

Letter from Australia

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[See table of contents](#)

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LETTER FROM AUSTRALIA

By David Garneau

A year ago, I was in Australia as a member of a group of Aboriginal curators sent by the Canada Council to check out the Biennale of Sydney. I am no world traveller; it was my first time off northern North America. Apart from the whole driving on the other side of the road thing; gorgeous architecture; bird of paradise flowers growing in ditches next to palm and banana trees; office workers carrying their boards on the train for some after-work surfing; thousands of fruit bats hanging from gum trees in downtown parks as parrots squawk overhead; Sydney is much like Regina.

People are people, and I was impressed by how similar Aboriginal folks are there and here. 'Black fellas' have a comparable history of colonialism, reserves/missions, residential schools, out-of-culture adoptions; and a recent government apology. Contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Vernon Ah Kee, Gordon Bennett, Richard Bell, Destiny Deacon and Daniel Boyd wrestle with these issues in remarkable art works that resonate with Canadian Indigenous experience.

While I met most of these artists and saw some of their works, I missed the big show. *Culture Warriors*, curated for the National Gallery of Australia

(Canberra) by Brenda Croft, had just closed. Fortunately, I was able to return to Australia this May and catch it at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. This ambitious exhibition mixes 'urban' artists—including the above named—with rural, contemporary artists.

'Urban' Aboriginal artists tend to differentiate their art from the much adored abstractions of their country cousins. Most, like Richard Bell—a former painter of tourist "art"—only use 'Aboriginal' motifs ironically. They rarely make work about the land, spirituality or anything else stereotypically associated with Aboriginal people. Daniel Body and Christopher Pease take on history painting; Gordon Hookey, Vernon Ah Kee and Gordon Bennett take on language and recent events; and Richard Bell takes on all comers. Bell's hilarious video, "*Uz v.s. Them*," pits the artist against a white actor playing a skin-head, racist boxer. It's all trash talk and testosterone. The video ends before the fight begins leaving the viewer thinking as much about masculinity and strategy as about racism.

Great efforts are made in this exhibition, and in curatorial strategies in Australia generally, to promote the work of rural Indigenous artists, for example



Daniel Boyd
Treasure Island, 2005

the Papunya 'dot' paintings, as contemporary art, rather than as 'tribal' art or objects primarily of ethnographic interest. Having spent some time with the best of these works, for example, Doreen Reid Nakamarra's vibrating pattern paintings, the argument seems reasonable, though it is strained in most other cases.

Culture Warriors was complimented in Brisbane by a collections show curated by Bruce McLean. *Breaking Boundaries* displayed that city's long-term and deep relationship with Aboriginal artists—a commitment shown not only in the great collection but also the hiring of an aboriginal curator, McLean. A similar commitment is seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney) and The National Gallery in Canberra. This leadership does not just represent Aboriginal art but enables it to flourish.

The Queensland Art Gallery is part of an ingenious complex that occupies several blocks across the bridge from downtown and

includes a museum, library, second gallery, and performing arts centre. Most facilities are free and attract huge crowds of happy people—including me, who caught the Nick Cave memorabilia exhibition.

Sydney University's art school occupies a sprawling refurbished mental asylum on a hilltop compound. It is as close to art heaven as I am likely to see. I counted over a hundred painters at the University of New South Wales' dynamic College of Fine Arts, all sharing a huge floor. The critical mass generates some interesting competition and amazing work. The school is getting a huge influx of cash (\$48 million) from the Conservative government to build a new art gallery and other facility improvements as part of a recent stimulus package (attention, Stephen Harper). In my tour of both painting studios, I was surprised to see a great deal of abstraction, which seems encouraged by the example and great commercial success of rural Aboriginal art.