

THIS IS MY HERITAGE

REVIEW KON GOURIOTIS



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IN NINETEEN-NINETY a group of four women: poets Oodgeroo Noonuccal (also known as Kath Walker) and Maureen Watson, theatre director Sue Rider and museum curator Judith Bartlett organised a performance of the play *You Came to My Country and You Didn't turn Black* in the Queensland Museum. Twenty-five years later the Queensland Museum has invited a group of Indigenous people from the Queensland community to be photographed for a collaboration commemorating that important performance and its accompanying exhibition.

This is my heritage, a poem from the play by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, inspired the exhibition title. First published in 1984, the play was programmed by Anthony Steele for the Adelaide Festival that year. The Wayne Goss Labor Government supported the staging of the play less than a year after the defeat of the 19-year Joh Bjelke-Petersen National Party Government in 1989. Works by 24 Indigenous visual artists from Queensland were displayed in conjunction with the play. Works by Fiona Foley, Judy Watson, Richard Bell, the late Gordon Bennett, Marshall Bell and other now celebrated Australian visual artists were shown.

Even today, the idea of a play in a museum is remarkable. Observing the play's significance for the time, the *This is my heritage* exhibition curators Michael Aird and Mandana Mapar point out, "It was a major coup and a notable change of direction for the Queensland Museum. The project captured the mood of the era, through a collaboration that involved an insightful creative team, the Indigenous communities and Museum staff."

This is my heritage highlights another continuing collaboration, between Aird and the exhibition's photographer and filmmaker,

Mick Richards. Aird and Richards have worked together in exhibitions, films and conferences for nearly 25 years. To collaborate for such a time, Richards explains, "There are no rules, it is how we intuitively work with each other well." They do not idealise their subjects but stick to realism to fix the 'facts' in their collection of stories from Aboriginal communities.

Richards says he is "not interested in negativity". In 2007 Aird and Richards were in Palm Island as the verdict into the death of Cameron Mulrunji Doomadgee was announced in favour of the perpetrator. The mainstream press represented the community as agitated, but Aird and Richards documented people going peacefully about daily life. Richards explains, "In all our shots, people were nice, people were happy, people were doing things, while all the press photographs were dark and dingy and there's no hope and there's doom in the air."

Aird, who graduated in anthropology in 1990 from the University of Queensland, is visionary and meticulous. He has become well known for his careful curatorial processes in finding and documenting photographs of Aboriginal subjects and uncovering the stories behind them. He is a photographer and a recorder of many Indigenous people's stories. He was born on the Gold Coast, spending most of his life in the region, the traditional country of his ancestors. His photography records things that interest Aboriginal people: preparing a dancer for a wedding, making fishing spears, cooking echidnas, Aboriginal children learning traditional dance.

Born in Cardiff, Wales, Richards migrated to Australia in 1989. His work has both logical and intuitive elements. His photography career

began accidentally in the early 1980s after a cameraman from BBC Wales, where he was working, suggested he take up photography.

As a keen reader and observer of history, culture, the arts and the military, he feverishly absorbs everything. He has mastered the chemical and digital photographic disciplines in still and moving image. He has created portraits, reportage, male erotica, as well as staged photography for artists and documented artists' works. He has documented subcultures from the world of Australian boxing, nightclubs, surfing, cars and beauty contests. His photographs feature in a diverse range of publications, books, magazines and newspapers in Australia and internationally. From time to time he also intermittently tutored in photography from 1994 to 2006, at the Queensland College of Art.

Around 1990, Richards and Aird met at a Spring Hill Baths Gallery exhibition, Brisbane. By early 1992 they were working together on the Aboriginal arts festival and conference in Yarrabah, near Cairns. Richards was commissioned by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous artist collective, The Campfire Group, to document the conference. In 1996 Aird invited Richards to be the portrait photographer for

- 01 This is my heritage, installation view
 - 02 Roxanne McDonald, print on vinyl, anti-UV high quality ink, 2100 x 1500cm
 - 03 Rhianna Patrick, print on vinyl, anti-UV high quality ink, 2100 x 1500cm
 - 04 Leonard Donoghue, print on vinyl, anti-UV high quality ink, 2100 x 1500cm
 - 05 Laurie Nilsen, print on vinyl, anti-UV high quality ink, 2100 x 1500cm
 - 06 Chenoa Deemal, print on vinyl, anti-UV high quality ink, 2100 x 1500cm
- Photographer, Mick Richards



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The 12 portraits tell tales of identity and resilience, the stolen generation, labour exploitation and ecological destruction stories from various ages and genders.

his second book *I Know a Few Words*. At the request of south-east Queensland elders, Aird had gathered traditional languages from a diverse cultural group, taking a thematic approach to reveal the old culture and present the renewed culture of knowledge and learning for a new generation of Australians. Two members of the project, Jo-Anne Driessens and Honor Cleary, appear in *This is my heritage*.

Mick Richards' photographs were curated by Aird for the first time for the 1998 Wearing Culture exhibition, at Queensland Museum. Their exhibitions and films include the 2011 exhibition *Woogoompab My Country – Swamp Country*, Gold Coast Art Gallery; the 2012 *Swamp Country*, Metricon Stadium, Gold Coast; 2013 films and photographs *The Longest Wave*, Bleach Festival Gold Coast; and, in collaboration with Alick Tipoti, *Marimawa*, a 2014 video performance, and 10 documentaries of the artists in the international and national travelling exhibition *Saltwater Country*.

Richards' diverse qualities as a natural social collaborator can be understood through the influences that have inspired him: Nan Goldin's intimate documentary photography, the harsh realism of Weegee's street photography, the hedonistic social photography of Rennie Ellis and the social activist documentation of William Yang. Richards' belief that the "camera can show anything you want" reflects the ideas of photographer and filmmaker Brassai, and he is inspired by the painter Caravaggio's "chiaroscuro" method of contrasting lights and darks. There is something of Eugène Atget in Richards' obsessive project documenting Brisbane's Fortitude Valley entertainment district, taking photos from every perspective of the terrain, to its subterranean life.

For the *This is my heritage* exhibition the curators worked with 12 Indigenous people from diverse communities, and facilitated their access to the Queensland Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island collection. Richards photographed each subject with a selected object from the collection. The 12 portraits tell tales of



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identity and resilience, the stolen generation, labour exploitation and ecological destruction stories from various ages and genders. Beyond the natural scale of 2 metres, Richards' photographs are accompanied by a brilliantly crafted, sensitive 40-minute film of great empathy: for this Aird interviewed the subjects and Richards filmed them.

The visitors to the exhibition immediately understand what the curators wish to achieve. It is an idea derived from their experiences with the community and their commitment to the public museums that care for our objects, asking them to be more open and empathetic. Such principles take time and skill to make real.

To construct these realities, which Richards and Airds have achieved, requires a long-term engagement with the community. The 12 subjects' stories, the stills and the film build a convincing image of where we have

come from as a nation and where we could go. How many curators and artists can really do that in Australia: to provide their subjects with an environment in which they can relax knowing they will not be exploited? Collaborations such as Aird's and Richards' are a rarity and the *This is my heritage* exhibition is one of their finest. ■

EXHIBITION
This is my heritage
Queensland Museum
Until 7 July, 2016

www.qm.qld.gov.au

07 Mick Richards photographing Jo-Anne Driessens, photography Michael Aird
08 *Clancestary*, 2014, photography Mick Richards

Courtesy the artist, Michael Aird, Queensland Performing Arts Centre and Queensland Museum.