# 65,000 Years brings truth telling to art history

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When the Potter Museum of Art reopens next year, it will be with a landmark survey of Indigenous Australian art. That won't be until May, but we're already getting a sense of how ambitious it will be. The publication that accompanies the exhibition, *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, could have been a straightforward catalogue; A few brief essays, a few images, and job done. Instead, it's one of the most remarkable art histories we've seen, ranging over millennia to tell the story of the unique art of this continent.

The 25 essays cover early cultural and design traditions of First Peoples and track the continuation and innovation of artistic practice through the British invasion, frontier massacres and beyond, while also featuring many leading Indigenous Australian artists of today. The mission is clear: this is a new book of record. It's an account that foregrounds ingenuity and resilience, and brings truth-telling to art history.


65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art. Published by Thames & Hudson Australia.

*65,000 Years* is edited by Marcia Langton AO and Judith Ryan AM, who also co-curated the exhibition with Shanysa McConville. Both editors are known for their scholarly backgrounds, Langton as a Yiman and Bidjara academic and public intellectual, and Ryan as the former senior curator of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria. This book is not short on rigour. In their opening essays, Langton and Ryan frame *65,000 Years* as a firm anti-colonial statement, and introduce the idea that Indigenous artists are architects of change. They include many contemporary artworks that confront the impact of scientific racism. Yhonnie Scarce's *Weak in colour but strong in blood* (2014) is a haunting glass work contorted by medical instruments. Judy Watson's *a preponderance of aboriginal blood* (2005) is a series of etchings of official documents marked with red, blood-like stains.

"65,000 years of ingenuity and resilience cannot be extinguished in a comparative instant." writes Ryan. Documenting this art history is a mammoth task. It's a sign of the editors' skill that they don't lean on a rigid structure. Material is organised fluidly, looking at particular regions, and key subjects like the frontier wars and scientific racism. Writers have room to make intriguing connections and draw threads to the present. It feels necessary, urgent, alive.

The essays draw from exhibition material but the connection rarely feels forced. That's partly because the exhibition is so large, with over 400 objects on display. It's also because the writers and thinkers come from different generations and backgrounds, from established curators to young arts workers, senior elders, historians and astronomers. A book like this can't cover everything but it can certainly hold a lot of perspectives.

Left to right: UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST (Dhalwaŋu clan, Yirritja moiety) Dhulmu-mulka bathi, 1942, pandanus, natural pigments, feathers, 64 x 25 x 11.5 cm. Donald Thomson Collection. The University of Melbourne, DT 329; UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST (Djinaŋ clan, Dhuwa moiety) Dhulmu-mulka bathi, 1937, pandanus, natural pigments, feathers, 64 x 29 x 12.5 cm. Donald Thomson Collection. The University of Melbourne, DT 332; UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST (Mildjiŋi clan, Yirritja moiety) Djarrapuŋ miny'tji (Monsoonal cloud design) on dhulmu-mulka bathi, 1936, pandanus, natural pigments, 26 Å~ 11.4 Å~ 11.4 cm, Donald Thomson Collection, The University of Melbourne DT 1383; UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST (Blue Mud Bay, East Arnhem Land) Dhulmu-mulka bathi, 1935, pandanus, natural pigments, feathers, 64 x 25 x 12.5 cm, Donald Thomson Collection, The University of Melbourne, DT 328; UNIDENTIFIED ARTIST (Djinaŋ clan, Dhuwa moiety) Dhulmu-mulka bathi, 1937, pandanus, natural pigments, feathers, 64 x 29 x 12.5 cm, Donald Thomson Collection, The University of Melbourne DT 332.

A real highlight is 'Turn to the River,' a moving essay on loss and the deep need for art, by the young Gulumoerrgin, Jingili and Anglo curator and arts worker Coby Edgar. Three essays on the 19th century are also essential reading, establishing many of the key issues around the representation of First Peoples. *65,000 Years* considers the work of European artists like Eugene von Guérard, but also explores how Indigenous artists like Johnny Dawson and Tommy McRae captured their rapidly changing world. In her essay, curator and historian Carol Cooper writes about a young Kuku Yalangi artist called Oscar, whose drawings documented the brutality of life in Far North Queensland. *Police boys doing duty (Lynch law)* (c1898) is especially chilling.

As Langton writes, *65,000 Years* is "studded with the heroic works by men and women who pioneered the transformation of traditional design and material with modern materials, the outstanding artists who have spoken back to the colonial gaze". There are

plenty of lightning bolts here, like Albert Namatjira, Emily Kam Kngwarray and the Papunya artists, but there's also a wariness around sensationalising these figures, or reducing the story of ingenuity to just a few key players.


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When it comes to the art of today, *65,000 Years* shows the great breadth of contemporary practice. There's Naomi Hobson's joyful photography, Marlene Rubuntja's textile sculptures about Arunda life, Djambawa Marawili's virtuoso bark painting, and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu's shimmering night skies. There are also several works by Brook Andrew, though many famous Indigenous Australian artists are absent.

*65,000 Years* also traces changing narratives around Indigenous art. Settlers disregarded what they saw; today the discussion is about cultural and aesthetic power. As Langton reminds us, "the changes came slowly, but it is clear now that most galleries exhibit the works of the First Peoples in the knowledge that they represent the original art traditions of our country". That slow change goes for arts publishing too. We've seen many brilliant monographs on Indigenous Australian art in recent years, but there's been a real lack of big picture Indigenous art histories. *65,000 Years* marks a new tideline, setting out a determination towards truth-telling and showing the continuation of artistic practice.

For many readers, this comprehensive account will feel like a book that puts a lot of pieces together, but that's not to say *65,000 Years* doesn't raise questions or lay down challenges for future scholars. Right now, for instance, First Nations artists from around the world are leading critical global conversations around archives, the role of institutions, climate and environmental protection, and collective care and practice. Curiously, the

participation of Indigenous Australian artists in these international exchanges is not really acknowledged. It's one of the few times readers feel they've reached the limits of the exhibition behind the book.

BILLY BENN PERRURLE (Alyawarr, 1943–2012), Artetyerre, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 150 x 300 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Kamberri / Canberra, 2009.20.

Unsurprisingly, there are also knotty questions about the University of Melbourne, where the Potter Museum is housed. One essay targets the history of scientific racism at the university, outlining how it once encouraged body-snatching, collected the skeletal remains of First People, and attempted to establish a basis for phrenology, eugenics and white supremacy.  In this essay, historian Ross L Jones says the university's path has been "tortuous and long but seems to be reaching some sort of conclusion". In the following essay, 'The Dark Heart', palawa curator and researcher Jessica Clark goes into the issues around repatriation, and describes *65,000 Years* as a testament to the many activists, artists, policymakers and non-Indigenous collaborators who have, as she puts it, "made this conversation unavoidable for the University of Melbourne". It drives home the complexity of a publication like this and what it means to put truth-telling into practice.

*65,000 Years* acknowledges these pressing debates but firmly draws the narrative back to the power, resilience and innovation of Indigneous art. It covers an ambitious territory and time frame, and it's no surprise that Ryan veers away from calling it a survey. As she puts it, it's best understood as a "conceptual map that shows us where we have been as a nation". You can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been.

***65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* is published by Thames & Hudson.**