

# ReconciliationNews

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A photograph of Michael Hohnen, an Indigenous Australian man, playing a didgeridoo. He is wearing a dark jacket and is looking towards the camera. A microphone is positioned in front of him. The background is dark with some blue and purple lighting.

Michael Hohnen  
and Mark Grose and  
**their passion for  
Indigenous music**

Rachel Perkins discusses  
**her love of  
filmmaking**

Alison Page, bringing  
people together through the  
**Freshwater Saltwater  
Arts Alliance**



**Reconciliation  
AUSTRALIA**

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As the national organisation building relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians, Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the elders both past and present.

Reconciliation Australia is an independent, not-for-profit, non-government organisation. Your active contribution and financial support helps us develop innovative programs and resources.

This magazine is compiled by Reconciliation Australia to share reconciliation stories, issues and opinions. Feedback and story ideas are always welcome along with names and addresses of people who would like to receive the newsletter. Please email us at: [enquiries@reconciliation.org.au](mailto:enquiries@reconciliation.org.au)

Caution: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication may contain the images of deceased people.

Cover image: Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, by Prudence Upton.



**Reconciliation**  
**A U S T R A L I A**

# CEO message

**How quickly this year has flown! All of a sudden we're talking about Christmas, thinking about a welcome break by a beach somewhere and looking forward to all that fun and food with family and friends.**

For most of us, taking a break will probably include music, movies and books, perhaps even a visit to a gallery or a festival. The arts enrich our lives every day and in much the same way as sport encourages respect and admiration for athletic talent, the arts can provide a real appreciation and understanding of culture.

We've devoted this edition of *Reconciliation News* to the arts and I hope you'll enjoy the various stories that together illustrate that reconciliation comes in many forms.

The thoughtful voice of film director Rachel Perkins whose work includes *First Australians*, *Mabo* and *Redfern Now* comes through clearly as she reveals her passion for filmmaking. Her quietly powerful films have helped demystify our hidden history and have fostered better understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.

You'll meet the Aria-winning team of Mark Grose and Michael Hohnen, directors of *Skinnyfish*, who are the driving force behind the amazing musical success of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu and many other Indigenous artists. Mark and Michael's commitment to discovering, mentoring and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander singers and musicians has opened a viable career pathway for Indigenous talent.

*Riding the Black Cockatoo* is the ultimately uplifting story of one man's emotional reconciliation journey that profoundly alters the course of his life. It's a wonderful story of the power of kindness, wisdom, friendship and respect. Children's author John Danalis's frank interview about his interface with Aboriginal culture really touches the heart.

Alison Page's informative article on her Saltwater Freshwater Arts Alliance shows how a great idea coupled with community support and cooperation can invigorate an entire region. This dynamic organisation on the mid-north coast of NSW celebrates the strong local culture and proudly shares it with the wider community through events, design, visual arts and cultural tourism.

You'll marvel at the remarkable tale of the discovery and return of a long lost collection of 122 artworks created by Stolen Generations Noongar children in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hidden in the basement of an American University more than 50 years after leaving Australia, the collection has recently been exhibited at the John Curtin Gallery in Perth.

We also highlight the much anticipated theatrical production, *Black Diggers*, which has its world premiere in the upcoming Sydney Festival. Featuring an all-Aboriginal cast, *Black Diggers* is the 100-year-old untold story of Aboriginal soldiers who fought for their country in World War I, despite not even being regarded as Australians by the government of the time.

There are articles too about award-winning young film director Dylan McDonald and his documentary *Buckskin*, a new work by the Bangarra Dance Theatre to celebrate its 25th anniversary next year and the recent international successes of Aboriginal artists.

And so, with the festive season almost upon us, I'd like to thank everyone who has supported Reconciliation Australia and Recognise throughout the year, including all the new members of our RAP family, now numbering more than 500. I wish you all a safe and happy Christmas and a new year that bodes well for reconciliation.

**Leah Armstrong, CEO Reconciliation Australia**



# Black Diggers

## the untold story



Image by Aaron Tait, courtesy of the Sydney Festival.

**The Sydney Festival promises to once again enliven and transform the harbour city in January with a bold cultural celebration based on high quality art and big ideas. As always, the entertainment will be diverse and enticing with such things as a burlesque circus, *Othello* from the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, a baroque orchestra, Chaka Khan and a big Rubber Duck. The numbers too are impressive—33 venues, 80 companies, 104 events, 372 performances and 722 artists!**

One show that instantly catches the eye is the Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival production of *Black Diggers* to be staged at the Sydney Opera House. Written by Tom Wright and directed by Wesley Enoch, *Black Diggers* uncovers the 100-year old story of Aboriginal soldiers in World War I, and follows their journey from their homelands to the battlefields of Gallipoli, Palestine and Flanders. In the world premiere on the eve of the centenary of the First World War, the story of those forgotten men is finally told.

Described as ‘a work of significance, scope and monumental ambition’, *Black Diggers* draws upon new research and extensive consultation, reclaiming a forgotten chapter of the enduring narrative of Australia’s wartime legacy. It shies away from none of it, and the all-male, all-Indigenous cast evoke these heroic men, recalling their bravery and their sacrifice.

The story moves through three phases of Indigenous soldiers’ involvement in the Great War —enlistment, life in the trenches, and returning home—to tell an amalgam of Black Diggers’ experiences and representations. The service of Private Douglas Grant becomes the central thread of this strong and theatrically robust work.

Sydney Festival Director, Lieven Bertels, says it was a story that needed to be told before commemorations of the Anzac centenary began. “The area in which I live in Belgium is known throughout the Commonwealth as Flanders’ Fields, the central battlefield during World War I. The silent, white headstones of the thousands of soldiers who died in my part of the world remain as powerful an image today as they were so many years ago.

“In the town next to mine, a lone Aboriginal Anzac digger lays buried, Private Rufus Rigney, Service No. 3872, a brave

Ngarrindjeri boy from the shores of Lake Alexandrina, South Australia. He chose to fight for a country that wasn’t even his, according to the government of that time.”

Director Wesley Enoch says: “When history has forgotten us we have to find ways of telling our stories. The history of conflict in this country goes hand in hand with our stories of survival. *Black Diggers* is a collection of stories about the men who fought for this country and in this country. The war they faced was as much for recognition as it was for King and country and their legacy can be seen in the reconciliation movement of today—black and white fighting together to overcome injustice.”

*Black Diggers* opens with its world premiere preview presentation at the Sydney Opera House on Friday 17 January commencing at 8.15 pm. It will run until 26 January, check the Sydney Festival website for times – [sydneyfestival.org.au](http://sydneyfestival.org.au).

# Rachel Perkins: in the frame



**Rachel Perkins is a writer, director and filmmaker whose Aboriginal heritage is the Arrernte and Kalkadoon nations of Australia. She is the daughter of legendary activist and sportsman Charles Perkins, who was the first Aboriginal man to graduate from Sydney University and the first to become the permanent head of a federal government department.**

Rachel trained at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs and is a graduate of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. She has worked at SBS and at the ABC, as executive producer of Indigenous programs. Her movies include *Radiance*, *One Night the Moon*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Mabo*. She was a director on the TV drama series *Redfern Now* and produced, wrote and directed a number of episodes in the series *First Australians* which won the 2009 AFI and 2009 Logie awards for most outstanding documentary. Her work is again on show in the second series of *Redfern Now*, currently screening on ABC TV and produced by her company Blackfella Films.

Rachel Perkins is a teller of stories. Stories about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their history and their cultures. Stories that touch the heart and linger in the memory. And in telling those stories, Rachel speaks to many non-Indigenous Australians, a connection that plays a part in the reconciliation quest, so important to our national wellbeing.

Recently Rachel took the time to talk to us about her film-making and other projects.

**You have written and directed some memorable films and television shows, what has been your favourite project so far and why?**

I don't really have a favourite project as such. They're all so different from one another in so many ways and each one is special. Certainly they've all been incredibly challenging, none have ever been straightforward... apart from *Redfern Now* which has been fairly straightforward. I think there have been certain highlights. The great thing about making films is you get to meet people and enter their lives in a way that you wouldn't normally have access. So working in the Torres Strait, finding out more about the Mabo decision, meeting the Mabo family and the Passi families, the lawyers who were involved, and just expanding my own knowledge of the legal battle behind Mabo was a highlight.

And going to Broome with *Bran Nue Dae* and getting to know Jimmy Chi, the Broome community and the musicians was a great honour. So in every project it's about the people that you collaborate with that make it a highlight. With *First Australians* we interviewed just about every leading thinker in Indigenous Affairs in terms of history and also a lot of community people who represented their people's stories. We now have strong relationships with all those communities where the source of the story is from. So, yes all the projects I've done have been special to me in their own way.

**What is it that motivates you to make a film? And what do you hope your audience will take away?**

It's always the story. And often it will be a story I have some sort of burning interest to tell. I have to feel very strongly about it myself. For instance in *Redfern Now* the issue we're dealing with is domestic violence in the Aboriginal community and I feel very strongly about that. With *Bran Nue Dae* it was about the celebration of Aboriginality, I feel very strongly about that. With *Mabo* it was the extremely personal sacrifice that the Mabo family went through for the greater advancement of Indigenous rights. So each story has a sort of kernel of meaning that resonates with me. So far, all those stories I have worked on, have been Indigenous. I think this is because we've been trying to catch up with telling the history of the country. Using film to bring people together.

“...the arts, sport and academia is where there really is an engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”

But that might not be always the case; there might be other projects in the future that might not have that rationale.

As far as reaching an audience, each film is different so I hoped with *Mabo*, that people saw the human side of a man who was separated from his homeland and fought for natural justice for that land to be returned to him. For *Bran Nue Dae*, it was that Aboriginality is something to be celebrated and can be a fun thing. With *First Australians* it was many things because there are many different stories but more generally with *First Australians* that Aboriginal and European history is very intertwined and there were great stories about forging relationships which are part of our shared human narrative.

**How effective do you think the arts are in fostering better relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians?**

I think the arts, sport and academia is where there really is an engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Those three arenas are where Aboriginal people come as equals to the relationship. Where you have collaboration, there's usually respect. In sport and in the arts it's a much more level playing field. It's those personal relationships, artistic relationships, often in intimate collaborations between musicians or artists, or theatre and performer or audience and performer that people actually engage. I think in academia as well, whether academics are non-Indigenous or Indigenous, they share a common interest—studying, researching, having discussions and so they naturally connect and engage.

**One of the hallmarks of *First Australians* was your thoughtful narration to provide the tone for each story. Was it a deliberate decision to take such an even-handed, almost dispassionate, approach to each narrative?**

We tried to present each story in a balanced way because we didn't want to preach and we wanted it to be accepted as easily as possible. Audiences don't like to feel overtly

directed although absolutely the series was highly crafted not to feel this way. Our strategy was to present some positive stories within the white-black interaction because otherwise it would have been just too depressing to watch and people would have turned off. So in every story we looked for a positive relationship that we could explore to give to people something to hang on to and to make them feel good about a part of their history at least.

**Redfern Now has been very well received throughout Australia. Why do you think it's been so successful?**

Well I think that Redfern has got such bad press and there's a lot of intrigue surrounding Redfern because it's so famously been called the 'black ghetto' of Australia, or seen as so by the media. So with something that looks behind the scenes, people have an interest in that. While most of the Aboriginal population is urban, so often the only Aboriginal people presented in the media are there for their traditional cultural interest. So urban stories about Aboriginal people experiencing life like anyone else are new and I think audiences can sense the authenticity. For Indigenous people, seeing themselves represented across their experiences I think is a positive thing.

For other Australians I think they have an interest in Aboriginal stories, and they find

“...in every story we looked for a positive relationship that we could explore.”

it refreshing to have stories that are well told and not preaching to them. The drama was compelling and, while the issues were uppermost, they were part of the drama rather than the driver.

**Your father once said 'We cannot live in the past, but the past is always with us'. Can you see the day when Australia will be confident enough to acknowledge its true history and teach that truth in schools?**

I think that day is here, I think it has arrived. Certainly with the new national curriculum that's going into schools things will change. Of course there are the extremes and those extremes will always exist but I think on the whole we are far more advanced than we were say two or three decades ago. Since my father's generation for example I think there have been massive changes.

**Speaking of reconciliation, and thinking of your father, when you make a movie or documentary do you feel a certain obligation to continue his quest for respect and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?**

Yes, certainly, I do feel obligated to continue that work. It is relevant to point out because of the context of this interview, that Dad was more interested in rights and social justice than reconciliation because he felt that the Treaty movement was railroaded by the government, they stepped away from it, putting reconciliation forward as the new agenda. He continued to feel bitter about that and would still feel that way today. At the 10 year point after the first period of reconciliation we didn't get what was promised which was a Treaty. So he would feel disappointed, as I do, about that.

**What is your view on the proposed referendum to recognise Aboriginal people in the Constitution? Is it important to you?**

Yes I support entirely those proposed changes by the Expert Panel and I agree with them that it doesn't compromise our sovereignty, or aspirations for a Treaty. I think that people who suggest that it does are doing our people a disservice by confusing the agenda. I think as Australians we should be governed by a Constitution that fairly represents all of us.

**You have been co-artistic director for several festivals, most recently the Mbantua Festival in Alice Springs. What do you enjoy about planning and staging a festival?**

I've recently moved back to Alice Springs for a while, mainly as part of my ongoing commitment to learning more about my culture and playing a role in preserving and keeping it strong. The only two festivals I've done are in Alice Springs and there's a reason for that in that it connects with my Arrernte heritage. I think the thing that excites me about festivals is, as I've said before, the partnerships—working with the artists that you get to meet, consulting with the communities and then putting something on for people.

Festivals are for people and I like doing things for people that extend their experience of Aboriginality. I think the special thing about a festival is that it stays in people's memories. Unlike a film you can't look at it again so a festival experience becomes sort of mythologised in a way that's quite personal. And if it's successful, and the two festivals we've done have been really successful, it becomes something that people remember for the rest of their lives.

**So what's in the pipeline in the next year or two that you can talk about?**

There's going to be more *Redfern Now*, just what form it will take we're not sure. Blackfella Films is now also embarking on a major television series for the ABC that tells the story of the meeting of Aboriginal people and the new arrivals in 1788.

**You always seem to have so many things on the go, how do you relax when you get the time?**

I just usually go out bush whether in Sydney up the coast or outside Alice Springs. That's where I feel relaxed and you know just spend time with my family and sleep a lot.



Allie (Lisa Flanagan) and Aaron (Wayne Blair) in *Starting Over*, *Redfern Now* 2 directed by Rachel Perkins. Image courtesy of ABC Television.



# A tale of two talents

Jack Buckskin. Image courtesy of Screen Australia.

**Young Indigenous film director Dylan McDonald recently won the prestigious FOXTEL Australian Documentary Prize at the Sydney Film Festival for his engaging and inspiring documentary *Buckskin*.**

Dylan's documentary records the work of Adelaide resident and Kurna man Jack Buckskin, who is on a mission to renew a once-extinct language and to inspire a new generation to connect with the land and culture of his ancestors.

"I wanted to respect his story and tell it as truthfully as I could. I know as soon as you turn the camera on and start editing, you're sort of twisting the truth but I think, and I hope, that I've captured his story truthfully," Dylan says.

Growing up in Kurna Country in the Adelaide region, Jack attended university, worked and aspired to play Aussie Rules at a professional level. However, in 2006 the sudden and tragic passing of his sister caused the 20-year-old Jack to give up on these dreams and aspirations. It was then that he decided to reconnect with his culture and discovered that his traditional Kurna

language was almost extinct and took it upon himself to revive it.

Production of *Buckskin* was made possible through the National Indigenous Documentary Fund (Call to Country Initiative) administered by Screen Australia's Indigenous department. The initiative gives young, Indigenous film-makers like Dylan an opportunity to shine, and shine he did. After being selected, Dylan was given just a week to find a subject and pitch it to the ABC. While doing his research he came across Jack Buckskin, the 2011 Young South Australian of the Year, and travelled to Adelaide to meet him. After spending an hour with Jack and hearing his story, it was confirmed that filming would go ahead.

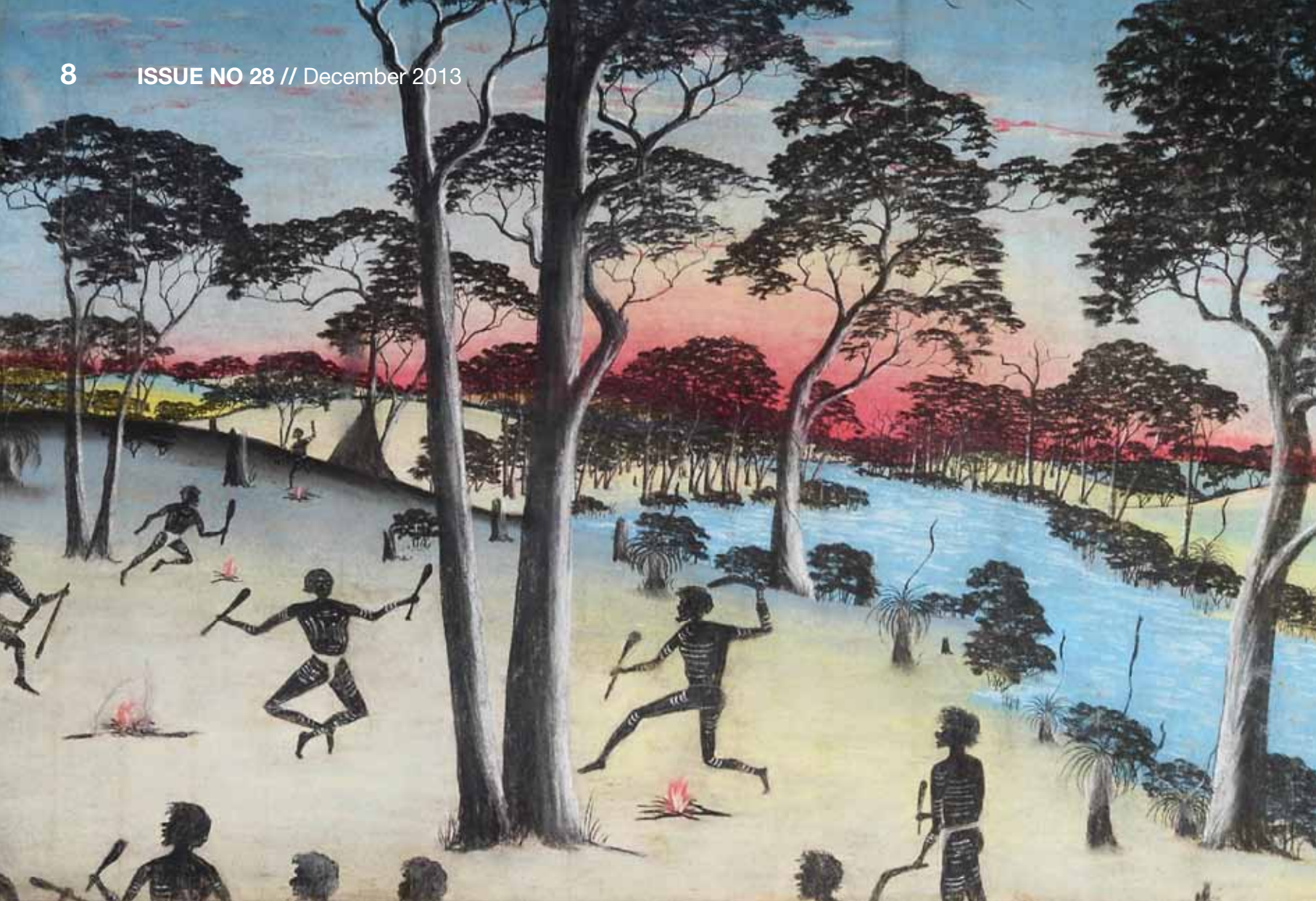
"We kind of connected instantly. He's not much older than me and it was sort of a mutual connection that drew me to his story and wanting to tell it," 21-year-old Dylan

says. For Jack, being asked to feature in the film was a huge honour. "It was a bit embarrassing at first having a camera in your face, but it was good for my daughter so that she knows my story."

The selection jury praised Dylan's talent saying, "The jury was unanimously impressed by McDonald's beautiful and wholly engaging film that tells the inspiring story of Vincent 'Jack' Buckskin. This film exhibits a truly fine talent." Dylan's award also included a handsome prize of \$10,000.

Through the support of the Indigenous Employment Program, Dylan is currently on placement with the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) as a trainee director and director of photography. *Buckskin* recently screened on ABC television.

*Content for this story was largely drawn from an article by the Deadly Vibe Group for which we thank them ([www.deadlyvibe.com.au](http://www.deadlyvibe.com.au)).*



Reynold Hart, *A Native Corroboree*, c1949, pastel on paper, 74.8 x 110cm, Image courtesy The Herbert Mayer Collection of Carrolup Artwork, Curtin University Art Collection.

# Coming home to Noongar country

Now and again on the evening news we hear the tale of a valuable painting found in an attic or bought for a song at an auction or garage sale. But when Professor of Anthropology at the ANU, Howard Morphy, visited to the Picker Art Gallery at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York in 2004 he hit the jackpot! More than 50 years after leaving Australia, and secluded in a wooden box for nearly 40 of those years, he discovered the missing Carrolup collection.

Earlier this year, through the generosity of the Colgate University, the 122 artworks were permanently returned to Australia and are now in the care of Curtin University. An exhibition of all the works, titled *Koolark Koort Koorliny (Heart Coming Home)*, *The Herbert Mayer Collection of Carrolup Artwork*, recently concluded in the John Curtin Gallery in Perth, and next year the University plans to tour the exhibition to the south-west of Western Australia and perhaps even to the eastern states.

The story behind this unique collection of Australian drawings and paintings begins in 1945 at the Carrolup Native School and Settlement run by the Native Welfare Department in the great southern region of Western Australia. It was here that Noongar children, removed from their families and aged between nine and 14 started drawing and painting thanks to the encouragement of new teachers Noel and Lily White.

In an article that first appeared on the website of the ABC in Perth earlier this year, ABC journalist Emma Wynne interviewed the Director of the John Curtin Gallery, Chris Malcolm, and Noongar Elder, Ezzard Flowers. She has been kind enough to let us reprint part of her article.

*"The young boys at Carrolup were trained as farm hands and the girls were trained as domestic servants," Chris Malcolm explains.*



"They were living in fairly harsh conditions. These children were part of the stolen generation and so they were almost incarcerated in Carrolup. When Noel White arrived to teach at Carrolup, he introduced an art program. He and his wife Lily were just blown away by the visual acuity that the children had. They were going out on bushwalks and he encouraged them to paint what they saw.

"Their work is incredibly sophisticated for children aged between nine and 14. They are very topographically accurate; they are very realist landscape paintings."

Noongar elder Ezzard Flowers, of the Mungart Boodja Art Centre in Katanning, believes the art would have been vital in helping the children maintain a connection to their culture.

"Art is a medium that has a healing focus," Mr Flowers says. "I'm sure that when the children started doing their artwork back in Carrolup in those days that they were not only focusing on what they were doing in regard to art but they were reconnecting to country through those scenes.

"There are scenes of corroborees, of hunting, and the environment. They were connecting back to culture and totemic symbols."

Outsiders also noticed the children's talent. In 1949 an English woman, Florence Rutter, heard about the talents of the Indigenous boys and girls at the Carrolup settlement and went out to visit them.

"She was given many of the works and she was telling them that she would take them to London and New York and try to sell them to dealers and collectors and try to bring back the funds to help them," said Chris Malcolm.

"There were some exhibitions in the early 1950s in Europe. It was quite a spectacle that these works had been produced by such young children."

It's not clear whether any money came back to the children but in 1956 a New York art collector, Herbert Mayer, purchased this collection. Eleven years later, Mayer donated the works to Colgate University, one of the oldest colleges in America. There, they sat in a box until Howard Morphy was given a tour of the university gallery and the box containing the pictures was pulled out of storage.

"It became apparent to Colgate that the best thing to do was bring the works back to Australia, and Curtin was chosen as the most appropriate place," Chris says.

Chris Malcolm says they are determined that the works won't simply be placed in another box. "It is up to Curtin to reach out to the great southern community to work out where the best place for these artworks is.

"The artists still have living relatives. The spirit of the agreement with Colgate is access for the Noongar people and furthering reconciliation and healing."

Ezzard Flowers visited Colgate in 2004 soon after the works were rediscovered and is delighted that they are now home.

"When we first came back in 2004, we had to sit down with the elders, and everyone's question was - when are they coming back?" he said.

"I thought we might be lucky to have them in my lifetime. But the beauty of the relationship that we had with Colgate University was that we had the students coming out, through

Curtin, and down to country, and we took them around to meet with the elders.

"From these years of partnership we've developed a long friendship. It's an amazing story and journey for the Noongar people, being reconnected to their history and this homecoming will not only benefit the Noongar people but also the wider community, who will learn the history of that little school that has been forgotten.

"This journey, and this story, is based on trust and respect," he said.

"These artworks are home and we don't have to spend a dollar on them. They have been gifted, just like they were gifted all those years ago, from the boys to Mrs Rutter."

**Barry Loo, On the Alert, c1949, pastel on paper, 75.8 x 75.7cm. Image courtesy The Herbert Mayer Collection of Carrolup Artwork, Curtin University Art Collection.**



# Making music with Skinnyfish

by Robert Beattie



Image courtesy Barunga Festival.

**By now we are all familiar with the hauntingly beautiful voice of blind Aboriginal singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu whose songs are heard on radio all around the country. With two highly acclaimed studio albums, ARIA and Deadly awards, a spine-tingling duet with Delta Goodrem on *The Voice* and an appearance on the Queen's Diamond Jubilee concert, Gurrumul is now recognised around the world, with Sting and Elton John among his many fans.**

Described as having 'the greatest voice this continent has ever recorded' Gurrumul owes his success to a natural gift nurtured during his years with Yothu Yindi and most recently Saltwater Band. But just as importantly his emergence on the world stage is also due to the diligent guidance of Darwin-based company Skinnyfish Music.

The philosophy of Skinnyfish Music is to empower and provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander singers and musicians to generate and pursue

their own creative and economic activity. Established 15 years ago by managing director Mark Grose and creative director Michael Hohnen, Skinnyfish Music now represents more than a dozen Indigenous musicians including Dewayne Everettsmith, Saltwater Band, Nabarlek, B2M, Lonely Boys and Tom E Lewis.

Mark and Michael recognise the value of music for its beauty and ability to bring people together to effect positive change in people and entire communities. As musical

mentors, they play a key role in recording and preserving language and its expression of traditional and modern culture.

"The greatest pleasure for me in being part of Skinnyfish Music is to watch a band or performer from a remote community be treated as equals with other musicians when they attend festivals or concerts. This rarely happens in their everyday life when they are constantly getting the impression that they are not as equal as they should be," Mark says.

"We are constantly working with Indigenous people who are incredibly talented, but who are surrounded by almost no infrastructure or support for artist development. One day we hope that the language and stories coming out of artistic expression in Aboriginal Australia will be one of Australia's biggest and unique assets," says Michael.

Skinnyfish also has a strong emphasis on training and community development projects in the homelands of its artists. Through special projects such as song-writing workshops, remote festival management, video clip production and performance, important messages about health, education and wellbeing are conveyed through music. These projects form an essential part of Skinnyfish Music's belief that music can be used as an agent for change in remote communities.

Mark has worked in remote Indigenous communities for more than 30 years both in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. For several years he taught disaffected Indigenous youth in the Kimberley, and spent two years as a community development facilitator in the Kimberley before becoming CEO of Galiwin'ku Community Incorporated, the largest community in East Arnhem Land (NT).

"I was amazed in 1996 when I first realised the impact music has on individuals and communities as a whole. I realised then that service agencies and Government departments were not focusing on the positive aspects of community life to attack the issues that affect people. Music is a powerful force for social and economic change and for bringing people together in the spirit of sharing a common goal," Mark says.

Educated at the Victorian College of the Arts, Michael played double bass through Australia and Europe in classical, jazz and pop (The Killjoys) ensembles for the first 10 years of his professional career. On moving to Darwin, his work with Charles Darwin University led him to Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island where he conducted a very successful music course.

It was during these workshops that their paths merged, and they soon discovered a shared desire to 'make a difference' to the lives of Indigenous people. Soon after, their independent record label was born and the amazing talent of Australia's Indigenous musicians had a window to the world.



"After 15 years of white fella music I wanted to see and hear something different, something more than our Western music tradition, but something that was still from Australia, my own country," says Michael.

For the past two years Skinnyfish has coordinated the Barunga, Ngukurr and

**"Music is a powerful force for social and economic change and a powerful force for bringing people together."**

Galiwin'ku Festivals. Now in its 28th year, Barunga is Australia's oldest and largest remote community festival, but in recent years it had lost its focus and so Skinnyfish were asked to step in. They reinvigorated the festival by concentrating on what was important to the local community.

"Above all, Barunga is a community event, it's not put on for whitefellas, although they're welcome of course. It's a festival of activities that appeal to the local audience and we don't want that to change," says Mark.

**Mark Grose and Michael Hohnen, 2013 NT Australians of the Year. Image courtesy National Australia Day Council.**

Earlier this year Mark and Michael were named the Northern Territory's Australians of the Year 2013 for their long-term commitment to recording and promoting Indigenous musicianship.

"It was an honour that will live with us forever, and in some ways it gives us the confidence to keep going with what we are trying to achieve with our bigger picture vision of giving Aboriginal people a valid, quality voice," says Michael.

So what lies ahead for these dynamic proponents of Indigenous music and culture?

"We want to continue to work on the same things we have worked on for the last 15 years, and help guide other career paths to positive worlds and outcomes. We will continue to expand our relationships across Australia and the south-east Asian region where much of our future lies," Michael says.

"The success we have had with the artists we work with has opened up a very exciting future where the possibilities of presenting to a broader Australian and International community the beauty and strength of remote Indigenous communities is now available," says Mark.

"We're both really looking forward to it!"

# Riding the black cockatoo

by Robert Beattie

Children's book writer, John Danalis, grew up in Queensland, the son of a bush veterinarian. The family home was full of acquired artefacts, one of which was a human skull, found by John's uncle. For many years it resided on the lounge room mantelpiece and was referred to as Mary. One day a doctor friend of John's father identified it as the skull of a male Aboriginal person with indications he had most likely died of syphilis. The young John Danalis had no idea that 'Mary' would one day have a profound impact on his life.



After leaving school John spent a decade dabbling in various occupations before enrolling at the Queensland University of Technology in a teaching degree. During a tutorial on Indigenous writing he happened to mention to the class that he'd grown up with an Aboriginal skull on his mantelpiece. The group were visibly shocked and their reaction gnawed away at him.

He started reading books on Aboriginal history and soon discovered a dark side he'd never learned about in school. "I'd begun to realise that Aboriginal people feel death very differently to white folk," John writes. "It's as though death is almost a living thing: a very real ongoing energy." Something told him that he needed to send 'Mary' back home.

After convincing his rather stern father that 'Mary' needed to be repatriated, John's uncle told him where he'd found the skull, right down to the name of the property. Armed with that information, and assisted by the head of the university's Indigenous unit, John started following leads and ringing around.

Eventually he made contact with Gary Murray from the Swan Hill Tribal Council who, by chance, was soon to hold a reburial of 30 sets of Aboriginal remains in Wamba Wamba country, just three kilometres from the property where 'Mary' had been removed 40 years earlier.

Gary advised John that a handover ceremony was necessary, preferably at John's father's house. But knowing his father would be reluctant John suggested holding it at the university. Gary agreed but insisted, "Your father really has to be there." John said he wasn't sure about that especially as his father's team Essendon had just lost again.

Gary laughed and said, "Ask your Dad about No 42 for Essendon...that's my son, Andrew Lovett Murray!"

The following day John was out bike riding in Brisbane when suddenly a red-tailed black cockatoo flew past him and continued flying ahead of him for some distance before veering off and perching on a tree. John had never seen a black cockatoo in the city before and later mentioned it to Gary who said, "Mate, the red-tailed black cockatoo is our totem...it's a messenger bird...he's keeping an eye on you!"

John's father did attend the moving handover ceremony and after being hugged by more Aboriginal people than he'd ever

met before, said to John in a quiet voice, "Those people were so beautiful. I've had to re-think 65 years of attitude."

The post script to John's story was unexpected. In the following months, as he read more about Aboriginal history, he became quite depressed, so much so that his hands would shake uncontrollably and he couldn't even write. Doctors prescribed a cocktail of drugs which only seemed to make things worse and at one point John became suicidal. After deciding to stop the medication he began to feel a little better and realised he had to fly to Melbourne and visit 'Mary'.

Gary arranged for John to be met by Jida Gulpillil (son of actor David Gulpillil) who drove him the 400 kms to Wamba Wamba country. On the way, Jida talked quietly about the land, the way it was and the way it is now. John says "all of a sudden, the land opened up and spoke to me."

**"The entire journey was, and continues to be, intensely spiritual."**

The burial area was surrounded by billabongs, and before they walked among the graves Jida smoked John once again. John then sat awhile with 'Mary' and within a very short time says he had a profound sense of calm. He says he also felt the presence of others. "I had a sense that there were people there just moments ago and they left just before we arrived."

After writing *Riding the Black Cockatoo*, John, Gary and the Wamba Wamba elders gathered at a special ceremony at the State Library of Victoria for the book launch where the elders presented John with a cloak made of 30 possum skins. Gary said he could choose to be buried in it when he passed away or he could hand it on to his daughters. But in the meantime, he should share the cloak with as many people as possible.

And that's what John has been doing for the last few years, travelling around the country telling his story at schools, conferences and seminars.

As for his health, John says, "this journey smashed me to pieces, then put me back together, better than before. I returned Mary to Country, and in doing so, I was brought home too."

Recently John was good enough to share a little more of his remarkable story which in so many ways is a powerful example of true reconciliation.

**For the most part *Riding the Black Cockatoo* has a frank and straightforward tone. But I imagine that it wasn't that easy to write. What was the hardest part of the story to tell?**

The entire journey was, and continues to be, intensely spiritual. Certain experiences I had were felt in a purely intuitive way; there was no thought, no intellectualisation, just an awareness which defies and eludes the limited constraints of the written word.

The second part of the book was exceedingly difficult to write; the massacres, my breakdown, and trying to reconcile the visions I'd had of Mary—were they real or imaginary, was I going mad or was I in fact seeing with an unaccustomed perceptiveness and sensitivity? And all the while, I worried that the book would alienate my family, insult Indigenous people, and appal intellectuals. Even the positive nature of the whole journey worried me; I saw none of the hopeless representations we often see on the news. I began to worry if the story was a true representation of Indigenous Australia or a narrow 'white boy saves the world' fantasy. In the end I realised that it was my responsibility to tell this story; to give a truthful account of Mary's journey back to country and of the experiences I had along the way. Experiences that for the most part came wrapped in love, forgiveness, kindness and laughter.

**There are a number of inexplicable occurrences in your story—like the red-tailed black cockatoo you saw on your bike ride, the Essendon connection, meeting certain people at the right time—do you regard them as mere coincidences or something more?**

I was quite empirically minded before this journey unfolded, but one thing happened after another, to the point where I realised that there is an incredible, unfathomable energy at work in the universe and there was

no point questioning it, I just had to ride it. And that's what it was like, a huge wave of energy that just rose up in Queensland and carried Mary all the way home to Wamba Wamba Country. The experience completely opened me up to the mystery of life. A year after Mary's reburial, a friend gave me a book by Joseph Campbell, where he explains that when we are truly 'on path', doors open, bridges appear, and guides suddenly materialise to help us. That's precisely what happened when I decided to return Mary.

**I imagine the remarkable change in your father's perception of Aboriginal people in just a single afternoon was a moving moment for you. Why do you think he was so affected?**

Well, let me just say that Dad hasn't become the poster boy for reconciliation, but for him it was a massive shift. Mum and Dad grew up in a small town on the Queensland-NSW border at a time when Aboriginal people often lived outside the towns in camps; shacks made from flattened kerosene cans and the detritus of the town. It was a sort of unofficial apartheid I guess, and the effect was that it kept entire generations of black and white Australians from ever getting to know each other. You had to actually walk across that racial barrier, which for many people wasn't the easiest thing to do.

When Mum and Dad agreed to come to the handover ceremony, they had no idea what they were stepping into, what the attitudes of the Indigenous people in attendance would be like. But they stepped across that divide and were met with kindness and gratitude. I'll never forget at the end of the ceremony when local Elders crossed that same divide and approached Mum and Dad with open arms and hearts. Here they all were, the same ages, the same love of country, they may have even grown up in the same town, yet they had been kept apart by racism their entire lives. It was a beautiful moment. You'd have to be made from stone not to be affected by that.

**After 'Mary' was returned, your spiral into depression was somewhat unexpected but your recovery once you visited Wamba Wamba country and the gravesite, was almost immediate. Were there larger forces at play in your 'cure'?**

After returning Mary, I spent a lot of time in the library trying to understand the true story of settlement. Invariably my reading took me into the 'murder maps' and the very graphic accounts of the massacres. The more I learned, the more I wanted to talk about it, with neighbours, with friends, with anybody! It was a conversation no-one wanted to have. Nobody wanted to acknowledge our past, yet I could see the scars all over the landscape, in our own faces; I saw an

entire nation self-medicating on alcohol, trivia and material consumption. Australia for me, became a vast unhealed wound. I went down like a ton of bricks and ended up heavily medicated for six months on anti-psychotics.

Eventually I managed to crawl out of that hell, towards Wamba Wamba Country and Mary. I found a doctor who showed me what I needed to get well could be found inside of me, I had friends who put me back on my bike and helped me sweat out those awful pharmaceuticals, and of course the last stage involved just being on Wamba Wamba Country.

“Sometimes we need to be smashed into a thousand pieces so that—hopefully—we can be put back together again, as a better self.”

**Images from ceremonial reburial of Yung Balug Ancestors at Lake Boort in May 2013. The ceremony was conducted by Dja Dja Wurrung Elders. (The Wamba Wamba clan is part of the Dja Dja Wurrung Nation). Images by Ken Wallace.**





Leading the smoking ceremony are (l to r) Jida Gulpilil-Murray, Jason Tamiru and Andrew Travis. Image by Ken Wallace.

On reflection, I later realised that I needed to take that ‘journey of the long dark night’. It allowed me to write Mary’s story with far more empathy. And, sometimes we need to be smashed into a thousand pieces so that—hopefully—we can be put back together again, as a better self.

**It seems that you have become a kind of reconciliation ambassador, travelling around Australia, talking to schools. What is the general reaction from students to your story? Do you get the impression that they want to know more about Aboriginal cultures?**

Ambassador sounds a little grandiose for my liking; titles like that generally make people run a mile! As a children’s book author, I’ve always

worked in schools. Mary’s return is just one chapter of my story, albeit a very important one. My work in schools generally focuses on the healing aspects of narrative. Story has the amazing capacity to bridge personal and societal chasms, and to transmute painful life experiences into a positive force. *Riding the Black Cockatoo* is a perfect example.

I tend to share Mary’s story more with older audiences. High school students are notoriously tough audiences, but with an opening line like, “I grew up with a skull on my mantelpiece”, I’ve pretty much got them in the palm of my hand. The story is an emotional rollercoaster, and I use lots of humour to balance out the sadness; after an hour we’re all pretty much exhausted! But you can see in their eyes, in their silence, that most of them go back into the world with clearer understanding of what reconciliation means... that it’s more than just a bumper sticker.



**Read the book—see the movie! The exciting news for John is that work on a screenplay of his book is now well underway with indications that it could be adapted as a feature film.**



The 2013 Saltwater Freshwater Dance Camp brought together 20 young people from the mid-north coast for three days of dance and cultural sharing including (front row l to r) Britney Brown, Myah Peters and Stevie-Grace Moran. Image courtesy of Saltwater Freshwater.

# Saltwater Freshwater— bringing people together

by Alison Page

**One community on its own can make a difference. We have seen countless examples of greatness coming from the smallest pockets of regional and remote Australia. But what happens when you bring *ten* communities together to reinvigorate our culture for the long term?**

Five years ago, I posed this question to 10 Local Aboriginal Land Councils across the mid-north coast of NSW, comprising Karuah, Forster, Purfleet Taree, Birpai (Port Macquarie), Bunyah (Wauchope), Kempsey, Thungutti (Bellbrook), Unkya (Macksville), Bowraville and Coffs Harbour. I asked them to make an annual investment of \$4,000 each, for three years to form an alliance that would implement a five year plan, in consultation with 300 regional artists and cultural practitioners through Arts Mid North Coast. They agreed, and

with additional funding from the Australian Government's Office for the Arts, the Saltwater Freshwater Arts Alliance Aboriginal Corporation was born.

The Alliance approaches community development from a positive perspective and focuses attention on what gives Aboriginal people an advantage: their culture. The Alliance creates more opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in niche employment in cultural events, design, visual arts and cultural tourism.

Based in Coffs Harbour, we deliver a year round program of arts and cultural projects across our 10 communities. These projects culminate in the annual Saltwater Freshwater Festival, which attracts crowds of up to 10,000 people each Australia Day.

The Alliance positions culture as the foundation for the long-term sustainability of the region's 14,000 Aboriginal people. With 50 per cent of those 14,000 people under the age of 19 and less than five per cent over the age of 65, a coordinated and



regional approach is essential to ensure the maintenance of culture as well as the creation of education to employment pathways around the theme of cultural identity.

The end of the 2013 financial year marked the end of the five-year plan and on reflection our achievements have far exceeded what was originally outlined in this ambitious plan.

The publication of the Saltwater Freshwater Art book in 2010, was the first time that the unique visual arts practitioners of our region had been catalogued. The beautifully presented book not only showcased the representation of the region's stories and its people, but it laid an inspiring foundation for emerging talent, particularly from the region's young people. As an extension of the important recognition provided by the book, our arts and cultural projects embody the preservation and passing down of our rich cultural heritage. With the book as a platform to grow from, there has been a particular revival in the ancient practice of weaving, with our own Mid North Coast weavers now empowered to teach the craft, keeping it alive for future generations.

Our cultural camps have seen the creation of a new dance piece and the engagement of young people in regional and local dance troupes as well as the revival of canoe building in Kempsey and Port Macquarie.

When the communities of the Mid North Coast expressed a desire to record traditional and contemporary stories, they did not envisage that the project would lead to a smart phone application that would

“Everything we do at Saltwater Freshwater is about making our unique culture strong and sharing it with the broader community; opening the world to Australia's warm, black heart.”

be downloaded by up to 50 people every day as part of the *Legendary Pacific Coast* tourism trail. However, our storytelling project has created this contemporary platform for our cultural knowledge as well as offering marketing opportunities as we grow our own cultural tourism product.

Saltwater Freshwater is moving from being an arts organisation heavily reliant on government grants to being a social enterprise which will achieve sustainability by generating commercial income through the National Aboriginal Design Agency (NADA). NADA is an integrated employment and training initiative aimed at 'closing the gap' in the region's Indigenous communities by supporting artists. The Agency does this by brokering partnerships between Aboriginal artists and manufacturers to create unique design products such as carpets, lighting, furniture, textiles, wall coverings, and architectural products containing Aboriginal art. It is an opportunity for manufacturers to be first to market authentic Aboriginal products that 'tell a story'.

As a social enterprise we are creating economic independence for Aboriginal artists as well as ensuring our own sustainability to make sure we are here for generations to come. Socially, this has a huge impact not only on our communities, but also on a global scale because design is a new language that enables us to tell our stories and communicate our Aboriginal cultural values to the world.

Everything we do at Saltwater Freshwater is about making our unique culture strong and sharing it with the broader community; opening the world to Australia's warm, black heart.

This can be best seen in the highly successful Saltwater Freshwater Festival. A free regional Aboriginal cultural event held each Australia Day, the Festival not only provides a platform for Aboriginal performers, artists and businesses but it unearths and showcases the rich, diverse and thriving Goori culture of the Mid North Coast.



Alison Page. Image courtesy Saltwater Freshwater.

The Alliance decided to host the Festival on Australia Day to counter a growing and concerning trend of anti-social behaviour on Australia Day that resulted in riots up and down the coast. Although there are lingering issues with the 26th of January, we are united by the concern not to relinquish the day to racism and misplaced nationalism. So this event has struck a chord with people who want to have a positive, family-friendly celebration on Australia Day and are delighted that Aboriginal culture has taken its rightful place and is central to the national identity.

The journey to reconciliation is a daily reality in the communities of this region, and in towns like Kempsey, Taree, Nambucca and Coffs Harbour, there is still a living legacy of racism. The Festival has

**Adam Russell provides a powerful symbolic moment at the Festival. Image courtesy of Saltwater Freshwater.**

emerged as a significant annual event in the campaign for reconciliation, being the only festival to bring together the whole community to celebrate Aboriginal culture on Australia Day.

When we took the Festival to Port Macquarie in 2011, the local police were worried that an Aboriginal event would attract trouble and that we had to put up fences to 'contain' people. The day after, we had the Area Commander from Taree putting in a pitch to host the Festival there, because in his words 'this town needs this'.

The 2014 Festival will be held in Kempsey—the town that recorded the highest "no" vote at the 1967 Referendum. 'White Power' was screamed at our team from a car of youths driving past as we set up the tents for NAIDOC this year so we know what we are up against. But we also know through this Festival that we can stamp out these negative pockets of racism with people power.

Just like we saw over a decade ago, when over a million people marched in cities and towns across Australia to support reconciliation; we want thousands of people to come to together in Kempsey and join us in celebrating our national day.

The message we want to pass on to people is that if they want to do something locally for reconciliation, come to the Festival in Kempsey—and bring your family and friends too—because you are all most welcome. Thousands of people coming together to celebrate in Kempsey on Australia Day sends a clear message to that community, as well as the nation that we are a modern Australia and that there is massive support for reconciliation.

Like the Saltwater Freshwater Arts Alliance, it's all about strength in numbers.

**Alison Page is the Executive Officer of Saltwater Freshwater and the Manager of the National Aboriginal Design Agency.**



## Aboriginal artists shine

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists have enjoyed significant international success over the past few months. Yhonnie Scarce and Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda (Sally Gabori) featured at the 55th Venice Biennale; Lena Nyadbi's installation now occupies the rooftop of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris; and six residencies were recently awarded for Indigenous artists by the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia.

The sculpture, glass work and painting by Yhonnie and Sally were on show at the prestigious Personal Structures, Palazzo Bembo, at the Biennale which finished last month.

A descendant of the Kokatha and Nukunu people of South Australia, glass artist Yhonnie created a free-standing sculpture for the Biennale, comprising a clear perspex coffin encasing 225 blown glass bush yams.

Sally is a world renowned contemporary visual artist from Gayardilt (Mornington Island) and her works for the Biennale were interpretations of connection with her country and community that take the viewer on a visual journey of her life experiences.

The Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, Lee-Ann Buckskin, says the Venice Biennale is one of the most prestigious arts events in the International calendar.

"The involvement of Ms. Mirdidingkingathi and Yhonnie Scarce is a significant achievement which the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board are very proud to have supported."



Work by glass artist Yhonnie Scarce featured at the Venice Biennale. Image courtesy Dianne Tanzer Gallery.

## Bangarra turns 25!

Next year, Bangarra Dance Theatre celebrates a special anniversary—25 years of gliding across the boards in front of packed houses all around the country. With so many stories told, so many amazing performances and so many standing ovations, it's certainly been a triumphant quarter of a century.

To mark the occasion, Bangarra will present *Patyegarang*, a new work that tells the true story of Patyegarang and her encounter with Lieutenant William Dawes during the early settlement of Sydney. Patyegarang was a young woman of intense and enduring courage, a proud spirit, an educator and a visionary—an inspiration today for respect of Aboriginal knowledge and language.

Expressed in the beauty of Stephen Page's distinctive choreography, the story of Patyegarang is brought to life through Bangarra's rare ability to illuminate human interaction through the prism of our contemporary experience.

Embracing the spirit of her perspective and passion, Page imagines the journey of Patyegarang who chose to gift to one of the colonists her language, her time and her friendship.

Lieutenant Dawes was an astronomer, mathematician and linguist. He lived separately from the early Sydney settlement in a place called Tar-ra (now Dawes Point) on country of the Eora Nation. Patyegarang guided him to understand the deep, spiritual significance of Aboriginal ancestors, myths and creation, and those exchanges of language, customs and stories were faithfully recorded in his notebook.

In *Patyegarang*, the audience is transported to another time and place and is privy to the moment of 'first contact' with all the accompanying sensations and emotions of such a unique encounter. In telling the story of an astonishing act of generosity and cultural exchange, this remarkable narrative dance work reveals a poignant chapter in our distant history.

For those familiar with Bangarra's expressive storytelling, this new work should not be missed. For first timers, it will be a beautiful introduction to the talents of Stephen Page and the Bangarra dancers.



Bangarra, *Patyegarang*, Jasmin Sheppard. Image by Greg Barrett.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have lived in this land for more than 40,000 years—keeping alive the world’s oldest continuing cultures.

Yet when Australia’s Constitution was first written, it mentioned the First Australians only to discriminate.

Today, 113 years later, a movement of Australians is growing to complete our Constitution. It’s time to recognise the first chapter of Australia’s story and the people who forged it. And it’s time to remove discrimination from our highest law—like the section that still says people can be banned from voting based on race.

We need to fix this. It’s the next step in reconciling our past. And it’s the right thing to do.

**Be part of the *Recognise* movement:**

Sign up as a supporter at [recognise.org.au](http://recognise.org.au)

Wear the R and spread the word

Sign up another five or ten supporters

Share the moving stories that we post on Facebook and Twitter

Organise your own local recognition event

Host an R stall at a public event

**Join us at [www.recognise.org.au](http://www.recognise.org.au)**