

the canning stock route project

WORDS BY CARLY DAVENPORT ACKER

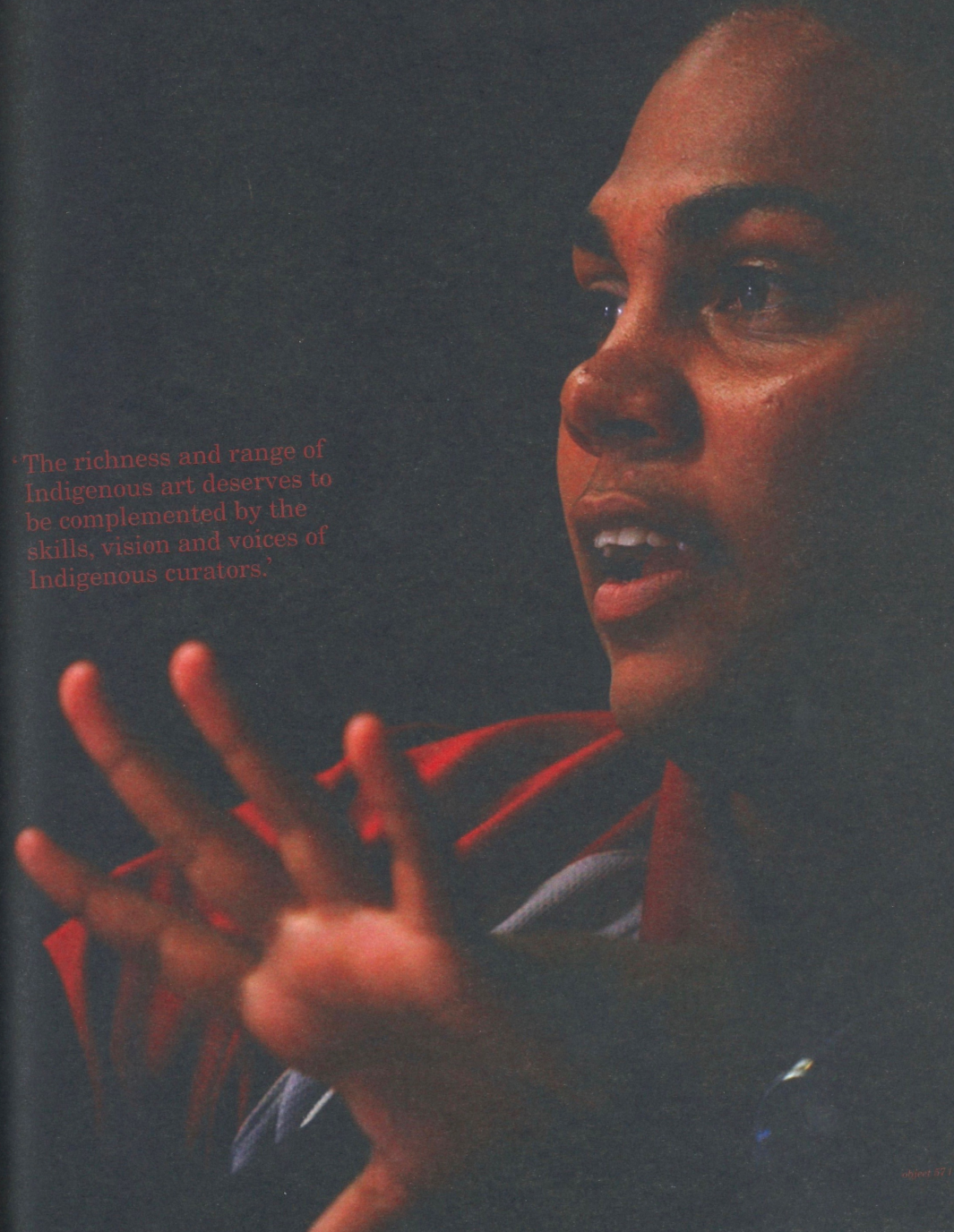
Indigenous art is one of Australia's most recognisable contributions to global creative and cultural expression. In a little over 30 years, Indigenous art has moved from desert novelty through commercial overdrive to contemporary excellence, opening up unprecedented dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

One of the overriding features of Indigenous art and creativity is its inventiveness, with ever more schools of Indigenous art styles and subsets of hypnotic variety. This multiplicity and innovation requires a curatorial response – in balance with the emerging Indigenous makers and artists, there is a need to grow young talent that can read, respond to and reposition these works. The richness and range of Indigenous art deserves to be complemented by the skills, vision and voices of Indigenous curators.

There are complex social and cultural forces to address in such transactions, particularly when those young curators are from remote areas. Acknowledging the need for culturally relevant professional development, the Canning Stock Route Project is offering realistic opportunities to three young and emerging Indigenous curators. At the heart of the Project's content development is a dynamic team, which is building an exhibition in readiness for its launch at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2010.

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Curator Louise Mengil.
Photo: Ros Swanborough

Below: Curator Hayley Atkins on the paper Stock Route. Photo: Ross Swanborough

Right: Wally Caruana surveying the works produced on the Stock Route and Lake Stretch, WA. Photo: Tim Acker

Far right: Emerging multimedia talent, Morika Biljabu, of the Canning Stock Route Project. Photo: Tim Acker



The Canning Stock Route Project (CSR Project) is a pioneering, multifaceted contemporary arts and cultural initiative that celebrates the lives and stories of Western Desert Indigenous people, their histories and their communities. Brokered by FORM, a not-for-profit arts and cultural body, the CSR Project represents 89 participating cultural custodians and artists from across the Kimberley, Pilbara and Midwest regions of the Western Desert. The alliance of nine Indigenous cultural organisations anchoring the project is unprecedented: Mangkaja Arts (Fitzroy Crossing), Warlayirti Artists (Balgo), Papunya Tula Artists (Kiwirrkurra), Yulparija Artists (Bidyadanga), Martumili Artists (representing Newman/Parngurr/Punmu/Kunawarritji and Jigalong communities), Tjukurba Gallery (Wiluna), Ngurra Artists (Nguman), Paruku Indigenous Protected Area artists (Mulan) and Kayili Artists (Patjarr).

In development since late 2006, the CSR Project has facilitated multiple in-country consultations and professional development workshops (in carving, weaving and painting) with artists across Western Australia, including a six-week journey back to country along the Canning Stock Route. The journey from Wiluna to Halls Creek provided an opportunity for more than 60 artists to record aspects of the region's remarkable history, and to tell their stories through painting. The journey also marked the beginning of the Emerging Curators Program.

The Emerging Curators Program nurtures young professionals and offers atypical career opportunities for Indigenous creatives from remote area communities. Under the mentorship of senior curator Wally Caruana, the three emerging curators – Murungkurr Terry Murray (ex-Mangkaja Arts, Fitzroy Crossing), Hayley Atkins (Martumili Artists, Newman) and Louise Mengil (Waringarri Artists, Kununurra) – are gaining skills that will become

increasingly valuable to remote area art enterprises. These skills include the ability to plan and design exhibitions, research relevant information, produce public program material and communicate ideas in multiple formats. All from traditional backgrounds, Murungkurr, Hayley and Louise bring an invaluable cultural awareness to the curation of this body of work, which spans multiple language groups interlinked by a shared Law and intricate family connections.

Wally has been working directly with the three curators on the exhibition's development. His engagement began at Lake Stretch, at the close of the Project's trip to country in August 2007, and will continue through to the exhibition launch at the NMA. From 1984 to 2001 Wally

was the senior curator of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Art at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), where he oversaw the development of one of the most important collections of Australian Indigenous art in a public museum. Wally also mentored some of Australia's leading Indigenous curators.

Wally sees FORM's curatorial framework as 'very intensive and focused, allowing time for ideas to formulate and evolve, to thrash through issues, and revisit ideas without the interruptions of daily life in a museum or gallery'. He notes that the 'apprenticeship' for becoming a curator has changed dramatically in the last 15 years:

Now there are several avenues: working in private and commercial galleries, doing voluntary or casual work in a range of art spaces – from contemporary art spaces to the larger institutions – and there are

curatorship courses being taught. However, for Indigenous people in remote communities such opportunities are far from easy to take up. I guess I learnt a few telling lessons when I first started work in the curatorial area. With no formal courses on offer, the mentorship system was most important – there were always certain people who were inspiring, who taught by example as much as by word. This is a useful model for developing curators in remote communities, and the CSR Project gives me the opportunity to put this into practice.

Wally finds the mentoring aspect of his role on the Project immensely attractive, and says that is what drew him to lead the program. 'The Emerging Curators Program gives me the chance to share the professional experience that I have been privileged to have had over three decades, to give back from what I have learnt,' he says. He acknowledges that the Project presents the challenge of formulating an exhibition around a theme that is at

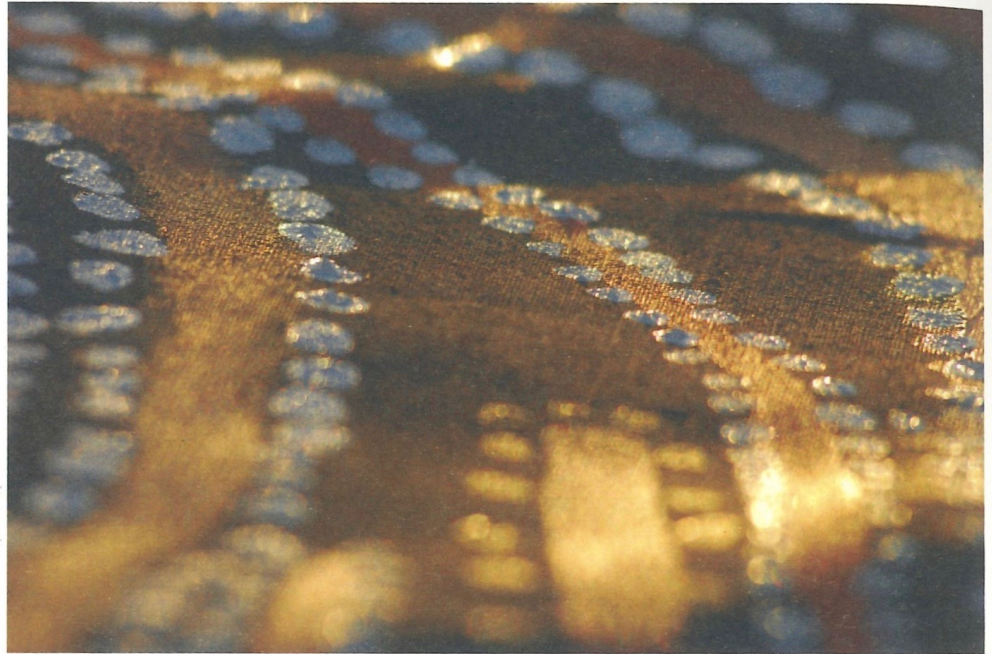
once an aesthetic experience as well as a learning one. Wally agrees with the Project's core philosophy:

There are talented, budding curators in Indigenous communities, and given the important part art plays in Indigenous society, especially these days on the cultural, social and economic levels, I believe there are significant roles for local curators in the future success of Indigenous art in terms of how it is presented to the world.

The alchemy of Wally's knowledge and each of the three emerging curators' cultural knowledge is generating a new curatorial dialogue. Each of the three generously share and bring their own magical perspectives in developing the CSR Project, while simultaneously building their own goals. Louise Mengil says, 'My role as a curator is really important in this Project and beyond. →

Artwork (detail) by Martumili
Artists Dulcie Gibbs, Muni Rita
Simpson and Rosie Williams
on the Stock Route.
Photo: Tim Acker

‘When you paint a story
of your life, family,
history and culture,
you become part of it.’



I'm learning things that help me with my work at Waringarri (Waringarri Artists, in Kununurra) too. One of my goals is to one day manage the art centre.'

The knowledge and cultural framework that the young curators bring with them harmonises and embodies the Project itself: it is an initiative weaving the importance of family connection, kinship and sense of one's country. As Hayley Atkins says:

I want to work with all six Martu communities – so they know about the Canning Stock Route, so they know where their families come from, where their grandfathers and grandmothers come from. This keeps our history and culture strong. At school and home you learn two ways. My family wasn't into art. I didn't know about it before. When you paint a story of your life, family, history and culture, you become part of it. The kids are part of it too, but we need to teach them so they know.

Murungkurr Terry Murray agrees that everything he does in contributing to the Project is linked to knowing his history, as told to him by his grandfathers. This way he can imagine the future:

In my work, I try to always think about passing on the knowledge to the next generation of family. I've got three kids. Putting my footsteps in my grandfathers', I think about how they lived: being strong, connected to their land.

Wally acknowledges that there are many benefits that remote community professionals like Louise, Hayley and Terry bring to a Project like this. He says that their contribution is critical to the Project's success, which 'is based on the coalescing of experiences and knowledge from within the communities and those from the professional and public domain'.

The CSR Project highlights the mutuality that is possible in working with Indigenous professionals from remote communities. Wally concludes:

The three emerging curators are full of ideas, willing to experiment and grapple with new ideas. But I am particularly impressed by – and have benefited from – their articulation of different ways of approaching art and the exhibition and, in fact, their enthusiasm for the various processes and procedures we are undertaking to develop the show. They have a strong sense of commitment to the Project. They are sharp, they keep me on my toes and they have a wicked sense of humour. ○

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* All quotes by Wally Caruana, Louise Mengil, Hayley Atkins and Murungkurr Terry Murray are from interviews with Carly Davenport Acker.

Carly Davenport Acker is Cultural Program Manager and Curator at Form, and Project Manager of the Canning Stock Route Project. Form is a not-for-profit cultural organisation based in Perth, Western Australia.