



CAROL MCGREGOR: Repositories of Recognition

Not a Calendar Girl¹: Carol McGregor's Repositories of Recognition

by Louise Martin-Chew

My cloak is a map of country

This is who I am²

Australia is the home of the world's oldest living culture, and its people carry that mantle with pride that encompasses their endurance and resilience. They survived early attempts by colonizers, who "discovered" the continent in 1770 and arrived in greater numbers beginning in 1788 to decimate the Aboriginal race and disrupt their connection to land. Aboriginal populations were rapidly reduced through measures that included the introduction of disease, poisoning and massacre, segregation in the 1800s, and assimilationist policies from the 1860s.

From 1869 to as late as 1970, Aboriginal children were removed from their families, creating a "Stolen Generation," and an ongoing societal dysfunction that has resulted in the over-representation of Australia's Indigenous people in prisons and disproportionately negative health statistics. In 2017, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* requested, on behalf of Australia's Indigenous people, "constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country."³ Unlike Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia has never negotiated a treaty or otherwise recognized its First Nations peoples. This continues to be a source of considerable sorrow, angst and discussion. However, at the heart of Aboriginality, vested in their long-held cultural traditions, is a holistic approach to managing the environment that was subtle enough to be invisible to the invading Europeans.

Relics of culture are tightly held. Cloaks made from possum skins, stitched together and painted with ochre, were an integral part of life. They were given to babies at birth, etched with identifying markings and totems, added to and extended, growing with that individual throughout their lives. White Europeans discouraged Aboriginal people from continuing their cultural traditions. When they denied Aboriginal people access to their lands and wildlife, the making of possum skin cloaks disappeared quickly. Christian values were imposed and traditional practices and culture were discouraged. Towns demanded that Indigenous people who wanted to receive rations drop their cloaks at the boundary of the settlement. The cultural practice of making possum skin cloaks was suspended.⁴



Details of possum skin bags from *not a calendar girl*, 2017.

There are few Australian possum skin cloaks that remain from the nineteenth century, and such rarity increases their preciousness. One is held in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and, in Australia, two from regional Victoria are held in the Melbourne Museum. Displayed under reverently low light, with permission from their Yorta Yorta and Gunditjamara custodians, these objects are dark with age and use. But their designs and patterns, fine stitching and sinuous lines reflect respectively the river origins of their Yorta Yorta maker, and the expanse of Lake Condah and its associated wetlands from the Gunditjamara maker. Every cloak was different and each was designed for the person for whom they were made, their totems and their terrain. They became a descriptor of the unique relationship of an individual with their place and culture.

Carol McGregor is a Wathaurung woman who is also of Scottish descent. The traditional lands of the Wathaurung people are located around Melbourne, Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula in Victoria. Since beginning her training as an artist in 2008, McGregor has worked to revive and celebrate the almost-forgotten tradition of working with possum skins. Small, furry and nocturnal, Australia's indigenous possum (*richosurus vulpecula*) is a protected species. For the contemporary revival of this art, McGregor has sourced skins from Aotearoa/New Zealand (where possums are not native and threaten biodiversity). The new skins are soft, crafted with designs painted and burnt on the underside, often in watercolor and natural ochres. A family cloak made by McGregor in 2013 called *(in)visible* uses the skins of sixty possums, and is painted with ochre and charcoal, organic forms and shapes flowing into each other. It features lines like topographical maps juxtaposed with rivers and creeks, which refer to her ancestors (and children) born along different river systems, yet connected through the movement of the sea, knowledge and genes.

In 2015, McGregor pioneered a research project called *Art of the Skins: Unsilencing & Remembering* to reclaim and reignite the tradition of making and wearing possum skin cloaks in southeastern Queensland.⁵ This collaborative community-based project is personal for McGregor. Aware of the importance of the cloaks, she enabled local Indigenous community members to express their cultural stories on the skins, investing this historic tradition with contemporary dynamism.⁶ She describes her interaction with this age-old craft, suggesting that "artifacts are vehicles of remembering, an active belonging to cultural practices."⁷

For this exhibition, *Repositories of Recognition*, McGregor made seven large possum skin bags, which feature painted diamonds formed by hand-drawn parallel lines and geometric patterns that she has used since childhood. Their irregular edges formed by the skin fold toward the outside of the bag: a natural shape evoking and acknowledging their animal source. Under the collective title, *not a calendar girl*, McGregor rejects the strictures of the Western calendar, acknowledging a land management system that honored the environmental balance prior to the arrival of colonist invaders. The form of a bag, in which objects may be collected and kept safe, is displayed, variously open and closed, reflecting the different approaches of generations to Aboriginality (its current acknowledgement and celebration exists in stark contrast to the secrecy with which it was guarded by some families in earlier times), and creating, for McGregor, her own repository of recognition.

Like the cloaks, these bags represent cultural authenticity. A related installation of much smaller untitled possum skin bags crowd together near the floor, each one connected by touch to the next. Their placement evokes the power of passing on cultural knowledge, a collective sharing, and the strength in being together. This collection of tactile objects, with the cloak *(in)visible* (2013), is reminiscent of McGregor's own personal narrative, an irregular journey from her Indigenous and Scottish ancestors, via birth and childhood in Aotearoa, and then to Australia as a young adult.

McGregor's Aboriginal great-grandmother, Annie, travelled to Aotearoa from the city of Geelong in Victoria with the white father of her children early in the twentieth century. In the preceding years, most Australian states passed legislation that made Aboriginal children, particularly of mixed race (i.e. "half caste"), vulnerable to removal from their parents. Aboriginal culture was not expected to

"She describes her interaction with this age-old craft, suggesting that 'artifacts are vehicles of remembering, an active belonging to cultural practices.'"

survive and assimilation was deemed the way to integrate mixed race children into white Australian culture, while "full blood" Aboriginal people were segregated on reserves and missions. The Victorian Aborigines Protection Act in 1869 did not define "half castes" as Aboriginal people, and many were forced to leave their homes. Missions and reserves were exclusively for "full blood" Aboriginal peoples; being "half caste" meant being discriminated by exclusion from these "Aboriginal" places, while facing racial discrimination within "mainstream" white society. McGregor's great-grandfather worked on boats travelling between Geelong and Wellington, Aotearoa and would have been aware that his family situation was less risky there.

In moving to another country, my family escaped assimilationist policies, but the silencing and isolation affected my grandfather's generation. We did know that Annie (my Aboriginal great-grandmother) was from Victoria, and that they wore possum skin cloaks—we have lots of photographs. Working with possum skins is my tangible way to connect. Before I began though, I went back to Aotearoa/New Zealand to visit the tannery and spoke about my projects, to explain how the possums were used culturally in Australia. A while back I was given a copy of a nineteenth century drawing of a woman in a possum skin cloak—she has the same face as Annie.

The possum skin bags are one of three materials used in the exhibition. The title of this exhibition is taken from an article by Adrian Franklin called, "Aboriginalia: Souvenir Wares and the 'Aboriginalization' of Australian Identity." Franklin's article describes the interest in souvenirs using Aboriginal imagery as an authentic expression of what is unique about Australia. However, the souvenirs made appropriated Aboriginal imagery without permission, were not made by Aboriginal people and were most popular at the same time as assimilationist policies were attempting to stamp out traditional cultural practices. Franklin suggests that, "the earliest forms of these souvenir objects, predominantly sold to a travelling public between the 1940s and 1980s, have become, collectively, a repository of memory and a reminder that Aboriginal culture had the first claim on what it is to be Australian."⁸ McGregor's response, visible in this exhibition, is created using the kitschy tea towels made for tourists. Ironically they came to define the national symbolism of Australia until the 1990s. Some tea towels show Aboriginal men holding spears and boomerangs, fulfilling the archetype of the "noble savage." Others are printed with Aboriginal dancers, marks and motifs borrowed from Aboriginal artifacts, indigenous

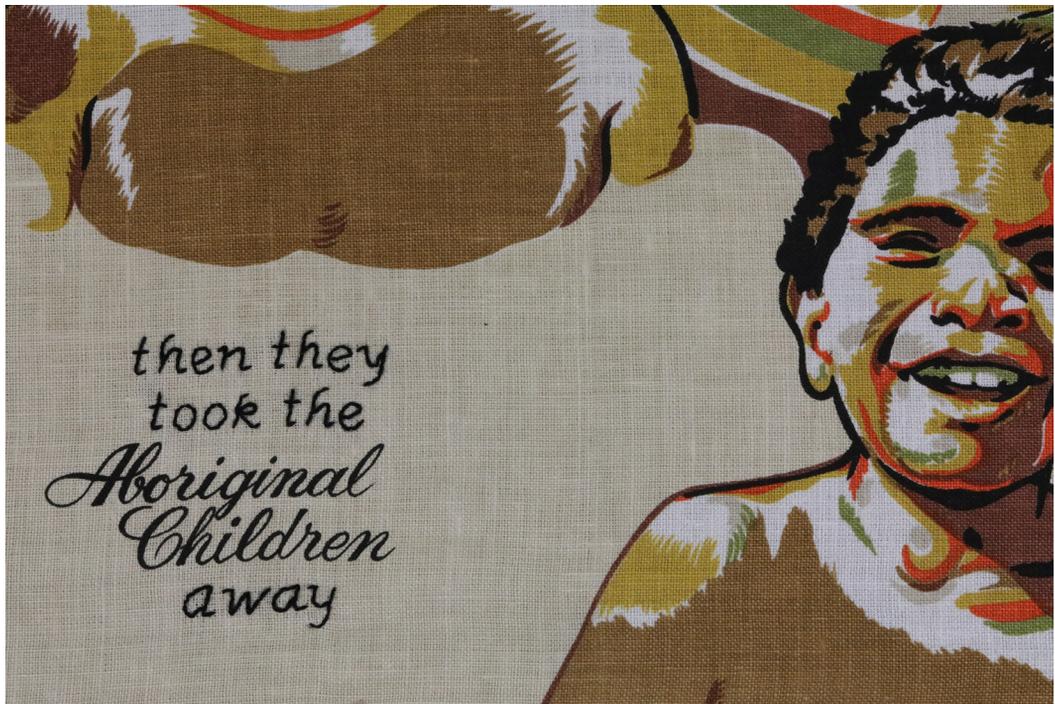
fish and animals, imagery copied from bark paintings, burial poles, sand drawings and other visible accoutrements of culture. Some even show maps of Australia marked with distinctive Aboriginal sites and animals unique to those places. These touristy items, made without the permission of Indigenous knowledge-holders, are still made and sold today. The fact that Aboriginal people were marginalized, their culture a target of assimilationist policies, and far removed from the public sphere, makes even more offensive the misappropriation of known Aboriginal aesthetics, culture and heritage for exploitative commercial ends.

McGregor has collected these objects for years. Many of them are vintage pieces, although others were bought from the USA as recently as last year. Often produced outside Australia, many of the tea towels she found are marked "authentic Aboriginal art." She has sewn, embroidered, and otherwise altered these objects to broadcast their fake claims to culture. Hanging throughout the exhibition space, they explore issues that are now widely understood. These include a greater awareness that Indigenous motifs may only be used by their custodians (although "fake" art continues to be made by unethical operators) and acknowledgement that the wrongs historically inflicted Aboriginal people, such as removal of children from their families, have generated ongoing issues in affected communities. Others refer to "insider" debates within the contemporary Aboriginal art world, with McGregor keen to stimulate viewers to undertake their own research with her use of the reference to Richard Bell's Theorum: "Aboriginal Art It's a White Thing."⁹ Tea towels are also sewn into aprons by McGregor, referring to the common practice of "placing"

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Detail of an apron from *not a calendar girl*, 2017.



Detail from *for Archie*, 2017.

Aboriginal people into domestic service, the most menial jobs for which they were expected to be grateful. She notes, "They elevate the primitivism and romanticization of Indigenous culture—while the truth was, children were taken away, "assimilated," and then trained for domestic service." The aprons hang in the space, like disembodied pinafores, some modelled on a nineteenth century servant's uniform. One work, *white bias*, echoes a 1980s apron style, the pocket embroidered with its title and its scalloped shape, and the neckline also finished in white bias (binding).

McGregor's amendment of the words printed on these items and embroidered alterations on fabrics turned "inside out" as a rejection of their fakery, make overt her simmering rage. A beautifully crafted apron is printed with the words "DESIGNED IN AUSTRALIA" on the waistband, to which McGregor has stitched, "without permission." One apron features an Aboriginal man's face, painted for ceremony, with "stereotyped" embroidered over a printed text that reads "Australian Aboriginal." An apron made from calendar-printed fabrics has words embroidered around the pockets that read "forced," "indentured," "domestic," and "slave." Crafted heart-shaped pockets on an apron titled *fake fake fake* are stitched amendments above the printed words "Aboriginal Art." A tea towel with happy Aboriginal children's faces hovering above the words "Aboriginal children" is called *for Archie* with McGregor's embroidered additions reading: "then they took the" (printed) "Aboriginal children", "away", a sad stitched postscript below. The title and text references the popular Aboriginal singer Archie Roach and his well-known song "Took the Children Away" from 1990.

Making art is the route McGregor takes to connect holistically to her heritage, with handmade craft being integral to her practice. "It's haptic", she says. "I have looked at many de-colonizing methodologies in my practice, but hands-on learning has been powerful. There's a continuum—holding things, like the cloaks that have been held by others in the past, mean a tumble of references come to me."

The possum skin bags, the tea towels and the aprons are arranged in groups of seven, referring to the Aboriginal Seven Sisters story related in cultures across Australia. Stories about the Seven Sisters, who are associated with the Pleiades star cluster, appear in cultures throughout the world. All of these exhibition components—seven aprons, seven possum skin bags, seven tea towels and the 49 smaller unnamed bags—travelled across the globe in November, known in the northern hemisphere

as the month of Pleiades. McGregor's endeavor to unsilence and remember the past is empowered by her metamorphosis of these souvenir objects and their visibility as they travel to other places under the same stars. In her process, these fake representations of Aboriginality are transformed from exploitative source materials into resonant and meaningful contemporary memories that communicate the indelible power of Aboriginal culture.

NOTES

¹ "Not a Calendar Girl" is the title of the installation of possum skin bags and aprons but also encapsulates McGregor's rejection of the use of calendars in the "fake art" tea towels made using Aboriginal marks and motifs.

² Words used by Yorta Yorta custodians in video interviews, part of the display of nineteenth century Possum Skin Cloaks, Melbourne Museum, viewed 20 October 2017.

³ *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3755370-ULURU-STATEMENT-FROM-the-HEART.html>. Retrieved December 20, 2017.

⁴ While possum skin cloaks were assumed to have been made as a widespread cultural tradition in southern Australia (due to the cooler climate in that part of the continent), McGregor's research project, *Art of the Skins: Unsilencing and Remembering*, found that possum skin cloaks were also an integral part of cultural life in southeastern Queensland. McGregor has also found evidence of their use as far north as Townsville, in inland Queensland (where temperatures drop below freezing during winter), and on the Atherton Tablelands (west of Cairns, North Queensland). It may be concluded that possum skin cloaks were widely used in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia although McGregor's research has focussed on Queensland where the tradition had been lost for some generations prior to her revival.

⁵ *Art of the Skins* was a partnership with the State Library of Queensland and facilitated with Taungwurrun-Yorta Yorta artist Glennys Briggs. Knowledge of the southeast Queensland cloak-making tradition had been lost, with many current elders unaware that it had ever been present in this state (although its existence was known in areas where the weather was cooler (e.g. New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia). McGregor's research toward her doctorate at Queensland College of Art discovered records of a localized tradition in the archives, including historical photographs. After that, with permission, she taught over fifty workshops in southeast Queensland to share her knowledge and techniques. She says, "We say the cloak-making practice was sleeping. It never died out and continues in the contemporary practice of making cloaks."

⁶ McGregor was given permission to work with possum skins by senior Victorian cloak makers Lee Darroch, Maree Clarke and Treahna Hamm, who shared their knowledge with generosity.

⁷ All quotes from an interview with the artist in her Brisbane studio, 11 October 2017.

⁸ Adrian Franklin, "Aboriginalia: Souvenir Wares and the 'Aboriginalization' of Australian Identity", *Tourist Studies* 10, No. 3 (2010): 197.

⁹ Richard Bell is an Aboriginal artist and social activist who won the major Australian Indigenous art award, the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 2003. His winning painting included the words "Aboriginal Art / It's A White thing." His accompanying "Bell's Theorem" is a manifesto that outlines some of the long-standing inequities in the Aboriginal art market. McGregor's use of these words plays on the fake Aboriginal art, printed on a tea towel by non-Aboriginal people.



ABOUT Carol McGregor

Carol McGregor is an Indigenous Australian woman of Wathaurung and Scottish heritage. She works across a variety of materials and techniques to unearth and visually activate histories and memories to inform her cultural sense of place. Her recent practice involves the revival of the traditional possum skin cloak as an art form and a way to strengthen community and individual identities. McGregor is currently completing her Ph.D. at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Australia.



Photo by Sardi Klein

ABOUT Louise Martin-Chew

Louise Martin-Chew has worked as a freelance writer since 1992, specializing in visual arts and design. Prior to that she worked in Sydney in exhibitions and publications management (Art Exhibitions Australia 1985-89) and was Editorial Manager of *Art & Australia* quarterly journal from 1990-92. Since then she has contributed regularly to national art magazines, newspapers and catalogues, and was Brisbane art critic for *The Australian* newspaper from 1997-2009. Most recently she has contributed to and authored books on Australian artists Judy Watson (2008), Fiona Foley (2009), Stephen Hart (2011) and Robert Brownhall (2012), with her most recent title, *Linde Ivimey* (UQ Art Museum, 2012) launched at a survey of Ivimey's sculpture at UQ Art Museum in late 2012. She is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Queensland (Creative Writing), developing a biography of Indigenous artist Fiona Foley.

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