

Rite of Passage

11 Contemporary Aboriginal Artists Reflect on 250 Years Since Cook's Arrival

Developed as a response to the significance of the year 2020 – 250 years since James Cook first landed in Australia – *Rite of Passage* is a group exhibition that aims to reframe the way that we perceive this year in our history. Curated by Shannon Brett and presented at QUT Art Museum, *Rite of Passage* will run from 7 March to 10 May 2020.

The exhibition posits 2020 as a key turning point – a transition from the past, towards a future that respects Aboriginality and validates the sovereignty of Aboriginal people.

Guest curator Shannon Brett, a descendant of the Wakka Wakka, Butchulla and Gurang Gurang clans, comments, “A rite of passage is an event that marks an important stage in someone’s life, or death – a transition. During a time not so long ago, the Aboriginal population of this country transitioned from a free civilisation to a nation conquered. In the process, thousands of years of ecological and spiritual power and cultural knowledge were diminished, and many customs and traditions of our original people were lacerated—with many lost forever.”

Rite of Passage showcases the strength of autobiographical work by eleven contemporary Aboriginal artists from across Australia. Artists include Glennys Briggs, Megan Cope, Nici Cumpston, Karla Dickens, Julie Gough, Lola Greeno, Leah King-Smith, Jenna Lee, Carol McGregor, Mandy Quadrio, and Judy Watson. Described by Brett as explicit in their actions regarding their Aboriginal rites, the exhibition reveals how these artists define themselves as voices of their families and their ancestors in their quest to preserve their Aboriginality.

Brett explains,

“These honest artists are creative storytellers, people who know our history and who understand those melancholy yesterdays and our acrimonious now. Through their work, the artists contemplate their inter-generational pain to de-colonise current social realities and to conjure political change that will educate a greater community conditioned by the constructs of whiteness. This has become their rite.”



Karla DICKENS, *Jack and Jill (A.K.A. Hung, strung and quartered)* 2016 (detail), mixed media. Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane. Photo by Mick Richards.



Glennys BRIGGS, *Swallow these words* 2020 emu egg (etched) and silver sweet dish. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Louis Lim.

Fearless and relentless, these artists carry the fire of a culture that lives on, as the passage that they now travel is no longer solitary – together they pave the way for tomorrow.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a 60-page catalogue, including a curatorial essay by Brett.

A suite of special public programs, including talks and drop-in workshops, will be held over the opening and closing weekends of the exhibition.

Following its run at QUT Art Museum, the exhibition will travel to Northsite Contemporary Arts (previously KickArts) in Cairns later in 2020.

For immediate release
4 February 2020

For media interviews with Curator Shannon Brett, or for high-res images, please contact:
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KEY EXHIBITION THEMES

- A visionary curatorial project led by one of Queensland's unique Aboriginal artistic talents, recently relocated from Far North Queensland to Brisbane.
- Featuring some of the most significant contemporary Aboriginal artists working in Australia today.
- Marking 250 years since James Cook arrived on our shores, 2020 is seen as a year of transition rather than celebration.
- Preserving Aboriginal culture through contemporary artistic practice.

EXHIBITION & EVENTS

Opening night: *Rite of Passage*

6pm-8pm, Friday 6 March.

Light canapes and refreshments provided.

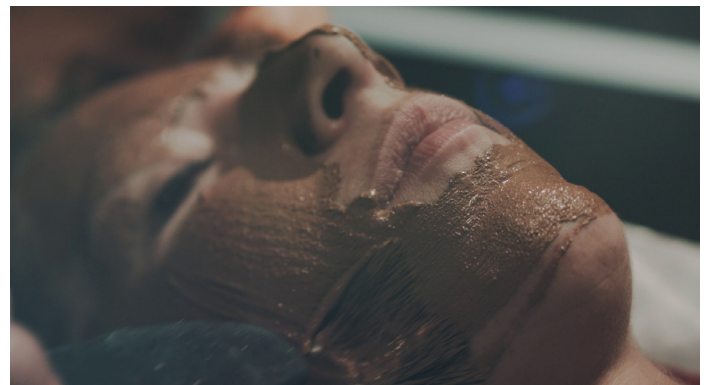
Opening weekend events

Saturday 7 & Sunday 8 March

[View the events program](#)

Exhibition

7 March – 10 May 2020



Megan COPE, *The Blaktism* (still) 2014, single channel HD video, sound, 8:04 minutes. Edition of 5 + 1AP. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

2 George Street, Brisbane

www.artmuseum.qut.edu.au

artmuseum@qut.edu.au | 03 3138 5370

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Carol MCGREGOR, *Wreath for Oodgeroo* (detail) 2020
possum skins, charcoal, ochre, binder medium, waxed thread.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Louis Lim.

Artist Biographies

Glennys Briggs

“The cultural influences in my work reflect the strong connection to people and land. Like a time-lapse photograph, my work is ever changing to reveal a long history. Each scene rests upon the other like the layers in a midden, each revealing more of the story.”

Glennys Briggs is an Indigenous visual artist (Taungwurrung-Yorta Yorta, North Central Victoria) based on the Gold Coast. Her work reflects a strong connection to land, culture and history through the mediums of painting, sculpture, installation and sound, wearable art and possum skin cloak making. However, her main art practice is printmaking.

Briggs’ prints have great depth and a strong emphasis on story, which she achieves by using different printmaking techniques. The story may have to be read layer by layer, like peeling an onion, to reach the small details and significance of the meaning of it. Sometimes the threads that connect us can be very fragile and translucent, and others strong and unbreakable, like the connection she has with her cultural and family histories. Briggs’ strong connection with her culture helps her tell the darker histories that need to be told.

Megan Cope

Megan Cope is a Quandamooka woman (North Stradbroke Island) in South East Queensland. Her site-specific sculptural installations, video work, paintings and public art investigate issues relating to identity, the environment and mapping practices. Cope’s work often resists prescribed notions of Aboriginality and become psychogeographies across various material outcomes that challenge the grand narrative of ‘Australia’ as well as our sense of time and ownership in a settler colonial state.

Nici Cumpston

Nici Cumpston’s gentle, quietly spoken demeanour belies a fierce and resolute passion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the development and recognition of their artistic practice. Born in Adelaide in 1963, Cumpston is a proud Barkandji artist, curator, writer, and educator, who is also of Afghan, English and Irish heritage. She is a descendant of the people of the Barka, the Darling River, in far western New South Wales. She has been documenting the Murray Darling Basin and its associated waterways since 2000. Cumpston explains, “The Rivers are our livelihood; like a trusted relative, they support us by providing food, water and shelter. We rely on them to sustain us physically, emotionally and spiritually.”

Karla Dickens

Driving forces behind Karla Dickens’ need to communicate are her Indigenous (Wiradjuri) heritage, sexuality and life experiences as a soulful, connected woman. Dickens uses recycled everyday items to explore notions of persistence amidst inherent violence and misunderstanding. Made with uncommon rawness and daring, her meticulously fabricated works emanate a rare truthfulness and honesty. Edgy and hard to confine, Dickens often cannibalizes existing works to create new ones. She presents a wide ranging and unique interpretation of the real world; where past and present collide in a multidimensional kaleidoscope of her own making.

Julie Gough

Julie Gough is a Trawlwoolway (Tasmanian Aboriginal) artist, writer and a curator of Indigenous Cultures at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Gough’s Briggs-Johnson family have lived in the Latrobe region of North West Tasmania (Latruwita) since the 1840s, with Tebrikunna in the far north east of the island their Traditional Country. Gough’s art practice often involves uncovering and re-presenting conflicting and subsumed histories, many referring to her family’s experiences as Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Lola Greeno

Lola Greeno is a Trawlwoolway (Tasmanian Aboriginal) shell necklace maker/stringer. Known for her distinctly patterned, often colourful and iridescent, delicate strands of shells, the artist collects her materials from the coastlines of the Tasmania mainland and the Furneaux Islands.

As an extension to her cultural practice, Greeno has recently developed a series of works using different shells, to design a pattern based on the Cape Barren Goose. Within a contemporary context, the materials reference the fauna unique to the islands. Other recent work represents Reconciliation Australia, using black crow and white penguin shells, while another work combines rice, maireener and kelp shells.

Artist Biographies (continued)

Leah King-Smith

Leah King-Smith is a Bigambul descendant whose visual art practice first came to prominence in 1992 with her photographic series *Patterns of Connection* (1991). In preparation for *Patterns*, King-Smith researched 19th century British colonial photographs in the State Library of Victoria's Picture Collection. The archival photographs had been taken at a time when photography was a tool that legitimised imperial economic expansion and the harsh and insensitive treatment of Indigenous races. Using various layering techniques, King-Smith creates powerful and evocative images that challenge the conventional and historical uses of photography. King-Smith has continued her focus on spiritual and metaphysical themes that represent her Aboriginal perspectives and evoke transitional processes from one state of being to another.

Jenna Lee

Jenna Lee is a mixed-race Larrakia, Wardaman and Karajarri woman whose contemporary art practice explores the acts of identity/identification, label/labelling and the relationships formed between language, label and object. Being a Queer, Mixed Race, Asian, Aboriginal Woman, Lee's practice is strongly influenced by her overlapping identities, childhood memory as well as maternal teachings of subject and process.

As an interdisciplinary artist, her work incorporates painting, printmaking, found object and sculpture with a reoccurring use of paper, the book, language and text. Recent work explores the transformation of the printed word through the ritualistic acts of destruction and reconstruction, seeking to translate the page into a new tangible language.

With mixed ancestry running alongside many events in history directly leading to the presence and resilience of both Asian and Aboriginal people in Australia, Lee's current area of artistic research revolves around ancestral cultural objects as well as interdisciplinary cross-cultural practices which aim to rewrite the telling of Asian and Aboriginal narratives in Australia.

Carol McGregor

Brisbane based artist Carol McGregor is of Wathaurung (Victoria) and Scottish descent and is a possum skin cloak maker, painter, printmaker and sculptor. As an artist, McGregor seeks to adapt and embrace new technologies to reclaim and connect to cultural expression, while revealing and exposing hidden histories within the landscape. Her recent art practice revives the traditional possum skin cloak as a contemporary art form and a way to strengthen community and individual identities.

Mandy Quadrio

Mandy Quadrio is a Brisbane-based visual artist. As a proud Palawa woman whose Countries are the Coastal Plains Nation and the Oyster Bay Nation of north-east and eastern Tasmania, her work incorporates accuracies of lived historical experiences of her Palawa people. She works across sculpture, photography and mixed media to assert a living and dynamic culture. In her practice, Quadrio reimagines cultural artefacts and found objects to draw attention to historical, cultural and political events that have been ignored or buried by Australian colonial histories. She creates contemporary works that bridge past and present.

Judy Watson

Judy Watson's Aboriginal matrilineal family is from Waanyi country in north-west Queensland. The artist's process evolves by working from site and memory, revealing Indigenous histories, following lines of emotional and physical topography that centre on particular places and moments in time.