

## Book Review

*Bush Women: Fresh Art from Remote WA*, edited by Darren Jorgensen, Fremantle Arts Centre, 2018.

### Sarah Ridhuan

Fremantle Art Centre's 1994 exhibition *Bush Women: Fresh Art from Remote WA* was the first to combine artworks created by female artists from the freshwater country of the north-west of Western Australia and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of the Western Desert. The selection of paintings by Paji Honeychild Yankkarr, Daisy Andrews, Queenie McKenzie (Gara-Gara), Tjapartji Kanytjuri Bates, Tjingapa Davies and Pantjiti Mary McLean was significantly positioned during a period in which Aboriginal women from remote Australia were rising in prominence within the Australian art world.

The original curator John Kean recognises *Bush Women* as an exhibition that both influenced and was influenced by particular context, noting in his essay 'Curating *Bush Women* in 1994' that it 'tapped into a dynamic moment, as the expressive trends, that would reach their zenith in the new millennium, were emerging'. The restaging of *Bush Women* in 2018 raises questions of shifts in interpretations, meanings and understandings both in local and global contexts. Whilst the works undoubtedly remain significant, what do they mean – in terms of the artists, the exhibition and the communities – almost 25 years later?

The book *Bush Women* was published in conjunction with the contemporary version of the exhibition and provides a useful insight into the development of the 1994 exhibition. It also serves to frame the featured artists and their practice within wider discussions of lived experiences, cultural negotiations and displacement – all of which are reflected in the paintings both stylistically and in content.

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**Corresponding author:**

Sarah Ridhuan, The University of Western Australia

Email: [sarah.ridhuan@uwa.edu.au](mailto:sarah.ridhuan@uwa.edu.au)

The two main essays by John Kean and Darren Jorgensen provide thought-provoking analyses from curatorial and theoretical perspectives respectively. The strength of these pieces is the recognition of the artists' distinctive styles, experiences and expressions while at the same time acknowledging that these are rooted within each woman's Country, socio-cultural relations and cultural/Ancestral narratives. Kean's essay provides an account of his role as curator of the 1994 exhibition, giving a sense of the developments and shifts in the Aboriginal art world during that period. His writing encapsulates his personal experiences of cross-cultural exchange and emphasises the strong relationships he established with many Aboriginal artists. Jorgensen's essay 'Women of the Western Desert Diaspora' continues to contribute to these layered understandings within the lens of broader socio-cultural, historical and political contexts. In expanding the narratives of these women's local experiences and art practices to a global experience of the Twentieth century, Jorgensen acknowledges that each of these artists occupy a position in the local as well as the global:

While produced within the life-worlds of the desert diaspora, the paintings of the women of the Western Desert diaspora express more universal experiences of alienation, longing and exile. (Jorgensen 2018:48)

Like Kean, Jorgensen is able to capture the sense of transformation and transition that reaffirms the agency of Aboriginal people navigating their local and global contexts.

The discussion of Aboriginal world-views and epistemologies – necessarily nuanced and complex – are made more effective by the excerpts containing the women's voices. These short extracts (re-printed from past texts) balance out the more analytical essays of Kean and Jorgensen. Whilst both men respect and acknowledge the significance of Aboriginal experiences, cultural identities and art practices – they are still writing from a white, male position. The personal voices of Pantjiti Mary McLean, Daisy Andrews and Paji Honeychild Yankkarr are interwoven throughout, creating a sense of the women's authority and agency. Their words validate the ideas and concepts explored by Kean and Jorgensen – and rightly so. These women were active in negotiating their position within and as part of shifting cultural practices, social relations and attachments to Country. The excerpts are brief but – like the artworks – recognise the women as individuals with distinct experiences and expressions, yet are also grounded in a wider socio-cultural network.

*Bush Women* as a publication highlights the significance of both exhibitions by exploring broader ideas and narratives via the art expressions of individual women from remote communities in Western Australia. There is however, still a sense of stasis despite the emphasis placed on the fluidity of cultural production, relations and practice. I wonder if accounts, commentaries or writings by Aboriginal women from these and other communities in 2018 – during the rehang of the exhibition – would have added another dimension of meaning, experience and expression. How do Aboriginal women who create contemporary art today understand and relate to the paintings of the *Bush Women* artists as well as to the exhibition itself? In concluding his essay, John Kean articulately considers these thoughts in relation to a circular understanding of time:

Will *Bush Women II*, an exhibition reconstituted with paintings originally produced in the early 1990s, connect deeply with paintings being produced in those same regions to this day? And can the paintings by the 'bush women' themselves also reach back, before white contact, to touch the Ancestral Past? (Kean 2018: 38)

In 2018, Aboriginal women from various communities still navigate their position within ever changing socio-cultural and political contexts. They actively engage with new tensions that give rise to different experiences and evolving art expressions - yet continue to assert their position in relation to identity, community and Country as their predecessors had done in the 1990s. Perhaps these women could have responded to Kean's questions and play a role in the significant dialogue this publication already raises.

### **Author Biography**

Curatorial assistant Siti Sarah Ridhuan has been at the Berndt Museum at The University of Western Australia since 2013, working on its diverse collections and various exhibitions. She has a First Class Honours degree in Anthropology and her interests include the intersections of anthropology, art and museums.

Email: [sarah.ridhuan@uwa.edu.au](mailto:sarah.ridhuan@uwa.edu.au)