as Family:*
 - *'We are living on Aboriginal land and therefore living Aboriginal history'*
 - *'We are located in different ways – as a parent, as an artist, or by one's geography, language, peoples'*
 - *'If you know your place, you know the world'*

- *'The moment I was unafraid to be me, knowing who I am and knowing my voice'*
- *'The point in your life when you're not afraid. When you travel overseas, you are respected and treated as a citizen of the world. Engaging with other native peoples – you are welcomed and you know that you are part of a global Indigenous community and that you are contributing to the world knowledge base of Indigenous peoples. You realise that it is a shared knowledge and you come back unafraid and you continue to share that knowledge.'*