

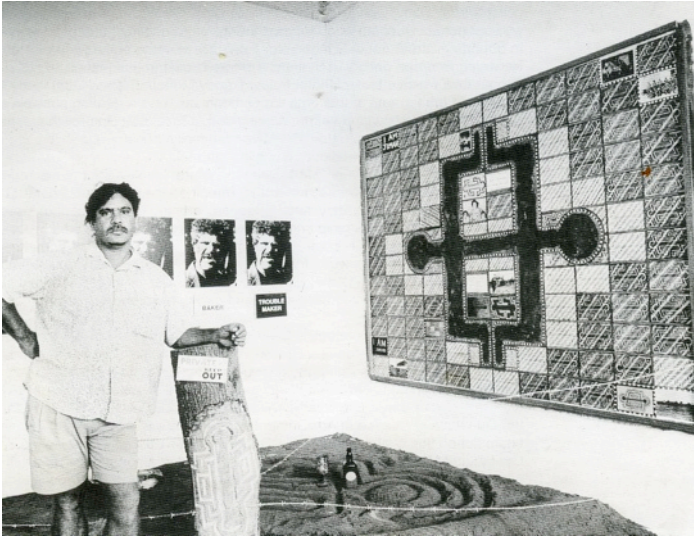
WHY YOU PAINT LIKE THAT

EXHIBITION ESSAY

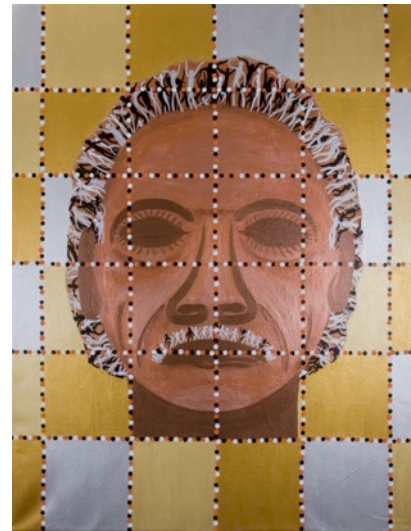


By Marshall Bell
2010

When I began painting I found the want for an authentic Aboriginal look based on and/or including my ancestral art was a very strong desire. I searched for that authentic look and found it a very daunting task to uncover. There is little to be found at any one place. It's not just that there's such minute institutional collections or supporting literature that makes it an overwhelming experience but the fact that material evidence is scattered over many and distant locations. If one has little idea of what they are looking for, then when finding something of relevance, it's hard to fully comprehend the value of what one is looking at. I find this a sad state of affairs particularly at a time when so many Indigenous people are searching for a connectedness to their past. Trying to define what their Aboriginality is and does it have an authenticity to it that makes a tangible connectedness to one's own stories and art.



**Gobi Tree carving, Gobi ground painting and Gobi mixed media painting
Marshall Bell, Sydney Biennial 1993**



***It Don't Look Like Me* 2010
91 x 71 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

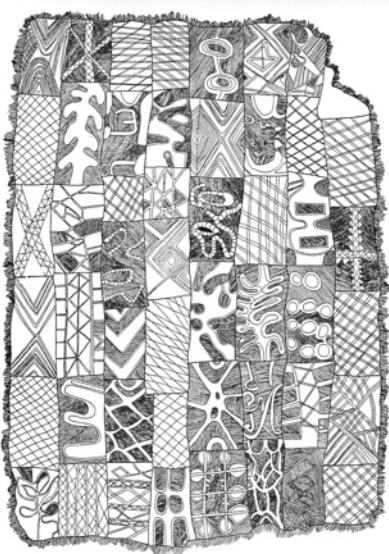
Given that the time of producing ceremonial art has been lapsed for so long is it any wonder little information is now preserved. Add the harsh restrictive and heavily enforced laws on governing our language and customs, one can understand why little passing on of this information was done. I've found many Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people have never heard of Indigenous animal skin rugs or cloaks, let alone the art on them. They were important cultural items, for it was on rugs and cloaks, like so many of the decorated artefacts found in South Eastern Australia, where our traditional art styles were recorded. The art of the skins told of who they were and where they came from. In my mother's tribe, the Kamilaroi, they called these designs "Mombarroi".

Art on the skin is why I use the grid design in my paintings and I cling so strongly to it. For me this is an important part of my traditional art and therefore I consider it is an Important part of me. This art style, along with the local style of ground painting incorporating the stone arrangements, tree carvings, rock painting, body painting and artefacts gives me the basis to my art. I draw on on all these art styles to create my artworks. I draw on all these styles for they were common to my ancestors lands. I use this as the basis for a license to create my art. Whilst many may think they can see non-Indigenous influences I do say very clearly these perceived influences are totally Aboriginal. They are not to do cultural reproduction of someone else's style or story, but as cultural creativity. I use these styles in a conceptual way as representation of my ancestors art styles.

In mapping the archaeology of my fathers country the Archaeologists Dr Bruno David, Dr Luke Godwin and the Anthropologist/Archaeologist Dr John Craib used "Predictive Modelling" in assessing the location of where they would find cultural heritage material. The data for the Predictive Modelling was drawn from other cultural heritage studies. They gathered previous Archaeological reports from local and nearby regions and sourced where evidence of cultural

heritage material appeared in certain conditions within an environment. From these sources and their own work they could say cultural heritage material would be found nearby permanent water sources or little or no cultural material would be found in sandy Cypress Pine forest areas. There is loads of many and varied Indigenous art styles appearing throughout South Eastern Australia. Designs and symbols that appear in Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland can be put forward as evidence for "Predictive Modelling", to assert that these designs and symbols are likely throughout the whole of South Eastern Australia.

The artwork on the Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks appear to have two interesting styles. Images of a rug at an overseas Museum is of one complete image covering the whole rug. It consist of three diamonds with lines along the sides. This image appears to be that of the three moiety classes. It is image that I have seen on a tree near a ceremony ground. Those rugs held in Australia show the other style. They are made up of artwork on individual pieces then combined to form the cultural item. These particular types of cultural items show a great array of individual styles and symbols. Perhaps it is because of their size that demands inclusion of more artwork. Included, amongst the designs, symbols and styles are those asserted as being exclusive to northern and central parts of Australia. One needs only to look closely at the rugs and cloaks from Victoria and see these designs, symbols and styles to those existing in artwork from northern and central parts of Australia. The same can be said of the Matthew's skin designs collected from around Southern Victoria and those existing in Victorian collections. One will see circles, cross-hatching, people, even the symbol for a woman sitting next to a digging stick. Circles appear on Sydney rock engravings and in Queensland rock art. If one looks at all the art styles of South Eastern Australia one can see elements of all the regional art that has been produced in Australia.



**Lake Condah 1872
Possum skin rug**



**Remains of Indigenous
animal skin rug from Mt
Moffat at Miles Museum**

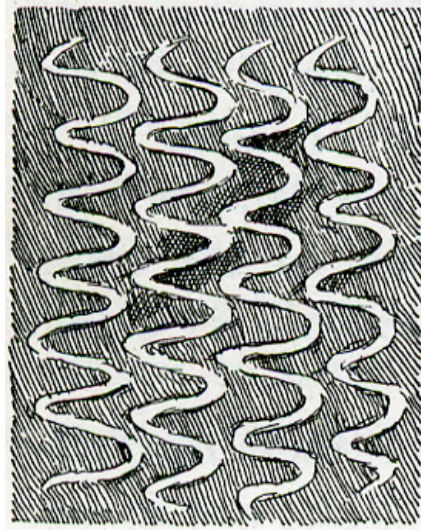
South Eastern Australian Indigenous artists have been incorrectly accredited with incorporating art styles as having been stolen from other regions of Australia. These assertions now appear untrue. I assert that this line of thinking is meant to be denigrating and devaluing. It ignores there is a convergence in South Eastern Australia art. This art draws upon every art form and art style practised throughout South Eastern Australia. What's more it has a factual basis to it. These art style are consistently recorded across South Eastern Australia.

Add the fact that Aboriginal people were removed from their ancestral lands and forced onto Aboriginal missions and reserves. These unjust acts created an environment where there were converging points. Local identities converged with regional identities creating a new artstyle look. No where can this be better illustrated than in the art from these places. Look at the Cherbourg style or art from Woorabinda. Look at the great artists from there, Robin O'Chin, Brian Fisher, Vincent and Roslyn Serico, one will see in their art this convergence of style. They have used this convergence to create their own art and tell their stories. I suspect that as the veil of Native Title secrets are lifted and Australians learn of individual clan stories, an interconnectedness from clan to clan will become apparent. Because common stories travelled from clan to clan right across Australia creating a connectedness.

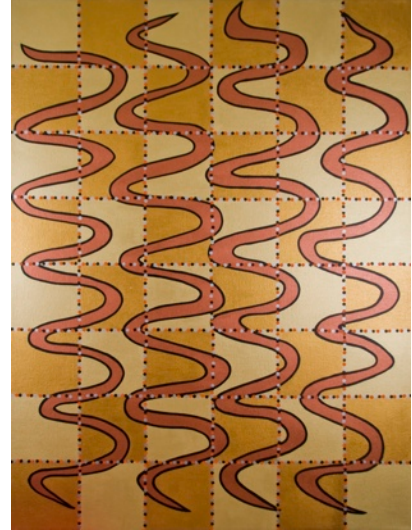
I have heard many from within the art world (including people at the Queensland Art Gallery, the Queensland College of art and Queensland's arts funding body, Art's Queensland) parroting off that these art designs are used in other areas of Australia, but are not aware that they appear in South Eastern Australian traditional art. These are the major institutions with available resources to debunk these assertions. Have any of these institutions looked seriously at this? Again I say these are unfounded and factually incorrect assertions. I suggest that this is one reason why one of the most important forms of South Eastern Australian traditional art is not seen as coming from here. I have often wondered why the art on Indigenous animal skins is not being taught at Australian art education institutions as that coming from South Eastern Australia.



Munda Gutta 2010
101 x 76 cm
Acrylic on canvas



**Animal skin design in
AW Howitt "Native Tribes
of South Eastern
Australia". 1904**



Mundas 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas

The Aboriginal Arts Committee of the Australia Council, Australia's major arts funder, issued an Edict in the early 1990's, directing South Eastern Australian Aboriginal artists not to use designs and symbols that appear in Central and Northern Australian art, even though there is evidence that they appear on rugs and cloaks of South Eastern Australia. They were clearly wrong on issuing that Edict and have done immense damage to the South Eastern Australian arts industry. So many artists have been fed this damaging line. As far as I know this Edict has never been rescinded. Compensation for this damage has never been awarded to artists affected by that dishonourable Edict. Not even a sorry.

The absence of Indigenous animal skins art and its history is so missing that it won't be seen at the major art institutions like the Queensland Art Gallery. Nor is there any Indigenous animal skin art at the Queensland Museum. It is like there is an accepted given that Indigenous animal skin art never happened. This demonstrates a neglect of my/our Indigenous art history. Even though there is consistently recorded existence of the Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks in Photographs, Literature, Paintings and hard copies held at Museums and other places.

Indigenous people all across South Eastern Australia made Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks. They needed them to keep warm. The appearance of Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks corresponded to areas where winter happens. Generally speaking they were found in the areas south of the Tropic of Capricorn down to Tasmania. These are the temperate areas of Australia where there is climate distinction from the wet and dry season of topical northern Australia to the summer and winter seasonal changes of southern Australia.

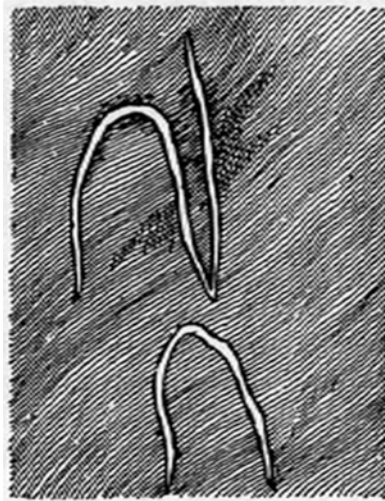
Here in Queensland, a corner of an Indigenous animal skin rug is housed at the Miles Museum. It was found at Mt. Moffat in the western region of the Carnarvon Gorge area of Central Queensland.

It was located by Dr. John Mulvaney's team when he did his famous excavations and carbon dating of a once inhabited cave. Co-incidentally some of the artefacts dated as far back as 15,000 years ago. I find it distressing knowing that such a valuable cultural item is housed at an out of the way place and that it is not fully appreciated as a very important valued cultural item.

Mulvaney's recordings along with Winterbottom recordings of the great cultural man of the Brisbane region from the 1950/60s, Willie McKenzie, tells of these skins. McKenzie suggest that these skins were manufactured and designed in the same way as the rest of the identified area had manufactured and used them. Interestingly he suggest that as well as incising the skins with shape shells, charcoal for black, ochres for red, clay for white, and a wattle tree bark dye for the yellow colour was used. The end of a stick was chewed into a rough paint brush and used to paint the skins.

J.J. Steele in his book "Pathways of south eastern Queensland" published a photograph of a man wearing an Indigenous animal skin cloak. It is said that the man is from Wodenbong. The border area between Queensland and New South Wales. The fact that this man is wearing an Indigenous animal skin cloak is spectacularly overshadowed by what this man is carrying. Together these recordings show clearly the northern range of how far Indigenous animal skins were used.

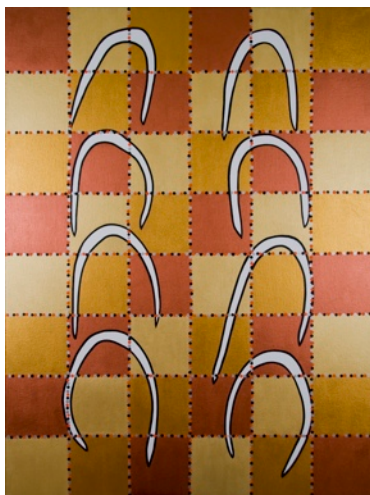
Fred Cahir in his 2005 paper "A Study of Inter-cultural Trade Items in Victoria" suggests, "these items



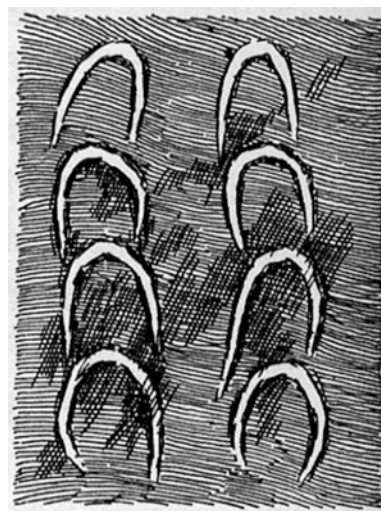
Animal skin design in AW Howitt "Native Tribes of South Eastern Australia". 1904



**Man & Woman 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas**



**Mob 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas**



Animal skin design in AW Howitt "Native Tribes of South Eastern Australia". 1904

were known to be major trade items in the inter-tribal trade well before any white person had come to these shores. Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks have been recorded since early days of white settlement. In 1803 in Victoria the escaped convict William Buckley is recorded as having been given a possum skin rug for which he exchanged his own jacket".

In 1835 John Bateman the man considered as the founder of Melbourne recorded as being given or traded a possum skin cloak. Fred Cahir's paper suggested "that at about the same time British colonisers in the Port Phillip region made attempts at opening formal trade networks with the Indigenous

people. Squatters from Tasmania who occupied land sought to employ Indigenous people in making baskets. Members of the Port Phillip association hoped that if a significant bilateral business relationship could happen then inter-racial relations would be more conciliatory than those of went on in Tasmania earlier".

Cahir further suggest that "the colonists trade in possum skins was not solely to establish and cement rapport. The Europeans greatly admired the ease with which the local Indigenous peoples procured as well as the aesthetic nobility the possum skins

afforded the wearer. They acknowledged the outstanding qualities of the possum skin rugs". A change in the producing practice where once bone and Kangaroo sinew was used for sewing the skins together was being replaced with needle and cotton". Miners and others writing in this period left glowing reports of the benefit of having an Indigenous animal skin rug. One writer says "one rug imparted as much warmth as a dozen blankets and in summer they were stored until the colder months returned". By this time the Indigenous animal skin rugs were considered the most high valued inter-racial trade item in

Victoria. In the 1850s H.W. Wheelwright writes "for all of the coverings in a dry cold winter, an possum skin rug is the best". He further recommended, "If any blacks are handy, it is best to get them to sew the skins, for a black's rug beats any other".



Animal skin design in AW Howitt "Native Tribes of South Eastern Australia". 1904



**Animal Skin Moiety 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

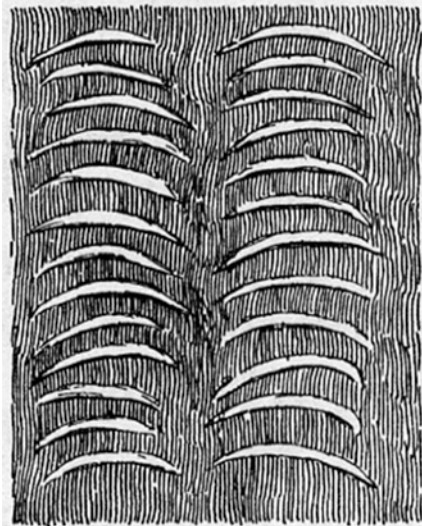
In 1854 the white artist Eugene von Guerard painted "Aborigines on the road to the diggings or The barter". This painting is held at the Geelong Gallery. The painting depicts Wathawurrung people offering possum skin rugs for sale. Cahir suggest that "the positioning of the Indigenous people as being of importance. The white consumer desiring to purchase possum skin rug is kneeling down inspecting the goods in a subservient pose, the Aborigines standing upright in dominant demeanour". Andrew Porteous an honorary correspondent for the Aborigines in the Ballarat district reported that "the demand Europeans for Indigenous animal skin rugs continued to be economically sustainable in 1866, 1867, 1869, 1871 and 1872".

A. W. Howitt, 1830-1908, first published his writings "The Native Tribes of south-eastern Australia" in 1904. He speaks of his first hand account of Kunai people of the southern Victoria region. He states, "The Kunai in their primitive state usually went about without any covering. But they made what is called possum skin rugs. These were made of the dried pelts of the possum sewed together with sinew. They did not dress the skins but merely dried them, and to make them more pliable cut markings on the skin side by means of mussel shells. These markings are called waribruk, and each man had his own".

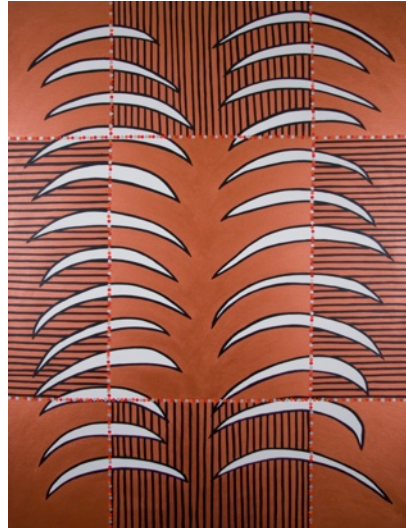
Earlier this century, Fabri Blacklock an assistant curator, for Koori history and culture, at the Powerhouse museum in her essay "Aboriginal skin cloaks" notes Howitt stating, "the importance of the designs found on the cloaks and how these could be used to identify the wearer." And Howitt in his own words saying, "each man's rug is particularly marked to signify its particular ownership. A man's designs from his possum rug were put onto trees around the site of his burial. Passing

references by others note individual designs on each pelt could represent rivers, camps, animals, like grubs, snakes and lizards, and plants". Interestingly enough in my mother's tribe, the witchetty grub is the totem for women and the two-headed goanna is the male totem. My mother and her mother, and her mother, and her mother all the way back to the first Kamilaroi women ever, and indeed right back to the first ever-Australian women put here is my line.

Fraser in his book "The Aborigines of New South Wales" mentions my matriarchal line's tribe in discussing the meaning of the designs found on the cloaks. He suggests that each family had their own design or what



Animal skin design in AW Howitt "Native Tribes of South Eastern Australia". 1904



**Back Scarring 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

Aboriginal people called their Mombarrai. Fraser quotes an Aboriginal as saying; "a friend tells me that he had a possum cloak made for him long ago by a man of the Kamalarai tribe, who marked it with his own Mombarrai. When this cloak was shown to another black sometime after, he at once exclaimed, "I know who made this; here is his Mombarrai".

Whilst the huge production of indigenous animal skins lasted to well in to the late 1800s and then dramatically dropped off they were still made into the early 1920s and 1930s.

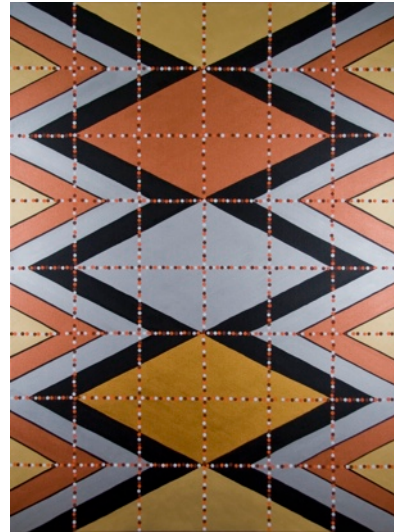
There is a considerable volume of evidence to prove beyond doubt that Indigenous animal skins as either cloaks or rugs existed and further these cultural items were decorated with a personalised art form. The recordings of the huge numbers being made suggests that indigenous animals were prolific through southern and eastern Australia. However there appears to be little in the way of suggesting how the Indigenous animal was gathered.

I will suggest ways my ancestors gathered Possums and Kangaroos. Indigenous animals were a primary food source for Indigenous people right through from before whites arrived up too now and I suggest that they will be for a long into future. The skins were a by-product of the Indigenous person's food production. Dr. Bruno David in 1995/6 surveying of my grandmothers country on my paternal side around the Dawson River located a number of sites that were either considered to be sugar bag trees or possum holes. At some of the sites footholds notches were cut into the trees beginning halfway up the tree up to cut holes, which housed either the bees or a possum. In discussions I had with Dr David he told often two smaller trees with a fork at about eight or ten up the trunk was cut down. These cut trees were then leaned against the tree with the bee's nest or possum in them. The fork of the smaller tree was jammed against the larger tree where a good balance for cutting was obtained. This was the same method that we had used when I was kid growing up in the bush around Mitchell. This method of climbing higher up the tree was used to raid the native beehives. Like native bees Possums live in the hollow inside of trees.

In 1843/44, Ludwig Leichhardt travel across my Dad's country on his way up north. He is recorded as coming to a tributary on the Dawson River. He came upon a very large number of bark huts, they numbered over a hundred. These huts appeared to be permanent dwellings. This village of huts could house in the hundreds. It was at the time empty of any people. In the village Leichhardt located three nets packed into animal skin bags. They were about 1 1/2 and about 20 feet wide.



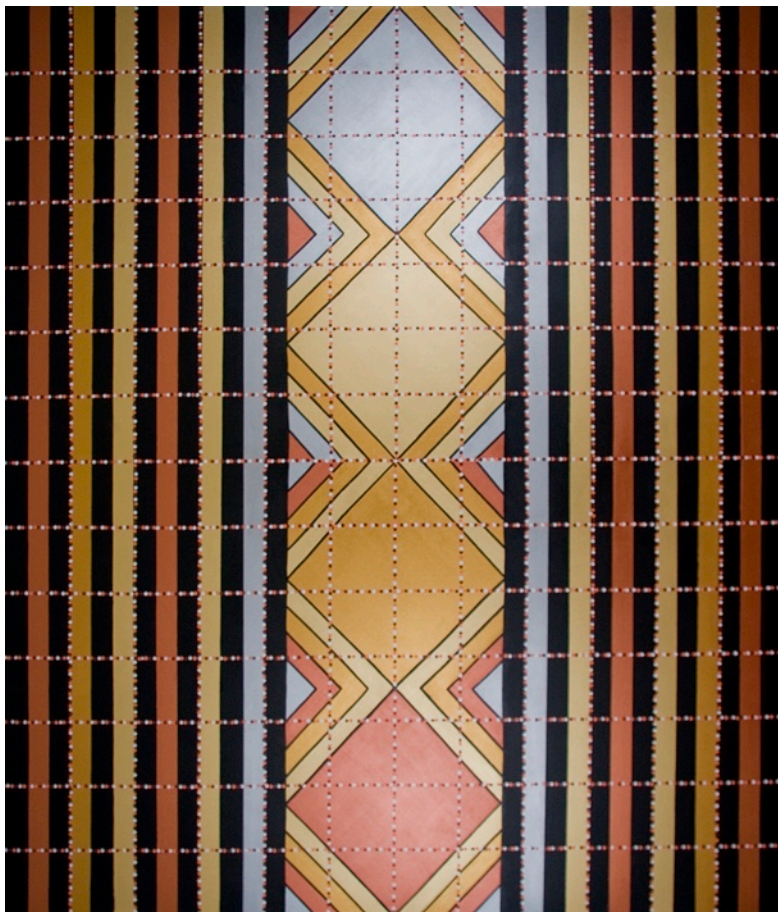
**Animal skin design in
The British Museum**



Moiety 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas



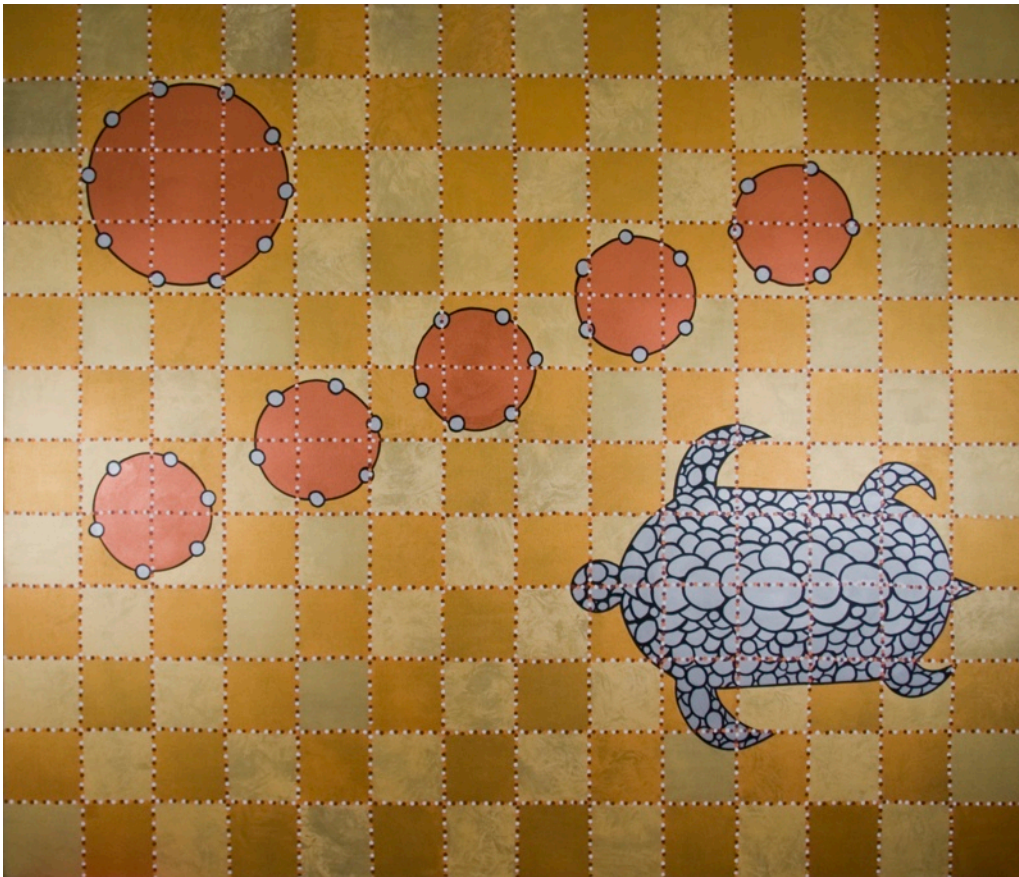
Day Night 2010
101 x 76 cm
Acrylic on canvas



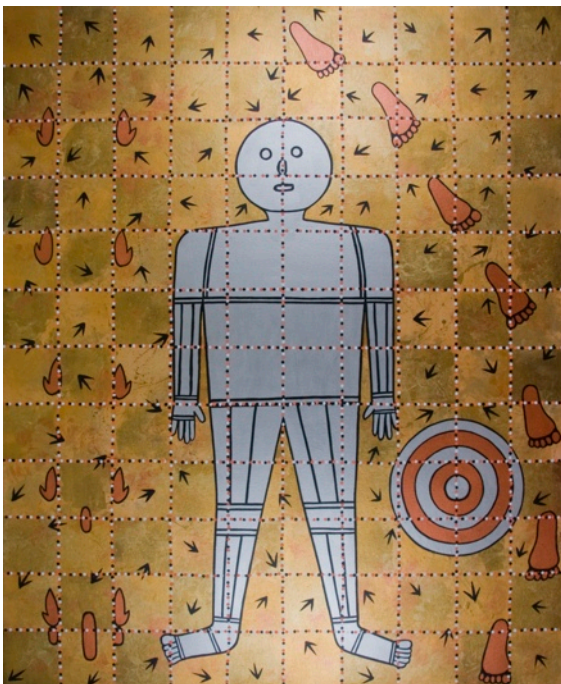
Tree Moiety 2010
213 x 181 cm
Acrylic on canvas

There were three nets in total. The nets were made from tree bark twine. Up to three nets would have been used in Kangaroo and Wallaby hunts. They were stung across dry creek beds or empty gullies. The game was ushered into the nets, trapped and killed. This would have supplied an abundance of primary food. These nets appear throughout this area as large cross-hatching in rock paintings. Having secured the indigenous animal perhaps in the above-mentioned manner they were brought back to camp where they were readied for production. It would take numerous animals to make an indigenous animal skin rug or cloak. Records reveal that some rugs and cloaks consisted of up to seventy individual skins in one single cultural item.

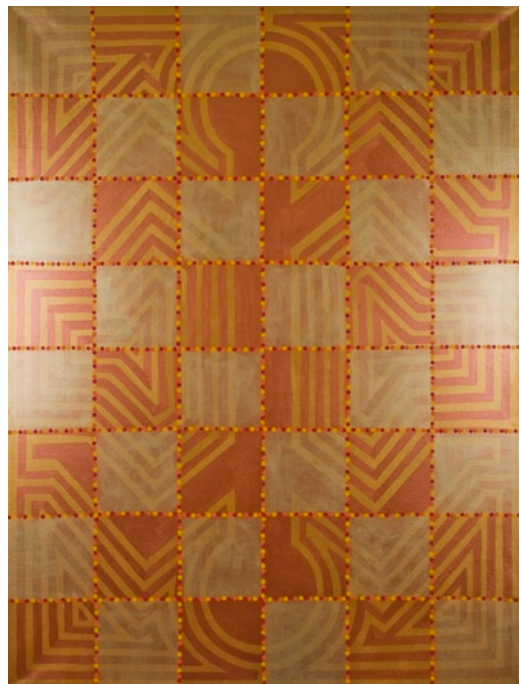
The skin was removed from the animal, the fat and flesh was scraped off often using shape stone flakes of shell. The skin was tied to sheet of bark and dried over an open fire. This gave the skin a tanned appearance and would also protect against insects. After this the skin would be dried and were rubbed with animal fat, ochres or



Stone Arrangements Via Toowoomba 2010
213 x 181 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Rock Painting 2010
183 x 152 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Gobi 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas

ash to make them soft and flexible. Holes were pieced through the Indigenous animal skin with a shapely pointed bone or a shapely pointed stick. The skins were cut into sewable sizes and sewn together with Kangaroo tail sinew. The sinew as it dries contracts and tightens the stitching closing any gaps in the sewing.

A lot of reasons are attributed to the decline in production of the Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks. One need only to look at the history of what happened during this time in Australian history to draw one's own conclusions. The population of



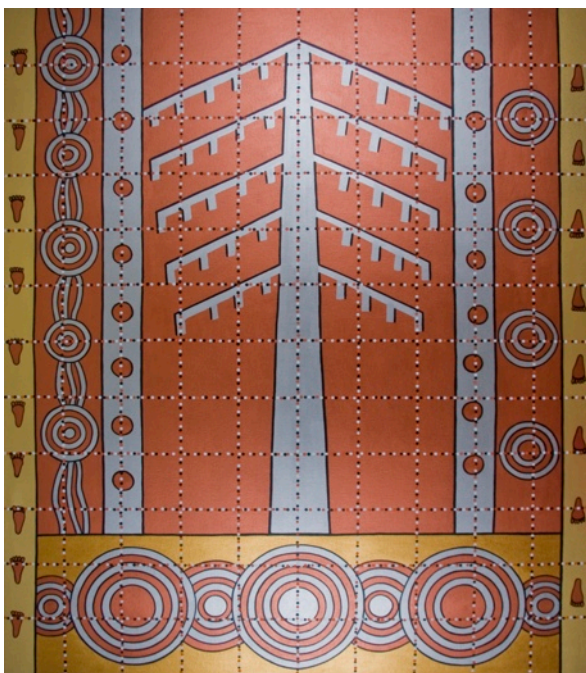
Scarred Possum Tree. Dawson River



Fred Embery, Bunya Carvings



Willie McKenzie in Bunya Body Paint



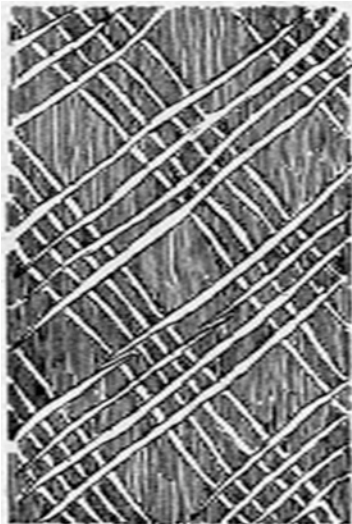
Bunya Story 2010
183 x 152 cm
Acrylic on canvas

Aboriginals fell well below what was here pre-whiteman. Blacklock in her essay suggests “that one reason was on a person being buried they would have their possessions buried with them. Also that some people were wrapped in their skin cloaks after their death and would have been disposed of”. Blacklock adds, “Another was that there was not an institution capable of collecting and preserving them, as they were highly susceptible to insects. Also the introduction of European style clothing and the annual blanket distribution from the crown diminished the need for the rugs and cloaks. Blankets were a favoured way of the whitemen to pass small pox and other fatal disease onto the Aboriginal population”. In the mid to late 1880s a considerably large number of these cultural item was sent overseas and did not return.

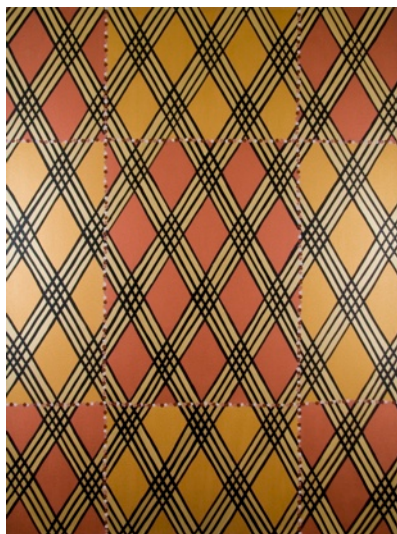
In 1971 after a number of years of ill-health with sugar diabetes and high blood pressure my mother died. My grandmother had died a month earlier, my uncle died a short time before that.



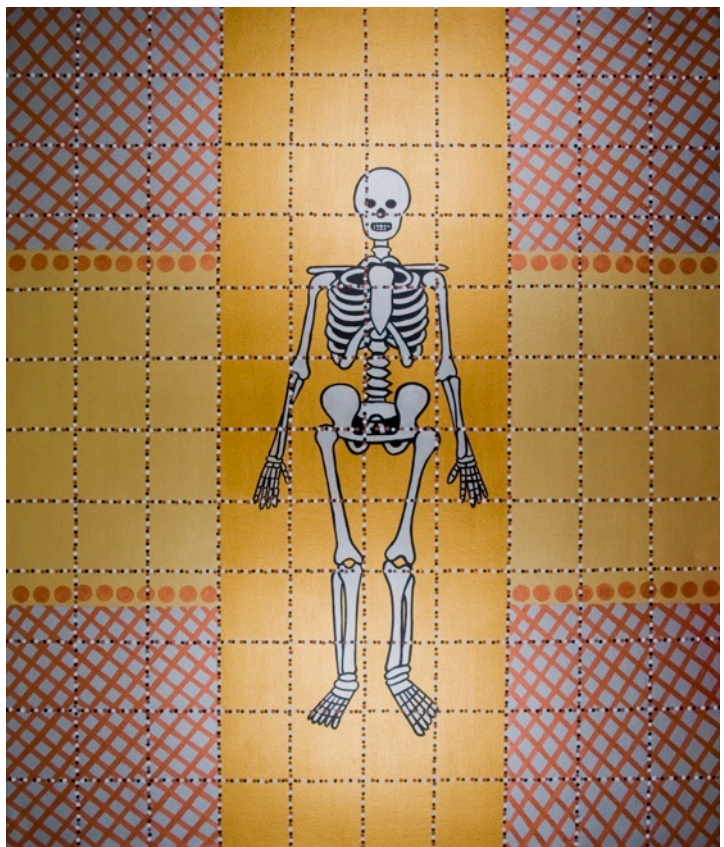
Cross Hatching at Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland.



**Animal skin design in
AW Howitt "Native Tribes
of South Eastern
Australia". 1904**

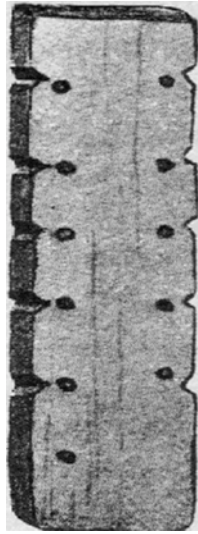


**Cross Hatching 2010
121.5 x 91.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

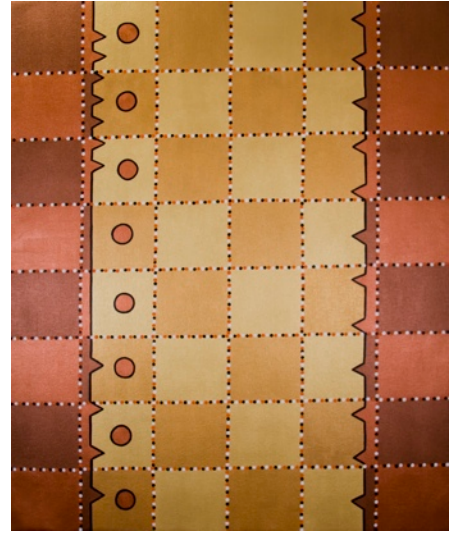


**Burial Crypt 2010
183 x 152 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

Much to me and my brother's eternal gratitude our parents friends, Harold and Nellie Leedie looked after us. It was in the 1972 I saw my first painted Kangaroo skin pelt near Dalby in Queensland. They were single pelts. It was part of collection of artefact that was made by Frank Carlo and his brothers Harold and Simon Leedie. The collection was for work Harold Leedie had done the manufacturing of the artifact. The returning boomerang were made from the black wattle, amongst the boomerangs were huge ones 28, 30 inch one all made from the root and tunk. The grain followed the boomerang around the around the shape with magnificent colour bands of the grain. The shadow boxes were made from the silky oak. Flo Carlo, Frank's wife and Jack Moffatt, painted them. The two Kangaroo pelts were painted by Flo and the other by Jackie Moffatt. That collection was worth at least a thousand gold boomerangs.

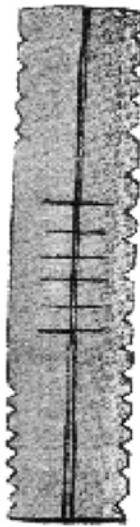


**Message Stick,
Yiman to
Mandandanji**

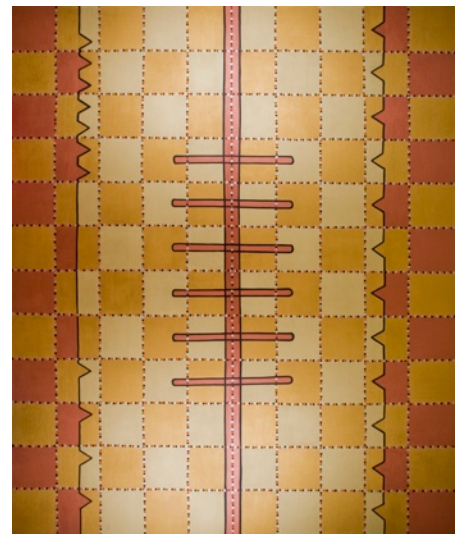


**Message Stick 1 2010
121.5 x 101 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

It wasn't until the mid 1980's that I painted my first Kangaroo skin pelt. By which time I had the opportunity to talk with Frank Carlo about those Kangaroo skins. He told me that he first saw Aboriginal people at Cherbourg Aboriginal mission paint them in the 1950's. He thought that they were painted for displaying at the Brisbane show "the Ekka". Those skins along with other Aboriginal artwork and artefacts from missions from throughout Queensland were displayed. In the 1970's and 80's I saw lots of the Kangaroos skins painted. Never a lot by one particular artist but by lots of different artists. I have seen Kangaroo skins painted by Reg Knox, Old Charlie Chambers, Mary, Rosie and Vincent Serico, Brian Fisher, Joe Skeen, Robin O'Chin and Baby Smith amongst others.



**Yiman
Message Stick**

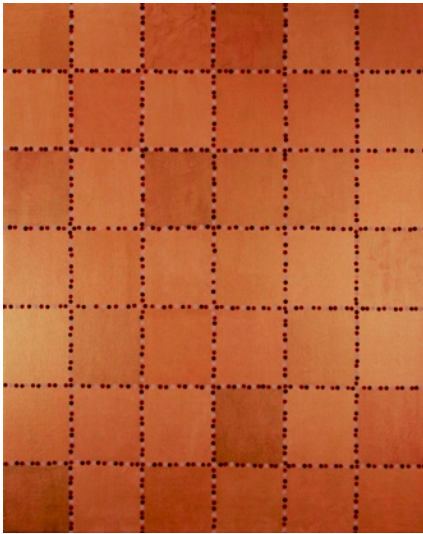


**Message Stick 2 2010
183 x 152 cm
Acrylic on canvas**

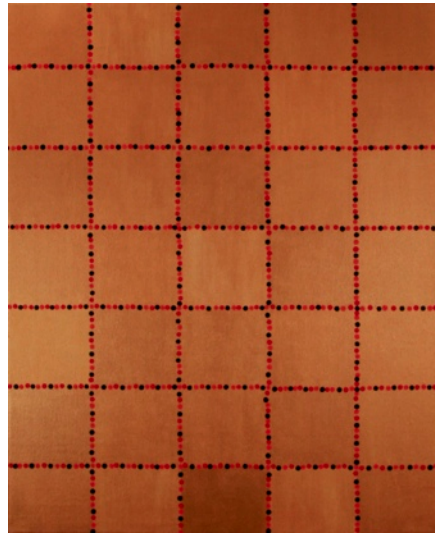
Indigenous animal skins were used for many various reasons and they were used in a variety of ways. Burial crypts held at the Queensland Museum used them. Indigenous people from my fathers country wrapped the remains of a person in the skins. Sometimes very special cultural items such as pointing bones or magic stones were wrapped in skins and placed inside the burial crypts. In my mothers country, there are recordings of an Indigenous animal skin rugs used when boys were going through initiation ceremony. The skins were used as bags, as water holders like a waterbed and many other ways.

It is thought that of the many hundreds if not thousands of rugs and cloak made that less than twenty Indigenous animal skin rugs and cloaks have survived. They are mainly in local museums

and overseas. Here in Australia there are cloaks in the Western Australia Museum, Gloucester Lodge Museum in Western Australia, the South Australian Museum and the Museum of Victoria. Overseas there are rugs or cloaks in the Smithsonian Institute- Washington DC, The British Museum, in London, Museum of Ethnology - Berlin, Germany and the Progeny Museum in Italy.



Blank 1 2010
86.5 x 70 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Blank 2 2010
88 x 70.5 cm
Acrylic on canvas



**Indigenous Australian animal skin
rug held at the Smithsonian Institute**

REFERENCES

- AW Howitt, book "Native Tribes of South Eastern Australia". 1905.
Fred Cahir, paper. "A Study of Inter-cultural Trade Items in Victoria" 2005.
Fabri Blacklock essay "Aboriginal skin cloaks".
Fraser book "The Aborigines of New South Wales".
L.Winterbottom, Interviews with Aboriginal Elders.



Art supplies funded by First Contact in support of the exhibition opening of the show "Why You Paint Like That" at the Woolloongabba Art Gallery on the 1st of April 2010.

Exhibition dates:
26th March ~ 17th April 2010

woolloongabba art gallery

Woolloongabba Art Gallery ~ 613 Stanley Street Woolloongabba Q 4102
Wednesday to Saturday 11am – 6pm
Enquiries (07) 3891 5551 ~ email@wag.com.au ~ www.wag.com.au