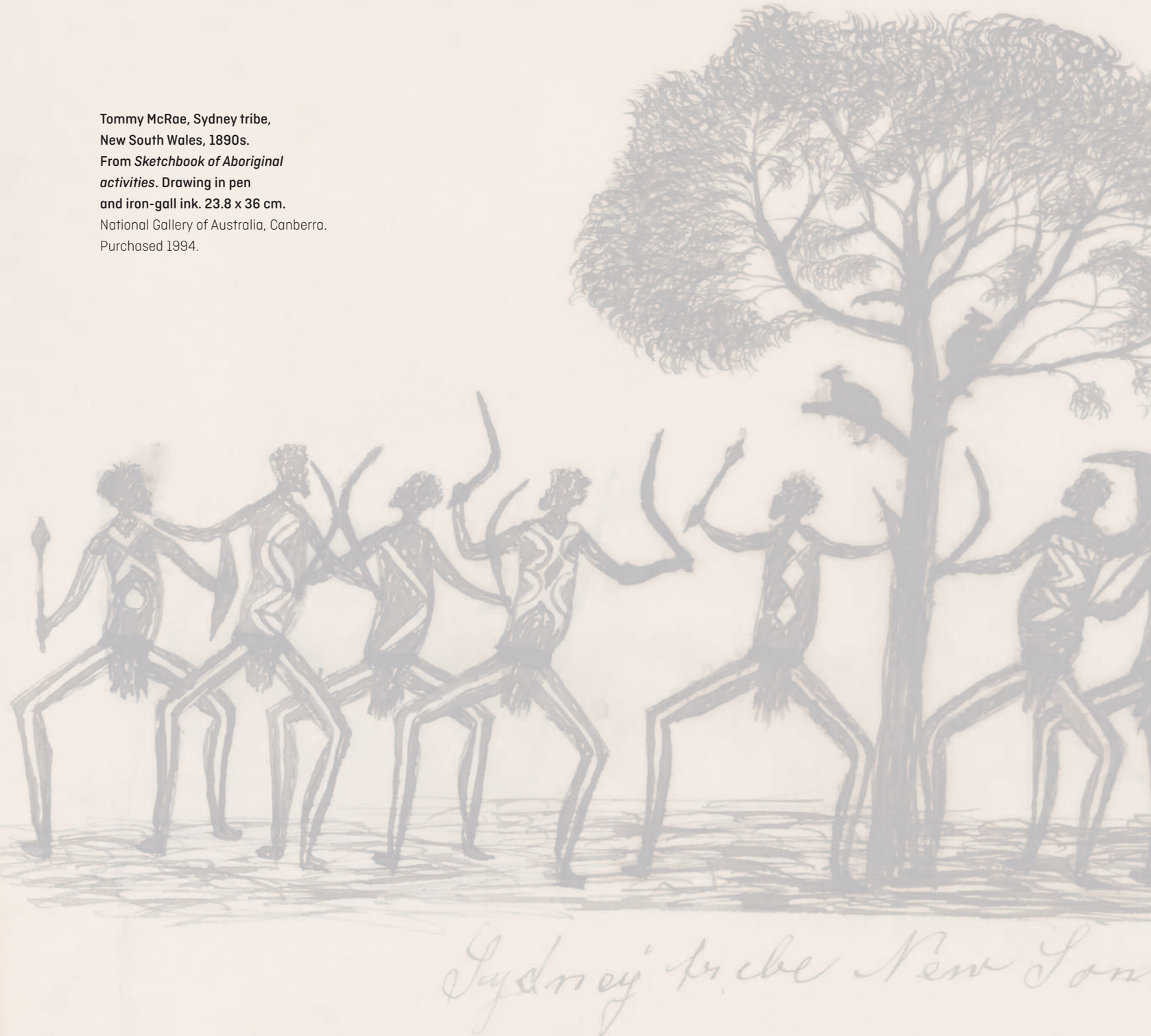

Tommy McRae, Sydney tribe, New South Wales, 1890s. From *Sketchbook of Aboriginal activities*. Drawing in pen and iron-gall ink. 23.8 x 36 cm.
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1994.

A STORIED APPROACH

Bronwyn Mahoney

Thinking about how Australia is today has to come from reflection on postcolonialism and race relations.

Thinking about museums in relation to this is obvious to me, as it's where I'm from. Though as a young curatorial assistant at the Queensland Art Gallery I often wrote papers on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, with age and space, I find approaching these practices is fraught with difficulty. As a white Australian woman, expatriated for almost sixteen years, I watch my country's discussions surrounding racism and reconciliation from a distance.
My family were early settlers, taking over land in the south-eastern area of Queensland, the land of the Bundjalung Nation. This part of history was never taught, not at school nor at home. I try and hush the casual racism that sometimes slips from my mother's mouth. She is a woman angry that she didn't get the farm, the family property.

And I am searching for a way to say it wasn't hers to have. The cognitive dissonance of white Australian society is sometimes stunning: bitterness for the experiences of grandparents, great-grandparents, can be held on to – the noise surrounding ANZAC Day is just one example – but is not countered by any widespread understanding of the continuing damage that European settlement wrought.

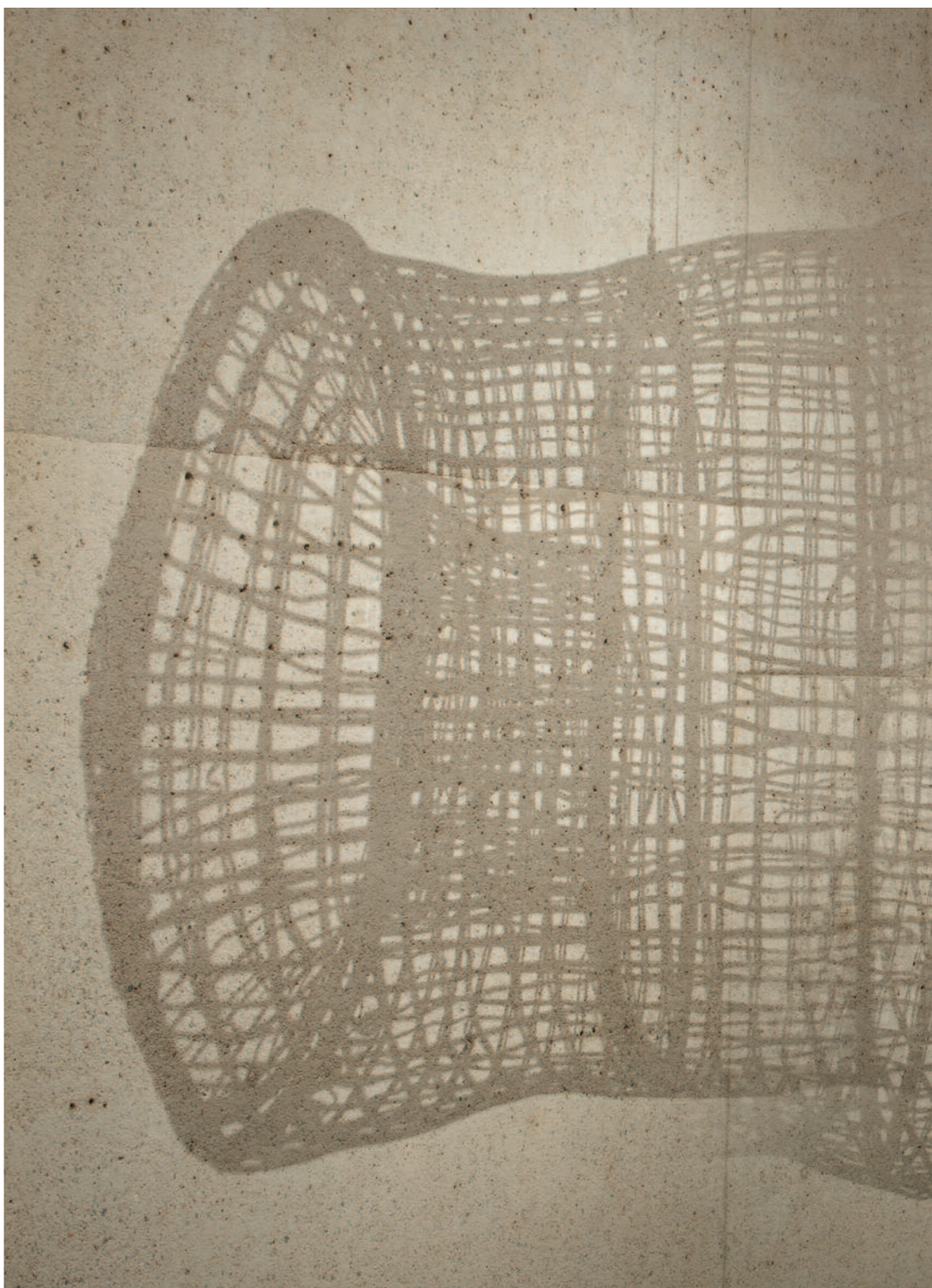

Fig. 1. **Urban Art Projects, *Fishtrap*, 2010. Metalwork, aluminium. 300 x 1200 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.** Acquired through the assistance of the National Australia Bank, 2010.

… All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues …
Elizabeth Alexander,
"Praise Song for the Day", 2009

Nowhere is our cultural disorientation better captured,
or the ambiguous transitional moment in which
we find ourselves more clearly underlined,
than in the complex issue of voice appropriation.
The issue of who can speak for whom,
and who can write for whom, is a major contemporary
issue in the social sciences and humanities.
Alan C. Cairns, Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State

Fig. 2. **Ramingining artists, The *Aboriginal Memorial*, 1987–88. Installation of 200 hollolog bone coffins, natural earth pigments on wood. H. 327 cm (irregular). National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.** Purchased with the assistance of funds from National Gallery admission charges and commissioned in 1987.

Visiting the National Gallery of Australia's (NGA) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander galleries, it was the sense of stories that struck me. "Redress" is a word heard often in popular, political and theoretical discussions of indigenous affairs. Redress means to put things right: in this, it is a very "broad" word, which doesn't encompass the actual small steps than any such "putting right" necessitates.

I was re-presented with the word when a friend told me about an article they had written on the opening displays at the NGA in 1982: a colleague convinced them not to write about their disappointment that Aboriginal art was not right up front in the galleries, the very first thing visitors saw.[1]

Fig. 3. **Each year the National Gallery in association with Wesfarmers Arts hosts a ten-day Indigenous Arts Leadership program for young people with a passion for working in the visual arts. Fellows and staff at the graduation event of the 2016 Wesfarmers Arts Indigenous Fellowship, National Gallery of Australia.** Reproduced with permission.

For my friend the problem was redressed with the opening in 2010 of the NGA's extension, the 1,100 square metres displaying around six hundred pieces from the largest permanent collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in the world (around seven thousand pieces). Whereas earlier it was European Impressionists that visitors first viewed[2] it is now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art that is given space to begin to truly tell a story, stories. After five years, the architectural addition and the museological approach remain fresh.

Museums are apparatuses of storytelling. They rely on metaphor and structure, the architecture of perception. And so now the first work encountered, from inside and out (thanks to a bank of full-length windows) is the *Aboriginal Memorial* (1988) (fig. 2), 200 hollow log coffins, one for each year of European colonization, commemorating the lives lost defending their land. Created by forty-three artists from around Ramingining in Arnhem Land, central-north Australia, Bernice Murphy calls it: "One of the most important of the dedicated permanent displays within an art museum".[3] Djon Mundine coordinated the Memorial for the Biennale of Sydney in 1988, the bicentenary of the beginning of colonization, a politically charged moment – Aboriginal people had only been recognized as citizens twenty-one years before and it would be another six years until the Mabo ruling. This 1992 High Court decision invalidated the legal fiction of terra nullius, the description in international law of a territory that no one owns, that no one claims ownership of; this legal fiction was the basis for England's colonization of Australia.[4]

A 1,100 square metres new extension displaying around six hundred pieces from the largest permanent collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in the world.

Fig. 4. **Fiona Foley, *Dispersed*, 2008, Charred laminated wood, polished aluminium, blank. 303-inch calibre bullets, 51 x 25 cm (each) 51 x 500 cm (overall). National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2008.**

This war memorial, then, is the foundation of the galleries. The structured metaphor is shifted to urban Indigenous art as visitors take the escalators to the first floor: Fiona Foley's *Dispersed* (2008) (fig. 4) is a more confronting work, and for those unaware of Australia's history, more difficult to parse … like the burial poles it is a monument to the people driven from their land, killed, dispersed. The metal, wood and shell casings embody what the word in the nineteenth century was: a euphemism for murder.

On the first floor, to reach the galleries visitors have to walk past the work, moving their perspective up to read the word. The word is a signal for what will be found inside the spaces – works from disparate places, from people who have been shifted, forcibly.

Then, suspended above the atrium – thus visible from below, from near the burial poles – between the new and original building, is *Fishtrap* (2010) (fig. 1). Twelve metres long this metal sculpture rescales a barramundi trap in the collection, thought to be by eastern Kunwinjku man Anchor Kalunba. Thus it draws things together, changes our vantage point, a contemporary translation of tradition. The ephemeralness of its shadow seems part of the work itself.

Once past these singular works are the galleries – the unparalleled Papunya Tula boards and canvases, the beginnings of wider Australia's engagement with stories from the Western Desert, stories that had been passed down by words and songs for generations. This curved, dark blue space opens into more traditional white-walled galleries where works from all over the country are hung in geographical groupings, except for works on paper, ceramics and textiles. Some of these smaller galleries incorporate political posters from the 1970s and nineteenth-century drawings, such as the one pictured here (title pages) by Tommy McRae (1890s): "Stories become mediums for Indigenous peoples to both analogize colonial violence and resist it in real ways."[5]

Fig. 5. **Tony Albert, *ASH on me*, 2008. Vintage ashtrays on vinyl lettering. 150 x 150 cm (installation)**
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 2009.

Since Aboriginal art has been displayed in museums – as art and not as vestiges of a culture in past tense in anthropological and ethnographic museums, discussions have constantly revolved around its exhibition, but in her report on the display of Indigenous art Bernice Murphy finishes with:

> For sheer diversity of regional, rural and contemporary Indigenous art's voices today, no single Australian museum can now surpass the historical and stylistic panorama provided by the suite of purpose-built Indigenous galleries of the National Gallery of Australia.[6]

There is a story, a myth of Aboriginal art, and some of that is seen in the NGA. But stories are fundamental. Humans use them to understand themselves and their world, to fill in blanks and transfer knowledge. Modern Australia is built on a national myth of mateship and fairness, with the ANZAC spirit at its centre. When Cook "discovered" people living on lands, in countries they understood by the stories told on and about them, the tales didn't translate and the invaders used the already long-dead Latin to declare the continent and its islands terra nullius.

And they used that falsehood to destroy the many countries, stories and languages. Thus the country is built on a legal fiction, which stayed in place until the Mabo ruling.

Image is its own industry in Australia. Not seeing the history that existed when the Europeans arrived, they had to create a story. Canberra itself is part of that, and a national art collection – in the same precinct as the national library, national portrait gallery, science museum, across the lake from the national museum – is a part of this. The notion of nation was established within the framework of colonization, which was part of the western canon of beliefs – of science, art, identity, etc.

The national identity is not "Born of the lean loins of the country itself", as one ardent nationalist put it, but is part of the "cultural baggage which Europeans have brought with them and with which we continue to encumber ourselves".[7] Indigenous people were initially "noble savages" but quite quickly they were disappeared from popular imagery, except on tourists' souvenirs – figures on ashtrays of people who were supposedly wiped from memories. Tony Albert, a young Girramay/Yidinji/Kuku-Yalanji man from Townsville in north Queensland began collecting these ashtrays from garage sales and thrift shops. He didn't know why. The work he made *ASH on me* (2008) (fig. 5) hangs in the Urban gallery, a collage of these images, which were the only place the artist saw people "like him" for a long time.

There are so many strands to the discussion of any art movement, and any art market. The possible threads surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art are multitudinous. Collections and displays like the NGA are integral: integral to education, to being part of an ethical art market, of being a space for transmission and development.

That is what drew me to these galleries, for the story I have started to write about the land of my grandparents which was the land of others that they never acknowledged, and for the recognition that, as former prime minister Paul Keating has described it: "No country which is great, and calls itself great, wants to live with the shame of the dispossession of its original people."[8] In Canberra, like nowhere else, is Australian identity given shape and form – planned, named, constructed, monumentalized, legislated and brought to life in myriad acts of political speech. Canberra, for better or worse, is where the official, institutional narrative of who we are is spun. It is our capital and so it seems only right that it is the testing ground for new stories. ■

NOTES

1. Alan C. Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2000, 14), quoted in Sophie McCall, *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2011, p. 1.
2. There was a period when visitors passed through the Aboriginal Memorial to enter the gallery.
3. These works are still on the ground floor of the original building, but a proposed rehang will see non-Indigenous Australian contemporary works moved into these spaces.
4. Bernice Murphy, "Understanding Museums: Indigenous People and Museums" in *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*, eds Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (Canberra: National Museum of Australia), http://nma.gov.au/research/understandingmuseums/Indigenous_people_and_museums.html.
5. *Glossary of Indigenous Australia Terms*, Australian Museum: http://australianmuseum.net.au/glossary-indigenous-australia-terms#sthash.ftxASReq.dpuf.
6. Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes, "Speaking Truth to Power: Indigenous Storytelling as an Act of Living Resistance", *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1, 2013, p. v.
7. Murphy, "Understanding Museums".
8. Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. ix.
9. Amanda Meade, "Paul Keating Lets Rip (Again): Indigenous Recognition Could Make Australia Great", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2015: http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/oct/21/paul-keating-lets-rip-again-indigenous-recognition-could-make-australia-great.

BIOGRAPHY

A Paris-based writer and editor specializing in contemporary art, Bronwyn Mahoney studied art history at the University of Queensland before working at the Queensland Art Gallery, Australia for ten years. Her work there included creating the gallery's first online presence, and she co-curated (with MAAP, Multimedia Art Asia Pacific) the Virtual Triennial, an online and on-site new media exhibition, for the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (1999).

She has published catalogue essays, texts and reviews, including in *Art Asia Pacific* and *Yishu*, and has edited publications for museums in Australia and Europe. Her major focus at the moment is remodelling her once-abandoned PhD thesis, "Remembering the Lost Future", into a novel exploring place and memory and the vagaries they imply.