

ABORIGINAL ART AND HEALING

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I should like to thank Dr Colette Rayment and the RLA committee for their invitation to give this lecture, concurrent with the Heritage Art Award, and I want to express my respect on being here, on the traditional lands of the Eora people.

Introduction

The effort by many Australians to heal deep wounds of our collective past has been evident in the healing journeys towards Reconciliation undertaken recently throughout this country. These journeys have required an empathic imagination, for in a sense they are an invitation to walk in the shoes of another and to understand more deeply our shared Australian heritage. My talk tonight is about artistic work that also can be interpreted as a journey – a journey towards coming to terms with certain disturbing and regrettable aspects of our common heritage. I am not speaking about art as a psychotherapeutical tool, but rather as a practical medium for naturally and creatively expressing human experience.

Aboriginal realities reflect complex cross-cultural histories, and these histories have long been the subject of a great deal of contemporary Aboriginal art. Tonight I wish to present for your reflection three approaches by Aboriginal artists – or in one case by a cross-cultural team – that use art as a healing medium and are examples of creative journeying towards wholeness.

The first of these is *Another View Walking Trail* in Melbourne, in which a group of artists offers another perspective on Melbourne's history. *Another View* is a symbolic journey that some find confronting, but it is a journey intended positively to engage the viewer and to act as a medium of transformation. It differs from the other art I shall discuss tonight, in that it is public art – the result of a civic commission. It is also a collaborative

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work between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, which was planned from the outset as a cross-cultural initiative. Prior to its installation in 1995, there was no other public work in Melbourne that provided a perspective of Melbourne's history other than the one which celebrated white settlement. The history of Melbourne, for example, which was created for tourists taking the City Circle tram journey, provided no reference to Aboriginal histories. It was as though our peoples had never existed.

Secondly, I shall speak about the work of the late painter and sculptor, Lin Onus, whose retrospective exhibition is now currently showing at Melbourne Museum, and was recently at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I want to discuss Onus's work as a metaphor for his personal journey, which can be read as a deep, healing process. This journey falls into two distinct stages. The first contains work that signifies a longing on the part of the artist to address his cultural losses. The second stage is markedly influenced by his encounter with a particular Indigenous group – distinct from his own – which made him welcome and helped him to discover new riches in a shared history. Onus's art was fuelled by his own personal need; but at the same time, he sought to reach a wider audience and positively to communicate issues that many Aboriginal Australians share.

Thirdly, I'd like also to present to you some of my own art as the expression of a symbolic, imaginary journey. It differs from the other two examples in that it does not deal with specific histories; but it symbolises for me a journey that can also be read as a kind of healing experience. My art is inner directed, and I often do not work with a particular audience in mind; but tonight I have chosen to present to you a series of paintings which were especially commissioned and did indeed address a particular audience.

ANOTHER VIEW WALKING TRAIL

The journey of *Another View*, as its name suggests, is about stepping into the perspective of another. For the artists of *Another View*, however, it was more than the consideration of differing perspectives in 'idea' only. They deliberately intended to evoke a

'feeling' response in the viewer, to engage the viewer's heart. Instead of echoing the emotional detachment of certain intellectual writings, they wanted *Another View* to be about feeling one's way into the world of nineteenth century Australia. This world included terrible realities for Aboriginal people and in a different sense, terrible realities for non-Aboriginal people too. Deaths of Aboriginal people featured as a strong theme, indicating the works as memorials to loss and the recognition of peoples whose traditional lands had been invaded. Essentially, the artists wanted to encourage cross-cultural empathic imagination.

Slide 01, *Another View Walking Trail* map¹

This first slide provides you with a map of the central business district of Melbourne. Here you can see the places where a series of artworks were installed or where sites were identified, as part of a guided walk around the city. Artists Megan Evans, Ray Thomas and others, wanted the experiential, emotional engagement with the works, to invite a reassessment and a re-evaluation of how we understand our shared histories. Thus, their art invites us to consider how histories have been acknowledged and recorded, embraced or cast aside. An initiative of the City of Melbourne in 1994, *Another View* can be walked in four to five hours, and when accessed by vehicle, visited in half that time.² Seventeen sites indicate histories previously unacknowledged by public monuments in Melbourne.

These sites, seen here on this map, thirteen of which are marked by the presence of artworks, are linked thematically by the Rainbow Serpent, who appears in many of the works. The imagined body of the Rainbow Serpent, beginning at Melbourne's Parliament house, seen here on the central right hand side of the map, continues anti-clockwise, circling the city centre and moving down over the Yarra River and into the Queen Victoria Gardens. This journey of the Rainbow Serpent³ is a story of

¹ Slide 01, *Another View Walking Trail* map, inside front cover, *Another View Walking Trail Booklet*, (Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 1995).

² *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, (Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 1995).

³ The Rainbow Serpent, a universal symbol about birth and life, death and rebirth, is interpreted in many ways by Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia. *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet.

transformation. The artists hoped that this metaphor would also symbolise the experience of the viewer.⁴ The work was to be seen not as specific commentary on the sites themselves, but as a window into alternative ways of viewing associated histories. It was hoped that it would encourage change in one's inner world, stimulating at the same time, 'healing', in the sense of revision, understanding and incorporation,⁵ reinforcing the view that there are many interpretations of shared histories.

Slide 02, Site 1, Parliament House with Mosaic in foreground⁶

We begin the journey at Site One, Parliament House, where a mosaic is installed in the pavement in front of the building.

Slide 03, Site 1, Parliament House Pavement Mosaic⁷

This other historical perspective is signalled by the Rainbow Serpent, seen here swallowing its own tail, in a symbolic expression of transformation. The continuous nature of the trail is also a metaphor of growth. Figures surround the head of the Serpent, referring to ceremonies portrayed in the work of Wurundjeri painter William Barak, in the late nineteenth century.⁸ This site was once the ceremonial grounds and the meeting place of the Kulin peoples; and originally it comprised a small hill with underground springs. When Europeans first entered Port Phillip Bay, five Aboriginal tribes lived on the land.⁹ One of these, the

⁴ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.1.

⁵ M. Evans, unpublished MS *Another View Slide List*; designed as a supplement to *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet. (1996).

⁶ Slide 02, Evans, M., and R. Thomas, Site 1, Parliament House with Mosaic in foreground, 1994-1995, ceramic tiles, glass tiles, cement, grout, adhesive cement, metal grill, 100 x 100cm.

⁷ Slide 03, Evans, M., and R. Thomas, Site 1, Parliament House Pavement Mosaic, 1994-1995, ceramic tiles, glass tiles, cement, grout, adhesive cement, metal grill, 100 x 100cm.

⁸ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet.

⁹ S. W. Wiencke, *When the Wattles Bloom Again: The Life and Times of William Barak - Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe*, (Melbourne: S. W. Wiencke, 1984) p.5. The nineteenth century ethnographer, Alfred Howitt, classified the tribes of the Melbourne region as the Kulin nation. Woiworung, Bunurong, Wathaurung, Taungurong and Jajowrong made up the alliance of a confederacy. G. Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*, (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, Penguin Books, 1985) p.36.

Woiworung peoples, embraced the Wurundjeri clan to whom Barak belonged.¹⁰ This mosaic marks the beginning and the end of the walking trail: and we are reminded of this by the Aboriginal flag.¹¹

Slide 04, Site 2, four poles in front of Old Melbourne Gaol¹²

At Site Two, Old Melbourne Gaol, we encounter a memorial to the first public execution of prisoners and the terrible spectacle of their deaths by hanging in early 1842. Four poles, two aluminium and two wooden, communicate the story of these prisoners, Maulboyhenner¹³ and Devay¹⁴ - who were Palawa¹⁵ or Tasmanian Aboriginal people, brought to Victoria by George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Victoria in 1839. He had hoped that they would influence Victorian Aboriginal people to regroup into designated sites.¹⁶ Proficient in the use of firearms, the prisoners, later joined up with a band of Kulin, and made numerous attacks on whites. When captured they were charged with shooting two men.¹⁷ The artists convey their empathy with these prisoners who were punished for what from their point of view could be construed as a situation of warfare, in which they

¹⁰ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, 2. Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*, p.39, p.42.

¹¹ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.4.

¹² Slide 04, Evans, M., Site 2, poles in front of Old Melbourne Gaol, 1994 -1995.

¹³ Also named Jack.

¹⁴ Also named Robert.

¹⁵ Sally Clark, Palawa Language Researcher, (Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc., Hobart), says the name 'Palawa' was used for the first time in 1993, after research was conducted by the Aboriginal Language Program for the TAC. Their research aims in 'retrieving' and 'reviving language' through recorded information that is essential for 'reconstructing the language', Clark explained. It is estimated that 8 - 12 languages were once in use in Tasmania. Clark, telephone correspondence, (May, 1996).

¹⁶ Both Maulboyhenner and Devay had attended Robinson in Tasmania also, where Robinson had been instrumental in relocating the remaining Indigenous Tasmanian people to Flinders Island in Bass Strait. *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, 4 - 5. Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*, 96-97. 'Robinson, G.,' in D. Horton, editor, *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History, Society and Culture*, Volume 2, M-Z. (Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1994) p.948.

¹⁷ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.5.

were fighting in defence of Aboriginal land and safety.¹⁸

Slide 05, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, aluminium poles¹⁹

Inside the aluminium poles, the artists inserted display boxes containing ceramic figurines and ceramic replicas of human bones. These bones were intended to symbolise the deaths of Aboriginal people in their defence of land.²⁰

Slide 06, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, ceramic figures within pole²¹

The ceramic figurines shown here, are small portraits of the prisoners. On the glass are screen-printed images of the men, derived from watercolours painted in 1837 by colonial artist Thomas Bock.²²

Slide 07, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, wooden pole, detail of text beneath painted peeling bark²³

One of the wooden poles on this site displays a textual description of the execution scene, cited in the *Chronicles of Early Melbourne*. Underneath naturalistically painted peeling bark, this

¹⁸ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

¹⁹ Slide 05, Evans, M., and R. Thomas, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, aluminium poles, 1994-1995, aluminium, paint, rope, ceramic, screenprinting ink, glass, 5ft high.

²⁰ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

²¹ Slide 06, Evans, M., and R. Thomas, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, ceramic figures within pole, detail, 1994-1995, paint, aluminium, ceramic, screenprinting ink, glass.

²² *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, endnote no. 12, acknowledges permission from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. Bock had been commissioned to produce portraits of the men and other Palawa people by George Augustus Robinson. It has been speculated that Robinson's intention was to gather 'accurate ethnographic records' in the commissioning of such portraits, but at the time there was a good trade in lithographic images of Aborigines who had assisted colonists in exploration. T. Bonyhady, *The Colonial Image: Australian Painting 1800-1880*, Australian National Gallery, (Melbourne: Ellsyd Press, 1987) p.22. Bock died in 1855 at the age of sixty-five years.

²³ Slide 07, Evans, M., and R. Thomas, Site 2, Old Melbourne Gaol, wooden pole, detail of text beneath painted peeling bark, 1994-1995, yellow-box wooden pole, paint.

text also symbolises untold stories and hidden histories.²⁴

Slide 08, Site 4, Pioneer Monument, Flagstaff Gardens, box installations in foreground²⁵

At Site Four, in the Flagstaff Gardens, the Pioneer Monument stands on the hill where ships could be first seen as they entered Port Phillip Bay. This place was later called Burial Hill, because it became the site of Melbourne's first European cemetery. The Pioneer Monument was erected as a memorial to these first colonisers. Here, seen at the bottom of the slide, three box installations provide an intimate experience for the viewer. The realities of invasion, of Aboriginal loss and dispossession are conveyed by symbols placed within.

Slide 09, Site 4, Box 3, 'a whole repertoire...'²⁶

Here is the third box. Evans wanted the viewer personally to interact with the consequences of colonisation by providing an artwork that could be properly viewed only when the viewer knelt before each box in order to look inside. The artist also wanted to convey her sense of being humbled before the past, suggested by the act of kneeling.²⁷ Their contents were intended to evoke a metaphor for looking back through time. The insides of the three boxes – like this one – were painted to resemble lined red satin.²⁸ Each one contained actual objects, which tell of shared histories – lace and ribbons, bullet shells and miniature painted portraits, overlain with etched text, which refers to the lyrebird as a metaphor for the remembrance of massacre in the novel by Liam Davison, entitled, *The White Woman* (1994). Here we may deal with the juxtaposition of things and consider the symbol of the lyrebird and our imagined hearing of its mimicry of the sounds of

²⁴ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

²⁵ Slide 08, Evans, M., Site 4, Pioneer Monument, Flagstaff Gardens, box installations in foreground, metal boxes and contents, 1994-1995, each box, 200 x 200 x 80mm (depth).

²⁶ Slide 09, Evans, M., Site 4, Pioneer Monument, Flagstaff Gardens, Box 3, 'a whole repertoire...'. 1994-1995, metal box, stainless steel, screen-printed ink on glass, ribbon, lace, brass bullet shells, enamel, watercolour on paper, 200 x 200 x 80mm (depth).

²⁷ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

²⁸ Evans confirmed that they were 'painted' not lined with fabric.

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massacre in the forest.²⁹ Evans used photographs of her own ancestors as reference for miniature portraits, symbolising time and generation. Lace became a symbol for the artist of the 'refined and delicate surface of the colonial experience' and its masking of a history of dispossession.³⁰ Red ribbons symbolise the sinews and veins of all people connected with the land. Beneath the skin, with physical, cultural and racial differences removed, we share the same life-blood as members of the human race. To the artist, the ribbon presented a 'binding together' of views of history without their invalidation. It was this sharing of differing perspectives that would bring about cross-cultural healing.

Slide 10, Site 15, Matthew Flinders Statue, with cross-box in foreground³¹

At Site 15, outside St. Paul's Cathedral, in Swanston Street, the statue of Matthew Flinders who circumnavigated the Australian continent in 1802 and 1803,³² inspired Evans to create another box installation, seen in the foreground of this slide. Here the artist created a three-dimensional cross which had, in her words, 'powerful associations with Christian values,'³³ but also with the destructive influences of missionaries in relation to Indigenous laws and language.³⁴ Another intended reference is to the Southern Cross, or the four star configuration, 'Barramal,'³⁵ an important sign for Indigenous peoples who carved the symbol into burial trees and etched it onto rocks. Not surprisingly it was misinterpreted by colonists, as Christian.³⁶

²⁹ Upon each clear glass lid, text from Liam Davidson's historical novel *The White Woman* (1994) was used to refer to 'lyrebirds and their mimicry of sounds' as echoes of history heard today. *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.7. L. Davison, *The White Woman*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1994) p.27. Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

³⁰ City of Melbourne, *Another View Slide List*.

³¹ Slide 10, Jones, V., Site 15, Matthew Flinders Statue. with cross-box in foreground, photographic slide, 1994 - 1995.

³² *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.19.

³³ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

³⁴ Evans, unpublished *Another View Slide List*.

³⁵ The emu constellation.

³⁶ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.19.

Slide 11, Site 15, Matthew Flinders Statue, cross box³⁷

This cross-box, like the box installations at the Pioneer monument, was painted with a red interior, perhaps symbolising the blood of genocide. Inside, ceramic replicas of human bones and bullet shells are placed; and the glass lid is etched with the declaration, 'In the name of progress...in the name of history, in the name of civilisation, in the name of England, in the name of His Majesty, in the name of Justice, in the name of Righteousness...' This statement, written by artist Megan Evans, addressed what she identified as the justification for colonisation.

This work was vandalised after its installation - someone taking what the artists imagined must have been a sledge-hammer to the reinforced glass. The artist has since created a replica work. For some the encounter with a view of history that confronts in the way that this work does, evoked a violent response.

One of the interesting facts about the walking trail is that five of the eighteen original artworks created for it were censored by the City of Melbourne during their production, and in some cases after the art itself had even been made. The censored works comprised:

1. A mosaic intended for the footpath in front of the Supreme Court of Victoria, depicting an image of the head of an Aboriginal man impaled on a symbolic sword of justice.
2. A brass inlay map of massacre sites in Victoria intended to be laid into the ground in front of the original site of John Batman's grave.³⁸
3. Four ceramic tiles, screen-printed with images relating to themes of Wisdom³⁹, Progress⁴⁰, History⁴¹ and Justice⁴² to be

³⁷ Slide 11, Evans, M., Site 15, Matthew Flinders Statue, cross box, 1994-1995, metal box, stainless steel, ceramic, brass bullet shells, screen-printed ink on glass.

³⁸ Site 3: now at Queen Victoria Market Carpark.

³⁹ Christianity and an image of a bible with the deaths of Aboriginal people (wisdom).

⁴⁰ Early colonist, Edward Henty and massacre evidence (progress).

⁴¹ The naive face of history, represented by two children, (Wainwright, T. G., *The Cutmear Twins*, 1842), surrounded by bones (history).

⁴² Skulls of Aboriginal people and police Dana (justice).

placed around the Queen Victoria Monument.⁴³ These images included specific reference to an early colonist, massacre, Christianity and Aboriginal deaths, and police and Aboriginal deaths.

4. Three ceramic tiles screen-printed with images relating to the native police, control of Aboriginal people, King Edward VII, and specific reference to an early colonist and massacre, to be placed in front of the King Edward VII monument.⁴⁴
5. An encased emu egg surrounded by bullet-shells to be installed in the footpath next to the Burke and Wills monument.⁴⁵

The censorship issue as it unfolded in relation to *Another View* also has implications when viewing these works in light of how we go about publicly and collectively coming to terms with our histories. The City of Melbourne's censorship of certain artworks initially grew out of inflammatory media reactions, but it was also the underlying wish of the Council to foster good cross-cultural relations that prompted these decisions. 'Silence,' a product of the colonising process for so many decades, was symbolically broken by the visual arts, in the form of the walking trail, yet, even this landmark, would ironically, involve a form of silencing of its own. The reasons for censorship decisions varied from funding difficulties to difficulties with the appropriateness of the imagery in relation to the sites or context where works were intended to be installed. It appears that although the work that was censored was not intended to make specific commentary on the monuments counterpointed, that it was nonetheless responded to that way. Perhaps this difficulty can be summed up with the view that skeletons were seen to be best left in the closet. The artists however, took the view that to speak out about histories and perspectives previously hidden, would assist in broadening public understanding of Australian heritage and relationship to Indigenous Australians. The diversity of responses to the walking trail works certainly reflected however, the diversity within the viewing public.

⁴³ Site 12. Queen Victoria Gardens.

⁴⁴ Site 14. Queen Victoria Gardens.

⁴⁵ Site 16. Swanston Street, Melbourne.

Slide 12, Site 16, Burke and Wills Monument⁴⁶

In Melbourne's main street, the Burke and Wills Monument inspired a box installation by Ray Thomas that was among the works censored. The monument to the explorers, made in 1865, was created to memorialise the ill-fated inland expedition of 1860.⁴⁷ This well-documented history describes how Burke had chosen not to take Aboriginal trackers with his party, as was customary.⁴⁸ Trekking inland, he met with many groups of Aboriginal people. However journal entries provide evidence that the party regarded Aborigines as 'troublesome' and the explorers avoided contact, using the threat of guns to keep them away.⁴⁹ Burke and Wills and their partner, King, got into trouble some months into their journey, arriving too late to meet another party who would supply them with provisions. Their colleagues believed them lost in the desert, and left, leaving behind provisions that lasted two months. Later Burke and Wills died, exhausted and malnourished. Burke had declined assistance from the local Yuntruwanta people and had shot at them. Following the death of Burke and Wills, however, King survived by accepting their help and he later returned to Melbourne with a rescue party who arrived to pick him up several months later.⁵⁰

Slide 13, Site 16, Burke and Wills Monument, Carved Emu Egg box⁵¹

The censored work for this site was a box with painted ribbons, containing an emu egg, carved with the face of an Aboriginal man, surrounded by bullet shells. A glass lid with etched text refers to evidence of massacre.

⁴⁶ Slide 12, Summer, C., Site 16, Burke and Wills Monument, 1865, bronze.

⁴⁷ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, pp.19-20.

⁴⁸ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, pp.19-20.

⁴⁹ H. Reynolds, *With the White People: The crucial role of Aborigines in the exploration and development of Australia*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1990) p.31.

⁵⁰ *Another View: Pathway of the Rainbow Serpent* booklet, p.20.

⁵¹ Slide 13, Thomas, R., Site 16, Burke and Wills Monument, Carved Emu Egg box, corner of Swanston and Bourke Streets, 1994-1995, metal box, stainless steel, enamel, emu egg, screen-printed ink on glass, brass bullet shells, polystyrene, 300 x 200 x 200 mm (depth).

Conclusion

Another View Walking Trail artworks can be interpreted as a number of single works that stand alone, but when they are participated in as journey, as they were intended to be, they explicitly challenge the viewer to consider another interpretation of Melbourne's past.

Response to these works, of course, says something significant about ourselves. Some viewers have responded with relief that histories previously unacknowledged by public monuments in Melbourne have now been addressed. When the works are rejected and negatively criticised, perhaps it is the feeling of discomfort that is rejected and the weight of history – rather than the art itself. It asks, however, the viewer to take a position in relation to the harsh histories conveyed. Indeed, its success depends on whether or not it operates on an experiential, feeling level and encourages an empathic association with Aboriginal people.

THE JOURNEY OF LIN ONUS

Slide 14, Portrait of Lin Onus⁵²

Lin Onus, seen here, was a prolific artist, whose work reflects a journey of a different kind. Throughout much of his life he experienced a feeling of cultural void, born from losses for his people, brought about by the consequences of colonisation. He yearned for that which was lost to him. Ten years before his unexpected death, however, he had the experience of meeting the Yulungu elder and artist Jack Wunuwun, from Garmedi in the Northern Territory, who responded to his sense of loss by inviting Onus into his family to share in Yulungu traditions and language. Onus's lifelong sense of grief over the loss of his Yorta Yorta language and ceremony, was thus replaced by a revitalisation of his artistic and cultural vision and expression. Meeting Wunuwun, whose traditional heritage had in a sense not been so savaged by the processes of colonisation on his people, transformed the artist's journey.

⁵² Slide 14, Johns, D., *Portrait of Lin Onus*, 1996, photograph.

I want to focus on the significance of the work that Onus created after his welcome into Yulungu culture, but as a prelude to this, show you this early series of works which reflect his need to discover alternative views of history from those which he had been taught at school.

Musqito

The Australian education system, which presented its students with non-Indigenous histories and values and reinforced the heroism of non-Indigenous historical figures, was something Onus questioned. Responding to the same sense of need to look into the past, as the artists of *Another View Walking Trail* have done, Onus looked for Indigenous heroes of his own. He became fascinated with stories of Indigenous resistance,⁵³ and his discovery of the existence of the Kuringgai⁵⁴ warrior ‘Musqito’,⁵⁵ from the Broken Bay area near Sydney, marked the beginning of a process of deep personal healing.⁵⁶

Musqito was a renowned enemy to colonists, feared for his effective fighting methods cultivated in guerilla warfare waged alongside the Eora warrior Pemulwuy in the 1790s.⁵⁷ He was captured by the British in 1805 and then incarcerated on Norfolk Island, where he remained in custody until he was transported to

⁵³ Onus found other revolutionaries that interested him including: ‘Nemarluk, Sandiwarra, Lionel Brockman, Pigeon, Walyer, Lin Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, (Upwey, c.1982).

⁵⁴ I. McLean, ‘One mob, one voice, one land: Lin Onus and Indigenous postmodernism’, in Neale, M., editor/author, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, exhibition catalogue, (Sydney: Craftsman House in association with G & B Arts International and the Queensland Art Gallery, 2000) p.46.

⁵⁵ Isaacs, *Aboriginality: Contemporary Aboriginal Paintings and Prints*, p.23.

⁵⁶ Onus writes that the Musquito series was ‘envisaged and created for three reasons: personal satisfaction and development, an interesting story worthy of re-telling and an attempt to redress the imbalance of the lack of folk heroes in Black Australian history.’ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.1.

⁵⁷ I. McLean, ‘One mob, one voice, one land: Lin Onus and Indigenous postmodernism’, in Neale, ed., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, 46. Pemulwuy, who led the defence of his land from 1790-1802, was so renowned as such an effective leader that the Eora were said to have believed he could not be killed by British firearms. E. Willmot, *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*, (McMahons Point: Weldons, 1987) pp.13-14.

Tasmania eight years later.⁵⁸ In Tasmania, Musqito received a pardon for his work as a tracker,⁵⁹ but by the 1820s he had formed an alliance with the Palawa people, aiding them in their resistance against the British.⁶⁰ When he was once again captured in 1824,⁶¹ and hanged in Ridsden Gaol the following year,⁶² his death marked the end of a period of resistance that had spanned at least thirty years.

This inspirational revolutionary was born anew through Onus's brush, in answer to the artist's need not only to know the history of what had happened to Aboriginal people, but importantly, to assist his own personal healing journey. Onus was also a revolutionary; one who used art as a medium to express issues of strong significance for Aboriginal people.

Slide 15(a), *The hangman's nose*, 1979-82, (b), *In hiding*, 1979-82, (c), *Quiet as dogs*, 1979-82, (d), *Premonition*, 1979-82, (e), *White man's burden*, 1979-82

(a), *The hangman's nose*, 1979-82⁶³

⁵⁸ Various crimes were attributed to him. Onus writes that these included: '...a tribal fight, ... murder of his wife, ... rape and murder of a white woman. There is no record of a conviction, indeed one cannot be certain, what his crime, if any, was. Certainly if there were any substance to the latter crime it is most likely that he would have been put to death immediately, evidence or no evidence. There are suggestions that Musqito had no 'criminal' record but was taken to VDL to work as a tracker for the Government.' Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.2.

⁵⁹ 'Musqito was employed as a stock-keeper for some years in North Central Tasmania. About this time there was a bushranger at large – Michael Howe, he was very active and of great concern to the authorities. Musqito and several white convicts were engaged to help capture Howe in return for free pardons and passage (if required) to their home country. It was Musqito's tracking ability that was instrumental in the capture of Howe. The white convicts who assisted were given money, free pardons and passage. Musqito received nothing.' Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.2.

⁶⁰ S. Kleinert, 'Rear-vision mirror: A Koori context', in Neale, ed., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, p.31.

⁶¹ I. McLean, 'One mob, one voice, one land: Lin Onus and Indigenous postmodernism', in Neale, ed., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, p.46.

⁶² S. Kleinert, 'Rear-vision mirror: A Koori context', in Neale, ed., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, p.31.

⁶³ Slide 15, Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series, (a), *The hangman's nose*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

Here Onus invites us to enter the world of Musquito and to journey with him in an empathic association with his plight. The first of the series, *The hangman's nose* (1979-82),⁶⁴ seen here on the left of the screen, provides the viewer with an insight into the plight of Musquito, alone and mocked by the name he received in Hobart Town, which is referred to in the title of the work. He is seated here in an alley-way, an environment evocative of feelings of loneliness, depression and loss. The sense of entrapment and hopelessness, is also emphasised by the blueness of tone.

(b). *In hiding*, 1979-82⁶⁵

In the next work, *In hiding* (1979-82),⁶⁶ the threat of war and genocide is faced by Musquito. He is in daylight, hidden by trees and ready for confrontation with the invader. The bush and the gums he knows well support him, and his belonging to land is implicit and unquestionable, because here Musquito becomes the bush itself. He is depicted as visually merging with the trunk of a gum tree, melting into bush,⁶⁷ and symbolically protected by the natural world, bathed in natural light. He stands as 'tree', strong, upright and enduring, ready to defend his people's land, even with the use of his invader's own weaponry.

(c). *Quiet as dogs*, 1979-82⁶⁸

In the next work, *Quiet as dogs* (1979-82),⁶⁹ Onus has painted Musquito with a group known as The Tame Mob, who were 'comprised of the remnants of several tribes driven from their

⁶⁴ Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series (a), *The hangman's nose* (1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁶⁵ Slide 15, Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series, (b), *In hiding*, (1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁶⁶ Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series (b), *In hiding* (1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁶⁷ 'A military report complains that a patrol would ride up at a gallop to where they knew he was and that Musquito and the mob would simply 'melt into the bush''. Onus, '*Musquito*', unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁶⁸ Slide 15, Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series, (c), *Quiet as dogs*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁶⁹ Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series (c), *Quiet as dogs* 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

homelands.’⁷⁰ A settler had written, stating, ‘those darkies were quiet as dogs before Musquito came along.’⁷¹ Musquito had in fact lived with the group ‘peacefully...until whites captured and mistreated many of the women’, after which ‘he led the group in acts of reprisal’, only to be later described by someone of his day as ‘the first Aboriginal revolutionary.’⁷² The Tame Mob here stand in readiness with him. However, it is clear by their expressions that they are also vulnerable. They face the viewer, holding their spears and wearing clothing, symbolic of a world before the coming of the white people. Musquito and a few of the group wear White man’s clothing, together with animal skins, perhaps symbolising not only invasion itself, but the fact that recognising the force of the invader has to be met with a knowledge of this world. They stand quietly defiant, resolute in their defence of land...waiting.

(d), *Premonition*, 1979-82⁷³

The fourth work *Premonition* (1979-82),⁷⁴ progresses to an image of impending death. It leaves the viewer with no doubt as to the outcome for the hero. Musquito sees himself clothed in prison stripes, looking up a rope. He appears to float in a dreamlike space which suggests the blackness of an endless, limitless universe. Musquito believed, Onus wrote, that ‘hanging would be his eventual fate.’⁷⁵

(e), *White man’s burden*, 1979-82⁷⁶

In the next work, *White man’s burden* (1979-82)⁷⁷ Musquito is shown empowered, seated on the back of a colonial soldier, but

⁷⁰ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.2.

⁷¹ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁷² Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.2.

⁷³ Slide 15, Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series, (d), *Premonition*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁷⁴ Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (d), *Premonition* 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁷⁵ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁷⁶ Slide 15, Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series, (e), *White man’s burden*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁷⁷ Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (e), *White man’s burden*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

he at the same time a symbolic burden, representative of Aboriginal people as an obstacle to land and to colonial peace of mind. He is not depicted as victim here, but rather as energised by the land to which he belongs. This, too, is suggested by the tone of the work.

Slide 16 (a), *Dreams in the garden of allegation*, 1979-82, (b), *Escape*, 1979-82, (c), *Final journey*, 1979-82, (d), *Tegg's legacy*, 1979-82, (e), *Wanted, one rope thrower*, 1979-82⁷⁸

It is fitting that in the next work *Dreams in the garden of allegation* (1979-82),⁷⁹ Onus returns the revolutionary to the bush that is his home and where he belongs. However, the image is disturbing, for again, it is one of dream, and the revolutionary is shown seated, clothed in prison uniform. Behind him are the forms of people he allegedly killed. Onus explained that 'Musquito was troubled by accusations of murders committed by him, whilst they were committed by others – particularly convicts killing each other and blaming the natives.'⁸⁰ The figures in this work disappear into a dusky light, depicted not in the natural hues of sky, but of land. Musquito's dream is one of escape, and this is dealt with directly in the next painting of the same name.

(b), *Escape*, 1979-82⁸¹

In this work, *Escape* (1979-82),⁸² a child stands, embraced by Musquito on a windswept ridge. The latter is no longer clothed in prison uniform, but in trousers and shirt, camouflaged by leaves. The painting illustrates the artist's written description that 'Musquito, two women and a child were separated from the main group and were pursued by a patrol for several weeks prior to

⁷⁸ Slide 16, Onus, L., 'Musquito' series (a), *Dreams in the garden of allegation*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁷⁹ Onus, L., 'Musquito' series (f), *Dreams in the garden of allegation*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁸⁰ Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁸¹ Slide 16, Onus, L., 'Musquito' series (b), *Escape*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁸² Onus, L., 'Musquito' series (g), *Escape* (1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

them arriving at the last hideout.’⁸³ Here he is free, yet his liberty is temporary.

(c), *Final journey*, 1979-82⁸⁴

In *Final journey* (1979-82),⁸⁵ Onus returns to the fate of his hero once more. Musquito is contained within a frame, represented by a corridor through which we are led as he awaits execution. His confinement is also emphasized by the box-like structure that encloses him. Onus gives us the opportunity to walk the same journey of Musquito, as he walks ‘the passageway of Risdon Gaol,’⁸⁶ for in order to reach him, the viewer must travel the corridor through which he has come. Alternatively, as bystanders, we wait for the revolutionary to come to us. As he faces us, he encounters us with direct gaze, on this his final journey. Onus thus seems to be asking the viewer to make a stand with him. It is Musquito’s tragic struggle along an imaginary walking trail that we are invited to share.

(d), *Tegg’s legacy*, 1979-82⁸⁷

In the ninth work of the series, *Tegg’s legacy* (1979-82),⁸⁸ Onus returns to a story of betrayal. Musquito had been difficult to capture and ‘had escaped many times before’, so that authorities ‘employed the help of a former member of the Tame Mob, known as Tegg. They promised Tegg that if he assisted in the capture of Musquito they would give him a small blue boat’ that he could use for trading with. The Tame Mob were later known as the ‘wild mob.’⁸⁹ Tegg, tricked by White authorities into believing he would be given a boat in exchange for betraying Musquito, becomes a Judas, who reminds us that Aboriginal people too can

⁸³ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁸⁴ Slide 16. Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (c), *Final journey*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁸⁵ Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (h), *Final journey*(1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁸⁶ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁸⁷ Slide 16. Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (d), *Tegg’s legacy*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁸⁸ Onus, L., ‘*Musquito*’ series (i), *Tegg’s legacy* (1979-82), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁸⁹ Onus, ‘Musquito’, unpublished artist notes, p.2.

also betray their own. 'Just as Musquito was never granted his promised pardon and passage home, Tegg was not to get his boat. He returned to the Wild Mob very bitter and using the knowledge gained from Musquito carried on the struggle.'⁹⁰ One account has it that the government was so startled by Tegg's actions that he was eventually given a boat.⁹¹

(e), *Wanted, one rope thrower*, 1979-82⁹²

The final work in this series, entitled, *Wanted, one rope thrower* (1979-82),⁹³ was, Onus wrote, 'an appeal to Aboriginal historians to write our history from our point of view.'⁹⁴ Deprived of the hope of survival, the revolutionary now drowns in a sea of papers, symbolic of the allegations and 'legal' justification for his execution. The rope that could save him that lies on the shore, is also the instrument of his imminent death.

Summary

Onus's preoccupation with suffering and injustice can be seen in a great deal of his work. His depiction of Musquito shows his early deliberate attempt to reach the viewer's heart and transform his/her perspective. Musquito is not heroic in the sense of a hero who has conquered or overcome his enemies. He is heroic because of his struggle and heroic because of his efforts to protect and to ensure his people's survival. His heroism is the courage of a revolutionary.

Slide 17, *Where to now?*, c.1986⁹⁵

Onus was clearly coming to terms with a deepening sense of what had happened to his people. His empathy with Musquito appears to

⁹⁰ Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁹¹ There are no references to him after mid 1827. Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁹² Slide 16. Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series (e), *Wanted, one rope thrower*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm.

⁹³ Onus, L., '*Musquito*' series (j), *Wanted, one rope thrower*, 1979-82, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 161 x 74.5cm, Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne.

⁹⁴ Onus, 'Musquito', unpublished artist notes, p.3.

⁹⁵ Slide 17, Onus, L., *Where to now?*, c.1986, linocut on paper, 41.8 x 29.7cm.

have assisted in giving a stronger creative voice to feelings of profound loss and dislocation, expressed here in this linocut *Where to now?* (c.1986).⁹⁶ Here he acknowledges that those things lost – like the ‘pieces of the jigsaw’ – cannot be replaced. The jigsaw was a symbol that Onus would continue to use, for it gave voice to his need to search for things lost, and it emphasised his awareness of his personal direction. In this way it was empowering. It was, however, Onus’s encounter with Aboriginal traditions that most deeply addressed his personal need. Whereas Musquito provided Onus with a source and symbol of political strength. Onus’s cultural strengths were deepened however, by his encounter with the traditional language of the Yulungu people that enriched his sense of positive cultural resources.

Slide 18, *Arafura Swamp*, 1990⁹⁷

This encounter led to wonderful works like this one, *Arafura Swamp* (1990),⁹⁸ that deliberately dealt with an interplay of symbols representing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visual languages, presented side by side. Here, photo-realistic images of waterlilies are interspersed with rectangular fragments reminiscent of Onus’s idiosyncratic jig-saw. This large painting thus portrays the artist’s love of water, reflection and light. Gum leaves float on the water’s surface and below, the transparency reminding us of the deeper ways in which we may interact with land.

Land as subject was the source and the centre from which Onus could spiritually regenerate. Land was for him a healing medium since he related to it as a place within. Although it profoundly mattered to him that knowledge of Yorta Yorta traditional language and ceremony were lost to him, his work displays a seeking to come home and a desire to be reunited with the land as an integrative place of personal spiritual empowerment and restoration. Onus made sixteen ‘spiritual pilgrimages’ to

⁹⁶ Onus, L., *Where to now?*, (c.1986), linocut on paper, 41.8 x 29.7cm, private collection.

⁹⁷ Slide 18, Onus, L., *Arafura Swamp*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182 x 182cm.

⁹⁸ Onus, L., *Arafura Swamp*, 1990, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182 x 182cm, Ballieu Myer collection of the 1980s.

Garmedi. He established a combination of images of land in western style, with traditional symbol and story.⁹⁹ During his life, he painted and related to three 'home-countries'; the Yorta Yorta land of his father's, the Dandenong Ranges where he lived and worked, and Arnhem Land, the country that he was invited to share.

Slide 19, *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988¹⁰⁰

Onus's *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun* (1988),¹⁰¹ seated before an ochre palette with brush in hand, is a tribute to and expression of respect for the man who assisted him to set out on his healing journey. It is a compassionate portrait, with Jack depicted with a gentle, relaxed expression, surrounded by imagery belonging to his traditional country.

Slide 20, *Mum, when do we get there?*, 1989¹⁰²

What Onus called his 'spiritual pilgrimages', those family journeys to Garmedi, are symbolised in this painting entitled, *Mum, when do we get there?* (1989).¹⁰³ On a long and winding road, the artist places an endless line of question marks to refer to his eight year old son's incessant question. We too are invited to travel with the Onus family, passing along the way, a blue tongue lizard, a windmill and a plethora of grass-parrots. Jo, the artist's wife, holds out a small map and magnifying glass, responding to her son's inquiry and in acknowledgement of the fact that they have got themselves lost in the desert.

Slide 21, *Road to Redfern*, 1988¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ M. Neale, 'Urban Dingo', in Neale, ed., *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus, 1948-1996*, p.16.

¹⁰⁰ Slide 19, Onus, L., *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun*, 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182 x 182cm.

¹⁰¹ Onus, L., *Portrait of Jack Wunuwun* 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 182 x 182cm, the Holmes à Court Collection, Heytesbury.

¹⁰² Slide 20, Onus, L., *Mum, when do we get there?*, 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 183 x 183cm.

¹⁰³ Onus, L., *Mum, when do we get there?* 1989, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 183 x 183cm, Onus Estate.

¹⁰⁴ Slide 21, Onus, L., *Road to Redfern*, 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 60 x 120cm.

One feels in works like this one, *Road to Redfern* (1988),¹⁰⁵ as if the artist has come home, for his work is now strengthened, not only by the defiance of Musquito, but with a deepening consciousness of Aboriginal history as a story of survival. What I have called Onus's 'survival' paintings, such as this one, deal with his lifelong awareness of political reality and its collective challenge. The 200 year anniversary of the invasion of Australia in 1988 was a 'major turning point' in Onus's life,¹⁰⁶ when he attended the titanic, peaceful anti-bicentennial demonstration in Sydney. In this work the artist's view from his four-wheel-drive invites us to look into the rear-view mirror of his vehicle to see the long and meandering road which he has travelled.

Slide 22, *And on the Eighth Day...*, 1992¹⁰⁷

Flags and their signifying colours became a symbolic language for Onus. This is evident in *And on the Eighth Day...*(1992).¹⁰⁸ The painting was created in response to a request by Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative to create a work for display in an exhibition entitled, 'True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Raise the Flag'.¹⁰⁹ Contributing artists were asked to create a work on the subject of how they saw the British flag. Onus introduces his characteristic humour into the work, but the image is really one of serious commentary on the effect of British invasion. The colours of the Union Jack – 'red, white and blue' – signify the 'colours of death' for Onus.¹¹⁰ He painted Angels flying above Aboriginal traditional lands. Draped in union jacks, they carry the instruments of invasion. One is poised with a gun to symbolise genocide, a lamb and barbed wire coil, to represent damage to country by sheep and the division of land. The other Angel holds a bible, symbolic of bringing Christianity to Aboriginal people. In this Angel's other hand, a 'toilet duck' is

¹⁰⁵ Onus, L., *Road to Redfern* 1988, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 60 x 120cm, private collection.

¹⁰⁶ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.13.

¹⁰⁷ Slide 22, Onus, L., *And on the Eighth Day...*, 1992, synthetic polymer paint on canvas 182 x 245cm.

¹⁰⁸ Onus, L., *And on the Eighth Day...*(1992), synthetic polymer paint on canvas 182 x 245cm, Collection: Tiriki Onus.

¹⁰⁹ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.22.

¹¹⁰ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.25.

also extended, because the artist felt that the toilet duck was ‘the most useless thing ever invented by White man.’¹¹¹ These symbols of death, division of land, damage to country, Christianity and useless offerings are enclosed within an atmosphere of threat. In the sky behind, a soft light seems to emanate from the land itself, overshadowed by menacing clouds.

Slide 23, *Fences, fences, fences*, 1985¹¹²

Early works depicting his father’s country conveyed the artist’s sadness over the way the land had been divided. In *Fences, fences, fences* (1985),¹¹³ the viewer is invited to take part in an empathic appreciation of Indigenous connection with land and in the shifting emotions relating to its inaccessibility. The absence of human presence and of the existence of animal life is only broken by the arrival of two sulphur-crested cockatoos, flying low over the river’s surface.

Slide 24, *Barmah Forest*, 1994¹¹⁴

Onus returned to the theme of Barmah, his father’s country, in the final years of his life. With *Barmah Forest* (1994),¹¹⁵ it seems that the artist no longer conveys a feeling of loss, but rather, a sense of completion; however, if you look closely, the four pieces of the jigsaw do not fit. They appear as though they do not disturb the tranquility of the scene and yet they are not quite the right shape. Onus seems to ask the viewer to enter the work and to engage with it in a way that demands effort. Animal and bird life are painted within three of the ‘pieces’ and one at first feels as though Onus has truly come home, for life appears to be symbolically infused back into the land, once made so bereft by the devastation of invasion. Traditional knowledge gained by the gift of Yulungu cultural heritage is conveyed in the details of the painted tortoise

¹¹¹ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.25.

¹¹² Slide 23, Onus, L., *Fences, fences, fences*, 1985, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 165cm.

¹¹³ Onus, L., *Fences, fences, fences* (1985), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 120 x 165cm, private collection.

¹¹⁴ Slide 24, Onus, L., *Barmah Forest*, 1994, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 183 x 244cm.

¹¹⁵ Onus, L., *Barmah Forest* (1994), synthetic polymer paint on linen, 183 x 244cm, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra.

and fish. The harmony within the composition – the light, the depth and the symmetry – communicates a sense of the living energy and lifeblood of land, for it is land that no longer appears to contain an absence, but rather, a vitality. However, it is also land where something is still wanting, symbolic of Onus's early acknowledgement that those things lost cannot be returned. Changes to the land in the form of 'farms, tourists, carp, and cows', gave Onus a sense of the impossibility of attempting to 'retrieve' all that was 'once present' in his father's country.¹¹⁶ His healing had to necessarily involve a coming to terms with deep sadness over this fact.

Slide 25, *Kaptn Koori*, 1985¹¹⁷

Something else that was always deeply healing and a relief from the seriousness of Aboriginal 'survival' issues, was the theme of humour in so much of Onus's work. His delight in the comic was evident in his interest in comic strip art, seen here in this work *Kaptn Koori*, 1991,¹¹⁸ made for his five year old son to provide the boy with an Aboriginal cartoon hero.

Slide 26, *Fruit bats*, 1991¹¹⁹

Humour emerged in sculptural installations like this well-known piece, where ninety-five painted fibreglass bats, made for fun, hang upside on a Hill's Hoist.¹²⁰ The ability to make humour a vehicle of transcendence over suffering and part of the everyday was important to Onus. Aboriginal cultural strengths which include an ability to 'laugh in the face of adversity', was something Onus saw as an essential part of 'ensuring the survival of an oppressed people'.¹²¹

Slide 27, *Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a*

¹¹⁶ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.26.

¹¹⁷ Slide 25, Onus, L., *Kaptn Koori*, 1985, gouache and ink on illustration board, 67 x 44cm.

¹¹⁸ Onus, L., *Kaptn Koori*, 1985, gouache and ink on illustration board, 67 x 44cm, collection: Tiriki Onus.

¹¹⁹ Slide 26, Onus, L., *Fruit bats*, 1991, installation: 95 fibreglass polychromed bats, polychromed wooden disks, Hills hoist, 250 x 250 x 250cm (installed).

¹²⁰ An Australian clothes line.

¹²¹ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.20.

minute, 1992¹²²

Something else that was very important in the artist's journey, was his collaborative work with other artists. His artist mate, Michael Eather, symbolised here by the sting-ray, travels with him on the famous¹²³ Japanese Hokusai wave.¹²⁴ Hokusai, a renowned Japanese printmaker of the nineteenth century, created a series of woodblock prints, on the subject of Mt Fuji – this famous wave featuring in one – where humankind was represented by 'mariners in their coasting boats, hanging on desperately' under the might of the great wave.¹²⁵ Here Onus, the 'urban' dingo, is presumably saying to his wife, Jo, the words which give title to the work, *Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a minute, 1992*. Unlike the unfortunate Hokusai mariners, the dingo and sting-ray are in control.

Slide 28, Goannas in wheelbarrow, 1996¹²⁶

Onus's final work depicting a wheelbarrow full of goannas was a fitting, parting creative message of transformation. Born from an earlier idea relating to feelings of disillusionment with the art

¹²² Slide 27, Onus, L., *Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a minute, 1992*, gouache on illustration board, 50 x 38cm.

¹²³ Hokusai's painting was '...quite possibly the most famous image in Japanese art, ever since it aroused the astonished admiration of the impressionists at the end of the nineteenth century, and inspired Debussy's composition *La Mer*.' J. Bennett, 'The Nineteenth century until the Meiji Restoration', in *Ukiyo-e to Shin hansa: The Art of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, edited by Newland A. and Uhlenbeck C. (London: Bison Books, 1990), p.149.

¹²⁴ Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*, from the series, '36 views of Mt Fuji' (Fugaku Sanj rokkei), 1831, 9 x 14 inches, (25x37.1 cm). Published by Nishimura Eijud. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Bennett, 'The Nineteenth century until the Meiji Restoration', in *Ukiyo-e to Shin hansa: The Art of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, p.148.

¹²⁵ In the original Hokusai work, 'mankind is represented by the unfortunate mariners in their coasting boats, hanging on desperately as the vessels are flung around like matches. The sacred mountain appears in the distance like a minor wave among greater, the use of the low eye-level demonstrating assured grasp of western perspective in a work which some might see as entirely exotic and Japanese.' Bennett, 'The Nineteenth century until the Meiji Restoration', in *Ukiyo-e to Shin hansa: The Art of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, p.149.

¹²⁶ Slide 28, Onus, L., *Goannas in wheelbarrow, 1996*, installation: fibreglass, synthetic polymer paint, wheelbarrow, 70 x 137 x 84cm (installed).

world, and the sense that ‘working in Aboriginal art [was] like trying to push a wheelbarrow full of goannas uphill!’, Onus transformed his problem into light-hearted fun.¹²⁷

Summary

Onus’s journey was a journey of healing the grief he had experienced as a consequence of cultural loss. It involved his moving personal discovery of revolutionaries like Musquito, and an active seeking to realise his place in the context of Australian histories, encouraged by the experience of being welcomed into the Yulungu world.

MY WORK

Slide 29, *Alitji and her sister were playing*, 1992¹²⁸

My own art has involved a strong interest in themes of growth and land. I have always drawn on the inner world of my imagination. Unlike Lin I have not grown up with a sense of inner void as a consequence of cultural losses, but I have experienced grief over such losses. Because of colonising processes, I did not have access to my people’s language or to traditional ceremonies. In 1997 however, I was shown the Indigenous collections of Museum Victoria and I had a life-changing experience, when I encountered for the first time, a Gamileroi – my own people – traditional cultural object. It was a carved wooden shield, made in the mid-nineteenth century, in the distinct shape of a gum-leaf, a symbol I have used often in my work. The shape of the object amazed me, but what really took my breath away was the small, incised line-work on the shield, surrounding a symbolic image of a goanna. The shield had line that was exactly like the line that I use in my own painting. I had been, for years, unknowingly painting in a linear style that was traditional to my people. I had thought, prior to seeing this shield that the way I use line was stylistically unique. In many ways, this experience was healing, for it confirmed that cultural things, some things lost, may not be

¹²⁷ J. Onus and T. Onus, *Lin Onus: Chronology*, unpublished manuscript, p.28.

¹²⁸ Slide 29, Leslie, D., *Alitji and her sister were playing*, 1992, watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

lost at all. My interest in journeys of change and transformation is symbolised in a great deal of my work, but a series of thirty-three works I created nine years ago are particularly relevant here.

Alitji in Dreamland is an illustrated version of *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1975. Alice of course, is a nineteenth century work by Lewis Carroll, first published in 1865. This classic English story was rewritten by Nancy Sheppard, as a cross-cultural gift, especially for Pitjantjatjara children, translated into their language and published as a bilingual text. Nancy placed Alice, whom she called Alitji, into an Australian context in order to make the story more culturally relevant to Aboriginal children. The book was thus intended as a cross-cultural bridge. When it was republished in 1992, with my illustrations, *Alitji* became the 44th translation of *Alice in Wonderland*.

The significance of illustrating an English story was not as some may expect, problematic for me, for I relate to *Alice* as a universal story that transcends cultural barriers. While I think it is vital to preserve the cultural integrity of things, cross-cultural expressions like this one, are something that I believe we all need. I think we need to make the distinction between assimilating experiences that are destructive to people and to their traditions and assimilating experiences that are not about destruction or infringement, but about cross-cultural sharing and respectful attempts to bridge the cultural gap. For it is these experiences that can be healing and which can operate as transcendent opportunities that incorporate change and adjustment to other perspectives. Further meanings in relation to *Alitji* have come to me retrospectively after the time I was creating the paintings, reflecting the intuitive nature of the way I work. Although *Alice/Alitji* is a book loved by people of all ages, I was very aware of the child audience for this book. For me, what is attractive about this classic is the theme of change and transformation and the constant viewing of things from different perspectives.

I will now show you eight works from this series before I conclude.

The story begins with Alitji and her sister playing in a creek-bed. Nancy chose to present the White Rabbit as a white kangaroo,

who hops by and disappears into a hole in the ground.¹²⁹ At this point in the story, as in *Alice*, Alitji has already fallen into her dream.

Slide 30, *Alitji fell for a very long time*, 1992¹³⁰

Following the White Kangaroo, she enters a hole in the ground and finds herself falling for a very long time until she lands suddenly in a heap of dry leaves.¹³¹

Slide 31, *Alitji was so small*, 1992¹³²

As in the classic *Alice*, Alitji finds that when she eats or drinks something she changes her size. Here, after noticing a dilly-bag lying nearby, she enters to find yams inside.¹³³ Her transformation has provided her with the opportunity to explore and discover the contents of the dilly-bag, which seems somehow a metaphor for life.

Slide 32, *After eating the yams Alitji grew so big*, 1992¹³⁴

And Alitji did indeed begin to grow after eating the yams. She grew so big that her head hit the roof of the cave and she began to cry. Later she would fall into her own pool of tears below, then shrink to the size of a flower and continue on her dream-journey.¹³⁵

Slide 33, *Alitji filled the wurlie completely*, 1992¹³⁶

¹²⁹ N. Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland (Alitjinya Ngura Tjukurmankuntjala)*, an adaptation and Pitjantjatjara translation of Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*, (Simon and Schuster, Australia, 1992, p.1.

¹³⁰ Slide 30, Leslie, D., *Alitji fell for a very long time*, 1992, watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹³¹ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, 1992, p.2.

¹³² Slide 31, Leslie, D., *Alitji was so small*, 1992, watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹³³ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, 1992, p.6.

¹³⁴ Slide 32, Leslie, D., *After eating the yams Alitji grew so big*, 1992, watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹³⁵ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, 1992, p.9.

¹³⁶ Slide 33, Leslie, D., *Alitji filled the wurlie completely*, (1992) watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

In one scene she comes across a wurlie, or dwelling which she enters, only to find that she begins to grow after drinking something. She grows so large that her body fills the entire wurlie. Animals surround her and begin to throw stones. As they fall they turn into honey-ants and swallowing the liquid from one, Alitji begins to shrink.¹³⁷

Slide 34, *Alitji gazed up into a tree and saw*, 1992¹³⁸

Later on her journey, now small again, Alitji meets a large witchety grub, to whom she turns for advice on the problem of what to do about her changing. The grub asks her to explain who she is. ‘‘I don’t know’’, she answers, ‘‘This morning when I got up I was Alitji, but I’ve been changed several times since then.... You see, I’m not myself...I can’t make it clearer, I can scarcely understand it myself, I’m quite lost from changing so often.’’¹³⁹

Slide 35, *Looking up, Alitji was startled to see the wild cat*, 1992¹⁴⁰

On Alitji’s journey she finds herself standing beneath a corkwood tree and looking up, is startled to see a wild cat sitting on a branch, (the substitution for the famous Cheshire cat of the English story). ‘It was grinning down at her and she thought it seemed good-natured, but it’s claws were very long and it had a great many teeth, so she prudently kept her distance, and said, ‘‘Cat, which way ought I go from here?’’

‘‘It depends where you want to get to,’’ the Wild Cat answered.

‘‘I don’t think I know,’’ Alitji said.

‘‘Well then, go whichever way you like.’’

‘‘But where would I arrive?’’ Alitji asked.’¹⁴¹

Perhaps this is the case for us all in relation to cross-cultural

¹³⁷ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, (1992) p.36.

¹³⁸ Slide 34, Leslie, D., *Alitji gazed up into a tree and saw*, (1992) watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹³⁹ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, (1992) p.39.

¹⁴⁰ Slide 35, Leslie, D., *Looking up, Alitji was startled to see the wild cat*, (1992) watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹⁴¹ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, (1992) p.55.

understandings. Our personal and collective direction is largely dependent upon the decisions we make on our own journey.

Slide 36, *Alitji woke up to find that it had all been a strange dream*, 1992¹⁴²

And of course as we all know, Alitji/Alice, goes off to experience other adventures before waking up to find it was all a dream. “Wake up, little sister,” she said to Alitji as she gently brushed away some fallen leaves that had fluttered down from the river gum upon Alitji’s face. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, I’ve had such a strange dream!” Alitji said. And she began to tell her sister all the strange adventures she had been dreaming about.¹⁴³

Conclusion

The inside and outside experience of art is in a way like Alitji’s journey. It is a story of transformation and of a world that the viewer can enter if willing to look at life from a different perspective and so be changed and healed by it.

The creators of *Another View Walking Trail*, wanted to show people that art could be a medium for transformation. It could act as a guide into the unknown and prompt the viewer to revise and to reconsider other perspectives. It could heal by this process and by cross-cultural encounter. Such healing would not necessarily mean a smooth road. Even the censorship struggle related to this work and our knowledge of it, can deepen our sense of the cross-cultural issues involved. It reminds us, too, of the strong feelings that are still current and that history is part of our present.

Lin Onus’s work provides us with a vision of a personal struggle and a kind of transcendence that comes from that struggle through imagery that symbolises a journey and coming to terms with cultural realities existing side by side. Onus wanted to bridge the cultural divide and his paintings and sculpture stand as testimony

¹⁴² Slide 36, Leslie, D., *Alitji woke up to find that it had all been a strange dream*, 1992, watercolour, ink, gouache on paper, 42 x 53cm (approx).

¹⁴³ Sheppard, *Alitji in Dreamland*, (1992) p.99.

to this. Humour was a source of strength and a vehicle for lightening the seriousness of the issues he dealt with in his work. He had journeyed far before his return to his father's Yorta Yorta country. In a sense Onus's art is about belonging. It is about knowing oneself and 'having a sense of place.'¹⁴⁴

My own work is about imaginary journeying and the thrill of it for me is that it has the power of transformation, for to celebrate life is to celebrate change and to change, I think, we need to be prepared to be transformed, and art can help us do that. Such change can also be healing. Alitji shows us that to grow is to encounter the unfamiliar, including the unfamiliar in ourselves. She responds to change with surprise and at times distress; and personal effort, as well as questioning that is required to reach out to others and to understand herself and the new world she finds herself in. She explores and her exploration, although certainly not without its own concerns, is overall always an adventure.

The work of many artists today is about personal and collective journey. It can also be interpreted as a symbolic place of healing, for art, like healing, is a process related to the relief of pain, since it can transform our sufferings. It is also an opportunity to engage with certain experiences that are most relevant to us. Aboriginal works that portray another perspective of our history are often about differing emphases on remembrance. The Aboriginal emphasis has been on the experiential nature of suffering and on grieving. Healing in this context, has involved the need for recognition, and sharing across cultural divides.

The themes of Aboriginal artists are themes that we all share, for they are themes about change and adjustments and incorporation. Art can function as a symbolic dwelling into which we may enter. It can provide us all, in a sense, with a kind of freedom and sanctuary. Sometimes it can also be an uncomfortable place, which we may visit, but not choose to dwell in for too long. It can evoke uneasiness. It can even seem to do harm, but often art that works in this way, does not evoke discomfort as an end in itself. Rather it functions as a plea to incorporate something into our life to help us understand it differently. Engagement with art that works for us in this way can be life transforming, since it

¹⁴⁴ Onus, interview, (January, 1995).

SIGHS TOO DEEP FOR TEARS

becomes a feeling language in which we can all share, transcending barriers and symbolising our common humanity. Like sighs – or ‘thoughts’ – that lie too deep for tears, the feeling language of art is a binding force that connects us all.