Koorah Coolingah—Children Long Ago: Art from the Stolen Generation of Australia

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Recently, artwork of child artists from the Carrolup settlement school in Western Australia was rediscovered in the archives of the Picker Art Gallery at Colgate University. The young artists were among what was then called the half-caste children and now known as the Stolen Generation. Between the late 1800s and mid 1970s the Australian government forcibly removed children from their families with the purpose of not only assimilating them into European culture, but also eliminating Aboriginal culture. With the support of a dedicated new headmaster and teacher Noel White (1946-1951), a group of male children became proficient artists. Through the efforts of Florence Rutter, who later co-authored the book Child Artists of the Australian Bush (Miller & Rutter, 1952), the children became internationally known. Tragically leading short and sometimes violent lives, most of the children went on to menial jobs. Their style, however, has remained an enduring influence on the local artists of southwestern Australia.

“It was a little brief spark that lit for them … glowed for awhile and then died out.”

—Patsy Millet

In 2005, A New York Times article announced a remarkable “rediscovery” of children’s artwork at the Picker Art Gallery located at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. Ninety-one drawings, several with work on both sides to total 113, were found in a box that was stored for almost 50 years and simply identified as “Aboriginal Art?” with a question mark. Colgate’s guest lecturer, Howard Morphy, Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University, described the encounter, “I took the lid off this box and I saw the drawing, a beautiful pastel drawing, and I immediately thought: Carrolup. I just leapt for joy” (O’Keefe, 2005). Morphy and his colleagues had been searching for this collection for 20 years with no result, and its rediscovery brings to light a story that will not be silenced. The young Aboriginal artists made sure that it would not, for in their drawings they document the loss of land, speech, and culture owned by a people for 40,000 years. The conditions under which such arresting work was made—and the international response to them—bring new questions about the power of cultural forms of representation. Making art not only helped the Carrolup artists to survive the death of their culture, but they also unwittingly become the cause of its current rebirth. They, like other Aboriginal artists, put the supposedly uninscribed territory on the world map, which thus makes them visible and understandable within our own epistemological frameworks (Grossman, 2006). Because of the overwhelming lack of agency in determining their own future, Aboriginal self-
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consciousness and self-representation are considered inherently political acts of resistance (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). They may not necessarily be explicit or intentional, as indeed the children’s works are not.

This article describes the enduring battle Aborigines face in attempts to create “meaning, knowledges and living traditions” (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, p. 128) under conditions not of their choosing. The battle is described through the story of a group of male children of the Stolen Generation2 from the Carrolup Native Settlement near Katanning in the southwest of Western Australia. Carrolup was one of 60 government settlements and missions operating between the late 1800s and mid 1970s that forcibly segregated young children, not only from the white social structure, but also from their own families, while purporting to offer them greater opportunities in that same society. Under these compelling conditions, the children made artworks that continue to mystify. It is this unusual art and the unusual circumstances of cultural genocide in 20th-century Australia that are inextricably connected in this story.

Colgate’s Collection of the Carrolup Artists

Colgate Alumn Herbert Mayer gifted the collection to the Picker Art Gallery in 1966. Mayer bought the work from Florence Rutter, the British benefactor who promoted the children’s work in Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The collection came with little documentation other than that found in Mary Durack Miller and Florence Rutter’s (1952) Child Artists of the Australian Bush which had been long out of print. The book was written to tell Australians about a group of approximately 15 “half-caste”3 Noongar, boys of the Stolen Generation who were betrayed by a society which was at best indifferent and at worst cruel.

The drawings found at Colgate once toured throughout Europe and Australia and were reproduced in Durack Miller and Rutter’s book. A much larger collection is owned by the Berndt Museum of Anthropology in Australia; others are still in private hands, of which many have yet to be identified. With this rediscovery, what might have remained a regional story has in the last 2 years become the locus of an international conversation.

As a result, critics, curators, and anthropologists have offered their theories. First, as Noongar people, the children’s inextricability with the land is also the cause of their prodigious power of observation resulting in highly accomplished landscape art. Few theories adequately explain how the children developed their work. For example, Howard Morphy (February 2007, personal communication) theorizes that the quality of the work lies in the fact that a group of children learned the skills associated with hand/eye coordination and a great familiarity with that landscape that enabled them to get a head start in reproducing it. However reasonable this explanation might sound, it is not sufficient. I suggest that the children’s knowledge of the land is beyond logic because it arises from an oral people who perceive the world as inextricable with the self.

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2 According to Anna Haebich (2002), “the term (Stolen Generation) remains problematic. Some people believe it is emotive and misleading. They claim that Aboriginal children were only removed to save them from conditions of neglect. They explain that while removals may be abhorrent to us now, they reflected practices of the time. The former Howard government encouraged Australians to walk away from the term.”

The former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, John Herron, told a Federal parliamentary inquiry that it was a misnomer, that there never was a stolen generation.” On February 13, 2008 the newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made a public apology to the Stolen Generation.

3 “Half-caste” is now considered a pejorative term. The term “mixed descent” is preferred. Noongar is also spelled Nyungar and Nyoongar, the word for “man.” The spelling “Noongar” seems to be preferred by the community at this time.

The spelling “Nyungar” seems to be preferred by the community at this time.
The unusual severity of their lives in a white dominant Australia is also an important consideration in forming theories about the nature of the work. Carrolup, and institutions like it, kept children contained in substandard housing, fed ill-nourishing food, barely clothed or bathed, subjected to physical labor, exposed to disease, and “educated” by untrained and mostly hostile teachers. Children endured institutional life until the age of 14, at which time they would be turned out with nothing more than a few dollars and a new set of clothes. Cut off from family, tradition, society, and love, the lives of many Aboriginal men led to prison, alcoholism, and early death (Stanton, 1992). This fate was sadly true for the promising young Carrolup artists.

The Intrusion of White Culture and the Authenticity Debate

Aboriginal anthropologist Marcia Langton (2003) theorizes that when non-Indigenous people talk about authenticity they mean “authentically primitive” (p. 87). In this light, in-authenticity might mean “part aboriginal” or “insufficiently primitive,” which implies that the artist is self-conscious or even political (p. 87). These notions give way to what Langton calls “boundary policing.” In order to be authentically primitive, an artist would need to be “quarantined in remote Aboriginal lands, untouched by media, education, health services, satellites, and above all, uncontaminated by reputable, honest art dealers and access to legal advice” (p. 87).

To the consternation of Indigenous artists and several Indigenous and non-Indigenous curators, the artwork of the Carrolup children is often not considered “authentic” by the public who expect to see the bark paintings from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory which began to flourish in the 1950s and the Central Desert Papunya Tula “dot paintings” which emerged in the 1970s. Both locations remained remote from white incursions longer than did the southwest, and their “pure” and impermanent work in sand and on trees intrigued the 20th-century century colonists. Their permanent incarnations of canvas and acrylic paint are products of white Australian advisers and have become widely appropriated in the tourist market. Critics such as Colin Rhodes (March 2007, personal communication) suggest that it was for this market that the work was originally intended.

Durack Miller’s daughter, Patsy Millet, describes the Carrolup children as seeing little, if anything, of the artwork produced in the southwest where traditional work remained ephemeral and, for the most part, undocumented. Paint and paper were unknown for pre-contact Aboriginal “artists,” and the majority of what Westerners define as art was drawn on sand or painted on bodies. The more permanent work was carved into rock. Unlike the better known locations of the Northern Territory and Central Desert in which the introduction of white culture was gradual, the southwest intrusion was sudden and complete. Their traditional forms and images did not survive. Rather, the children’s landscapes ushered in a distinctively hybrid iconography.

4 The arts were not a significant part of the lives of the Noongars, as it was in other areas of Australia, most notably its Center. However, the Carrolup art of the late 1940s and early 1950s was the first art made by Aborigines to gain international notice. As John Stanton points out, “it was another two decades before the emergence of Central Australia’s Papunya dot painting tradition, often cited as the starting point for a contemporary Aboriginal art industry” (cited in Laurie, 2006).
Their culture was pretty well cut right away from them. So there was very little hope that they would start making complicated dot pictures. That wasn’t of the southwest anyway. They weren’t going to do that, and they hadn’t seen any of that. And the artwork that actually survived from the southwest is very, very thin on the ground. But people say it’s not Indigenous artwork, it’s artwork that could be done by anybody. It doesn’t show any sign that it had been done by Aborigines. You have to take that into account. (P. Millet, May 2007, personal communication)

Michele Grossman’s (2006) description of the colonial introduction of writing and textuality to Indigenous people as not only a form, but also as a political and cultural event, is applicable to the introduction of drawing materials which led to the children’s works on paper. She suggests that this new form disrupts Aboriginal ways of viewing and being in the world:

By introducing new ways of organizing meaning and knowledge that would subsequently be taken up in varying ways and degrees by Aboriginal peoples themselves…. The historical introduction of writing to Aboriginal societies is thus a form of what Gayatri Spivak terms “epistemic violence” (1988), insinuating an invasive order of knowledge, classification and value that attempts to transform Aboriginal consciousness both through suppressing and

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Figure 1. *A Native Corroboree*. Artist, Reynold Hart. Pastel. Courtesy of Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University.
marginalising its previously *analphabète* systems of meaning and by re-shaping the ways in which Aboriginal peoples come to know and relate to themselves, to each other and to settler colonialism. (p. 1)

The introduction of Western materials was the result of colonial influences, and particularly, the white art advisors who saw the possibility of marketability in permanency. The Carrolup children capitalized on these new materials to record what they saw in the present as well as a past they imagined and to which they desired to return. Like the art of the incarcerated, the children reached beyond the fences that confined them against their will. Several drawings show Noongars in ritual paint, hunting or dancing by the campfire, celebrating the disappearing world of Corroborees (traditional Noongar dances and ceremonies) performed at the outskirts of the Carrolup settlement where parents camped and waited for furtive visits from their children.

**Research Methodology**

**The Purpose of the Research**

The nature of this research is complex in terms of Noongar identity, culture, and the subject positioning of the artists of the Carrolup Native Settlement. Their artworks defy the theories and expectations that adults have held—and often continue to hold—for children. While conceived in the artistic vocabulary of the “white man,” they defiantly transcend that vocabulary and, therefore, demand that they be understood: to learn the back story of the artists who made them. Upon viewing the Colgate collection, I anticipated that the way the children arrived at this work would bring a much needed perspective to art education.

**Research Questions**

First, I asked how Noongar people see, observe, and make meaning from the land. A Noongar artist said, “When we go into the bush we see something entirely different from a non-Indigenous person.” This ability to “see” the land might be responsible for their preternatural ability to record it. Then, I asked how the canvas became a replacement for the land which has been lost, enabling a new generation of artists to create skilled works with a minimum of formal training. How did the self-taught Carrolup inmates create a sophisticated and coherent art movement under brutal conditions? How do non-Indigenous viewers understand and appreciate the many levels of knowing, meaning, emotion, and spirituality that are embedded in these works? Finally, how do non-Indigenous people position themselves in light of the appalling history of the forcible removal of Indigenous children? I found most answers to be understandably insufficient considering Australia’s complex social network.

In light of the loss of land, the inability to inhabit it at their will, and the children’s use of adopted materials and iconography, I asked whether these images were pictures of resistance or collusion in the terms used by Grossman (2006). The ambiguousness of resistance and collusion is described in Grossman’s essay “When They Write What We Read” in which
she analyzes Gladys Gilligan’s composition, “The Settlement,” a child’s essay about the Moore River Settlement. Gilligan was A.O. Neville’s (Chief Protector of Aborigines) poster child, who writes in the adopted language of her white teachers. Her essay reads as a deceptively simple narrative yet, on further inspection, the reader becomes aware of a sly commentary embedded within.

In 2007 I asked Grossman whether the Carrolup children were like the well-spoken Gilligan who wrote benignly and articulately about the goodness of the settlements (Maushart, 2003). Was the Carrolup artwork a visual counterpart to aboriginal autobiography and life-writing? Within the seemingly collusive writing lay a subtle resistance with which the Carrolup drawings have a similar effect. An initial reading of the drawings suggests that they are made by skilled adolescents. However, the boys also prove to be skilled in the subtle reclamation of their ground by populating the landscape with grass trees, also known as “black boys,” a presence which, by proxy, allows the young artists to act upon the land itself. While drawn in a recognizably Western style, the work suggests nostalgia for pre-contact Australia. Grossman suggests that the style of the paintings is also worth noting because of the way in which the artists draw on, but also revise, Western art traditions and genres. Again, like Gilligan’s composition, they do not announce themselves as distinctively “Indigenous” in the way that Indigenous art has subsequently come to be known and understood (M. Grossman, March 2007, personal communication).

**Methods**

My questions led me to Western Australia to meet with the descendants of the children as well as the Noongar artists who have been inspired by the child artists and initiated a landscape genre called the “Carrolup Style.” The research was thus qualitative and employed an emphasis on collaboration, transparency, and negotiation in its methods and approaches. In this context, I was able to weave the perspectives of Indigenous family members, Indigenous and white artists, curators, critics, historians, gallery and museum staff, academics, and educators. My methodology was primarily based on conducting interviews. The Indigenous interviewees had either experienced displacement as a result of government policies and/or were artists who have been inspired by the Carrolup children. Finally, I cross-referenced the data from each group described above, particularly those of the two groups (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) for overlapping ideas and concepts.

The following paragraphs present a historical and critical analysis of the morals and politics of Western Australia as a backdrop for the brief years in which the children were making art at the Carrolup Settlement.

**Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land**

The Carrolup and nearby Moore River Settlements, like other Aboriginal missions and reserves overseen by the state in the first half of the 20th century, were emblematic of a darker purpose: the explicit suppression of,
and contempt for, traditional Indigenous cultures—their languages, material culture, history, social and kin networks, and cosmologies. The colonizing impulse in Australia, for which the doctrine of *terra nullius* was the iconic expression, sought to evacuate Aboriginal presence from the landscape, to render the land void of meaning and, in particular, devoid of Indigenous presence; the people, artifacts, and other material/cultural/social traces, especially those that suggested an ongoing connection with inhabitation of the land rather than an instance of “pastness” (M. Grossman, April 2007, personal communication). The erasure of historical processes from the point of view of Aboriginal knowing continues to perpetuate the myth of *terra nullius* and the real connection between white domination and representation (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Contemporary Aboriginal cultural practices seek to resist misrepresentation by reclaiming its knowledge of and connection to the landscape.

Aboriginal art and artifacts were perceived by 19th-century colonists as iconic objects of early human life. They were collected as exotic souvenirs and delivered to the homeland as emblems of its greatness. To this day, the myth of the “Stone Age” Aboriginal artist continues to recirculate throughout Australia, albeit in ways that support the multicultural agenda of the “new” Australia (Langton, 2003). Quite a few white Australians continue to conceive 21st-century artists as fossilized products of a frozen past. But the products which were once strictly considered ethnological artifacts are now housed in modern and tasteful museums, hygienically separated, however, from white art. The architecture of the museum is an ever-present reminder, says Aboriginal anthropologist Marcia Langton, of the settler state and the isolated positioning of Aboriginal art within it as a metaphor of colonial mastery:

It is a new version of the museum fossils that earlier audiences gawped at in order to be reassured of the march of evolution in which they represented, naturally, the pinnacle…. Whiteness was defined by the early colonists in opposition to these works of the lowest levels of human evolution. (p. 83)

The persistence of colonialist and imperialist practices not only in the arts, but also in all forms of Aboriginal representation, makes the use of the term “post-colonial” suspect (Langton, 2003). Current discourses, therefore, are located around the effects of colonial representation of Aboriginality as it developed under the project of Western imperialism in a mutual engagement of power and knowledge versus appropriate self-representation by developing arguments and analyses of Western ways of knowing (Anderson, 2003). The absoluteness of false representation affects every aspect of the Aborigine’s experience of his/her own Aboriginality (Dodson, 2003).

In 1972, the United Nations (UN) Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities examined discrimination of the world’s Indigenous peoples. “Objective criteria” of Indigeneity, conceived by the dominant culture, were used as “ideological tools designed to assist
the state in applying its policies of control, domination and assimilation” (Dodson, 2003, p. 29). Aboriginality was described in the loaded language of deficit:

By our lack, we provided proof of their abundance and the achievements of ‘progress’; by our inferiority, we proved their superiority; by our moral and intellectual poverty, we proved that they were indeed the paragons of humanity, products of millennia of development. (p. 36)

Historically, Aboriginality was defined by the Australian government in terms of proportions of blood (Dodson, 2003). This definition served the colonized state’s need to define the modern in opposition to the “primitive,” to justify progress and superiority, to justify racist ideology and policies, which meant controlling, managing, and assimilating Indigenous cultures (Dodson, 2003). Because the Aborigine is defined in a comparison with non-Indigenous peoples, Aborigines are unable to experience a mutual relationship with them, “because a relationship requires two, not just one and its mirror” (p. 37). From a non-white position, white implies the color of the human race, an invisible signifier against which other ethnicities are examined (Dyer, 1997).

As a result of the UN study, Indigeneity must be defined according to the Indigenous perception and conception of itself. Self-definition, with its implicit self-determination, is bestowed by international law to all peoples and integral to determining the group’s economic, social, and cultural development. However, as Mick Dodson, Chair of the Australian National University’s Institute for Indigenous Australia, insightfully points out, the old definitions remain as enduring constructs despite their illegality. They can be neither censored nor eliminated and, therefore, need to be understood as mutually constructed by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal peoples. Race, whiteness, and coloniality, “each provide the means for the other to exist, to construct and act on the world” (Tascon, 2005, p. 242).

The Genesis of The Carrolup Native Settlement

The notion that art and the Stolen Generation might be spoken in the same breath is also a surprising discovery to the historians, anthropologists, and sociologists who know the cruel history of forcible removal of children of mixed descent. The official government policy in Australia from the 1920s to the 1940s, specifically in Western Australia, was to breed out the black—breed them white (Manne, 2001). After World War II, the government was incumbent to change its rationale from “breeding out” to “assimilation” so as not to risk comparison with German extermination policies (Manne, 2001). The young artists at Carrolup were products of the new government assimilationist policies. The pretext for this Draconian system was to give the “half-caste” children a better future. While this notion is difficult to understand today, many colonists believed they were saving a primitive race. To this end, the Aborigines Department was established in 1897 with two employed on its staff: the Chief Protector and a traveling
inspector. It was formed to supervise all matters affecting Aborigines in Western Australia (Haebich, 1988). From birth to death, the life of a “half-caste” was controlled by the Chief Protector.

The mixing of races posed to early colonists a most vexing problem since the “half-caste” population was believed to inherit the worst characteristics of both races (Dafler, 2005). Acknowledged as half-British, the white population felt a responsibility to “save them” from their black mothers who were unilaterally considered by law to be unfit (Maushart, 2003). The only solution was to separate them, and in the language of the day, “breed them” with whites.

In 1905, Western Australia introduced the Aborigines Act⁸ which remained the framework for Aboriginal policy during the first half of the century. The purpose of the Chief Protector of the Aborigines Department was ostensibly to protect and care for its Aboriginal inhabitants. In reality, it set the precedent for under-funding and failed policies. As Paul Biskup (1973) says, they didn’t want to be protected, they wanted to be equal. It also prohibited areas as unlawful for Aborigines and half-castes not in lawful employment (Haebich, 1988). By 1909, Katanning became the site of racial tension (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2004), and the Noongars were moved from the land and onto fringe camps which quickly became slums. By the late 19th century the majority of inhabitants were of mixed descent, and the original culture on its way to extinction.

In January 1915, after more complaints from their white neighbors, the police uprooted the entire population of Katanning Aborigines to Carrolup Native Settlement (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2004). The settlements became holding stations. Expectations were low and the status quo would not be interrupted easily, particularly by a group of talented boys who far exceeded the standards of their white peers. Therefore, the government rationale was that training other than for future menial employment was a waste of time.

With no standards or accountability, the Chief Protector’s use of legal guardianship for children under the age of 16 was at best arbitrary. Aboriginal parents were forbidden contact with their children who were often told that their parents abandoned them or were dead (Haebich, 2002). In truth, letters from parents poured into the Aborigines Department begging the Chief Protector to release their children. Many children believed the lies and would never forgive their parents (S. Hill, May 2007, personal communication).

A series of indifferent and neglectful teachers perpetuated Carrolup’s reputation as an outcast among outcasts until Noel White was appointed in 1945. Millet describes the previous teachers as “standardly unimaginative.” White abandoned the curriculum and took the children for walks in the bush. Back in the classroom, he asked the boys to reflect and write about what they had seen. Without White’s prompting, a few boys unexpectedly

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⁸ The 1905 Aborigines Act of Western Australia managed the reserves with medical care, rations, and employment. The police “protected” the reserves and enforced rules that affected every aspect of the Aborigines’ lives. Today, the Act stands as the literal and symbolic beginning of systematic dispossession.
drew expert representations of animals and plants. When asked if he influenced the boys, White said,

“Certainly I did! I influenced them to use the eyes in their heads. Sometimes I would take them back and back to the same place, even to the same tree, to see how things looked at different times of the day, in different lights. When they made their first tentative sketches of trees I would encourage them but I would suggest also that we went for another walk to find out more about the way branches grew from trunks and how foliage masses looked against the sky.” (Durack Miller & Rutter, 1952, p. 44)

Rutter (1950) wrote *Little Black Fingers* as her history of finding the children while forming a Soroptimist Club in Perth—the counterpart to the men’s Rotary. A promising relationship began between Rutter and White.

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9 The book was originally meant to catalogue the children’s work and further their publicity. Patsy Millet calls the title “a shocking piece of patronization,” and it certainly sounds so. However, there is another reason for this unfortunate title. They “became known as ‘little black fingers’ pictures because of the sooty finger marks left on the paper by children working by candlelight” (Hoy, 2005).

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**Figure 3. Possum (Animal description).**

Artist, Revel Cooper. Graphite, ink, and Crayon. c 1945-1953. 56.2 x 38 cm. Courtesy of Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University.
As an outsider, she was unaware of the “bewildering maze of contradiction” that lay ahead and foiled all attempts to carve out a new future for them (Durack Miller & Rutter, 1952, p. 15). Rutter hoped to establish an art and vocational school, funded with the money from the sale of their work, as professional preparation after their “graduation.” But with the sudden closing of Carrolup in 1951, all plans evaporated. The children were sent to jobs in cities in continued separation from their families.

The Development of Iconography

Protests were heard the moment that the children's artwork was moved outside the settlement walls. “This is simply not Aboriginal art.” “Why weren’t they left alone to produce what was recognizably Aboriginal art?” A few critics felt that even the introduction of “the white man’s materials” muddied “native” art (Durack Miller & Rutter, 1952, p. 62). White influence on Aboriginal life was cemented, and no turning back was possible, for colonization changed every aspect of Aboriginal life. The arts could not remain untouched, nor could totemic symbols retain their meaning. White material culture was now a part of the Aborigines' mental architecture, just as totemic symbols had been. This hybridization was still new and perplexing to the Euro-Australians.

While words such as “untrained” and “untutored” abound in the writings of Rutter and Durack Miller, the authors acknowledge that a coherent and characteristic style emerged from what might be called an “artistic brotherhood,” for the girls had been sent to the Wandering Mission in 1949-1950 at the peak of their production.10 The boys were private while they worked, but they shared and discussed their work afterward. The last living Carrolup artist, Mickey Jackson, describes their friendly contests:

When we were doing painting in the mission, we used to have a race to see who did the best painting. And we used to say to one another, “Don’t you look at my painting, and don’t you do the same painting as I do.” We used to watch one another. When it was finished we used to put them side-by-side and work it out from there. “My trees are better than your trees,” or “My colours are better than yours.” We used to have a competition there, and it used to be tops. (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006, p. 2)

There was much debate at the time regarding where their technique came from. The children might have been influenced by the picture-books the Whites introduced to them, as then Picker Art Gallery director Lizzie Barker and others speculate (L. Barker, September 2006, personal communication). No doubt, as the works are viewed today with new interest, discussion about possible influences persist. However, the boys primarily learned from observation and each other, evident in a conversation quoted in Durack Miller and Rutter (1952).

“You think the road goes small, only when you walk on it’s the same all the way.”

“Fences too!… You think the posts go small!”

“You want to draw how you see, not how you know!” (pp. 44, 45)

10 The separation of girls and boys in terms of color, talent, and inclination cannot be ignored. It is a mine field of bias to contemporary readers, but originally, was written with benignly good intentions. Whether or not the girls were invited out into the bush is unclear. Simply, they are described as preferring to design, “suitable, perhaps, for dress materials or furnishing fabrics, while the boys’ work was bolder, more definite and literal, portraying landscapes, animals, and hunting-scenes” (Durack Miller & Rutter, 1952, p. 15). Later the authors say in a similarly benign way, “The girls showed little initiative beyond the scribble patterns, though in many of these they produced lively and original results” (p. 43). However, Patsy Millet believes that the girls might have confined themselves, rather than being confined; the Whites would have been happy to see the same standard of work from the girls (P. Millet, 2007, personal communication).
But like all children and adults who no longer have autonomy and freedom—only the desire for it—expression of that desire is urgent and its flowering uncanny, unpredictable, and sometimes, startlingly sophisticated. The roads discussed above, and so often found in the Carrolup children’s work, usually lead to the horizon and a beautiful sunset, but not without the fences that restricted them from wandering in their land. Were they painting more than accurate representations of roads disappearing into the distance? Or were they picturing their desire to go back to their beloved land and people? Noongar artists, such as Shane Pickett, believe that the ancestral phenomenon of Dreaming—hearing the voices of the ancestors since the beginning of time—was released in the pastels and watercolors introduced to Noongars for the first time through the children (S. Pickett, May 2007, personal communication).

**The End of Carrolup**

The Department for Native Affairs had been called upon in the past to cope with many complex problems of degeneration, but here was a completely new and bewildering problem of regeneration, to which

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**Figure 2. No Title (description: landscape with fallen tree).**
Artist, Parnell Dempster. Pastel and graphite. 1953. 22.9 x 29.2 cm.
Courtesy of Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University.
no clause in the “Act” (1905) offered as much as a clue. (Durack Miller & Rutter, 1952, p. 70)\textsuperscript{11}

At first, the government used the Carrolup artwork as proof that their assimilationist policy of the 1940s and 1950s worked—that “native” children might learn to do what their white peers could do, \textit{if only they had a chance}. But finally, their work was too good. It was an embarrassment for a system that was set up to fail. Success could not be tolerated, particularly international success that drew attention to the appalling conditions. The Department of Native Affairs’ indifference and increasing hostility to the children’s international attention was ostensibly because art took the children away from practical training.

This was not a good thing, to let these children think that they could make a living fiddling around with paper and crayons…. They (Department of Native Affairs) thought it was a diversion for the kids, that it was not going to be good. But yes, there was a hidden agenda. I think there was the usual heavy handed action and thought behind that move of the day. I think it was a disapproval of Noel and Lily White that they were too progressive. (P. Millet, May 2007, personal communication)

In the last days of Carrolup, Native Affairs attempted to wean the boys from art to sports and social activities. Exhausted by the conflict, the superintendent resigned and the Whites received notice of Carrolup’s closing. Noel White went on to teach in Perth and Fremantle Prison where he saw many of his former Carrolup students again. Back in London and facing financial troubles, Rutter sold her entire collection to the traveling American art dealer, Herbert Mayer.

A year later, Carrolup opened as Marribank Farm School for rural and technical training of young men and boys. In 1988, the Carrolup Cultural Centre was opened as part of the Australian Bicentennial Celebrations. It was expanded in 1995 to include an additional gallery. Since then, the ownership of the settlement was passed from the community to the Southern Aboriginal Corporation. Problems in maintaining the facility are currently under review (J. Stanton, July 11, 2006, personal communication).

\textbf{Conclusions and Recommendations}

The disturbing feelings that arose as I looked at the Carrolup artworks in the archives of the Picker Art Gallery continued to haunt me in the public and private collections in Australia. After my initial astonishment and awe of the beauty of their drawings, an unsettling feeling set in. Somewhere hidden is the sadness inherent in an adopted language not the children’s own. The irony is that untrained Aboriginal children captured a technique beyond the imagination of their coeval white counterparts. Their youthful talent that would be wasted during their own lives now reaches out to us after their deaths. Perhaps this is the meaning of the “rediscovery” of the work. It is the beautiful visual expression of a brutal past—of young lives stolen with impunity. And because of its beauty, we cannot look away from

\textsuperscript{11} Today, scholars are divided on the issue of the closing of Carrolup. John Stanton (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006, p. 5) agrees with the ulterior motive theory. Professor of Geography at Colgate University, Ellen Kraly (September 18, 2006, personal communication), believes that the closing was part of a trend of the government institutions which were making way for missions.
our own implication. Here we see some of the finest examples of Western visual expression—a representation of “civilized” culture staring back at us with a wry smile.

Notwithstanding their beauty, I view the boys’ drawings as pictures of loss. This is not due to the lack of the good intentions from individuals like White or Rutter, but rather, to the critical mass of white arrogance emboldened by the Social Darwinism of the 19th century. However, the triumph of the Carrolup children lies in the new generation of artists working in the “Carrolup Style.” It is a style created out of displacement, incarceration, humiliation. It has become the art of a place that patches together past and present, colonization and reconciliation. They are pictures of an interrupted, but finally, resilient culture. That they continue to be arresting is also part of the triumph—making art, literally from a rubbish heap, of such startling beauty that we submit to them unconditionally.

How does one make sense of these children’s works in relationship to the current field of art education as it is often practiced? The answer might be found in the mystery of a 13-year-old whose observation is so sophisticated that it defies the theories and expectations of adults. The phenomenon of “school art” does not invite children to use important subject matter from their living experience and, therefore, limits the potential richness and quality of children’s art. We art teachers can learn from this “non-art” teacher, Noel White, who by exceeding the expectations inherent in an inscribed and pre-determined body of knowledge, includes and acknowledges children. White appeared without a curriculum, but with an understanding of the children’s need to find a language that would tell their stories. It is possible that agendas, theories, and our own adult minds prevent us from standing back far enough to witness the making of art.

References


Art from the Stolen Generation of Australia

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