

*Pam Johnston Dahl Helm: Lost to our Mothers*

**Diana Wood Conroy**

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“We saw that our own children were sometimes lost to us as we were lost to our mothers, and they to their mothers” (Pam Johnston, *Free Spirit*, 1996, n.p.)

In the time I knew Pam Johnston<sup>1</sup> during her doctoral study at the University of Wollongong (1995-1998) the search for mothers, the need for certain and indissoluble affections underpinned her art and writing. The father was lost and absent: there was a constant matrilineal momentum in her positioning of herself. “To explore mother daughter relationships, to examine oral histories as a way back to Aboriginal connections to land”, she wrote, was pivotal to her work (Johnston 1997, p.5). As a tribute to her, and because of my admiration for her courage and passion for justice I would like to tease out some of the complexities of her exploration by placing her in the context of her times.

Writing about the category “Aboriginal art” the anthropologist Howard Morphy discussed in 1988 how the art of various regional Aboriginal traditions, such as that of Papunya or Yirrkala, is now placed beside the work of individual artists of Indigenous ancestry, such as Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffatt or Trevor Nicholls, whose work could be classified as “contemporary world art”.

The category ‘Aboriginal art’ then, challenges the traditional boundaries of the Western art world through its diversity. The global significance of ‘Aboriginal art’ as presently constituted is that it includes in an ethnically defined category works that would equally fit into that dominant unmarked category – contemporary fine art. The very process, however, of incorporating some forms of contemporary art within the category of Aboriginal art while excluding others in turn re-problematizes it. For if Aboriginal art is nothing other than art produced by Aborigines, then some of the works in that category are most similar in format terms to works excluded from it. Thus Imants Tillers’ *Nine Shots*, which provided the inspiration, or perhaps the irritation, for Gordon Bennett’s *Nine Ricochets* is excluded from Aboriginal art. Yet it is part of the history of Bennett’s painting and therefore Aboriginal art history (Morphy 1988, pp.419-20, cited by McLean 2011, p.105).

Pam Johnston’s body of work is associated closely with the rise of Aboriginal urban art in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and in a parallel fashion to Morphy’s examples,

forms part of the history of the interactive Koori art movements of the east coast of Australia at this time. In 2012 Pam Johnston described herself on social media as a “practicing visual artist, community worker and unattached scholar”, with no mention of Aboriginal affiliations. Like Tracey Moffat, Destiny Deacon or Fiona Foley she may have preferred to be an artist without the ‘A’ word slanting all interpretations of her work. I would argue in this essay that conclusive definitions of origin are not, in Levi-Strauss’s sense, “good tools” to think with. The scholar Alison Ravenscroft described the tumult of images and stories between black and white in Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* as a “poetics of equivocality” and this is a much more useful approach in unlocking Johnston’s imagery (Ravenscroft 2012, p.71). I would like to consider Pam Johnston’s *oeuvre* as part of a great movement of the times to contest and revision canonical Australian histories and invoke spiritualities of land. Both Aboriginal and European histories are relevant in considering her work.

## Background and Context

Between 1995 and 1998 I was officially Pam Johnston’s supervisor in the Doctor of Creative Arts degree at the University of Wollongong, although in many ways it was she who educated me. An exhibition and installation called *Indigenous Women’s Spirituality* accompanied her thesis entitled *Transformation (Death) Appropriation, Conception (Birth) Identity, Transition (Life) Land*. She extended and developed themes from her 1990 Master of Visual Art thesis *The Woman Spirit Journey: A celebration of women’s spirituality* from the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW. The unpublished thesis, with a video and slides, is held in the Archive of the University of Wollongong Library and is a prime resource for untangling the contexts of her work. Despite the controversies about identity and place that circulated around her, it was the community of marginal and dispossessed people that remained central. The quote leading this text came from an anthology of writing by women in Mullawa Women’s Detention Centre, put together by Pam Johnston, their teacher, in 1996. Pam Johnston’s 1997 doctoral thesis begins with the statement:

My identity as an Aboriginal person has been questioned by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. My identity as an Aboriginal person has been rejected by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. My identity as an Aboriginal person has been accepted by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Thus I have an ambivalence regarding Aboriginality that needs to be explored (Johnston 1997, p.3).

In the late 1980s and 1990s ‘identity’ was a key word in Australian arts. Textile artists and craftspeople emerging from the hierarchies of modernism searched for identity. Women in Australia were freshly aware of new realms of equality under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1986 and the Equal Opportunity legislation of 1987. In the 1970s Aboriginal arts communities - Papunya in the Central Desert and Yolngu regions in the North - had become glowing centres of renaissance nationally and internationally. In the 1980s it was the turn of so-called urban Aboriginal artists, often from the fringes of cities and towns, who had lost language and the freedom to inhabit land in the turmoil of colonisation, but had retained strong ties of kinship to each other and indefatigable ties to country. In 1984 Indigenous curator Djon Mundine<sup>ii</sup> was appointed to the Art Gallery of NSW, and in the same year *Koori Art 84* was the first urban art to be exhibited in the Sydney public gallery ArtSpace (McLean 2011, p.57). A group of ten urban artists came together to form the Boomalli Co-operative of Aboriginal artists established

in Redfern, Sydney in 1987.<sup>iii</sup> Pam Johnston was invited to join them, although later she left the group through disputes about the appropriation of traditional and remote Aboriginal imagery by urban artists, including herself (Johnston 1997, p.44).

The Sydney writer Jennifer Isaacs published *Aboriginality* in 1989, a book that explored “urban” artists of this time, many from Boomalli, who expressed their edgy political and spiritual positions in the familiar techniques of oil painting, acrylic and printmaking. A quote of Johnston’s appears on the cover: “Our culture confirms that we exist through ritual, image and spirituality. It is us and our lives confirm it.” One of the painters in *Aboriginality*, Trevor Nicholls, later represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1990 and observed, “My work is not purely Aboriginal art, it’s a mixture. My work is cross-cultural...” (McLean, p.102, citing Nicholls in Thompson p.104 -110).

The powerful voice of these artists resonated for me at the Power Institute of Fine Arts Forum on Aboriginal Arts at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1991, with such artists as Fiona Foley and Lin Onus speaking of their formative experiences in political terms of the longstanding dispossession and demoralisation of Aboriginal people since white settlement.

In that same year 1991, as a visual arts lecturer, I became the co-ordinator of the first Introduction to Aboriginal Arts and Society subject at the then School of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, and was able to bring Aboriginal artists, writers and thinkers into the lecture room. When Bill Harrison, the Indigenous director of the Aboriginal Education Unit at the university gave the first lecture with authority and wide-ranging scholarship, I stood at the back with great emotion, remembering how the voice of Aboriginal people had been absent in all my studies of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in the 1960s. It seemed a new beginning of agency and hope. Over the next few years Hetti Perkins with her father the famous activist Charles Perkins, Bronwyn Bancroft, Brenda Croft, Tracey Moffat, Ruby Langford and others came down to Wollongong from Sydney to talk to the 50 or so students, who included Kooris as well as International students from across Asia and Europe. Banduk Marika from Yirrkala in the Northern Territory was Artist-in-residence in 1991, beginning a long interaction with Yolngu printmakers. As well, emerging local Wadi Wadi and Thurrawal artists such as Lorraine and Narelle Thomas, Kevin Butler and Jeff Timbery participated. The poet Joy Janaka Wiradjuri Williams (b. Sydney 1942- d. Wollongong 2006) was the Indigenous tutor and lecturer ( see Peter Read, 2009.)

Pam Johnston followed Janaka as lecturer and tutor in the subject in 1996-97 and brought a fiery quality of immediacy and passion through her first-hand accounts of Aboriginality in the city and country. She believed that “the personal narrative, the ‘telling’ became a validation of identity and of existence” (Johnston, 1996, n.p.). A naturally engaging speaker who was involved in text and language as well as imagery, Pam was keen to instruct on Koori languages that formed a subtext to ordinary Australian English, often racist in implication. She handed out a multi-choice “intelligence test” on Koori semantics, satirising the notorious intelligence tests that had given Aboriginal people low rankings, based on a white education system. Her fluent writing accompanied her artwork and was parallel in significance. The intellectual fire she brought to language was countered by the feelings and intuitive acts that resulted in her constant visual imagery of women in a spiritual understanding of land. Both text and image were narrative.

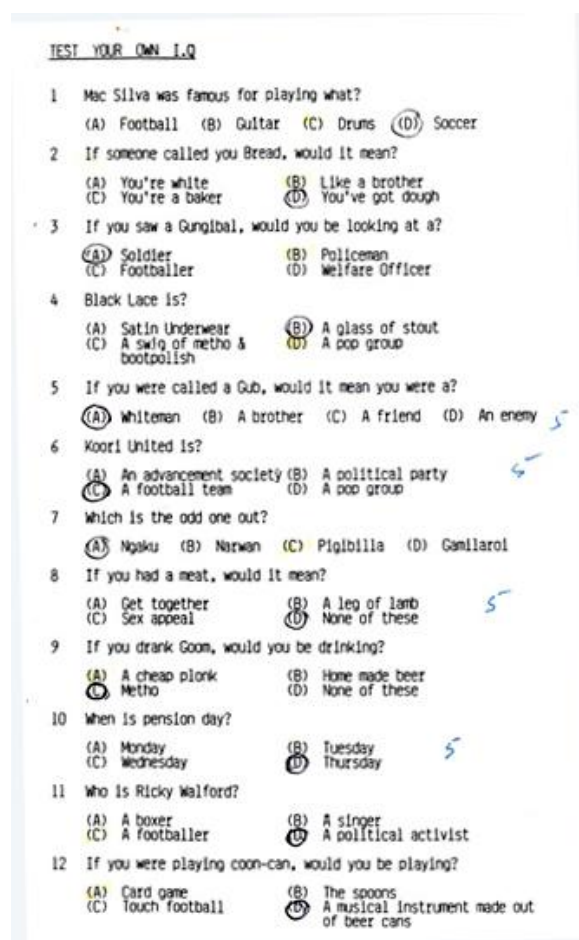


Fig.1. Pam Johnston, "Test your own IQ"  
Handout to class *Introduction to Aboriginal Arts and Society*, 1995

## Journeys to country

To understand Pam Johnston's imagery it is relevant first to look at journeys she made back into country. Accompanying Ruby Langford Ginibi as her adopted daughter, Pam drove through Ruby's Bundjalung country in northern NSW. She photographed Ruby's relations at their invitation, and the series of black and white photos of people from the settlements at Box Ridge Mission, Coraki and Tabulam were exhibited at Lismore Regional Gallery as *Journey to Bundjalung Country* around 1997, the first exhibition about the Aboriginal people of the area. Particular women, such as Auntie Eileen Morgan made a deep impression. She quoted her at Box Ridge Mission, Coraki: "See that tree over there. I was born under that tree. That's my born place." She pointed to the tree, about one hundred yards from her verandah (*A Journey into Bundjalung Country* c. 1996, n.p.)

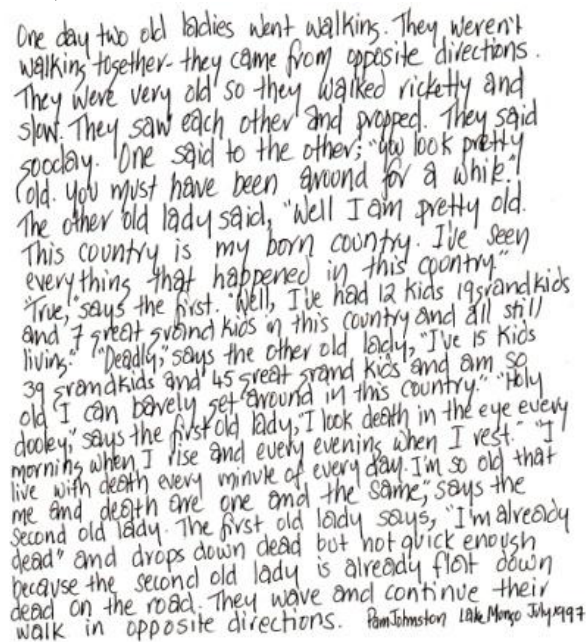
Pam Johnston joined a ten-day artist's workshop, held July 6-16, 1997 to experience the environment, history, and cross cultural layers at the World Heritage Site of Lake Mungo in western NSW, which I organised with Kay Lawrence from Adelaide. Thirty-two artists from around Australia, from UK, Poland and America were invited to come to Lake Mungo in western NSW for ten days of intensive workshops. Revolving around the broad field of textiles, with people involved in installation, photography, paper, surface design and

printmaking we hoped to establish collaborative networks and deepen the understanding of material processes in relation to the complex arid environment of Lake Mungo, with its many histories.<sup>iv</sup> I remember Pam unrolling a scroll of paper on the veranda of her cabin and painting the long linear horizon dotted with clouds and trees for the whole length. I recorded her several times in my journal as fundamental to the strange euphoria of those days.

July 1997, Lake Mungo. Walked at dusk under an overcast sky to the labyrinthine gardens of spinifex just up the road. Feet crunch because everything that drops on the ground remains entire through the extreme dryness - turds, scats, burrs like tiny grenades, dry sticks, spinifex spines, feathers. The fire had burnt all day with Pam looking after it, and people sitting around it stitching, drawing and plant dyeing - pungent smells of cooking bush leaves.

The tobacco bush with small yellow flowers was introduced here from Europe with settler wheatbags, John Handy the Aboriginal guide said. It is not pulled out because the kangaroos like to eat it. Saw a small flock of emus: how poised they are. Pam did an emu walk - stretching out her spine and walking on tip-toe. "You can get up really close if you walk like this." "Don't the emus notice you're not really an emu?" "No, they're too polite."

Silcrete is a very hard rock used for artefacts, often in crescents of stone. The fragments of giant emu egg *genyornis* are thicker and a different texture to modern emus, said the young non-Aboriginal ranger. By comparison John Handy the Aboriginal ranger had seemed gently mocking, realising that information freely given is not valued, and facts have to be needed in advance rather than spoken to an unready audience. Pam told a story about the 'old girls' competing with stories of being 'deader' through the number of children and grandchildren they'd had (Conroy 2000, pp.25-30).



One day two old ladies went walking. They weren't walking together - they came from opposite directions. They were very old so they walked rickety and slow. They saw each other and propped. They said soodley. One said to the other; "you look pretty old. You must have been around for a while." The other old lady said, "Well I am pretty old. This country is my born country. I've seen everything that happened in this country." "True," says the first. "Well, I've had 12 kids 19 grandkids and 7 great grand kids in this country and all still living." "Deadly," says the other old lady, "I've 15 kids 39 grandkids and 45 great grand kids and am so old I can barely get around in this country." "Holy dooley," says the first old lady, "I look death in the eye every morning when I rise and every evening when I rest." "I live with death every minute of every day. I'm so old that me and death are one and the same," says the second old lady. The first old lady says, "I'm already dead" and drops down dead but not quick enough because the second old lady is already flat down dead on the road. They wave and continue their walk in opposite directions. Pam Johnston Lake Mungo July 1997

Fig.2. Pam Johnston  
Written text for exhibition *Response to Lake Mungo*  
Long Gallery, University of Wollongong, 1997  
17.5 x 16.5cm

**Transcription.** One day two old ladies went walking. They weren't walking together – they came from opposite directions. They were very old so they walked rickety and slow. They saw each other and propped. They said gooday. One said to the other; “you look pretty old. You must have been around for a while”. The other old lady said, “Well I am pretty old. This country is my born country. I've seen everything that happened in this country.” “True,” says the first. “Well I've had 12 kids 19 grandkids and 7 great grand kids in this country and all still living.” “Deadly,” says the other old lady, “I've 15 kids, 39 grandkids and 45 great grand kids and am so old I can barely get around in this country.” “Holy dooley,” says the first old lady, “I look death in the eye every morning when I rise and every evening when I rest”. “I live with death every minute of every day. I'm so old that me and death are one and the same”, says the second old lady. The first old lady says, I'm already dead” and drops down dead but not quick enough because the second old lady is already flat down dead on the road. They wave and continue their journeys.

## **The Mother genealogy**

The rules of kinship, wrote the classical scholar Page DuBois, separate nature from culture (DuBois 2010, pp.175-176). Kinship, that understanding of the intricate pattern of relationship is a primary mode of knowledge in Aboriginal societies. By the late 1980s and early 1990s feminism had become a new way of thinking for western women, allowing an intoxicating sense that women could aim high, could have an uncontested voice in the workforce. Every aspect of scholarship was changed by a fresh alignment of subject, by post-structuralist critiques of objectivity, by psychoanalytic approaches. ‘Women's Studies’ appeared in the curriculum. In my first discipline, classical archaeology, scholars found previously invisible evidence of women and their lives in the archaeological record. This fervour for discovering lost or overlooked histories empowered Pam Johnston to concentrate her research on women, and particularly those women a generation older than she was, women in the classificatory mother relationship to her. The *Old Women* 1997 text quoted above demonstrated the disjunction between Aboriginal ideas of women's fertility and western feminism. She loved the bag-like shape of bodies worn by child rearing, the banter and dark humour - as shown in that story - and the fierce tenacity to hold on to the child, to not have another one taken. “The ‘old girls’ become shaped as a metaphor for a spirit of the land,” Pam wrote (1997, p.5). Yet in the western world of institutions, feminism as an individual empowerment was a great asset, as demonstrated for Pam Johnston in the support of women in the artist's collective 2+2=5.

She struggled as a young woman in the city to find her locus. In 1972 Pam travelled to the Tent Embassy in Canberra to protest for Land Rights but records, “My perception was that I was a ‘half-breed’, not black enough... The Aboriginal people in Canberra in the 1970s did not understand the emptiness of loss of identity and rejected the lighter skinned people who had only just started publicly identifying as Aboriginal” (1997, pp.33-34). She continued: “We were not what was represented as Aboriginal. We were somehow ‘other’ but where were we in the history and culture surrounding us? We were not full-blood and felt less than human” (1997, p.36). Knowing very little about her mother, she did know that her “home place” was Goonoo Goonoo Station, two kilometres from Caroon Mission where the Gomileroi people were:

I walked the black soil plains up to Moree and over to Werris Creek. I talked with the old people. I found my mother was not well known because she had not been raised in the area. My grandmother on the other hand, although not well known was well respected by those who knew her, including old Mr French at Moree and Hector Griffin at Werris Creek (1997, p.38).

She had another encounter:

One man now long dead showed me how to do the iron bark smokings to mingle the ancestors with the air we breathe and make us safe and strong. He gave me his memories of my grandmother as well. He described her physicality to me as a young woman... He described both her pain and the pain of my mother as women who were both light, beautiful, more skilled in the white ways and unable to sit easily with their people (1997, p.45).

Years later Pam Johnston added another memory:

My mother met Ruby long before I did, somewhere way back in the early '50's. I didn't know that until Ruby told me and my mother was dead by then. Ruby held something of my babyhood in her memory (Johnston, Pam and Janie Conway-Herron 2012, p.14).

Were her mother and grandmother denied acceptance in both white and black communities, always walking a tightrope, coming from rural poverty and without security or education? There is no way of really knowing apart from these hints in Johnston's written work. As a child in the 1950s I remember the fearfulness among white people of English and Scottish descent associated with people who were darker. Having just a "touch of the tar-brush" was enough to be a social outcast, as was my own great uncle who had married a Tongan and whose talented children were brown. Years later, living in a northern Aboriginal settlement, I observed the unconscious cruelty of people with gleaming black skins and secure in their land and language towards light skinned Koori people who came north longing for community. Conventions were strict, and the same outcast status would fall to any woman, white or black, who became pregnant out of wedlock. The lineage of marriage and generation, which established children's paternity, had been a fundamental requirement for social status in the long histories of western societies. It meant great grief to transgress the iron rules. Remote rural settlements and stations were often outside the law. The anthropologist TGH Strehlow recorded the predations of white men on black women when he was Chief Protector in the 1930s: "The worst elements of white society were at liberty with Aboriginal women and increasingly breeding a generation...about whom no one had a clear social policy" (Hill, 2002, p.269). The light skinned offspring of these liaisons were 'removed' to orphanages or foster homes, for a 'proper upbringing' with no knowledge of or contact with their mothers.

*Bringing them home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders* was released in 1997 and the anguish suffered became public. This statement from Pam Johnston's thesis was reiterated again and again: "Knowledge of languages, customs, sacredness and tradition, even family itself was in many cases lost in the mire of a horrible history" (Johnston 1997, p.45). The anger, and sadness, of Aboriginal people brought up in European foster homes and institutions became a palpable driving force to a new generation of urban artists.

## **Traditional patterns: Dreaming and re-Dreaming**

In order to place Pam Johnston's imagery, some understanding of the complex field of Aboriginal religion is necessary. I will refer to two scholars whose work stood out in the 1990s and would have been known to her. Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University, W.E.H Stanner (1905 – 1982), was renowned for his humane scholarship in this area and long work with people of the Daly River in Central Australia. He posited that the encompassing idea of all Aboriginal cultures is that "all living people, clan by clan, lineage by lineage were linked patrilineally with (totemic) ancestral beings by inherent and imperishable bonds." These "imperishable bonds" were formed of living people, countries, and ancestors and this tetrad penetrated every facet of Aboriginal life. The ancestors had left a world full of signs to the people they had brought into being, and these signs indicated the necessity of following perennial patterns. The discipline of religious rituals renewed and conserved all forms of life, including the life-force that kept animating the world to which people were bonded.

Stanner introduced the word "Dreaming" to describe "an activity that represented a continuing highway between ancestral supermen and living men (sic)..." (Stanner 1976, pp.1-2). He finds an implicit theory of something very like the unconscious where "elemental forces, antecedent to the formation of mature human beings operate below the level of waking or conscious mind by continuing perennially through sleep and dream, as major determinants of conscious human conduct" (7). Stanner referred to the over-used word "spiritual" to mean a belief that at least one of the several elements in Aboriginal thought which compose a person are "connected to clan through some incorporeal entity with everything in 'his' country" (9). He writes that according to the Aboriginal theory of reality, living and dead, human and animal beings, persons and things, persons and environment can and do co-penetrate each other (18).

The anthropologist Diane Bell, a younger colleague of Stanner's, produced a stirring book, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983), based on her immersion in Central Australian communities with Warlpiri, Warumungu, Alyawarra, Kaytej, Warlmanpa and Anmatjirra speakers, which painted a very different picture to women's religious life to that of previous anthropologists (Bell 1997, p.50). Parallel to Stanner's patrilineal emphasis she found an equality of status for women's religious ceremonies in the Central Desert with those of men, with a different focus. Male anthropologists, including Stanner, had not worked directly with women and had tended to see them in the light of their own (British) societies, where religions were patriarchal, and women had few ceremonial powers. Bell pointed out that while the sacred knowledge of ancestral travels was shared jointly by men and women, the women's major themes of land, love, and health highlighted their role as nurturers of people, land and relationships. "Through ritual re-enactment women establish direct contact with the past, make manifest its meaning and thereby shape their worlds. The past is encapsulated in the present, the present permeates the past". The common purpose of both men and women was to maintain their society according to the Dreaming law (Bell 1997, pp. 51-52). Bell accentuated the fact that "ritual knowledge resides with the older women who, once freed from the immediate responsibilities of child care devote their time and energies to upholding and transmitting their spiritual heritage to successive generations" (54).



## **The continuity of colonialism**

What happens when that ancestral knowledge is lost, when the transmission is broken? This is the heartrending position that faces urban Aboriginal people whose languages are forgotten and whose land is inaccessible. The anthropologist Gillian Cowlshaw was aware of the problem in 1992 in her essay *Studying Aborigines: Changing Canons in Anthropology and History*. She described how anthropologists ignored what they considered “detrribalised and dispossessed” people on the fringes of towns because their actual social lives were judged “uninteresting” (Cowlshaw 1992, p.24). By contrast, Jeff Collman argued that living on the fringe of a town should rather be seen as “an important political act” rather than a “symptom of individual and group decay” (Collmann 1988, p.236, cited by Cowlshaw p.27). The urban artists made painting into another “important political act” and showed that culture was not static but changed with changing circumstances. The white insistence on an unchanging “traditional” Aboriginal culture failed to see the actual changes in cities and towns all over Australia where Aboriginal people struggled to live.

Where can the Dreaming be found? Can it be rediscovered? Appropriating Central Australian dotting or x-ray style figures from the North as a sign of “Aboriginality” used to be falsely encouraged by white teachers as a sign of homogeneous Aboriginality open to all. The fact is that patterns and motifs cannot be borrowed without permission because in each distinct Northern and Central Australian group they are owned by specific groups. This has caused problems for urban artists: in turning away from copying traditional artforms each must find his or her permissible individual approach.

In 1993 I addressed this issue in a letter to the innovative Sydney curator and writer Jo Holder about some brightly coloured panels filled with animals by a group of emerging Aboriginal artists in Wollongong; Trish Woods, Lorraine Brown, Narelle Thomas and Donna Thomas.

I feel that your doubts about the Wollongong City Gallery panels, so obviously decorative, fall into the category of our bias towards ‘high art’. We like art that is fractured, pared down, minimal, in series. Yet these panels come from a group of women trying to repair enormous cultural damage: loss of language, loss of myth/history, loss of land – the colour and detail comes from a fierce desire to redress the cultural blankness to which their families had been relegated, to offer the next generation a new affirmation (Conroy, *Letter to Jo Holder*, 1993, p.1).

Trish Woods, a Koori woman from southern Queensland, felt strongly that her forgotten stories could be re-envisioned and re-invented. The lost Dreaming could be re-dreamed. This is what Pam Johnston set out to accomplish, with people, land and relationships at the centre of her concerns.

**Considering the painting: *Shimmer VI*, 1996.**



Fig.3. Pam Johnston. *Shimmer VI*  
Gold leaf, acrylic and shellac on rag paper, 100cm x 50cm, 1996  
Collection Diana Wood Conroy

The red, gold and brown painting shows an iconic, stylized image of a woman with rounded body and long arms circling it. Her legs are truncated points. Her head is an egg-shaped oblong without facial features. The centre of her body is a dark circle containing shadowy small figures, and the darkness of this void is a dominant form in the composition. Around her head, almost like a halo are two pale, leaping thin figures each diving in opposite directions. In the foreground at the bottom of the image are scalloped forms, possibly hills with a row of stick figures floating above them. A band of geometric ornament is layered in the imagery on the right side of the painting. All the figures are encompassed by a vast landscape, with rocky hills in the background, and scribbles of vegetation in the centre, represented much more naturalistically than the figures. This archetypal Australian 'landscape', with distance and perspective is reminiscent of the stretching plains of western NSW, where Johnston's maternal site of Moree exists, dotted with scrub and rimmed by distant hills. Both figure and ground in Johnston's painting are gold in colour with the figures outlined in red. It is important that the gold substance of the figures is the same as the gold of the country.

**Gold and red**

The materials used in *Shimmer VI* were gold leaf, acrylic and shellac combining to form a very shiny reflective surface. The gold leaf has implacable associations in western art, referring to

Byzantine and medieval religious imagery. The discovery of gold in Australia in the mid nineteenth century propelled the population of the country into a major European colony. Gold had been ignored, as far as can be known, throughout the vast timespans of Aboriginal antiquity, indicating that the golden backgrounds of Johnston's women have a personal or wider art historical significance. The gold was based in her visionary experiences of the land as light, warmth and full of presence. In Greek icons a golden ground signified "the uncreated light of God's presence" (Pearson 2005, p.28). Johnston did not care that its use offended eyes preferring a secular minimalism, as it made her vision of the intense light of the bush real to her. I raised the issue with her, but she discounted any concerns. It is worth quoting her passion for the technique:

Gold leaf is so delicate, so fragile. I buy it by the book. Each page of the book is a mixture of pure gold, brass and copper. This mixture suits me best as I like the lusciousness of the metal mix. I move the gold leaf around gently and wriggle it up and down so that it looks like old skin. It has taken me many years to be in control of the gold leaf and now it just seems to grow out of the ends of my fingers. I cover the gold leaf with shellac to give it extra texture and depth. I go to a place that is absolutely solitary in my mind...It is the creative process itself that has the most significance for me.... It is the time when I understand the nature of universal religion and truth as an elemental balance (Johnston in Ambrus 1995, p.88).

The intense shininess quality of the golden paintings was intentional. Writing about western desert painters at Yuendumu in 1988, Francoise Dussart discussed the choice of luminescent colours that characterised women's art.

The shiny paint is similar to the oil and animal fat that is rubbed on the body before it is painted and similar to the shiny look of the best ochres...Surface shininess in general is considered a sign of health, well-being and beauty, and recalls the Ancestral Beings completely beautified when they originally emerged from the Ancestral ground (Dussart in McLean 2011, p.192).

The term "shimmer" was used by Howard Morphy referring to a particular quality of light evoked by intricate cross-hatching of Yolngu bark painting that represented "the sensation of light... the shimmering effect of finely cross-hatched paintings which project a brightness ... that endows the painting with ancestral power" (Morphy 1991, p.194). Morphy's analysis was compelling and much discussed at the time, and it seems likely to me that in choosing the title *Shimmer VI* Johnston pointed to an analogy with Yolngu connections to ancestral powers. On the back of the painting was pasted a page of text to explain the image.

I walk on the land that holds the body of my mother and grandmother.... My body, this land, my mother, my grandmother are one in the sun. *Shimmer* is about the subconscious merging of body with landscape. The visual works explore our relationship with the natural world through the effects of weather on our skin, the rain, the sun, the heat, the cold, the clinging of sand and soil. The landscape through its relationship claims us despite ourselves, simply because we are a living part of it...*Shimmer* is ultimately a spiritual exploration.

I would like to explore some of the ambivalence that the powerful painting *Shimmer VI* arouses in me through searching its associations and connections.

## Parallels amongst contemporaries

The frieze of stick-like figures in *Shimmer*, their reiteration and slender forms, has similarity to those of artists represented in the 1987 collection *Aboriginality*. The symbolic use of imagery became a vital political subtext in urban Aboriginal art. The waving attenuated forms of incised and painted rock art, such as Mimi figures, predated living groups in northern Australia, and because that imagery was not 'owned' it could be used and understood as almost generically 'Aboriginal'. For example, Sally Morgan's acrylic paintings *Hold on to the dreaming* and *Anxious Angels*, both painted in 1989, have clusters of highly stylized figures. Judith Warrie (Jenuarrie) and Heather Walker also derive figure imagery from rock art in prints and paintings (Isaacs 1987, p.63 and p.64). All these artists painted using western materials and processes and were discovering their Aboriginality. Karen Casey from Tasmania offers another comparison to Johnston, with lithe figures painted expressionistically and "drawn from early rock art." She commented:

The label 'Aboriginal Artist' concerns me though partly because we are being pigeon-holed... To be an artist in any environment requires a pretty strong commitment...I'm an artist who happens to be Aboriginal, not an 'Aboriginal artist'. I don't feel I have to prove I'm a Koori but I do have to prove to myself that I'm an artist in my own right and that my work can stand on its own merit. I believe that's particularly important for all of us: that we are eventually accepted into the mainstream of contemporary Australian art (Thompson 1990, p.143, p.146).

Johnston explained her figures:

I would like to draw...the women who took me to country where I discovered the same sense of belonging and where I met the ghosts of my mother and grandmother and their mothers before them. I would draw a circle in the centre of these women to represent the centre of self – the little child and grown-up women meeting (Johnston 1997, p.91).

The image of a figure with a central womb cavity can be found in two remarkable Aboriginal artworks, both from postcolonial contexts. Ten years after Pam Johnston's painting, in 2006, the Tiwi ceramicist Cyril James Kerinauia made a patterned earthenware form 600 mm high called *Bima and Jinani*, echoing the female figure with a hole in the centre of *Shimmer*. Poised in the centre of the empty oblong hole is a small black figure, the child Jinani whom Bima let die, by accident leaving him in the sun while she dallied with her lover Tjappara the moon man. This potent story of how death came to humans is the central myth in Tiwi funerary ceremonies. The woman Bima becomes a wailing curlew, continually mourning her child (*From the Earth: contemporary indigenous Ceramics* p.34). The womb is a place of loss, as well as life, a void that resonates with Johnston's image.



Fig.4. Cyril James Kerinauia, *Bima and Jinani*, 2006  
Earthenware with underglaze decoration, 60 x 32 x 8 cm



Fig.5. George Mung Mung, *Pregnant Mary*, c.1983  
Carved in wood with natural ochres, 64 cm high

Catholic art historian Rosemary Crumlin saw the powerful image by George Mung Mung of Warmun in Central Australia, *Pregnant Mary* as “one of the great religious images of this century.” She describes the figure as that of a young unmarried Warmun girl who “carries the child in her womb-shield beneath her heart” (Crumlin 1993, p.101). Like Johnston’s image the arms encircle the womb, but in Mung Mung’s carving the womb is white, not dark. Both the Kerinauia and Mung Mung objects possess a centralized and symmetrical composition, typical of the stillness of an icon.

A more distant comparison to *Shimmer VI* is to an actual icon, a type of image that would have been known to Pam Johnston through her studies in art history. The twelfth century image of the Virgin poised in the centre of the curved apse, between heaven and earth, places the Christ Child inside her in a circular space. Her arms are raised, like the supplementary flying figures in Johnston’s painting. This fresco in the apse of a church at Trikomo in Cyprus has a prayer painted beneath the Virgin’s feet. “...pure Virgin, Mother of the Lord, behold the desire of my miserable soul and become my intercessor at the time of judgement...” Perhaps Pam Johnston, with her interest in many spiritual traditions had a faint memory of such a composite figure (common in Byzantine art) and knew that the role of the “Mother of God” was to be a mediator, to give nurture and help in a harsh society (Maguire 1999, p.104).



Fig.6. Virgin with Christ Child, 12<sup>th</sup> century  
Detail of fresco in apse of church, Trikomo, Cyprus

Johnston quoted her friend, the remarkable Ngaku artist Robert Campbell Jnr (1944 - 1993), “He was very supportive of that idea of being yourself and painting your own truths as you experienced them. He wanted our people’s stories to be told in a hundred different ways” (Johnston 1997, p. 44). In this sense, *Shimmer VI* can be read as Aboriginal in its different visual strategies that express yearning for ancestors and evocation of place. With its wider resonances, it is also “contemporary world art” in Morphy’s phrase.

## Conclusion

Pam Johnston once told me how she met the Dalai Lama (then touring Australia), while she was conducting troubled boys through the Yiribana Indigenous section of the Art Gallery of NSW. They had never been into an art gallery before; she was warning them not to touch the art. The Dalai Lama came up to talk to her and Pam said they got on wonderfully. Probably he recognised her vitality and warmth looking after the boys, and also that her energy overlaid other painful knowledge.

In 1992 Philip Jones observed, “Today there is a clearer recognition that the most inventive and exciting aspects of Aboriginal material culture arise from the ground that lies between Aboriginal and European society” (Jones 1992, p.71). The intense debate about “what Aboriginal art is, does and means” continues, wrote Ian McLean in 2011 (p.94). The art does not exist without artists, who come from every kind of diverse Aboriginality. Unpredictable and with nothing to lose, they continue to astonish, using the full range of sources available to a contemporary person, inventing and re-inventing.

Pam Johnston’s ability to take on daunting ontological issues in confronting the multiplicity of her identity is a large achievement. Her personal history is reflected in many stories of those hoping for, suspecting, or finding Aboriginal ancestry. She illuminated my understanding of the complexity of the loss, the terrible unknowing erasure of people’s identity with kin and land. Like the longing for an unobtainable love, the paintings are rituals to bring certainty and closure. They speak of a vital era in the emergence of urban Koori art. The edginess of such Koori paintings received a strong emphasis in the 2013 *Australia* exhibition at the Royal

Academy of Arts in London (Caruana and Cubillo in *Australia*, pp. 42-50). The same issues are still current in 2014. If in the end Johnston's paintings only authenticate the "poetics of uncertainty" as Ravenscroft puts it (p.71), this is true to her understanding of herself and her history.

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**Biographical note.** Diana Wood Conroy (BA (Hons) Archaeology, University of Sydney, Doctor of Creative Arts (University of Wollongong) became a tapestry weaver in the 1970s, and has research interests in archaeology and anthropology. Her involvement with Aboriginal communities began in 1974 when she was co-ordinator of Tiwi Designs, Bathurst Island, Northern Territory. She has published extensively on issues of contemporary textiles and visual arts. She is Emeritus Professor of Visual Arts, Faculty of Law, Humanities and Arts, University of Wollongong.



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<sup>i</sup> During this time she was known as Pamela Johnston Dahl Helm, and her Doctor of Creative Arts thesis in the University of Wollongong Library appears under this name.

<sup>ii</sup> “Indigenous” has become a favoured term since about 2000, rather than “Aboriginal” which has historical overtones of colonisation, while “Indigenous” has a global scope. The actual name of the community is the preferred usage, e.g. Koori (a generic title for urban people on the east coast of Australia), Tiwi or Warlpiri. “Non-Aboriginal” may be used instead of “white”, because the general Australian population is multi-ethnic, not just Anglo-Celtic.

<sup>iii</sup> Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative was established by Fiona Foley after experience in Central Arnhem Land community co-operatives. It included Queenslanders Avriell Quail, Aarone Raymond Meeks (Margie West “Flash Marks: A brief history of twentieth century Queensland Aboriginal Art”, in Neale and Kleinert 2000, 188). Euphemia Bostock, Jeffrey Samuels were founding members, with Bronwyn Bancroft, Brenda Croft and Hettie Perkins. Boomalli Artists listed in 2014 on the Aboriginal Artists Directory website were Aarone Meeks, Adam Hill, Aroha Groves, Badger Bates, Elaine Russell, Euphemia Bocstock, Gordon Hookey, Jason Groves, Jeffrey Samuels, Joe Hurst, Khi-lee, Leonie Dennis, Mervy Bishop, Michael Riley, Rea, Roy Kennedy (<http://www.aboriginalartdirectory.com/shop/artist-association/boomalli-aboriginal-artists-cooperative.php>, accessed 10.2.2014).

<sup>iv</sup> *Lake Mungo Revisited* curated by Jennifer Lamb of Goulburn Regional Gallery NSW became a travelling exhibition 2000-2001. Pam Johnston did not participate, but did return to Lake Mungo taking groups of her own in workshops.