

Exhibitions at The Box in Plymouth and Tate Modern in London, alongside a new publication, are just three ways to engage with the world's oldest living culture, that of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, writes *Ellen Mara De Wachter*

## Tracing Australia's Songlines





During 2021–2022 the British Council and the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are collaborating on their most ambitious ever cultural exchange, celebrating the diversity of cultures and languages throughout Australia and the UK, and themed around the question, 'Who Are We Now?' With more than 200 events in the UK across all art forms and regions, one of UK/Australia Season's central strands is devoted to art created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These initiatives hope to convey an awe-inspiring vision of a culture that has existed for more than 60,000 years, from the era of the megafauna to that of mobile phones. With more than 500 Aboriginal nations spread across Australia and the Torres Strait Islands, Indigenous cultures display a great diversity of practices and beliefs, held together by sophisticated and enduring knowledge systems. At the core of Indigenous Australian cosmology is a deep understanding of the land as a living provider of both physical and cultural sustenance, and as the foundation for family, language and identity. Known as 'connection with Country', this profound relationship with the land lacks an equivalent in European culture. However, an appreciation of its role in sustaining life in adverse conditions could help inform the choices that humanity makes to assure its survival as the climate continues to change in the years ahead.

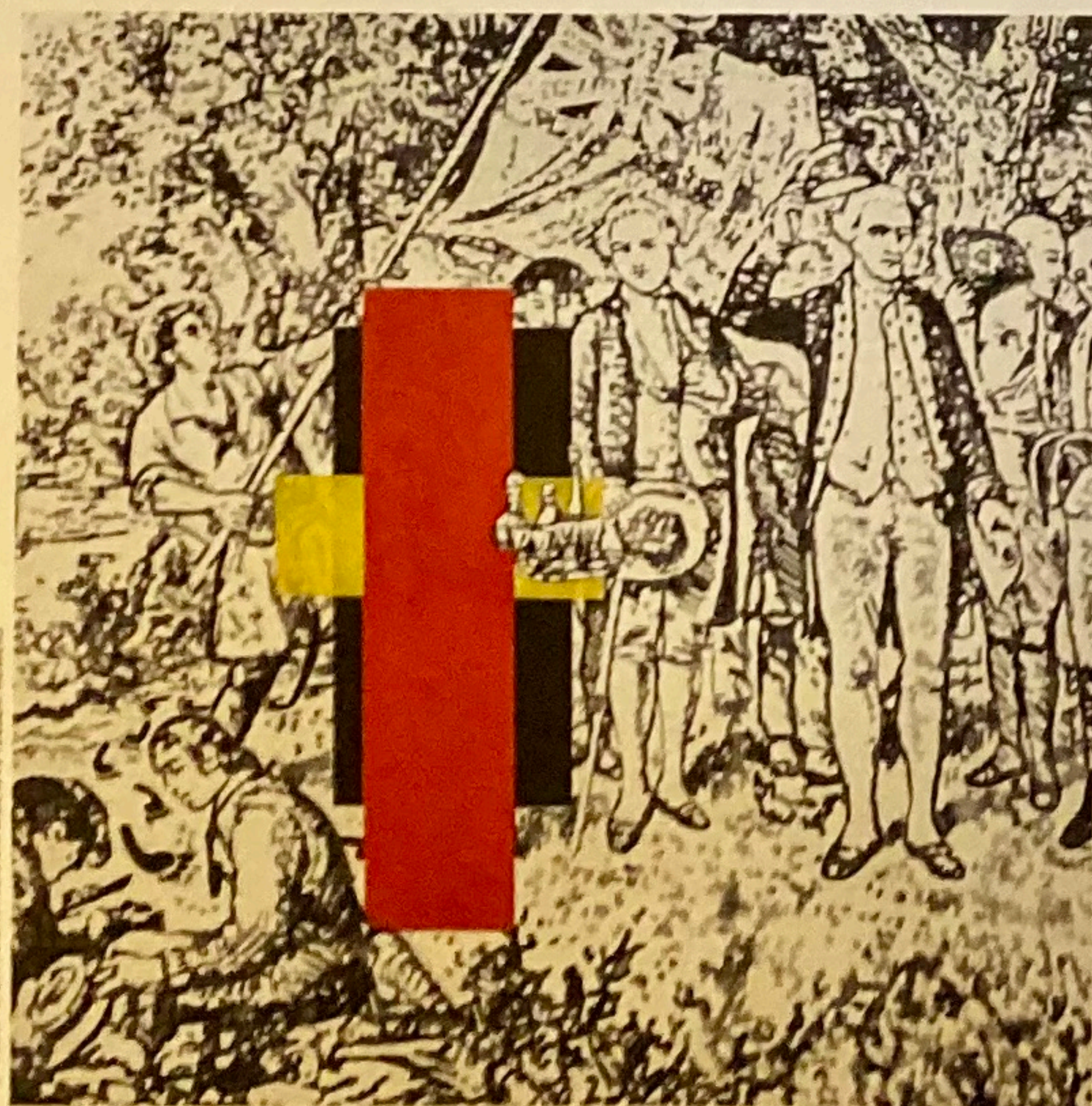
The impact of British colonialism on Aboriginal peoples since the late 18th century is the focal point for several projects, and the book *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* delves into the histories of nearly 160 objects held in public collections in the UK and Ireland. Indigenous Australian artefacts can be found in more than 75 museums around the UK, with the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford holding by far the largest collection, which counts more than 16,000 Aboriginal Australian objects. At Glasgow Museums, a collection of 500 objects has a special focus on artefacts from the Torres Strait Islands, and boomerangs, used for hunting and ritual purposes, can be found in museums including the Horniman Museum and Gardens in south London, Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery in Exeter, Sheffield Museums and the World Museum Liverpool. National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, holds a remarkable collection of bark paintings by celebrated artists including Peter Marralwanga, Narritjin Maymuru and John Bunguwuy, which were commissioned in the 1980s. Edited by British Museum curator Gaye Sculthorpe and academics Maria Nugent and Howard Morphy, both of the Australian National University, the book features contributions from 22 authors. A handful of these writers are Indigenous Australians, and the book as a whole is the product of the museums' wide-ranging collaborations with Aboriginal communities, Indigenous research fellows and the descendants of those who made the objects in question.

The volume provides evidence of the maturation of attitudes towards Indigenous art, which have evolved from a gawking curiosity about

Previous spread: artists from Tjanpi Desert Weavers let their *tjanpi* sisters fly, Papulankutja, Western Australia, 2015



BENNETT © ESTATE OF GORDON BENNETT, MOFFATT © TRACEY MOFFATT



Above: Tracey Moffatt, from the series *Up in the Sky*, 1997; left: Gordon Bennett, *Possession Island (Abstraction)*, 1991



scientific 'specimens' to a sober respect for artefacts that often transcend the confines of European culture. With chapters devoted to bark paintings, funerary objects and woven works made by women, the book casts its net wide and never attempts to simplify the complicated relationships between colonisers – or invaders – and Aboriginal artists.

The three editors present their approach as a 'new museology', based on 'principles and practices of consultation, collaboration and co-curatorship with communities'. The resulting balance between excavating the meanings of objects in their own right and in terms of their role in colonial-era relationships aims to provide new information for both Aboriginal communities and the museums that are responsible for preserving their artefacts. Contributor and Indigenous research fellow Jilda Andrews has acknowledged how this new way of connecting people and museums gave her the means to find a position of strength and comfort from which to question the objects. Her text about Indigenous Australian nets and string bags made from vegetable fibres considers these objects as metaphors for the patterns and entanglements of the Aboriginal relationships to both Country and colonialism.

The book repeatedly paints museum collections as the dynamic reservoirs of knowledge that they are, in which objects hold potentially kaleidoscopic arrays of meaning that shift and grow over time. Colonial-era traumas in many ways still persist and, although this means that 'objects can be seen as severed from Country, it is still possible to detect a connection', according to Andrews. A poignant case in point is the pair of tiny baby's slippers decorated with seashells, which were gifted to the Duchess of York in 1927 when she toured Australia with her husband, who would later be crowned King George VI. The Duchess doubtless missed her infant child Elizabeth during her six-month trip, and she received many generous gifts for her daughter, including the slippers, which are now on display in Windsor Castle. But the meaning of these endearing accessories, with their traditional Aboriginal shellwork, is far from straightforward. They were made when the 20th-century Australian state policy of removing Aboriginal children from their mothers was in full force. The children were institutionalised in Christian missions, where they were taught to reject their Indigenous heritage and adopt the practices of dominant white culture. It is estimated that at least 100,000 children were taken from their families as part of this policy, which lasted from the 1910s to the 1970s, resulting in inestimable trauma for what has become known as the 'Stolen Generations'.

Funding provision for collaborations between national institutions such as museums and universities and Indigenous Australian communities is one of the legacies of the landmark Mabo Decision in 1992, in which the High Court of Australia overturned the 'terra nullius' policy, according to which British forces assumed the land belonged to no one and seized ownership in 1770. The decision, named after Edward Koiki Mabo, a Meriam man from the Torres Strait island of Mer, or Murray, and a land-rights campaigner, was the outcome of a 10-year legal battle, and finally recognised the native title rights of Aboriginal

John Mawurndjul, *Buluwana, Female Ancestor*, 1989

IMAGE COURTESY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AUSTRALIA, PHOTO: JESSICA MAURER © JOHN MAWURNDJUL, COPYRIGHT AGENCY



Below: Malya Teomay,  
Kungkaangkajpa waka  
beard, 2015, facing page  
Mulyatjiki Marney, Nancy  
Nyanyipayi Chapman and  
Mayawaku May Chapman,  
Minyipuru at Pangkai, 2016





Right: Joseph Nangan, carved pearl shell, from the Kimberley region, Western Australia, c1970s; below, right: shellwork shoe, likely from La Perouse, Sydney, c1920



Turtle-shell helmet mask, likely from Mabuag, Torres Strait, before 1885



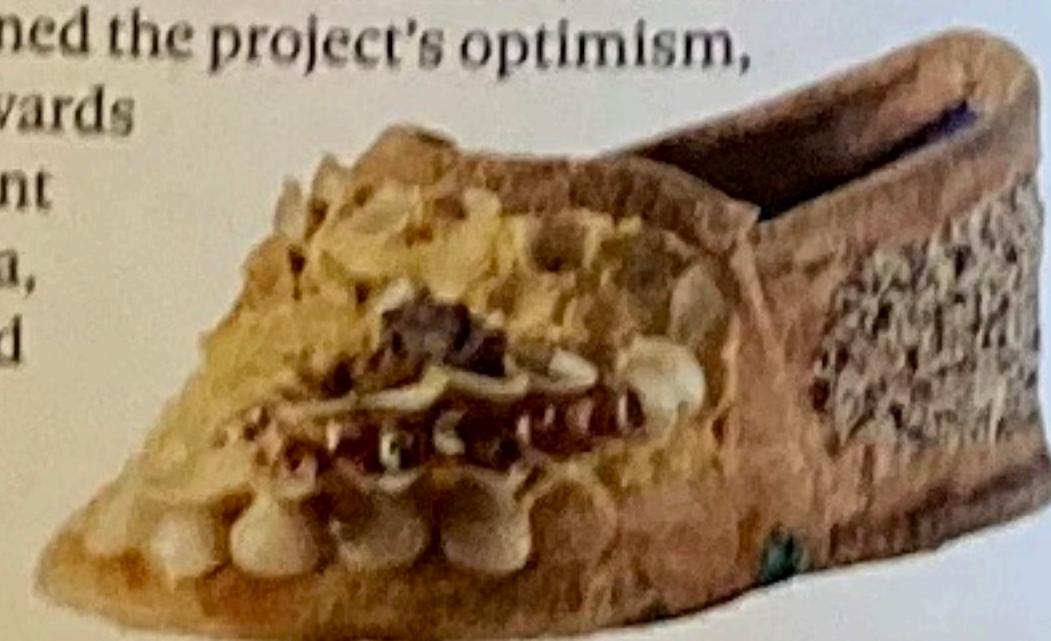
communities. It is the historical anchor for Tate Modern's exhibition 'A Year in Art: Australia 1992'. Today, although they are recognised in principle, title rights are often difficult to prove due to the lack of paperwork and can be extinguished by other laws, so the issue remains a live one. This is borne out by the significant volume of protest and activism that infuses works by 11 contemporary Australian artists in Tate's show.

The Mabo Decision recognised the intrinsic nature of Aboriginal connection with Country. Today, that traditional relationship with land co-exists with modern ways of life in a way the artist John Mawurndjul, a Djunkay or knowledge-keeper for his clan, the Kurulk, sums up with the assertion 'I am the old and the new'. Mawurndjul paints on tree bark, a material used for ceremonial and practical purposes, using ochre sourced in the earth of his Country and the traditional *rarrk* technique of fine cross-hatching. In anthropomorphic figures such as *Buluwana, Female Ancestor* (1989) the lines represent the power and spirit of ancestors rather than their bodies, since tradition dictates that depicting the bodies of the deceased is to be avoided.

Other works directly address generational traumas suffered by Aboriginal Australians, as well as contemporary economic and health disadvantages, and issues that affect the sacred bond with Country such as mining and colonial land appropriation. Gordon Bennett's paintings perform a sharp critique of colonial vanities that persist to the present day. His *Possession Island (Abstraction)* (1991) reworks Samuel Calvert's 19th-century etching *Captain Cook Taking Possession of the Australian Continent on Behalf of the British Crown* (1770), a group portrait that includes among the crowd of settlers a depiction of a servile Aboriginal man holding a tray of drinks. Bennett has repainted that portion of the image in a style reminiscent of Aboriginal dot painting, adding a set of black footprints leading up to the Aboriginal man. Bennett also obscured the man's body under stark blocks of black, yellow and red, the colours of the Aboriginal

Flag. Elsewhere in the show, Tracey Moffatt's photographic series 'Up in the Sky' (1997) is set in a modern-day outback town. Her enigmatic and often disturbing scenes allude to the inhumane practices of settler societies. In one particularly disturbing image, a white woman cradles an Aboriginal child while through the window a pair of nuns is seen approaching.

To know history is a prerequisite for moving forward, and the Tate exhibition depicts some harsh realities, while also informing viewers of the facts relating to the ongoing traumas wrought by colonialism. Alongside the project of education is one of repairing and moving forward, something the 'Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters' show, at The Box in Plymouth, accomplishes with a celebration of contemporary Aboriginal culture. The project, which was seven years in the making, is led by Margo Neale Ngawagurra, senior Indigenous curator at the National Museum of Australia. After opening in Canberra in 2017, it toured Australia and will travel to Berlin and Paris after its time in Plymouth, the only UK venue. It features over 300 contemporary paintings and objects by more than 100 artists, including ceremonial shields, spears and spear-throwers, as well as carved bowls, woven baskets and coolamons, the gently curved containers for holding goods or carrying a baby, made from wood or reclaimed metal. There are also several sculptural depictions of the Seven Sisters, including life-size woven figures of the sisters in flight, and at rest, as well as a group of intricately decorated ceramic vases representing them, made by women at Ernabella Arts, Australia's oldest Indigenous art centre, established in 1948. Neale Ngawagurra explained the project's optimism, and why she believes the attitude towards reparations for colonialism is different in Australia than in Europe and Africa, because 'the historically marginalised people live here and are part of the debate', which puts it decades ahead



of other parts of the world in seeking a way forward through politics, voice and agency. There are Aboriginal voices in many parts of society, including her own at the National Museum of Australia, where a third of galleries are dedicated to First Australians and around 70 per cent of collection pieces are by Indigenous artists. More widely, 60 per cent of artists in Australia are Indigenous, staggering considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 3.3 per cent of the population. As Neale Ngawagurra sees it, 'We are the first and main stream, no matter the numbers.'

The Songlines are routes that traverse the continent, told as stories. Sometimes referred to as the 'Dreamings', the breadth and depth of their meanings, associations and knowledge is, as Neale says, 'essentially indefinable'. The epic Seven Sisters Songlines relate to the archetypal story of the Pleiades stars, told around the world since antiquity, in which seven sisters are chased cross-country by Orion (the great hunter in Greek mythology), who is personified as the shape-shifter Yurla in the Aboriginal Songlines. The events that unfold during their epic journey serve as a means of transmitting the cultural rules and information that constitute a knowledge system related to Country, its animals, plants and landmarks.

The project is the museum's response to an appeal from Anangu elder David Miller, who told them in 2010, 'You mob gotta help us... those songlines they been all broken up now... you can help us put them back together again.' Museum curators collaborated with knowledge holders across Martu country and Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) and Ngaanyatjarra lands of Australia's Central and Western deserts, to form a 'curatorium' of elders responsible for preserving the Songlines. The team travelled more than 7,000km across those three deserts, engaging with remote communities to produce works and interpretation content for the exhibition. And although the project benefits from world-class museum curatorship, Neale Ngawagurra maintains that Aboriginal peoples are in fact the first curators, since 'they are on Country curating Country'.

Because Aboriginal society is non-text-based, knowledge of the Songlines is transmitted orally and visually, through painting and drawing, but also video, dance, song and performance. Most of the works on show were produced as part of journeys made by traditional knowledge-keepers to reconnect with Country. The vast circular canvas *Minyipuru at Pangkal* (2016) depicts the Seven Sisters at a sacred waterhole. Exhausted from Yurla's pursuit, they have turned into boulders to rest, and as they sleep more sisters are born, represented in the painting by groups of circles. The work was painted during a journey into the outback by sisters and custodians of the Minyipuru Songline, who are part of the Martumili Artists group: Mulyatingki Marney, Mayiwalku May Chapman and Nancy Nyanjilpayi Chapman, who is also a senior law woman for her people.

On the enduring relevance of Aboriginal Songlines, Neale Ngawagurra notes that 'painting is an introduced medium, but it's the same stories'. And the exhibition continues to modernise them, importing them into the latest digital technology in the DomeLab, a seven-metre wide immersive bubble on to which videos are projected. These animate and explain the symbols within Aboriginal paintings and transport viewers to remote sites, such as Walinynga Cave Hill, which may be the only known site of ancient rock art depicting the Seven Sisters. The exhibition will carry the Songlines onwards to each city that it visits, sharing the wonders of Aboriginal culture and knowledge across Country, time and space.

- 'Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters', The Box, Plymouth, to 27 February. [theboxplymouth.com](http://theboxplymouth.com), reduced-price entry with National Art Pass
- 'A Year in Art: Australia 1992', Tate Modern, London, to spring 2022. [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk), free to all
- *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* is published by British Museum Press
- For more on UK/Australia Season visit [britishcouncil.org.au](http://britishcouncil.org.au)