

BOOK REVIEWS

Indigenous archives: the making and unmaking of Aboriginal art, edited by Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2017, 469 pp., AUD\$39.99 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 742589 22 0

This voluminous collection is edited by two pre-eminent academics: Darren Jorgensen, a lecturer at the University of Western Australia, and Professor Ian McLean, the Hugh Ramsay Chair in Australian Art History at the University of Melbourne. They have gathered 18 essays that present the myriad ways in which Indigenous culture, history and records are being re-examined and their nature and significance reevaluated. In his introductory essay, Ian McLean draws a parallel between the hermeneutic task of the Indigenous shaman and the Western archivist, both being in control of their respective archives, and plots out the convergence of the two approaches in the contemporary Aboriginal art movement. The dynamics of power, control and understanding within Western Indigenous archives which he identifies permeate the essays that follow.

Indigenous Archives is divided up into four sections, each containing essays that focus on a given aspect of Australian Indigenous archives, or draw on a given methodology. Section one, 'Limits to Archives', outlines the pitfalls and limitations that characterise remote archives, particularly those belonging to Aboriginal art centres or relating to Indigenous artists. The contrast between the popular narrative and the nuanced detail unveiled by deeper scholarship can be quite pronounced, often resulting in misapprehensions populating the layman's understanding of history. The four authors draw on their experiences undertaking art historical research for their respective doctorates, presenting an account of how and why the archives they utilised were constructed, the obstacles they encountered and the effects that the state and nature of these archives has on research.

Section two, 'Histories from Archives', presents some of the rich historical narratives that can be drawn out of the archives and the consequent insights into an artist's life and practice afforded by a deeper understanding of their history and context. The authors here take the opportunity to compare the work of these artists with that of their peers and contemporaries, proffering their explanations for the choices in aesthetics and content made. The section neatly illustrates key themes from the preceding section.

The third section, 'Indigenising Archives', addresses Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding, touching on the methods employed by individuals and communities in taking in and digesting information, as well as how knowledge is preserved, peer-reviewed and passed on. Robert Lane examines the archival art of Wukun Wanambi, a Yolngu elder and accomplished artist of Arnhem Land. The Ara Irititja digital database belonging to the Anangu people of the Western Desert is expounded upon by Dallwitz et al., and is an open-source archive of images and stories accessible both to members of the Anangu community and to legitimate researchers. These examples demonstrate the ways in which new technology can be utilised in constructing and revisiting archives and the scope that technology facilitates for communities to do so on their own terms.

The fourth section, 'Decolonising Archives', moves away from remote archives and presents the strategies being utilised by contemporary Indigenous Australian artists to tease apart the historical narratives and facts offered or omitted by the archives with which they engage. Christian Thompson's and Julie Gough's artist's residencies at the

Oxford Pitt River Museum and Cambridge anthropological archives respectively demonstrate the precarious positions as representatives of their culture and communities that Indigenous artists may find themselves in. The myriad artists interrogating historic photography and records of Indigenous people feed into the deconstruction and re-evaluation of imperialistic and colonial narratives that populate the historical record, not a small aspect of contemporary Aboriginal art. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll outlines the reasoning and theory behind the anachronistic revision of past stories and events within modern perspectives that characterises much of the Aboriginal contemporary avant-garde. The investigations and interventions presented in this section nicely conclude the ruminations and research compiled in this book.

A significant thread that runs through *Indigenous Archives* is the recasting of shamanic knowledge and practice into more modern forms, particularly those of visual art and aesthetics. The archival function that a painting or songline fulfils for Indigenous communities is a major part of how these communities formulate and assert their culture and history, as well as consolidating their collective knowledge in forms which do not solely rely on oral transmission. The ways in which Indigenous Australian communities have been taking back their stories and applying an Indigenous lens to them constitute an important aspect of self-determination, and these strategies are aptly demonstrated throughout these essays. My recent postgraduate fieldwork experiences on the collection belonging to the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre in Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia, afforded me the opportunity to observe directly the potency of a living archive as an empowering strategy in strengthening traditional Indigenous culture and knowledge within a modern paradigm. Through this book I was better able to contextualise my experiences and integrate them into the larger current that it taps into.

This illuminating book enriched my understanding of the history of Aboriginal art, as well as its contemporary status and function both within Indigenous Australian communities and beyond. The sole shortcoming is the lack of an index, which makes it difficult for the reader to pursue related subjects and figures across the collection of essays, but by no means should this minor quibble overshadow this worthwhile volume. The authors do not claim this book to be comprehensive, but it nonetheless provides a broad snapshot of scholarship in this area, leaving the reader with many worthwhile threads to contemplate.

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'Me Write Myself': The Free Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land at Wybalenna, 1832–47, by Leonie Stevens, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, 2017, x + 356 pp., AUD\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 925495 63 8

At the beginning of her book *Me Write Myself*, Leonie Stevens imagines Tasmanian history studies as a room filled with over two centuries of writing: books, reports and archives line the walls and spill onto the floors. I find it an evocative image, for it reminds me of my own