

## Renewal

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Here you are in the eastern part of Wiradjuri country;  
A land enriched by Wambool (Macquarie River),  
Populated by Australia's diverse flora and fauna,  
And home to the Bathurst clan of the Wiradjuri nation.

Here you are in Charles Sturt University  
A learning institute established for the public good  
Populated by learned scholars, teachers, students and professional staff  
And home to the Bathurst clan of the Wiradjuri nation.

This year Bathurstians celebrate two hundred years of Australia's oldest inland settlement. This term settlement cause's disquiet as it implies a neutral expansion of the new Australian colony. Or, perhaps, as history records, a controlled expansion for new grazing lands by Governor Macquarie (Pearson, 1984). In fact settlement does not describe the disruption of three clan boundaries and their use of land or the invasion of territory that provoked active resistance and war (Pearson, 1984). The use of English words, like settlement, blanket over the truth of the racial conflict that deeply stains this country. The English language drives dualisms (white/black; good/bad; light/dark) that imply privileged values, ancestry, culture and education.

The conflict zone that exists between Aboriginal peoples and White Australians continues to reverberate. Even today in Bathurst conflict is plays out like the accidental locking of Elders out from the island on the Wambool on the morning of the re-enactment of the Proclamation of Bathurst this year; or the sixty plus year struggle to achieve the co-naming of Mount Panorama with its original name *Wahluu (to watch over)*. The conflict zone is entrenched and deep. However, on both sides of the trench, there are many people building bridges and finding ways to use the trench to drain away the sadness, grief, trauma and anger of colonisation.

In this exhibition you will find yourself surrounded by the expressive creations of Aboriginal artists, both local and from around Australia. What we hope you find is a narrative about conflict and a countering of this conflict with celebration of Aboriginality. Many of the selected artworks communicate powerful emotions and stories of battle, separation, destruction, and anger.

From the earliest drawing represented in this exhibition - the 1880 work *[Battle Scene]* by Kwatkwat artist Tommy McRae (1835-1901) boldly draw in pen and ink depicts acts of battle by Aboriginal peoples in response to ever demanding land encroachments by the colonists – to Gordon Bennett’s *Panorama Stream (with floating point of identification)* where Aboriginal motifs bleed atop a black canvas featuring topographically abstract expression. Each of these paintings place Aboriginal people and identity at the centre of investigation by the artist, expressing determined and sometimes defiant Aboriginalities.

In contrast, the works of Wiradjuri artist H.J Wedge (1957-2012) and Julie Dowling (Yamatji-Budimia) are intensely personal examinations of self, identity, family and connections to community and culture. Wedge evokes a dreamscape, perhaps nightmarish, in his 1996 painting *Destruction of life* where he overlays the destruction of Australian fauna with the fate of Aboriginal Australians. Dowling’s 1996 *Reunion with my Ancestors* and 1996 *His Fathers Son* is thickly imaged with spiritual and personal symbolism. Both artists speak to us about their embodied interpretation of personal experiences of trauma and transgenerational experiences of trauma resulting from the colonial act.

At the heart of the exhibition are two, newly made by the Bathurst Aboriginal community, Possum Skin Cloaks. These cloaks are cause for celebration of reclamation of cultural practices and celebration of Aboriginality here in Bathurst. Made between October 2014 – April 2015, these two cloaks detail Wiradjuri stories and the Dreaming of Bathurst.

*Cloaks were used in daily activity, to keep warm, to sleep in and carry our babies. Cloaks were an important trade item. Cloaks were significant in ritual and ceremony. We were buried in our cloaks – ‘wrapped in our Country.’ (Couzens, 2011).*

Possum skin cloaks are communally made. They require hunting of many possums, skinning, treating of the skins, sewing of the skins together into the shape and size of the cloak, design etched into the cloak. The process of creating a single cloak takes many people and much time, providing time and space for sharing, community building and reflection. Many participated in the process of making the possum skin cloaks, from Elders to children, Aboriginal community members and friends.

The significance of this exhibition is its unflinching presentation of the conflict zone between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal people. There is an emotional power in this pain being made present alongside two new important Possum Skin Cloaks. The Cloaks represent a renewal, as the community reclaim cultural practices and enact those practices. We hope that you engage deeply with this exhibition and feel the bittersweet strains between conflict and celebration. Meditating and reflection on these two complex and powerful emotions is a strong commitment to place, this place, Wiradjuri country.

Couzens, V. (2011) *Kooramook yakeen: possum dreaming*. Culture Victoria  
<http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/kooramook-yakeen-possum-dreaming-by-vicki-couzens/> Accessed 10/6/2015 12.52pm

Pearson, M. (1984) *Bathurst plains and beyond: European colonisation and Aboriginal resistance*, *Aboriginal History* 8: 63-79.