

Being an Aboriginal Artist is not a Lifestyle Choice

I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we stand on, the Wangal people.

I also want to acknowledge my elders and any Aboriginal people in the audience today.

My name is Bronwyn Bancroft and I am a Bundjalung Nation woman, Northern New South Wales.

I am also an Artist and Community Grass Roots campaigner.

The title of the presentation today is “Being an Aboriginal Artist is not a Lifestyle Choice”.

On March 11, 2015 as reported by Latika Bourke “An unrepentant Tony Abbott is refusing to apologise for saying taxpayers should not be expected to fund the ‘lifestyle choices’ of Australians living in remote communities, despite a backlash from Indigenous leaders”.

Prime Minister Abbott's statement was made in response to the West Australian Government's plan to close up to 150 remote communities in that state.

Not surprising that many of these communities are sitting on vast repositories of minerals.

Premier Barnett made the declaration in November 2014, when he stated that half of 274 regional communities under review would be closed.

\$4.5 billion in federal and state funding was being allocated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services/Resources in Western Australia.

Premier Barnett also declared Aboriginal people in remote communities had failed.

Almost simultaneously, the portfolio of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sector, that Prime Minister Abbott claims as his and should be the champion of, had reported that \$30 million in essential services funding was being cut to Western Australia.

These calamitous statements by senior elected figures sent tremors of outrage through social media platforms and rallies in protest were organised nationally.

Effectively, they have forced Premier Barnett to withdraw his proposed plan.

This outcome was only realised when members of our Australian communities rallied on behalf of the Aboriginal people in that state.

Aboriginal people living in those communities are connected as traditional custodians This point needs to be accepted for what that represents.

It's not just a simple exercise of moving the population around to fit into government services. It's about maintaining a link with ancestors and control over the future with your children and the potential desecration of sites.

Desecration was realised when the 'Burrup' peninsula, which just happens to be the largest concentration of rock art in the world and is approximately 30,000 years old, was de-registered from the protected heritage registry by the same WA government.

In 1816 Governor Lachlan Macquarie made orders to soldiers: "All Aborigines from Sydney onwards are to be made prisoners of war and if they resist they are to be shot and their bodies hung from trees in the most conspicuous places near where they fall, so as to strike terror into the hearts of the surviving natives".

The barbarity of such a statement never stops ringing in the ears of Aboriginal people and I am just one person who will spend my life fighting the inequality that has and still exists for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today.

Jeffrey Hepenstall sent an email to Senator Nova Peris at Parliament House on 16th August 2015 at 5.39am: "I am a racist and proud of it. I am sick and tired of hearing about the stolen generations. White women had their babies taken from them in the name of keeping everything in society just right and above board. You are just another bleeding heart coon. You people are a stone age race that should have died out, but the British didn't have the backbone to do it. You pricks are lucky that the Dutch or the Spanish didn't get here first as they would have done a better job of it!"

- Posted by Nova Peris, Facebook. In support of Racism #stopswithme.

This is just one brief overview of incidents in Aboriginal Affairs in Australia and I have not gone into detail, I merely wanted to highlight the inequity that will always exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while we do not acknowledge the colonisation issues that still haunt us as a nation.

Obviously I could cherry pick alarming moments in the unsettling of Australia by colonisation and its effects but I don't want to. It creates large reservoirs of despair and anxiety in me and I am one who is proactive in contributing to make change.

The previous information is a simple reminder that we need a treaty in this country and soon. It is the only way to build real respect and solid and enduring relationships with each other.

Today I am presenting my cultural and Artistic identity to you and I will attempt to highlight the importance of country/family and the continual reinvigoration of the basic realities of life and my existence here.

It is hard to imagine a life lived if you have not lived it. From the very first time that I could discern shade from light, line from tone, I have been in love with art and the creation of that art.

Whether it was drawing on the walls (as a small child) to hiding under the grey chairs of the kitchen, where if you rubbed your eyes hard enough, the under pattern would create a kinetic and psychedelic pattern.

Trees, bark, rocks and sky set me on a journey to record and exact the beauty of nature, through my eyes.

I am here today because I am a creator, but it is a long way from where I began.

My father, Bill was Aboriginal. Bill informs a lot of my story in life. His general happiness, have-a-go attitude together with bucket loads of forgiveness and full on charisma, ensure his place in my heart and my ongoing life, as a talisman.

He grew up in a small regional area, Lionsville, Northern New South Wales, Western Bundjalung, part of the greater Bundjalung Nation, part of many Aboriginal nations that make up Australia.

His Mother's name was Alice and she gave birth to 5 children, 4 boys and 1 girl.

Her sister had 4 children to the same man, Arthur Bancroft but she died in childbirth and my Nan came to care for the children and married the same man.

This was not a common feature for Australia at the time, as Arthur was English and the Sisters were Aboriginal.

This is a crucial piece of information for outsiders. Our place in this world is not there to be challenged.

We are a family, who have withstood Massacre, survived treacherous Racial policies and vitriolic attacks from ignorant and scared human beings, been knitted together by the remoteness of existence and triumphed over adversity by sheer grit and determination.

This is what makes me who I am.

I have been moulded by the past and shaped by the events of my life, the good, the bad and the ugly, but ultimately this is the essential force of my being.

I have absolute pride in the tenacity of my family, engaging in their enduring chapters in our Australian history.

I was Bill's last child, one of seven children. My mother, Dorothy was a homemaker and while Dad worked as a sleeper cutter, she kept her home and children on a very tight leash.

Mum and Dad moved to Tenterfield from a very small place called Drake.

My Mum's father, Arthur, lent our family money to secure a home. 1500 pounds.

Dad worked in the bush to pay back his father in law, which he did in 1978. It took Dad 20 years to repay that money.

We were poor. We went to church. We played a lot of sport and were involved in the small town of 3,000 people.

These rural frontiers were harsh places. Aboriginal people have often been moved to places, placed on missions, moved away from family and often could not get jobs 'in town'.

My father gave his life to us so that we could gain an education. All of his children went to year 10 or were able to secure apprenticeships. My eldest sister, Letitia and I finished the HSC and went on to Tertiary education while Dad was alive.

Dad looked on education as a Source of enlightenment, but also as an equaliser.

He would say, “You have to be 3 times as good as ol’ Whitey, then you might just get recognised”.

My journey sprang from these humble beginnings. I was a quirky child. Sports orientated and always drawing. Drawing was an escape for me from 3 tormenting brothers, who I am sure set out to plague me.

I completed my HSC certificate in 1975. I had studied art by correspondence from Sydney, as only two students were studying it at my school. Not having a full time teacher made it difficult.

In high school, I did have a good art teacher, Jean Braid, who believed in my talent. This belief was like a beacon in a Sea of Insecurity.

I gained entry to the newly created Canberra School of Art at the ripe old age of 17 and left Tenterfield.

I completed my Arts degree, doing an additional year due to a Racist comment about ‘not doing Abo shit here’ in the painting department.

I was so distressed that I attempted to change to an Arts Degree in English at ANU, seeking a meeting with the Vice Chancellor, but missed out by a day and returned to the art school.

These life hurdles are just that. As my Father used to say “Bronwyn, you don’t have to go through the brick wall, you can climb it, go around it or tunnel underneath it”.

After my initial foundation year at the Canberra School of Art, I transferred to a new course being implemented, Visual Communications, which was a photography and design course. I took Drawing as every elective. I had found my niche.

I was married in 1976 and living in Canberra.

I completed my arts Degree in Visual Communications in 1981 and we moved to Sydney, to follow my husband’s career as an Actor.

I was not your typical wife from that generation. I wanted and needed to do my Art. I was driven by my desire to create. I was seeking autonomy as a woman.

In 1985, I started a shop in Rozelle, called Designer Aboriginals Pty Ltd and I know the 'english' grammar is incorrect but I wanted it to be named this.

My Son was 6 weeks old, my husband was in a Quentin Tarantino-type movie called Dead End Drive In.

I was determined to find myself above the domesticity and chaos of nappies, house cleaning and cooking and I found it at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative in 1987.

I became one of the Founding Members, alongside Euphemia Bostock, Jeffrey Samuels, Michael Riley, Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, Brenda Croft, Arone Meeks, Fern Martens and Avril Quail.

Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, now at Flood St Leichhardt, has been an integral part of my life journey as an Aboriginal Artist.

Being able to exhibit and co-exist with other Aboriginal Artists in an urban environment was profoundly unique and ultimately inspiring.

The Co-operative, like many arts organisations in Australia, has experienced tumultuous highs and lows over its existence.

Several imminent closures were remitted by sheer determination to stay open against all odds.

The most dramatic event for me occurred over 6 years ago when I received a call from a distressed chairperson stating that the Co-operative was closing and was I interested in assisting in the struggle to hold the Co-operative's place in Australian history. Naively, I consented. The situation was indeed dire.

The remit was huge. Of course, at the time I had no idea the debt was so large; that unfolded pretty quickly.

We got together a team and we started with the basics. Many volunteers contributed in these initial stages and many, including myself are still volunteering at the Co-operative.

The battle to retrieve the honour of the history of the Co-operative and the inherent right for Aboriginal people here in NSW, to have a space to exhibit their work in a large city, had begun. Over 28 years we have encouraged

regional Aboriginal Artists from New South Wales to engage in the space and overcome small town mentalities.

In 2009, I contacted Robyn Ayres, the Director at Arts Law Australia to enquire about a constitutional change that would assist with moving forward as a Co-operative.

Robyn recommended Allens Law Firm as a possibility for this minimal ask, on a pro bono basis.

I met with one of the partners, Vijay Cugati and he forwarded our request to their pro bono board for approval and we moved ahead with this initial request.

Friendships were formed, understandings established and enormous contributions to the fight for survival for Boomalli were created.

Allens have been assisting us now for the last 6 years.

Some of the landmark achievements we have been able to achieve with this amazing expertise are;

Boomalli had a land tax Bill of \$12,713.73 and Allens were able to petition the office of Hardship to waiver these fees as the Co-operative was in Dire Straits and had no money. This afforded the Co-operative relief from the Mountain of Debt.

We fought to have our Rates Bill waived on the grounds that we had inherited another Consortium's debt, we were an original component of this collective of Aboriginal entities. We had a good response initially, but did not get our request through Council. Allens went back again with a request to waiver interest accrued (\$7,444.20). We were informed on July 22nd 2014 that this application had been successful.

A defining moment was when we successfully obtained transfer of the building to Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.

The vein of this conversation evolves from being potentially evicted by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. We were informed by a Senior Bureaucrat that we had a month to get out. The memory of

sitting in this huge space, with art on the walls, people volunteering, having no money still gives me shivers down my backbone.

We were being evicted by the government. Obviously, not the first time that this has occurred in the history of Australia for Aboriginal people.

We have a fighting spirit. The flame of our families history cannot go out! We asserted our right to be and we embarked on an incredible journey.

Allens conducted searches on behalf of Boomalli and discovered that the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts did not own the building and had no foundation to be instructing us to vacate the building.

It was discovered that another entity, the Indigenous Land Corporation held the caveat on the building, which was transferred from purchases made for Aboriginal groups/organisations by the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (abolished in 2005 by the Howard government).

I have to tell you, this was an epiphany. How could we have come so close to being decimated – If we had been intimidated by the messenger of doom from DEWHA in the form of a senior program manager, Boomalli would not be here.

On 28th June 2011 the property at 55-59 Flood St, Leichhardt was transferred from Tullagulla to Boomalli.

Thousands of hours later and an intense workload as the senior strategist for scheduling, programming and the overall running of the organisation I can proudly affirm that the Co-operative is back on track or as we like to say “Black on track!”

Other areas that I am interested in are the protection of Artists Rights and I have been an activist in this field for decades. I currently sit on 3 boards, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, Copyright Agency and Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.

The Copyright Agency directorship allows me to provide an Artist’s voice to the complex issues that have evolved in relation to digitisation and the protection of Copyright for Artists. I believe that Artists have the right to be fairly remunerated for their work.

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience was established 11 years ago by my son – Jack Manning Bancroft who was studying media at Sydney University. He was confronted by the lack of Aboriginal students who were attending university and so with a few friends and an unfailing optimism, they started AIME. We have grown from a small group of Aboriginal students at Alexandria Park High School to 4,500 Aboriginal students nationwide, in 11 years.

AIME is a game changer for Aboriginal students, their families and communities as for some of the children, they are the first in their family to transition to Year 12.

The exchange between University students (mentors) and Aboriginal students is a two-way learning structure and is breaking down barriers. I have a firm belief that this generation will be able to build on the foundations laid down by their elders.

I am currently also the senior applicant for my family, in our Native Title Determination for the Western Bundjalung Nation.

Native Title is a highly problematic process. The forensic nature of compiling information and genealogy is taxing and could be interpreted as discriminating against the claimants.

One phrase that had to be contested with the government solicitors was ‘the right to oxygen’.

This example gives some indication of the intensity involved in such negotiations and some of the numerous clauses that are part of the process of Native Title Determinations.

I took the responsibility to be the senior applicant because I want our family and the other applicants' families to achieve recognition of traditional custodial rights.

I do not believe in the process but because our people have not achieved recognition for their long history in our country, I will fight for that.

To highlight just one travesty of justice, we can shine a light on Edward Ogilvie, who was born in 1814. He travelled to Australia with free passage. The

government gave his family 2,000 acres (800 hectares) of Aboriginal land. He extended his holdings over time to the Liverpool Plains.

Edward pushed into our country in 1840, with a black tracker, called Billy Cobra. He took up – which means stole! - 56 miles of both sides of the river and named his property 'Yugilbar'. He also took active measures to discourage selectors at Yugilbar – he was one himself so the irony of that is self explanatory.

(Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 5 1974)

He could do little about miners, who took up areas because of a Gold Rush at Lionsville. My Grandfather was one of those miners and he was able to buy the land that I currently own. He allowed us to live continuously in the country of our ancestors.

He had to fight to stay on this land, with very real threats made by Edward Ogilvie to use aggression to move our family off.

My grandfather paid for his land, Ogilvie, who became a magistrate over time, did not pay for the land he selected in our Bundjalung nation.

These historical examples of inequality stand for what they are and there is no way that historical commentators can make these events vanish.

This minuscule snapshot might assist you in understanding the ongoing drive and momentum by Aboriginal people to achieve truth in this country.

Lastly, I want to share with you some images from my last exhibition 'Riverstones and Ramifications'. This exhibition, hosted by Blacktown City Arts Centre, was created as a tribute to my family and, in particular, my wonderful Uncle Pat who died last year, aged 94.

Uncle Pat lived in the area all of his life. He was a miner, a drover, a horseman, whip maker and much more. He made an enormous contribution to my knowledge of our area and how to live in the bush.

My home at Lionsville is off the grid. I have no technology, no television and my nearest neighbour is 15 minutes by car. You live in the heart of the landscape with a river running by the house.

Uncle Pat referred to our country as a secret place. It is profound and overwhelming in celebrating the splendour of nature. This place informs all of my work and has done for 3 decades. I go home on average 6 or 7 times a year and my cousins caretake when I am not there.

I know we are meant to be able to articulate and share our creative genesis and theories with as many people as possible, but I prefer to engage with my work instead of writing or talking about it. The act of creating for me is a chance to connect with memories and push those creative boundaries to the ultimate extremes.

I live in two worlds. The bush and the city and this allows me a wonderful touchstone for my life.

I hope that some of what I have spoken about today can give you an insight into one person's life. All that is me, the sum of my creativity is surrounded by the light of this history. This land, my family and my people are my inspiration.

In closing, I want to affirm that being an Aboriginal Artist is not a lifestyle choice, it is a life you have been born into.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today.