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Policy and Practice

Collecting Contemporary Australian Art

1980 - 1995

A thesis
presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in Museum Studies
Massey University, Palmerton North
New Zealand

Susan F. M. Abasa

2001
To the Memory of my Mother, Bicky,
and
For my Father, André and my Brother, Andrew Peter
ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s contemporary art has been considered “a hot item”. Art practice has been marked by diverse styles and innovative techniques and was often accompanied by a radical critique of art’s production and its reception.

In this period, there have been shifts in the sensibilities of some intellectuals and artists and a growing cultural critique which questioned or rejected the homogenizing values and universalizing notions of the ‘grand master narrative’ espoused by art museums. Instead, a growing consciousness about ‘the politics of difference’ has challenged the art museum to acknowledge the importance of cultural diversity and adapt its policies and practices to reflect such dynamics.

This thesis examines the way in which art museums have developed and enacted policies to collect contemporary Australian art between 1980 and 1995 and the consequences of those policies for the construction of public collections. The discussion is framed by the context of government policies for the arts and cultural heritage which underwent significant ideological transformation in this period.

The thesis investigates the acquisition policies and practices of four leading Australian art museums between 1980 and 1995. It compares and contrasts acquisitions in those institutions and illustrates findings through a quantitative analysis of their collections.

The thesis argues that there is a substantial difference between the rhetoric of acquisitions policies and actual collections of contemporary art. It reveals the anomalies and tensions which surround ‘the finely honed discursive and rhetorical devices created to justify the structural and institutional support for élite practice.’

It concludes that the collections of contemporary art are conservative, partial, incomplete and impoverished anthologies of contemporary art practice and that the art museum finds difficulty in overruling the traditional values of art history and the ‘grand master narrative’. By establishing, perpetuating and institutionalizing the canon, the art museum systematically regulates and reproduces cultural representations. Furthermore, government cultural policies which increasingly support élite producers in ‘cultural industries’ and aim to disseminate the resulting ‘Australian culture’ to more consumers through cultural tourism and art export, assist the art museum to maintain its position.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many staff in Australian art museums have assisted this project. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales: Deborah Edwards, Curator of Decorative Arts & Sculpture; Renee Porter, Assistant Registrar Cataloguing & Documentation; Barry Pearce, Curator of Australian Art. At the National Gallery of Australia: Senior Curators Roger Butler, Wally Caruana, Gael Newton and Andrew Sayers; Maxine Esau and Diane Johnston, Assistant Registrars (Documentation); Grant Smith, Systems Analyst. Margaret Shaw, Chief Librarian and her staff answered many enquiries. At the National Gallery of Victoria: Eva Kanepe, Assistant Registrar; Jason Smith, Curator of Contemporary Art, Michael Watson and the library staff. At the Queensland Art Gallery: Doug Hall, director, and Dr. Caroline Turner, (then) deputy director gave their support to this project at the outset, offering access to reports, minutes and acquisitions data. To them and to the following staff I owe special thanks: Julie Bond, Glenn Cooke, Julie Ewington, Judy Gunning, and Anne Kirker. Chris Saines, formerly Manager of Curatorial Services, and now Director, Auckland Art Gallery, provided an in-depth interview on policy developments at the Gallery since my resignation from the Gallery in 1988.

Martin Shub, Discovery Media provided access to NATSIVAD, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists DataBase. Information on the Taxation Incentives Scheme for the Arts came from Susan Nolan, Australian Department of Communications and the Arts, the National Association for the Visual Arts and Tom Lowenstein, Lowenstein Sharp Feiglin Ades. Senior Policy staff at Arts Victoria, Arts Queensland and the NSW Ministry for the Arts provided policy documents, annual reports and answered correspondence. Librarians at Massey University, the College Liaison and Inter-loan sections, assisted with overseas loans and access to ABN. The Parliamentary Library, Canberra, provided research reports and House briefings. Pamela Lovis assisted with proof reading. Andrew Abaza offered commentary and advice on constitutional law, economic theory and taxation issues. Roimata Olson helped shape and produce the final print copy. I am grateful to Professor Mason Durie, Head of the School of Māori Studies, Te Pūtahi-a-Toi, for smoothing administrative arrangements on several occasions.

A substantial part of this thesis relies on data from the art museums surveyed, which in raw form were incompatible. The Art Management System database created especially for this project holds almost 30,000 records. Phillipe Limsowtin designed that system, presided over early data retrieval and tutored me in the basics.

My special thanks go to Henry Barnard for his patience and perspicacity in supervising this thesis. Fragmented and long as the research process has been, his guidance, knowledge and good humour have sustained me in the task. David Butts, my senior colleague in Museum Studies, has been a steadying influence, asking challenging questions. He also commented on drafts, interrupting his leave to do so. As advisors these two share important characteristics - they possess, and nurture in others, a respect for ideas and value the dignity which is achieved through the expression of creative excellence. I have learned much from them and am strengthened by the association with them on this project.

The final part of this work came together immediately following the death of my Mother. She quizzed me about the key arguments regularly and, eager to see the work completed, she cajoled and worried that progress was erratic. The thesis is dedicated to her, in acknowledgement of her keen intellect, her respect for heritage in its many forms and to her enduring faith in sound educational principles, beliefs which have been transmitted and sustained within my family. To them, and to those close friends who have been guardians of these values and who have supported me, I can only hope that some of your confidence in me is rewarded.
# CONTENTS

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Abbreviations

Glossary

Reader's Guide to the Thesis

Introduction

Research Objectives

The collections database formed for this project

Limitations

Preview of Chapters and Key Arguments

Chapter One: Government and Cultural Policy

Part One - Transformations: An Overview of Australia's Political Economy

Egalitarianism, Utilitarianism and Paternalistic Intervention

Post World War II and Keynesianism 1940 - 1970

The New Paradigm

The Knowledge Economy and the "Clever Country"

Part Two - Transformations: Changing Approaches to Cultural Policy

Government Patronage of the Arts and Cultural Development

The period of "voluntary entrepreneurship" c.1930 - c.1968

"Statutory patronage" - c.1968 to the present

"De-centralised patronage" - c.1985

"The arts industry model" - c.1989 to the present

Part Three - Cultural Policy Development After 1990

Introduction

The ALP and Coalition Parties and their Arts Policies 1980 - 1995

Victoria - Mapping Our Culture and Agenda 21

Queensland - A State for the Arts

New South Wales: Arts Funding is Cultural Policy

The Commonwealth - Creative Nation, 1994

Conclusion
### Chapter Two: Institutional Practice: Contemporary Collecting

#### Part One - Institutional Histories and Collecting Policies
- National Gallery of Victoria 45
  - Acquisition policy development 47
  - The Development Collection 49
- Art Gallery of New South Wales 51
- Queensland Art Gallery 52
- National Gallery of Australia 55

#### Part Two - Collecting in Practice
1. Overview 59
   - 1.1 Number of acquisitions 1980 - 1995 59
   - 1.2 Changes in the rate of acquisitions after 1987 61
   - 1.3 Range of acquisitions 62
   - 1.4 Value and number of acquisitions 63
2. Media 65
   - 2.1 Installation, electronic and performance art 65
   - 2.2 Decorative arts 66
   - 2.3 Pictorial art (drawings, paintings, photographs and prints) 68
   - 2.4 Collecting works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists 69
3. Method of Acquisition 70
   - 3.1 Purchase 70
   - 3.2 Gifts 72
4. Artists 73
   - 4.1 Number 73
   - 4.2 Gender 73
   - 4.3 Emerging artists 74

#### Part Three - Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme
- Development and Implementation of the Tax Incentives for the Arts Scheme 78
- Outcomes of the Scheme 1990 - 1995 79
- Analysis: The Scheme and Cultural Reproduction 81

### Conclusion 85

### Chapter Three: Contemporary Art and the Representation of Women Artists in Art Museums

#### Introduction 87

#### I - The Framing Discourses 88
   - The Status of Women - Equal Opportunity 88
   - The Contributions of Feminist Art Historians 92

#### II - The Empirical Evidence 95
   - Statistical Evidence - Previous Studies 97
   - Results of This Study 98
### Part One: An Overview of the Empirical Study of Women Artists

Women Make Up Approximately One-Third Of All Artists  
Less Than A Third Of All Works Acquired Between 1980 and 1995 Are By Women Artists  
Women Make The Largest Proportion of Textiles, Multimedia and Metalwork Yet These Are Least Likely To Be Acquired  
The Greatest Number of Works Made By Women Are Prints, Photographs and Aboriginal Art  

#### Summary

### Part Two: An Examination of the Relationship of Media and Gender

Key Findings Concerning The Relationship of Media and Gender  
Sculpture and Painting  
Printmaking  
Ceramics  
Photographs  

#### Summary

### Part Three: A Critical Analysis of Collecting Practices at the Margins

Representation of the Women’s Art Movement  
Emerging Artists: The Michell Endowment and Margaret Stewart Endowment  
“Is There A Gender Issue In Aboriginal Art?”

#### Conclusion

### Chapter Four: Collecting Contemporary Aboriginal Art

#### Introduction

---

#### Part One: Presentation of the Data

The Growth of Contemporary Aboriginal Art in Public Collections  
Contemporary Aboriginal art collecting escalates after 1988  
All collections of Aboriginal art experience growth but the extent of growth varies  
Purchase is the predominant form of acquisition  
There is a nexus between acquisitions and exhibitions  

The Development of Survey Collections of Contemporary Aboriginal Art  
Collections favour ‘tribal’ rather than urban-based work  
Collections do not maintain focus on regional representation

#### Part Two: Acquisition Practices in Art Museums Examined

The Period of Oversight and Neglect - Art Museums and Aboriginal Art to 1984  
Exhibitions of Aboriginal Art 1929 - 1984  
Acquisitions of Aboriginal Art by art museums to 1984  
Acquisitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales to 1984  
Acquisitions at the National Gallery of Victoria to 1984  

The Period of Awakening: 1984 - 1988  
Papunya - “too ethnographic for the galleries not ethnographic enough for museums”  
Changes in policy and practice
Acclaim: Building the Profile 1988 - 1995 151
The Australian Bicentennary 1988 152
Strategic interventions: exhibitions and cultural tourism 153
Strategic interventions: the art market 154
Strategic reactions: art museums, exhibitions and acquisitions 154
Strategic reactions: employing staff of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent 157
Conclusion 158

Conclusion 161

Appendices
Appendix 1: Brief for Design of Database: Art Management System 169
Appendix 2: Art Management System - Technical Information 174
Appendix 3: Operations Income Indicating Government Subsidy and Non-Government Revenue 186
Appendix 5: Chronology of Key Government and Museum Policy Initiatives 191
Appendix 6: Total Acquisitions 1980 - 1995: Summary of Raw Data 194
Appendix 7: NGA Contemporary Australian Art Acquisitions and Total Acquisitions 1980 - 1995 Compared 195
Appendix 8: QAG Analysis of Acquisitions 1990 - 1995 196
Appendix 10.1: Works by Media in Individual Collections: Summary of Raw Data 199
Appendix 10.2: Total Works by Media: Summary of Raw Data 200
Appendix 11: National Trends (Media): Summary of Raw Data 201
Appendix 12: Frequency of Acquisition: Raw Data (Incidence 4-17 only) 204
Appendix 13: Taxation Incentive Scheme for the Arts 214
Appendix 14: No. of Works by Medium, Institution and by Gender 1980 - 1995 216
Appendix 15: No. of Unique Artists by Gender, Medium and Institution 1980 - 1995 217

Select Bibliography
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Shift in Cultural Policy 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Typology of Arts Funding (after Rowse 1985)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Total Acquisitions 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Contemporary Australian Art Acquisitions National Gallery of Australia</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Range of Acquisitions by Media 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Value of Acquisitions and Number of Works 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Queensland Art Gallery Ceramics Acquisitions 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Total Acquisitions Pictorial and 3-Dimensional Forms Compared</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>National Trends Print Acquisitions 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Acquisitions of Aboriginal Art 1980-87 &amp; 1988-95 Compared</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Method of Acquisition All Institutions 1980-1995</td>
<td>70+71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sources of Revenue for Acquisition by Purchase</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Gender Total Number Contemporary Australian Artists Acquired 1980-1995</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Frequency of Artists Acquired 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Distribution of Donations under the Tax Incentives for the Arts Scheme by Number, Value and Category of Institution</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Value of Individual and and Corporate Donations through TIA 1990-1995</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18 Percentage of Works Created Before 1970 and Acquired Through TIA Scheme 1987 - 1995 82
20 Gender and the Hierarchies of Value in the Art System 94
21 The Number of Women Artists Represented in All Collections 1980 - 1995 99
22 Representation of Women Artists in Individual Galleries 1980-1995 100
22 All Galleries Women Artists 1980-90 & 1990-95 Compared 100
23 Number of Works By Gender All Collections 1980 - 1995 100
24 Number of Works by Gender for Individual Galleries 1980 - 1995 102
27 Acquisitions on Non-Aboriginal Art 1980-1995 130
28 Aboriginal Art Acquisitions 1988-1995 130
29 Method of Acquisition, Aboriginal Art 1980-1995 132
30 Collecting Contemporary Aboriginal Art 136
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Government outlays on cultural facilities and services 1986-1994</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Goss Labor Government Review of Arts and Culture</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>National Gallery of Victoria Acquisitions Policies 1985 and 1994-95 compared</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Queensland Art Gallery Acquisition Policies 1984 and 1988 compared (with amendments passed through Trustees in 1994 and 1995)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>National Gallery of Australia Acquisition Policies 1976 and 1994 compared</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Age at First Acquisition (%)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Discrete Women Artists Represented in Four Collections 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Type of Art Practice by Gender</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Number of Discrete Women Artists by Medium Acquired 1980 - 1995</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Number of Women’s Works by Medium Acquired 1980 -1995</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Number of Artist Members of the Sydney Women’s Art Movement Represented in Public Collections</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sydney Women’s Art Movement Acquisition Details</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Gender Of Artists Represented in the Michell Endowment 1980 - 1987</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Gender Of Artists Represented in the Margaret Stewart Endowment 1987 - 1995</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Women Artists in the Michell Endowment, the Margaret Stewart Endowment and the NGV by Medium</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women Artists in Four Contemporary Australian Art collections 1980-95</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Collecting Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art 1980-1995</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Aboriginal Art Acquisitions 1980-1995</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Queensland Art Gallery</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Exhibitions of Aboriginal Art 1980-1995 (Number)</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in the thesis. They are explained in context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGDC</td>
<td>Art Gallery Directors’ Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNSW</td>
<td>Art Gallery of New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Cultural Ministers’ Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLR</td>
<td>Commonwealth Law Reports</td>
</tr>
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<td>DASETT</td>
<td>Department of the Arts, Sport, Environment, Tourism and Territories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCA</td>
<td>Department of Communication and the Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCITA</td>
<td>Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEO</td>
<td>Equal Employment Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOC</td>
<td>Equal Opportunity Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCC</td>
<td>Heritage Collections Committee / Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATSIVAD</td>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGA</td>
<td>National Gallery of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGV</td>
<td>National Gallery of Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QAG</td>
<td>Queensland Art Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>Queensland (State of)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQL</td>
<td>Sequential Query Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA</td>
<td>Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Education Scientific &amp; Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vic</td>
<td>Victoria (State of)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**GLOSSARY OF TERMS**  
*(Sources indicated in italics)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Art</td>
<td>For the purposes of this project, the database categorises all works of art made by artists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent as Aboriginal Art.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australiana</td>
<td>Refers to material which may have value above and beyond that suggested by its inherent nature due to its association with Australian history or culture. <em>(Cultural Gifts Program, 1985)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avant-garde</td>
<td>A term implying interest in advanced forms of contemporary art. <em>(Cultural Gifts Program, 1985)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics</td>
<td>Objects made of clay and subsequently fired. Includes all accepted sub-disciplines such as porcelain, pottery and earthenware. <em>(Cultural Gifts Program, 1985)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorative Arts</td>
<td>Visual art forms which derive from design and / or elaboration of objects of practical utility. <em>(Cultural Gifts Program, 1985)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawings</td>
<td>Two dimensional works of art dependent on the predominance of linear representation of masses. Principally a work of art created by means of linear media such as pencil, charcoal, chalk, conte, crayon / oil crayon, pen and ink, felt-tipped pen or fibre-tipped pen etc., Used where a work of art relies on these mediae. It is recognised that paintings may incorporate drawing in these mediae.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>A compound made from the fusion of silica and an alkaline flux under intense heat and often in combination with other ingredients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>Artefacts fashioned from precious or semi-precious metals, stones or enamels designed to ornament the body. Contemporary jewellery may be made from a wide range of non-precious materials; its designation as jewellery is confirmed by its purpose. The database categorises jewellery as silver/metal which encompasses decorative arts made in metal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paintings</td>
<td>Two dimensional works of art dependent on the predominance of representation of masses as opposed to drawings which depend largely on linear representation. In a technical sense this refers to works created with a brush by means of a medium orientated to the depiction of mass areas such as oils, gouache, synthetic polymer paint (acrylic), tempera or watercolour. Other media such as pastel and collage may be regarded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Photographs Images reproduced through the chemical action of light on sensitised paper or other support. Refers predominantly to still images. Moving images are classified in this project as film or video.

Print Images produced in multiples based on master designs created by artists on suitable supports including a copper plate, woodblock, screenprint etc., and printed under the artist’s supervision. Monoprints - a single impression print - is classified as a print. (Cultural Gifts Program, 1985)

Sculpture A work of art in three dimensions, including relief works or works in the round. It excludes three dimensional work with utilitarian purpose. The database recognises furniture in this category.

Textiles All cloth works of art. The database includes costume and fashion in this category.

Video / video recording Magnetic tape recording used to capture visual images. The term encompasses video cassettes, video discs and any other receptacles of implanted signals, capable of translation into visual images. (Cultural Gifts Program, 1985). The database includes only original works in this medium.

Watercolour A transparent painting medium of which water is the vehicle, and its opaque variant gouache, most often applied to paper.

References


Before undertaking analysis of the quantitative data on which this thesis is based, it was necessary to verify the orthography of artist’s names as well as their biographical details.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists dates of birth may not have been recorded in official documents and therefore information on older artists, in particular, may be imprecise. Similarly, artist’s names may differ as current linguistic conventions change. In an attempt to standardise information, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base (NATSIVAD) has been taken as the authority for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists biographical details.

NATSIVAD was first established by Dr. Luke Taylor for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in the period 1987-1990, listed some 1,300 artists and published by Discovery Media in 1991. The current database was updated and expanded with financial assistance from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) between 1993 and 1995. The NATSIVAD database comprised 5,500 records at the time my research commenced but has been extended since then. However, some artists represented in collections analysed in this current project did not appear in NATSIVAD. Every effort has been made to verify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists’ details and to ensure that inaccuracies and inconsistencies have been eliminated from the database established for this thesis. Despite this, it is likely that some errors remain.

The following Authorities have been consulted in the process of checking data and appear below in the priority order.

- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Artists Data Base (NATSIVAD). 4th edition. Discovery Media
  http://discoverymedia.purescript.com.au


Cultural protocols and respect
It is customary for some Aboriginal communities not to speak the names of the deceased during periods of mourning.

I am aware that several significant and senior Aboriginal artists have died during the course of preparing this research and that the official period of mourning may not be over. I wish to acknowledge their passing with respect for them and their kin. Wherever it was possible to remove their names from the narrative which follows, I have done so. In a few cases this was not possible.