

# **The Crucible and Australian Aboriginal Art as an Expression of Cultural Leadership**

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## **Abstract**

*This essay explores the concept of the 'crucible' in the work of Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas and applies it to Australian Aboriginal art as an expression of cultural leadership. The exploration of creativity as transformational human activity is complementary to expressions of leadership in the arts relating to the crucible. In this essay, the work of a select group of Aboriginal artists is interpreted through the lens of the crucible. The format of this visual art essay privileges the interpretation of works of art as a primary source.*

**Keywords:** Crucible, Aboriginal art, cultural leadership, creativity, transformation, visual arts

## **Introduction**

This essay is a creative interpretation of cultural leadership in Australian Aboriginal art, which is inspired by creativity as a transformational human activity. As an Aboriginal art historian, belonging to the Gamilaroi people of northern New South Wales, Australia, my focus upon visual art privileges the interpretation of works of art as a primary source. I have long been interested in the lives of Aboriginal artists and the meanings and interpretation of the works of art they create. Australian Aboriginal art is a beautiful living cultural heritage which calls out to be understood and celebrated.

An area which has been neglected in art historical writings is the interpretation of Aboriginal art in regards to leadership. Since art history is a discipline which often draws upon a diverse range of interdisciplinary sources, especially in regards to the interpretation of Aboriginal works of art, the work of the leadership theorists Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas has inspired me to consider leadership in the arts through a different lens. I first came across their published writings in a course I undertook in Indigenous research and leadership at the University of Melbourne in 2014. The ideas presented in this essay are an outcome of my thinking about the concept of the 'crucible' presented by Bennis and Thomas, and the ways this concept may be applied to the interpretation of Aboriginal art. I have also long been interested in themes of Aboriginal cultural expression in relation to cross-cultural and intergenerational issues experienced by Aboriginal people in relation to the experience of colonisation. Interpreting Aboriginal art leadership through the metaphor and symbol of the 'crucible' appeals as a positive way to consider the challenges Aboriginal people face, and how these might be interpreted and understood through Aboriginal creative expression.

## Crucibles of Leadership

In their article, 'Crucibles of Leadership' (2002), Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas explore the idea that the way people respond to adversity can provide insights into the ways they approach leadership.<sup>1</sup> Bennis and Thomas argue that extraordinary leaders transform experiences of meaning in their lives. They cite, for example, a problem encountered at a factory when the workers challenged management in response to a misguided decision that took away a late-night coffee break. A buzzer which 'announced the workers' break had become faulty, and when the management of the factory 'arbitrarily decided to postpone the workers' break for ten minutes when another buzzer was scheduled to sound', the workers, who needed their break at the original scheduled time, walked off the factory floor to have their break as usual, in defiance of the new directive. When a visiting executive was called to address the growing crisis that followed between the workers and the factory management, the executive decided that rather than take an authoritative or punitive approach towards the employees, he would instead refurbish everything. His refurbishment strategies included a decision to convert the factory into an environment where its employees had more 'responsibility for running their workplace'. Increased freedom and control at work was supported by other positive opportunities for the workers. These actions transformed the factory into a more productive experience for all.<sup>2</sup> The executive thus responded creatively to a workplace crisis which might otherwise have continued to escalate and worsen. The significance of this experience for the executive was something Bennis and Thomas identified as having been not unlike that experienced by other 'top leaders in business', who had dealt with their own leadership challenges similarly. They had tackled problems they had encountered as crucibles of leadership, creatively transforming issues that many people might have considered negative, into positive outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Distinctive leadership abilities develop, Bennis and Thomas concluded, when leaders have been confronted by 'a trial and a test' that 'forced them to question who they were and what mattered to them'.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, leadership practices are important because they affect others, but they also reflect the values and perspectives of the leader.

The concept of the 'crucible' falls into a broad spectrum of human experience, and Bennis and Thomas cite a number of examples. 'Crucibles' can also be identified as extreme human experiences. Bennis and Thomas describe, for example, the experience of an American journalist, Sidney Rittenberg (1921- ), who was unjustly imprisoned in Communist China in 1949 because he was wrongly identified as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent. In solitary confinement and a small dark prison cell for six long years, Rittenberg discovered a strategy for survival in his

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Bennis and R. J. Thomas. (2002). 'Crucibles of Leadership'. *Harvard Business Review* (September), 60-68; See also: W. G. Bennis and R. J. Thomas. (2007). *Leading for a Lifetime: How defining moments shape the leaders of today and tomorrow*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press; R. J. Thomas. (2008). *Crucibles of Leadership: How to learn from experience to become a great leader*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Press.

<sup>2</sup> Bennis and Thomas. 'Crucibles of Leadership', 63.

<sup>3</sup> Bennis and Thomas. 'Crucibles of Leadership', 63.

<sup>4</sup> Bennis and Thomas. 'Crucibles of Leadership', 63.

remembrance of a small epigram by the American poet, Edwin Markham (1852-1940), titled ‘Outwitted’:

He drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!<sup>5</sup>

The verse, which had been recited to Rittenberg as a child, conveyed the message that although his imprisonment had shut him out of the circle of life, he could creatively transform the crisis of the experience by drawing his own symbolic circle into which he could invite others. He subsequently befriended his prison guards, persuading them to bring him books and a candle so that he could read. Six years in a dark prison cell was finally interrupted by his release when the Chinese authorities realised that he had been unjustly imprisoned.<sup>6</sup> Later however, Rittenberg was detained once more and sentenced to ten years imprisonment for supporting democracy during the Cultural Revolution in China. Again, he used the experience to study, write, and think. Although he was ‘severely tested’, he ‘emerged from his second period of imprisonment certain that absolutely nothing in his professional life could break him’. Remarkably, he established a consulting firm ‘dedicated to developing business ties between the United States and China’.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, ‘crucibles’ range from relatively benign situations to extreme examples such as this, that test the very core, spirit and humanity of an individual. Bennis and Thomas have explored the ‘crucible’ in leadership in a range of published writings.<sup>8</sup>

### Defining the ‘crucible’

‘Crucibles’ may be negative or positive, but they are nevertheless characterised by their transformative nature. Three definitions for the word ‘crucible’ include:

1. ‘a vessel of a very refractory material (such as porcelain) used for melting and calcining a substance that requires a high degree of heat’;
2. ‘a severe test’; and

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<sup>5</sup> The other pages (website). ‘Poems’. <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/mark01.html> (accessed 22 May 2019); Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 67.

<sup>8</sup> For example: R. J. Thomas and W. Bennis. (2002). ‘Leadership crucibles’, *Executive Excellence*, Vol. 19, Iss. 11, (November), 3-4; W. Bennis. (2006). ‘Authentic Leaders’, *Leadership Excellence, Aurora*, Vol. 23, Iss. 8, (August), 3-4; W. Bennis and R. J. Thomas. (2006). ‘Crucibles: They make leaders’, *Leadership Excellence, Aurora*, Vol. 23, Iss. 7, (July), 15; Thomas. (2008). *Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader*; R. J. Thomas. (2008). ‘Life’s Hard Lessons: Recognizing and discussing defining moments in both your professional life and personal life makes you a better leader’, *HR Magazine*, (June), 143-146; W. Bennis. (2009). ‘Crucible Generation’, *Leadership Excellence, Aurora*, Vol. 26, Iss. 5, (May), 8.

3. 'a place or situation in which concentrated forces interact to cause or influence change or development'.<sup>9</sup>

The first definition is especially symbolic of its application to 'crucible' leadership, because when you heat metal at high temperatures and for long enough, it returns to a liquid state and is radically transformed. This image of a 'crucible' provides a powerful visual metaphor and reminder that something which can appear solid, static and fixed, can potentially contain properties of change and transformation.<sup>10</sup> Bennis and Thomas explain that 'crucibles' also change the individual. Since they are often borne of problematic or traumatic experiences, they test the individual and stimulate deep thinking and self-reflection which provides opportunities to examine values, assumptions and judgements. 'Crucibles' can occur, they advise, as a result of serious life experiences such as life-threatening illness or violence in discrimination.<sup>11</sup> It is this latter observation that was the initial inspiration for this essay with reference to the 'crucible' and Aboriginal leadership in the arts in Australia.

If I were to seek my own metaphor to imagine the 'crucible' for Aboriginal people, I would visualise an Aboriginal coolamon as a cultural container or carrying vessel symbolically filled with the fire of inspiration, creativity and Aboriginal histories waiting to be transformed by the artist through the creative power of art. Coolamons were used traditionally to carry babies and other items. They are a wooden cultural item carved from a tree. The tree may in turn be interpreted in regards to Aboriginal ancestry and the life journey.

### **Transformative Creativity**

The application of Bennis and Thomas's findings to the artistic sphere reveals interesting dimensions, for if an individual can experience transformative events in such a way so as to positively influence their ability to provide leadership, then an individual artist who experiences a 'crucible' can do the same and use this experience to channel it into their artistic expression. Since art has played a powerful role in human histories and across cultures, the commonly held interpretation of art as a journey for the artist could be extended to the interpretation of 'crucibles' as milestones on the creative life journey.

For the Aboriginal artist, however, the life journey inevitably involves encounters with challenging contemporary realities and engagement with traumatic histories relating to racism and colonisation. This is evident in the creative work of many Aboriginal artists today. Five artists have been selected for the purposes of this essay whose work may be interpreted in regards to crucible leadership: Rover Thomas (1926-1998), Lin Onus (1948-1996), Trevor Nickolls (1949-

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<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (2019). 'Crucible'. (definition). <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crucible#learn-more> (accessed 20 May 2019).

<sup>10</sup> The history and etymology of the word 'crucible' comes from Medieval Latin. A 'Crucibulum' is an 'earthen pot for melting metals'. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 'Crucible'. (definition).

<sup>11</sup> Bennis and Thomas. 'Crucibles of Leadership', 61.

2012), Julie Dowling, (1969- ), and Dale Harding (1982- ). Their creative contributions will be referred to later.

Interestingly, ‘crucibles’ provide opportunities for reinvention, learning and exploration. They enable what Bennis and Thomas refer to as a kind of ‘neoteny’, a quality found in juvenile characteristics that reflects delight in curiosity and learning.<sup>12</sup> A characteristic of individuals who respond to such life experience, however, may not necessarily be about a delight in discovery, especially with consideration to ‘crucibles’ that are related to painful or challenging narratives. Importantly however, ‘crucible’ experiences can impact the way an individual conceptualises and tells the story of the particular life event they experienced, how they dealt with what occurred, and how they were influenced by it. Individuals who respond to adversity with resilience, perseverance, strength and wisdom, make powerful leaders who allow adversity and significant life events to change them so that they emerge from such experiences feeling stronger and more confident.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of such considerations, what happens when an artist engages with a ‘crucible’ experience? While Bennis and Thomas do not explore the experience of the creative, they suggest that leadership skills born from adversity include engagement with others in ‘shared meaning’, the development of a ‘distinctive, compelling voice’, ‘integrity’, and ‘adaptive capacity’. They argue that the latter is of particular importance because it is a kind of ‘applied creativity’ that is an opportunity for growth through reinvention.<sup>14</sup>

Arguably, all of these leadership skills are shared by many artists, because artists routinely explore meaning in their creative work. They also seek to develop a distinctive artistic voice through the application of their creativity to all manner of questions, learning and life experiences. They often seek to establish and to nurture their artistic skills with integrity and openness to adaptation, exploration and discovery. In this way, art can also be experienced as a catalyst for personal growth and investigation. Through creative journeying the artist can explore new pathways and discover previously unforeseen horizons connected to their own personal narratives. Art can indeed be experienced as profoundly transformational for the artist as an individual, or for artists who choose

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<sup>12</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 68.

to work collaboratively. It can also be used as a healing tool.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the idea of creativity as transformational has been explored in a range of published writings.<sup>16</sup>

When the transformative power of art is considered within the contemporary Aboriginal art context, and its development over the past four decades of the Aboriginal art movement in particular, fascinating pathways emerge. Themes that have developed include emphases on cultural identity, belonging, and shared life experience. The relationship between art and life becomes particularly relevant, and narrative is an important vehicle of expression for Aboriginal people. A complex network of visual storytelling about experiences relating to identity, history, and heritage abound in the visual arts.

Counteracting what the Australian historian and anthropologist, William Stanner (1905-1981), called the ‘great Australian silence’,<sup>17</sup> contemporary Aboriginal artists often utilise art as a platform of communication to explore their own narratives which contain topics that were once largely ignored in Australian society. Historical neglect was evident to Stanner in 1938 when he recorded his early thoughts in regards to Aboriginal people. ‘The process of extinction still goes on in the remoter parts of the outback, out of sight of the white urban populations, and out of mind’, he wrote.<sup>18</sup> Three decades later, Stanner emphasised this perspective in regards to Australian history books, which had largely failed to include and acknowledge what had truly happened to Aboriginal people as a consequence of colonisation. In his Boyer lecture, ‘The Great Australian

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<sup>15</sup> While the work of the artist, and the experiencing of art as a viewer is not the same, both roles can potentially be transformational. It is also worth noting that the transformative nature of creativity is commonly evidenced in art therapy programs. Art can be positively explored as a healing tool and this is a by-product of creative practice familiar to many artists. There is a broad field of literature on art as a form of therapy. See for example: D. Arrington, Banowsky. (c. 2001). *Home is where the art is: an art therapy approach to family therapy*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas; C. Case and T. Dalley. (Eds.). (1990). *Working with children in art therapy*. London: Tavistock; A. De Botton, A. (2013). *Art as therapy*. London: Phaidon Press Limited; D. E. Gussak and M. L. Rosal. (Eds.) (2016). *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of art therapy*. Chichester, UK.; Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016; S. Hogan. (Ed.) (1997). *Feminist approaches to art therapy*. London; New York: Routledge; M. Frings Keyes. (c. 1983). *Inward journey: art as therapy*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court; H. B. Landgarten. (c. 1981). *Clinical art therapy: a comprehensive guide*. New York: Brunner/Mazel; E. G. Levine and S. K. Levine. (Eds.) (2011). *Art in action: expressive arts therapy and social change*. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. (electronic resource); B. L. Moon. (c. 2003). *Essentials of art therapy education and practice*. Springfield, Ill.: C.C. Thomas; J. A. Rubin. (Ed.) (c. 1987). *Approaches to art therapy: theory and technique*. New York: Brunner/Mazel; L. Silverstone. (2009). *Art therapy exercises: inspirational and practical ideas to stimulate the imagination*. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. (electronic resource).

<sup>16</sup> See for example: M. L. Gram. (1969). ‘Aesthetics and Cultural Transformation’, *The Journal of Education*, Vol. 152, No. 2, Aesthetics in Education (December), 89-98; T. Hart. (2009). ‘Chapter 7: The Process and Paradox of Transformation’. Counterpoints, Vol. 162, *From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of Consciousness*, revised edition, 157-177. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42977401>; E. Mellou. (1994). ‘Creativity: The transformation condition’, *Early Child Development and Care*, 101:1, 81-88. doi: 10.1080/0300443941010108; M. Schwebel. (1993). ‘Moral creativity as artistic transformation’, *Creativity Research Journal*, 6:1-2, 65-81. doi: 10.1080/10400419309534466.

<sup>17</sup> W. E. H. Stanner. (1969). ‘The Great Australian Silence’, in *The 1968 Boyer Lectures: After the Dreaming*. Sydney: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 18-29.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. H. Stanner. (1979). *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1; Stanner. (1969). ‘The Great Australian Silence’, 18-29.

Silence', (1968), Stanner referred to the exclusion of Aboriginal people in Australian historiography, identifying what he called a 'collective cultural amnesia' about Aboriginal Australia. He surveyed books published between 1939 and 1962, that indicated a complete lack of attention to Aboriginal people. While his list was a 'partial survey' Stanner's research made it clear that the level of 'inattention on such a scale' could not 'possibly be explained by absent-mindedness'. What he called 'a cult of forgetfulness' had been 'practised on a national scale'. He predicted that this so-called 'forgetfulness' would be addressed by later generations of historians. If a 'comfortable nostalgia for a vanished past',<sup>19</sup> needed to be shaken up however, not only historians, but artists would be seen to address this most powerfully in the next generation and in later generations to follow. Indeed, many Aboriginal artists from the 1980s to the present day have become creative leaders in their own right. They speak out publicly about previously neglected realities in relation to Aboriginal people via the language of art. Art has provided them with a safe, public platform that has the power to reach people. Contemporary visual art has the potential to communicate to art audiences, giving them new ways to understand and to relate to Aboriginal people and their narratives.

### **Crucibles of Leadership in Aboriginal Art**

'Crucibles' of leadership in Aboriginal art are most evident in works of art that communicate powerful life experiences. Sometimes these experiences may be collectively inherited by a community. This is acknowledged in the research that has been undertaken on the effects of intergenerational trauma and Aboriginal people.<sup>20</sup> A 'crucible' experience does not always point to one significant life event or a series of life events. For Aboriginal people who routinely face challenges relating to racism, justice and human rights, the entire life journey can be interpreted as a 'crucible'. The ways that the 'crucible' is engaged with by the creative artist is evident in a broad range of Aboriginal art today. The artist has become, not simply a leader in the conventional sense, but one who leads by using the creative platform to create awareness more broadly. Ultimately, awareness may also be potentially transformative for others.

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<sup>19</sup> Stanner. 'The Great Australian Silence', 22-25, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Healing Foundation. (2014). Muru Marri - A Resource for Collective Healing for Members of the Stolen Generations: Planning, implementing and evaluating effective local responses. Prepared for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation by Muru Marri – I. Blignault, L. Jackson Pulver, S. Fitzpatrick, R. Arkles, M. Williams, M. Haswell, and M. Grand Ortega. (Nov.). <https://healingfoundation.org.au/app/uploads/2017/02/Muru-Marri-SCREEN-singles-sml.pdf> (accessed 30 May 2019); P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, and R. Walker. (Eds.) (2014). Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice. Barton ACT.: Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/working-together-aboriginal-and-wellbeing-2014.pdf> (accessed 30 May 2019); See: J. Atkinson, J. Nelson, R. Brooks, C. Atkinson, and K. Ryan. (2014). 'Chapter 17: Addressing Individual and Community Transgenerational Trauma', in P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, and R. Walker. (Eds.). Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice. Barton ACT.: Commonwealth of Australia, 289-303. <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/aboriginal-health/working-together-second-edition/working-together-aboriginal-and-wellbeing-2014.pdf> (accessed 30 May 2019).

Individuals who have experienced powerful ‘crucibles’ often share characteristics of resilience, perseverance and strength, and these characteristics abound in Aboriginal communities. Good leaders deal with what occurs creatively. They might respond to adversity, for example, with all of these characteristics. They might counter adversity with wisdom and humour. They allow significant ‘crucibles’ to change them, but rather than remaining negatively challenged by powerful experiences that might make some individuals feel that they are broken, creative artists have the potential to emerge from engagement with a crucible feeling stronger and more confident. They have the potential to become transformative leaders through the medium of art because they find a way of drawing from their experience to be of assistance to others. In the artistic realm, this assistance often comes in the form of educational journeying through engagement with art, counteracting the legacy of the great Australian silence.

When an artist experiences a powerful ‘crucible’, he or she knows that art is a medium of creative expression that can be drawn upon to communicate to others. Leadership skills relating to adversity include engagement with others in ‘shared meaning’, and this is something to which many artists can relate. Artists often seek to develop a ‘distinctive, compelling voice’ through their art, which is a characteristic Bennis and Thomas have also identified in regards to leadership and the ‘crucible’ experience, but it is also pertinent to artistic expression in the visual arts.<sup>21</sup> The characteristics of ‘integrity’ and ‘adaptive capacity’ are relevant to leaders who have experienced crucible events, too. Bennis and Thomas argue that adaptive capacity is of particular importance because it involves a kind of ‘applied creativity’, which can be an opportunity for growth through reinvention. Such ‘applied creativity’ relates directly to the experience of the artist who transforms experience through the medium of art in order to create something new.<sup>22</sup> Artists often, almost routinely, explore new ideas, and they directly or inadvertently stimulate opportunities for growth in themselves and in others. They utilise invention and reinvention to create new ways of seeing and understanding.

For the purposes of this essay, and to illustrate how the ‘crucible’ may be applied to leadership in the arts, I have selected a group of artists whose work has made, and continues to make, a powerful impact upon art audiences. Lin Onus, Julie Dowling, Rover Thomas, Trevor Nickolls, and Dale Harding, have been chosen as examples of ‘crucible’ leadership because they share a keen interest in addressing matters of historical importance to Aboriginal people and communicating these through skillful and insightful artistic expression. Each in their own individual cultural and creative ways, contribute a unique visual language of their own that offers the viewer a deeper understanding of Aboriginal histories and contemporary realities for Aboriginal people.

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<sup>21</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Bennis and Thomas. ‘Crucibles of Leadership’, 68.

## Lin Onus (1948-1996)

Lin Onus, a Yorta Yorta artist who sought during his lifetime to give art audiences opportunities to better understand Aboriginal histories and justice issues through artistic expression created, for example, what has been described as the ‘first history paintings by an Aboriginal artist’.<sup>23</sup> In a series of narrative works of art that explore the life of the nineteenth century Aboriginal freedom fighter Musquito (c.1780-1825),<sup>24</sup> Onus also addressed the need to acknowledge Aboriginal perspectives and histories. He explained:

Some people write their history, I can’t write so I paint instead. Whilst painting Musquito I became sure of the fact that for the first time I was painting for my people, not for the money, not for the influential “Gubbah” (white man) but for my community.<sup>25</sup>

Although he was not initially inspired by a need to paint for the ‘Gubbah’, Onus nevertheless went on to develop a distinguished career as a painter who influenced non-Aboriginal art audiences he also engaged with. Addressing the inheritance of hidden histories of resistance, he was one of the first contemporary Aboriginal artists to consciously give voice to Aboriginal histories in a deliberate and personal way through painted expression.<sup>26</sup> Onus absorbed what the Aboriginal activist, Gary Foley, has described as, ‘the emotions of the great political struggles’ he had both witnessed and taken part in, drawing from them and working with them creatively.<sup>27</sup> Onus realised, for example, that the Australian education system had offered to Aboriginal people ‘everyone’s else’s history and values’. Responding to this ‘crucible’ which had grown meaningful to him during his formative years, he embarked on a journey of his own to learn about and to understand Aboriginal histories, counteracting the dearth of opportunity his generation and generations of Aboriginal people before him had experienced at school.<sup>28</sup> A growing understanding of the reality

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<sup>23</sup> Aboriginal Education Unit. (1993). ‘Aboriginal Images: White Australia has a Black History’. Sydney, NSW.: New South Wales Department of School Education, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Musquito is thought to have been an Eora man, born at Port Jackson, New South Wales. His resistance to colonial rule was met with fierce reprisal from the colonial government who ordered his arrest in 1805. Exiled to Norfolk Island as a prisoner for eight years, Musquito continued to live in Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) where he was ‘praised [for] his service as a tracker of bushrangers’. Later, his animosity towards the settlers led to further revolutionary activities in the early 1820s. Musquito’s capture in 1824, led to his subsequent trial in Hobart Town (Hobart) for the ‘murder of a stockkeeper’. He was hanged on 25 February 1825, even though the crime had not been clearly attributed to him. See: N. Parry. (2005). ‘Musquito (1780-1825)’. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/musquito-13124/text23749>. (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Statement by Lin Onus for ‘Dalkuna Munaway Nhe Rom’ exhibition, Melbourne, 1987, in Aboriginal Education Unit. (1993). ‘Aboriginal Images: White Australia has a Black History’, 13.

<sup>26</sup> See for example: H. Perkins and B. L. Croft. (1994). ‘Truths, myths and little white lies’, in Sydney, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, *True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists raise the flag*. Sydney: Institute of New International Visual Arts and Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.

<sup>27</sup> G. Foley and B. McGuinness. (2000). ‘Lin Onus: A personal/political memory’ in Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery. (2000). *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*. (Ed.) Margo Neale. St. Leonards, NSW.: Craftsman House in association with G and B Arts International and the Queensland Art Gallery, 33.

<sup>28</sup> J. Isaacs. (1992). *Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings and Prints*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 26. This book was first published in 1989.

of an Australian school curriculum that had reflected non-Aboriginal values and histories, led Onus to explore Aboriginal historical figures, whom he claimed as his own cultural heroes.<sup>29</sup>

Aboriginal freedom fighters were people Onus could admire. They resonated for him personally and culturally, unlike the non-Aboriginal heroes of colonial invasion taught at school.<sup>30</sup> Foley stated that Onus's struggle for Aboriginal justice had 'pervaded his consciousness all his life', and that it had defined 'the nature of his being'.<sup>31</sup> The artist's 'crucible' was his lifelong engagement with, and struggle to come to know, Aboriginal histories and to communicate narratives of relevance through his art. In his final painting of the Musquito series titled, *Wanted, one rope thrower*, (1979-82),<sup>32</sup> Onus painted Musquito as if drowning in a symbolic sea of papers. The multi-layered meanings inherent in the image included an appeal to Aboriginal historians to write their own histories and to present their own perspectives.<sup>33</sup> The transformative power of Onus's Musquito narrative can be identified in the ways he interpreted this history and made it relevant to Aboriginal people in the contemporary context.<sup>34</sup>

### **Julie Dowling, (1969- )**

For Julie Dowling, of the Badimaya people,<sup>35</sup> references to freedom fighters in her work, are revelatory of the artist's mastery as a creative leader who celebrates and commemorates Aboriginal history through the power of portraiture. In her moving *Self-portrait: in our country*, (2002),<sup>36</sup> Dowling references her heritage and matrilineal ancestors, depicting herself as the central figure in the composition. Her body, silhouetted against the earth becomes a window into the past, and an expression of connection to her ancestors and country, where the past becomes symbolically one with the present. The inspiration for the portrait originated from the need to express how she felt about 'returning' to her 'grandmother's country, which is located near a small town called

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<sup>29</sup> Isaacs. *Aboriginality*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Foley. 'Lin Onus', 38, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Foley. 'Lin Onus', 33.

<sup>32</sup> Lin Onus, *Wanted, one rope thrower*, (1979-82), Musquito series, Aborigines Advancement League Collection, Melbourne. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5 cm. Image Reference: D. Leslie. (2008). *Aboriginal Art: Creativity and Assimilation*. South Yarra, Vic.: Macmillan Art Publishing, 237.

<sup>33</sup> L. Onus. (c. 1982). 'Musquito', unpublished notes. Upwey, 3.

<sup>34</sup> The way that Musquito was responded to is evident in newspaper articles of the day. For example, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* made reference to Musquito on a fairly regular basis. See; *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, (1804-1825). (references to Musquito). 23 December 1804, p. 3; 7 July 1805, p. 1; 12 January 1806, p. 1; 19 January 1806, p. 2; 16 March 1806, p. 2; 17 March 1825, p. 3; 22 April 1824, p. 2; 28 April 1825, p. 2; On 17 March 1825, a short announcement describing Musquito as a 'Sydney black', announced he had been executed for 'murder'. 17 March 1825, p. 3; Almost one year later on 16 March 1806, another mention of Musquito was made in regards to the 'long standing animosity of the natives' that followed his death. 16 March 1806, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> National Portrait Gallery. (2018). 'Julie Dowling'. <https://www.portrait.gov.au/people/julie-dowling-1969> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Julie Dowling, *Self-portrait: in our country*, (2002), synthetic polymer paint, oil and red ochre on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 2002. Accession no: NGA 2002.377. Image Reference: National Gallery of Australia. 'Julie Dowling'. *Self-portrait: in our country*, (2002). <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=37840> (accessed 29 May 2019).

Yalgoo', located north-east of Geraldton in Western Australia. Dowling paints herself with her ancestors as if time has not separated them.<sup>37</sup> Like Onus, the 'crucible' in Dowling's artistic expression is identified in the way she engages with, and responds to, narratives of the past. Rather than paint images directly attesting to the historical suffering of Aboriginal people during the colonial era, however, Dowling's heroes and heroines are men and women portrayed with dignity and strength.

*Walyer*, (2006),<sup>38</sup> a large romantic portrait in the National Gallery of Australia collection, depicts, for example, the Aboriginal freedom fighter (c.1800-1831), also known as Tarenorerer of the Tommeginne people of Emu Bay, Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania). Walyer wears a traditional cloak, incised with cultural designs revealing of her heritage. Stephen Gilchrist, former curator at the National Gallery of Australia, writes that Walyer had been 'sold into slavery to Bass Strait sealers' as an adolescent. She later escaped and returned to her people where she fought alongside them with 'male and female warriors who attacked the establishing colonies and other Aboriginal groups with great success'. Gilchrist explains:

By examining episodes in history that privilege an Aboriginal perspective, Dowling's portraits reveal what we as a nation choose to remember and what we force ourselves to forget.<sup>39</sup>

In her biography of Walyer, Vicki maikutena Matson-Green of the Palawa people, refers to Walyer as a heroic leader who organised attacks against Van Diemen's Land settlers in the late 1820s. Walyer had not only learned English during the time she was abducted, but she had also learned how to use firearms after observing their use by her captors. In 1830, her recapture by sealers later led to her apprehension by the colonial government authorities who responded to her as a formidable foe who should be annihilated. Blamed for atrocities against white settlers and for her organised revolutionary activities, Walyer died on 5 June 1831 after contracting influenza.<sup>40</sup> European introduced diseases such as this played a powerful role in causing the deaths of Aboriginal people in the colonial era. While Dowling is a leader in the depiction of heroes and heroines of Aboriginal history, she also chooses to paint individuals who convey leadership through their contribution to Aboriginal community and their achievements, today. Her portrait

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<sup>37</sup> National Gallery of Australia. 'Julie Dowling'.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Dowling, *Walyer*, (2006), synthetic polymer paint and natural earth pigments on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 2007. Accession no: NGA 2007.9. Image Reference: National Gallery of Australia. 'Julie Dowling'. *Walyer*, (2006). <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=144778> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>39</sup> S. Gilchrist. National Gallery of Australia. (2010). <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=144778> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>40</sup> V. maikutena Matson-Green. (2005). 'Tarenorerer (1800-1831)'. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/tarenorerer-13212/text23923> (accessed 29 May 2019).

*Richard Walley*, (2015),<sup>41</sup> featuring the distinguished Aboriginal activist Richard Walley, (1953-), a Nyoongar artist, writer and performer, honours a contemporary leader whose cultural and community achievements were acknowledged with a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 1993 ‘for service to the performing arts and to the promotion of the culture of the south western Aboriginals, the Nyoongahs’, and a Doctor of Letters from Murdoch University in 2001.<sup>42</sup>

### **Rover Thomas (1926-1998)**

For the Kukatja/Wangkajunga artist of the Kimberley, Rover Thomas, massacres in his community which occurred just prior to his birth were representative of a powerful intergenerational ‘crucible’ which he painted repeatedly. Thomas inherited the traumatic histories referred to as the ‘killing times’, because massacres had been occurring in the Kimberley until 1925, the year prior to his birth. He grew up with people who had first-hand memories of the atrocities. In his writings on the historical legacy of the Kimberley, Wally Caruana, former curator of Aboriginal art at the National Gallery of Australia, refers to ‘the confrontations between white and black, often resulting in massacres’ of Aboriginal people and the ‘forced migrations of peoples’ that were all part of the modern history of the Kimberley. Massacre was, Caruana writes, ‘fresh in the minds of those of Thomas’ generation’ who had ‘either lived through it or learned it from their forebears’.<sup>43</sup> In paintings such as *Ruby Plains killing 1*, (1990),<sup>44</sup> and *Ruby Plains killing 2*, (1990),<sup>45</sup> Thomas communicates the tragedy of the ‘killing times’ through his art. He made, for example, eight paintings comprising a series that referenced serious conflict in the eastern Kimberley in the early twentieth century.

*Ruby Plains killing 1*, is one of the eight paintings.<sup>46</sup> The power of Thomas’s visual narrative seems all the more disturbing because of the simplicity of the image. The only content that suggests something is wrong is Thomas’s minimalist reference to a figure on the left-hand side of the

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<sup>41</sup> Julie Dowling, *Richard Walley*, (2015), synthetic polymer paint and red ochre on canvas, 152.5 cm x 121.5 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Accession number: 2015.64. Image Reference: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. <https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits/2015.64/richard-walley> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>42</sup> National Portrait Gallery. (2015). ‘Richard Walley OAM honoured in new Portrait Gallery commission’. (2 Sept.) <https://www.portrait.gov.au/content/richard-walley-oam-honoured> (accessed 29 May 2019); Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Australian Honours. <https://honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/873640> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>43</sup> National Gallery of Australia. (2000). ‘World of Dreamings: Traditional and modern art of Australia’. (Rover Thomas). <http://nga.gov.au/dreaming/Index.cfm?Refnc=Ch5> (accessed 22 May 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Rover Thomas, *Ruby Plains killing 1*, (1990), from the massacre series, natural earth pigments on canvas, framed 92.4 x 202.2 x 5.5 (d) cm. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 1990. Accession no: NGA 90.1755. Image Reference: National Gallery of Australia. <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=147688> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Rover Thomas, *Ruby Plains killing 2*, (1990), from the massacre series, natural gum and pigments on canvas, framed 92.8 x 112 x 55 (d) cm. National Gallery of Australia, purchased 1990. Accession no: NGA 90.1730. Image Reference: National Gallery of Australia. <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=148446> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>46</sup> National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. (2009). Commentary. <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=147688> (accessed 29 May 2019).

composition, and yet the title indicates unerringly what the painting is about. Likewise, in *Ruby Plains killing 2*, from the same series, Thomas presents the viewer with what can be imagined as a topographical map of his ancestral country. Reference to a figure in the bottom left hand side of the composition again disturbs the apparent tranquility of visual reference to the land. This visual sign, and the title of the painting signals the hidden history of tragedy. The remarkable nature of works of art created by Thomas on the theme of massacre, is not only the reality of what occurred, but the recent reality of the experience for his community and the way that Thomas recorded this.

While cultural and contemporary narratives play a strong part in the art of Rover Thomas, so too does his traditional country. Visual references to actual locations in his paintings and the familiarity with which the artist paints his country, establishes the imagery as culturally and spiritually significant. It is imagery that is also intimately linked with oral histories and shared, communal recollection. Thomas was ‘first and foremost a great painter’ who made ‘sophisticated, modernist’ abstract works of art with ‘universal appeal’.<sup>47</sup> A remarkable aspect of Thomas’s painterly translation of these histories is the way he constructs his compositions. He uses imagery symbolising the land which would not usually be associated with images of massacre. The country itself becomes ‘witness’ to ‘the atrocities, bearing marks of history’, and the artist’s leadership is inherent in his efforts to communicate this to the world through powerful visual narratives. Thomas conveyed the meaning of the narratives of massacre known in his community through what the late art critic, Nevill Drury, has referred to as the ‘inherent spirituality of the landscape’.<sup>48</sup> The dissonance between the terror of massacre with the subtlety and beauty evident in Thomas’s image-making only seem to reinforce his message all the more meaningfully. Drury explains:

What is truly extraordinary is that a timeless, universal quality arises in these works which seems to transcend the tragedies themselves: it is also a great tribute to the descendants of the victims that they are able to recall these grim events without moral outrage or vengefulness towards present-day white Australians. These were tragedies in the past, they say; these were killings that happened “in them days”.<sup>49</sup>

Thomas did not begin painting until he was in his mid-fifties. He had been a stockman who had worked on various cattle stations prior to becoming an artist. His rich cultural life experiences underpin works of art that drew upon ‘cosmological and historical references’ and presented audiences with a ‘new and profound view of the land’.<sup>50</sup> He also presented, most meaningfully, a

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<sup>47</sup> National Gallery of Victoria. (2003). ‘Rover Thomas: I Want To Paint’. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/rover-thomas/> (accessed 29 May 2019); Holmes à Court Gallery. (2003). *Rover Thomas: I want to paint*. (exh. cat.), East Perth, WA.: Heytesbury Pty Ltd, Holmes à Court Gallery.

<sup>48</sup> N. Drury. (1999). ‘The Spiritual Perspective of Aboriginal Painter Rover Thomas’. Nevill Drury (website): <http://www.nevilldrury.com/nevill-drury-articles-rover-thomas.htm> (accessed 22 May 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Drury. ‘The Spiritual Perspective of Aboriginal Painter Rover Thomas’.

<sup>50</sup> K. Akerman. (2000). ‘Rover Thomas’, Tribute, *Artlink*, March. <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/1390/rover-thomas/> (accessed 29 May 2019).

‘crucible’ which was passed to him intergenerationally, which he transformed on the surface of the canvas into compositions of beauty that are imbued with strong feelings relating to histories of massacre that took place on the land of his ancestors.

### **Trevor Nickolls (1949-2012)**

For the Ngarrindjeri artist, Trevor Nickolls, the ‘crucible’ evident in his work is his engagement with a society that symbolises a clash between Aboriginal and Western cultures. This was a theme that consumed him for decades. Nickolls was interested in what the Gamilaroi art historian, Donna Leslie, has described as images of coexistence and contrast. His painted metaphors referred to a challenging cross-cultural world.<sup>51</sup> They are revolutionary, innovative, and intensely personal.<sup>52</sup> Nickolls eschewed the need to meet with Western expectations of image-making, seeking and building a visual language that dealt with the cultural duality of life he experienced personally. His imagery was unfamiliar to art audiences because it explored the encounter between Aboriginal cultures and Western society. He wanted to find ‘balance between the black and the white’, but his efforts were a constant, enduring, personal struggle.<sup>53</sup> The incongruence between Aboriginal tradition and Western technology led also to his exploration of alienation and loss in a profoundly meaningful way.

In *Dreamtime machinetime*, (1979),<sup>54</sup> a painting now in the Art Gallery of South Australia collection, for example, Nickolls’s dreamlike world is dominated by a looming skyscraper, depicted anthropomorphically with sharp teeth ready to swallow a giant dollar sign whole.

In *Machine Time Madonna*, (1981),<sup>55</sup> a painting also in the Art Gallery of South Australia collection, Nickolls captures the theme of duality once again, contrasting more obviously the theme of spirituality and peace with the deathlike, detachment of the machine age. Ulli Beier, in *Dream Time - Machine Time: The Art of Trevor Nickolls*, (1985), explains that Nickolls’s narrative was essentially autobiographical because his art was a ‘personal commitment’ rather than a ‘political statement’,<sup>56</sup> and yet Nickolls’s narrative seems also profoundly universal. The artist’s

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<sup>51</sup> D. Leslie. (2008). *Aboriginal Art: Creativity and Assimilation*. South Yarra, Vic.: Macmillan Art Publishing, 105, 134.

<sup>52</sup> L. Onus. (1990). ‘Language and Lasers’, *The Land, The City: The Emergence of Urban Aboriginal Art*, Special Supplement, *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 3 (May), 15.

<sup>53</sup> L. Thompson. (compiler). (1990). *Aboriginal Voices: Contemporary Aboriginal Artists, Writers and Performers*. Brookvale: Simon and Schuster, 110.

<sup>54</sup> Trevor Nickolls, *Dreamtime machinetime*, (1979), synthetic polymer paint, metallic paint on canvas, 121 x 51.5 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia. Gift of the Bensimon Family 1996. Image Reference: Art Gallery of South Australia. <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/dreamtime-machinetime/35848/> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>55</sup> Trevor Nickolls, *Machine Time Madonna*, (1981), synthetic polymer and metallic paint on canvas, 59.5 x 50 cm. Art Gallery of South Australia. A. R. Ragless Bequest fund 1988. Image Reference: Art Gallery of South Australia. <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/machine-time-madonna/23950/> (accessed 30 May 2019).

<sup>56</sup> U. Beier. (1985). *Dream Time - Machine Time: The Art of Trevor Nickolls*. Bathurst, NSW.: Robert Brown and associates, in association with the Aboriginal Artists Agency, Sydney, 28, 12, 14, 16.

leadership is inherent in the expression of a ‘crucible’ of experience to which many Aboriginal people can relate; the reality that the imposition of Western society is a world utterly different to Aboriginal heritage and the Aboriginal way of being.

### **Dale Harding (1982- )**

Dale Harding, of the Bidjara, Ghungalu and Garingbal peoples, works with a range of influences that are also intergenerational and personal. In a powerful series of works of art exhibited in 2013, Harding referenced, for example, oral histories of his family and ‘complex and often painful hidden histories of violence and discrimination’ that had been ‘enacted against Aboriginal communities’. In so doing, Harding’s art signifies much broader narratives of colonialism and its scourge internationally.<sup>57</sup> In *bright eyed little dormitory girls*, (2013),<sup>58</sup> Harding made five hessian and wool items that symbolise domestic slavery experienced by his ‘mother, grandmother and great-grandmother’. Historically, the use and abuse of Aboriginal girls and women was widespread in Australia, and often connected with the forced removal of children from their families. Harding’s grandmother had been taken from her family and consigned to a mission dormitory. She was trained to undertake domestic duties and contracted to work for others at the tender age of thirteen years. When her employer attempted to abuse her, she defended herself with a ‘mop and bucket’. Her punishment for resisting included having to ‘wear a hessian dress’, which was harsh and unforgiving against her skin. Harding’s hessian garments symbolise his grandmother’s experience. They feature ‘stencilled numbers and letters printed on the coarse weave [to] signify the inhumane practice of calling inmates by an alphanumeric code, rather than their names’. Crowns embroidered by the artist on the left-hand-side of each garment are intended to identify the ‘wearer as the property of the state’. Harding reports that his grandmother, who was identified not by her first name but as ‘W38’, was ‘hospitalised because of the severity of the abrasions on her neck and arms caused by the hessian sack she was forced to wear’. He symbolically alleviated the punitive memory by embroidering soft, mohair designs around the neck of the garment.<sup>59</sup>

*White Collared*, (2013),<sup>60</sup> which was created the same year as *bright eyed little dormitory girls* extends Harding’s theme of enforced Aboriginal enslavement, juxtaposing the feminine beauty of lace collars with threaded leather cords suggestive of a collar or item that cannot be easily removed. Harding’s ‘imagined artefacts of mission times’ symbolise the control of government, state and

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<sup>57</sup> D. Harding. (undated). Artist Profile: <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/artists/dale-harding/> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Dale Harding, *bright eyed little dormitory girls*, (2013), hessian, mohair wool, 5 parts: bag 1: 30 x 22 x 3 cm; bag 2: 33 x 21 x 3 cm; bag 3: 31 x 22 x 3 cm; bag 4: 32 x 20 x 3 cm; bag 5: 34 x 21 x 3 cm. Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds provided by the MCA Foundation, 2013. Accession number: 2013.61A-E. Image Reference: Museum of Contemporary Art. <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/2013.61A-E/> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>59</sup> D. Harding. (2014). (quoted by Lauren Barker). ‘Dale Harding, artist’. The Weekend Edition, 13 March. <https://theweekendition.com.au/the-locals/dale-harding/> (accessed 31 May 2019).

<sup>60</sup> Dale Harding, *White Collared*, (2013), found collars, rawhide, thread and brass, 190 x 38 x 2 cm (dimensions variable). Image Reference: Institute of Modern Art. <http://www.4a.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/11.jpg> (accessed 30 May 2019).

church authorities over Aboriginal lives.<sup>61</sup> Through his use of carefully selected found objects as symbols of servitude, the artist transforms each lace collar into headdress like imagery, when he turns the collars upside-down and has them displayed that way. They also echo the spiritual symbol of a halo.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Bennis and Thomas teach us that extraordinary leaders utilise ‘crucible’ experiences in their lives to create transformational change. Since ‘crucibles’ can change the individual and are often borne out of traumatic experiences, they can stimulate deep thinking and self-reflection that provides opportunities to learn about life and relationships. ‘Crucibles’ challenge the individual to examine his or her own values, assumptions and judgements, but when an artist channels the experience of a ‘crucible’ into his or her creative work, they can challenge the audience, too. All of the Aboriginal artists mentioned in this essay do this in implicit and explicit ways. Art can be powerfully effective in communicating human experience. It can potentially transform the hearts and minds of the audience. Art can be a vehicle to communicate personal ‘crucibles’ that reach people emotionally. For example, it can act as a source of reflection about Aboriginal Reconciliation and its meaning. It can assist in guiding the interpretation of Aboriginal histories, and it can potentially generate increased understanding.

The Yorta Yorta artist, Lin Onus, conveys the importance of Aboriginal histories for Aboriginal people, and in a different way, for the non-Aboriginal audience. He aims to present Aboriginal histories and to seek their acknowledgment in a world which had largely neglected Aboriginal people. He identifies his own cultural heroes, counteracting the information he had been taught at school.

Julie Dowling, of the Badimaya people, explores historical and contemporary freedom fighters in her work through the power of the portrait. Seeing herself as indivisible from, and intimately connected to, her ancestry, Dowling references her matrilineal line, and identifies with narratives of history that acknowledge the strength and dignity of Aboriginal people. These become a powerful ‘crucible’ of humanity depicted on the surface of the canvas that art audiences can access and relate to.

The Kukatja/Wangkajunga artist of the Kimberley, Rover Thomas, painted massacre histories, which are a meaningful intergenerational ‘crucible’. They convey an inherited narrative and its ongoing effects on his community. His paintings on this theme remind the audience of the contemporaneous reality of conflict in his traditional country. Thomas records this with visual

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<sup>61</sup> Institute of Modern Art (website). (2015). ‘Dale Harding: White Collared’. <https://ima.org.au/exhibitions/dale-harding-white-collared/> (accessed 29 May 2019).

<sup>62</sup> M. King. (19 Sept. 2015). Institute of Modern Art, related podcast (with reference to ‘Dale Harding: White Collared’, 8 Aug. to 19 Sept. 2015. <https://ima.org.au/exhibitions/dale-harding-white-collared/> (accessed 30 May 2019).

beauty that establishes him as a sophisticated painter immersed in country who records such narratives in his own inimitable way.

For the Ngarrindjeri artist, Trevor Nickolls, the 'crucible' is his personal struggle with a non-Aboriginal society which has been imposed upon Aboriginal people. Nickolls paints cultural dualities that are an enduring struggle, conveying to art audiences in the process, a broader Aboriginal struggle that is a legacy of colonialism.

Dale Harding, of the Bidjara, Ghungalu and Garingbal peoples, reminds his audiences that his own family histories are intergenerational and personal. They contain painful hidden histories and yet he symbolically transforms these histories with sensitivity and compassion. Harding's work also points to broader meanings relating to racism and the historical control of Aboriginal people by the invading peoples. His 'crucible' is the personal nature of the narrative that is intimately connected to family.

'Crucible' experiences such as these are more likely to belong to a continuum of experiences in the life of an Aboriginal person. Repeated experiences of discrimination may be interpreted as a 'crucible' that Aboriginal leaders can draw from to teach others about justice and human rights. Ongoing hardship and persecution might, for example, represent a prolonged 'crucible', which can also indicate resilience and strength, something which Bennis and Thomas have identified as characteristic of leadership. 'Crucibles' can provide opportunities to learn and to gain valuable insights about life. While they may not be welcome experiences, the insights they bring can ironically inform the ways an individual approaches leadership. Bennis and Thomas argue that extraordinary leaders have a tendency to transform experiences that are meaningful in their lives. Interestingly, it does not matter whether these experiences are negative or positive, but generally they relate to a life experience, or an exposure to suffering that can be transformative. All of the artists mentioned in this essay manage, whether intentionally or not, to utilise art as a platform that is ultimately transformational.

The key to such transformation in the life of the artist as leader lies in the way a 'crucible' experience is creatively interpreted by the artist and audience. Paintings by Rover Thomas, for example, have the potential to transform the viewer to consider the sanctity of Aboriginal lives. Thomas's voice is all the more compelling because of the Kimberley painting style he utilises. He demonstrates adaptive capacity that challenges the audience to understand the human experience more deeply. Leaders in the visual arts like Thomas demonstrate that they are leaders because of the particular way in which they have communicated the 'crucible' they have experienced. When an individual artist responds to adversity with resilience, perseverance, strength and wisdom, he or she communicates powerful leadership. Leaders can skilfully use their experience to engage with others in shared meaning, and when they are able to effectively engage others in the narrative of their experience, they can inspire others. The development of a distinctive and compelling voice

is particularly powerful when it is spoken through the integrity of lived experience. All of the artists mentioned do this with great meaning and depth, indicative of their leadership in the arts.

It is my hope that educators might consider the interpretation of Aboriginal art through the lens of the 'crucible' as a meaningful metaphor that encapsulates the Aboriginal experience informed by shared histories and contemporary cultural and intergenerational realities. I hope that this work supports a growing, deeper understanding of Aboriginal art and the ways that diverse Aboriginal visual languages of creativity offer new insights into Aboriginal leadership in the arts for study and reflection.

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