The Hitchhiker's Guide to Australian Aboriginal bodily adornment, object making and jewellery, BC-AC (Before Cook – After Colonisation)

Introduction

In this paper I presented a thumbnail sketch of Aboriginal body wear, bodily adornments and bodily modification practices from pre-Anglo-European contact until the present day. Many of my examples were drawn from Central Australia and the Western Desert, where I lived and worked for many years from the early 1980s until the early 1990s. A comparative approach was taken, and these practices were examined in relation to certain contemporary body adornment and modification practices currently popular in the dominant culture of this country. In addition, I provided an overview and sampling of a number of recent jewellery projects and other bodily ornamentation and adornments currently being crafted and created in various parts of Aboriginal Australia. In this presentation I did not purport to provide exhaustive coverage of this very broad field, but rather, to provide a basis for those who may wish to explore related topics further.

Part One

The Decorated Body:

Indigenous Australian Bodily Adornment and Bodily Modification Practices: An Implicit Challenge?

Introduction

Ingrained, ‘everyday thinking’ tends to lead many people towards classifying certain societies as ‘civilised’ whilst categorising others as ‘primitive’ on the basis of their bodily modification and adornment practices. One of my implicit aims in this presentation was to challenge such accepted wisdom by demonstrating that hierarchising societies on such a basis is illogical and innately flawed.

Just as people in contemporary western societies engage in a number of body ornamentation practices (for instance, the wearing of detachable objects including necklaces, rings, brooches) and ephemeral bodily alterations (temporary body staining, hair colouring, hair extensions and so on) as well as bodily modification practices (for example face lifts, botoxing, body piercings, body building, tattooing and so forth), Indigenous Australian societies also engaged in practices of bodily alteration, modification and adornment. Included among these are body piercings and scarification, as well as the wearing of feathers, animal fur or bones, hair extensions and other kinds of hair-string ornamentation. In some, mostly remote, parts of Australia such practices continue.

Sociologist Chris Shilling has conceptualised the human body as an ‘unfinished’ biological phenomenon that is taken up and transformed as a result of social participation. Regardless of one’s social or cultural background, each of us is born with an ‘unfinished body’. As we grow up, there are social pressures that lead to our bodies being clothed, adorned and otherwise modified. Exactly how this occurs depends on prevailing socio-cultural norms. These norms are determined by the dual factors of time and place.

The significant point is that our bodies are in a continuing state of ‘becoming’ throughout our lifetimes, not simply because of natural processes, the most obvious of which is ageing, but also as a result of socio-cultural pressures that lead us to alter or ‘beautify’ them. The precise nature of these bodily beautifications, alterations and modifications varies greatly according to the specific social and historical circumstances, but this is something that all human cultures and societies hold in common.

Using this as a starting point, I canvassed a number of Indigenous bodily modification and adornment practices, focusing primarily on nasal piercings and the wearing of nose-peg and the use of woven hair-string for body decoration.
Indigenous Bodily Modification Practices: Piercings and Bodily Scarification

I. Nose-pegs

This section, which dealt with pre-contact body modification and decoration practices that in some regions have continued after contact, was supported by a number of visual images of Aboriginal men wearing nose-peg ornamentation. Nose-pegs were typically crafted from the bones of a large marsupial, usually a kangaroo, and were about eight or nine inches in length and around half an inch in diameter. These were inserted through a hole that had been pierced through the nasal septum, in and out of which the nose-peg could easily slide. They could also be moved and re-moved with relative ease.

Until the quite recent past, Aboriginal men from Central Australia, the Western Desert and elsewhere in Australia frequently wore such nose ornamentation. In some parts of Australia, Aboriginal women also decorated their noses with nose-pegs. While nose-pegs were often fashioned from animal bones, they could also be made from plant material, small branches or crafted wooden objects suitable for such ornamentation. Included as an example of such alternative 'raw material' used in the making of nose-pegs was an image from the South Australian Museum, of Banksia flower-heads used for making nose-sticks, Darwin NT (Gift to South Australian Museum from Paul Foelsche, collected in the late 19th or early 20th century).

As has been explained, nose-pegs were frequently crafted from animal bones. Equally commonly used for this purpose were the bones of large birds. In the Central and Western Desert regions the largish wing bones of bush turkeys or bustards (Ardeotis australis) were often used as nose-pegs. As is the case today with various facial and other bodily piercings, substitutes or 'sleepers' could be placed through the same aperture when infection threatened or mood dictated. After colonisation, increasingly creative substitutions for 'traditional' nose-pegs ensued as a result of the introduction of new materials. Included among these were elegantly fashioned wooden or other objects, and occasionally even thin-stemmed clay pipes. Unfortunately, nose-pegs are now rarely part of Indigenous attire.

In this section of the presentation numerous visual images of Aboriginal men sporting nose-pegs were shown. Coverage spanned differing regions of Australia. Included among the images was an 1844 watercolour by the Adelaide-based George French Angas, entitled Captain Jack, a depiction of Kalditpinna, a Kaurna elder known to British settlers as Captain Jack. Kalditpinna worked with missionaries on recording the original language and culture of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains.

Angas's watercolour, which is on permanent display at Adelaide’s South Australian Museum, shows Kalditpinna as the proud bearer of a range of different ritual body incisions and decorations. His pierced nasal septum facilitated a magnificent nose-peg of unknown provenance. Kalditpinna also had ritual scarifications on his chest as well as bodily adornments, including a headband decorated with beautiful feathers, a fascinating beard decoration, a waistband and a rather fetching pubic tassel. The specific materials from which the majority of these bodily adornments and decorations had been crafted are not always clear.

An 1890 photograph of a man called Alligator Ned from the Darwin region is also on display in the same exhibition space (Alligator Ned, aged 46, 1890, Larrakia man, South Australian Museum, Adelaide). Sporting what appears to be a nose-peg crafted from wood, Alligator Ned also has armbands, ochred hair and bodily scarifications on his chest and upper abdomen.
In terms of their symbolic power, nose-peggs were widely interpreted by members of the colonising group as exemplifying quintessential, unsalvageable primitivism. Today, such frankly racist attitudes no longer go unquestioned, as young Indigenous photographer and digital artist Brook Andrew has demonstrated in his iconic 'Sexy and Dangerous', which is held in Melbourne's Ian Potter Centre. Andrew's celebrated Photoshopped image focuses on a reworked archival image of a handsome young Aboriginal man wearing a magnificently decorated nose-peg and other bodily adornments. Brook Andrew challenges audiences to review received, entrenched ideas and stereotypical thinking about what constitutes Aboriginal male beauty. Contesting past representations of such nameless young men as archetypically 'primitive', Andrew transforms this beautiful young man into a contemporary sex symbol. In doing so he raises many questions about dominant perceptions of such archival imagery.

It appears that regardless of specific historical and socio-cultural circumstances, the human body has been and still is the original 'canvas' for inscriptions and visual display. The decorated, 'marked' and modified body is a feature of all human societies. There is even a reference in Genesis to a man who took to wearing golden nose-rings! The human body has been a primary site for graphic inscription both in the past and in the present — whether that be the dyeing of skin or hair, tattooing or piercings and so on.

Enduring racist or at least ethnocentric attitudes towards Indigenous body inscription, embellishment and enhancement need to be revisited in the light of the contemporary proliferation of facial and other bodily piercings in the dominant western culture. It is time to turn the anthropological gaze onto the practices of the dominant culture in this arena, and to revise received ideas about whose practices are 'civilised' and whose are 'primitive', and even to question such terminology, as all too often such formulations hinge on extremely tenuous foundations. In contemporary western societies, including Australia, multiple piercings of almost every part of the body, ranging from the genitals to the tongue, the nipples, the lips, the nostrils, the naval, ear cartilage, earlobes and elsewhere are widely considered — at least by some — to be ultra-chic, the height of 'cool'.

Postmodern nasal piercings: spectacles botted through the nasal bridge, designed by artist James Sooy, 2005, Dallas Texas USA
Photograph courtesy James Sooy

Perhaps surprisingly, very different human societies — albeit for different underlying reasons — do sometimes take up similar piercing and bodily modification practices. As Susan Holtham writes:

What seems evident is that in traditional societies, ritual body modification practices connect people and their bodies to the reproduction of long established social positions whereas in the industrialised West, body piercing seems to serve the function of individuating the self from society.

Such desire for individuation can lead youth in the industrialised west to extreme bodily alteration practices, although this sometimes can also be driven by a need for acceptance or integration into a particular sub-cultural group.

To conclude this section, in contemporary western cultures marking the body via multiple piercings shows the lengths to which people are prepared to go in differentiating the self from the hegemonic social body, whereas in traditional Aboriginal cultures such practices relate to becoming more closely integrated into that social body.

Regardless, negative interpretations of the cultural practices of others within this broad arena should be regarded as hypocritical and illogical in the light of the contemporary social practices of the dominant group in this country, where bodily alteration and enhancement practices proliferate.
ii. Hair-string and Feathers

'Traditional' Aboriginal Body Wear: Hair-string and Feathers

Hair-string, also known as hair-rope, woven from human hair and sometimes from animal fur, either by hand or with a spindle,\(^1\) arguably has been the most highly utilised Indigenous bodily adornment in Central Australia and the Western Desert and beyond. Its ubiquity in everyday life and in ceremonial practice meant that it was, and in some places, still is, highly prized, circulated and traded between and among Indigenous groups. Typically rubbed or smeared\(^2\) with red ochre in order to strengthen its connections with Ancestral Power or what has become known as 'The Dreaming',\(^3\) hair-string was (and is), in some parts of Australial used both by young and old, women and men, for a wide variety of purposes both functional and decorative, as well as in a number of secret-sacred contexts. It was often used in conjunction with beautiful bird feathers, interwoven with animal fur or bark, or threaded with beans and used as a necklace or belt. In Central Australia and the Western Desert it was frequently interwoven into the long conical bun worn by men. Hair-string was also routinely used to tie up such conical buns.\(^4\)
At this point in the presentation I showed a range of photographic images of Aboriginal people with hair-string and other bodily adornments and modifications, taken roughly a century ago by the highly esteemed Walter Baldwin Spencer.

Baldwin Spencer, the British-born Oxford-educated anthropologist who also happened to be a gifted photographer, undertook various expeditions to Central and Northern Australia, together with his associate Gillen, an Alice Springs-based postal worker, between 1894 and 1927. Spencer’s ‘early-contact’ or in some cases ‘first-contact’ photographs show Aboriginal people, both young and old, in glowing good health.

These historically significant photographs also provided visual evidence of the ubiquity of hair-string, frequently accompanied by feathers, fur or other decorative items, as an Aboriginal bodily adornment favoured by young and old. Included among the Baldwin Spencer photographs were many that were relevant to the focus on Indigenous use of hair-string for ritual and bodily adornment or decoration:

- A photograph of a young Tjingili woman with plaited hair and with a woven hair-string extension/attachment, taken at Powell Creek, NT, September–October 1901. The girl’s ritual, ornamental scarring, another valorised bodily modification practice, was also noted.

- A photograph of a Kaititja woman with a head-band decorated with fluff and fur-string (interwoven with hair-string) neckband, taken at Barrow Creek, NT, June–July 1901. The ritual, ornamental scarring on the woman’s upper body was also pointed out.

- A photograph of an elderly Warrumungu woman wearing a woven hair-string head band with a very finely feathered ornament and neckband, taken by Baldwin Spencer at Tennant Creek, NT, in July–September 1901. It was observed that this bodily adornment was ‘simple and elegant’ – perhaps somewhat akin to the wearing of a single string of pearls by an elderly white Australian ‘lady’. Furthermore, it was pointed out that such body wear and ornamentation was not the exclusive preserve of the young.

Elderly Warrumungu woman wearing a woven hair-string head-band with a very finely feathered ornament and neckband, Tennant Creek, NT, July–September 1901, photograph courtesy Walter Baldwin Spencer

- A photograph of a middle-aged Warrumungu man wearing woven women’s head-rings with a view to curing his headache, taken at Tennant Creek, NT, 4 August, 1901. Attention was also drawn to the man’s conical bun and beard extension.

- An undated photograph of an old Arrernte man, precise venue unknown, with hair-string and hair-extensions. Again, the point was made that such hair-string adornments were not only fashionable among youth.

- A photograph of an Arrernte man with a conical bun that was tied with hair-string (left) and Arrernte man with hair-string plaited into hair (right) rubbing the edge of a spear-thrower on a shield to make fire, taken at Alice Springs in 1896.
A photograph of a group of Arrernte women decorated with rabbit fur and rabbit tails intertwined with hair-string for a women-only ceremony, 6 April 1901, taken at Charlotte Waters, NT. This particular photograph was included to demonstrate the highly developed improvisational skills of Indigenous people and their pronounced ability to utilise the new materials, items and species introduced by the British colonisers. The integration of such objects or materials into their existing ceremonial and everyday life and material culture in apparently seamless ways required a high level of creativity and skill. Incorporating such introduced items, objects and ideas into their own cultural repertoire and ‘making them their own’ has long been a successful survival strategy of Australian Aboriginal people and is equally evident in their bodily adornment and jewellery-making practices of today.

Arrernte women decorated with rabbit fur and rabbit tails intertwined with hair-string for a women-only ceremony, 6 April, 1901, Charlotte Waters, NT, photograph courtesy Walter Baldwin Spencer

- A photograph of an Arrernte girl decorated with rabbit fur and rabbit tails intertwined into hair-string for her first ceremony, Charlotte Waters, NT, 1901.

- A photograph of a woman’s mourning headdress made from animal bones interwoven with human hair-string affixed onto a head-pad of woven hair-string. The focus of this extraordinary photograph was a recently widowed Arrernte woman, whose upper body was covered with pipe clay (white being a colour signifying mourning) with a dangling headdress comprising small animal bones and locks of human hair, parrot and cockatoo feathers and stuck onto a head-ring with a fixative made from the resin extracted from porcupine grass.

An Arrernte woman’s mourning headdress, made from animal bones interwoven with human hair-string affixed onto a head-pad of woven hair-string, photograph courtesy Walter Baldwin Spencer
A photograph of a head-pad or head-ring made from woven human hair-string from Fregon, SA, home of the Pitjantjatjara people, unknown maker. Such head-rings are called manguri in the APY Lands and their purpose is to help carry heavy loads on the head. The load is typically food or water contained in large dishes. The head-rings are made from hair-string or sometimes from twisted grass or bark and more recently from interwoven pieces of cloth. This photograph was courtesy of the South Australian Museum.

A photograph of a woman's public tassel, made from human hair-string. This photograph, also courtesy of the South Australian Museum, was taken west of Hermannsburg, NT, on the homelands of the Luritja people—a typical item of clothing or bodily adornment for a Centralian woman. Teenage girls would often wear eye-catching public tassels consisting of spun hair intertwined with fur, twisted around with hair-string so that the strands would all hang downwards. The visual effect was particularly pleasing when large groups of girls or young women painted up and then danced in all-women ceremonies.

A photograph of a Warrumungu man, taken in Tennant Creek, NT, 24 August 1901. The man was in the process of releasing his classificatory mother from the interdiction of silence following a death. The woman's head-band and her public tassel, both made from human hair-string, were noted. This photograph was courtesy of Walter Baldwin Spencer.

Other images were also shown in this part of the presentation, mainly from the collections of the South Australian Museum. Included among these was a belt from Hermannsburg, NT, home of the Arrernte people, made from the seeds of the bean tree that were threaded onto hair-string. Women involved in ceremonies drape strings of 'inermte' beans around their necks and bodies prior to dancing. Today, small artefacts (mainly necklaces) are made from 'inermte' beans and are frequently sold to tourists, particularly in and around Alice Springs. These are affordable and portable souvenirs.

Discussion: Cultural Understandings of Hair-string in the Australian Central Desert and Western Desert

The function of hair-string has always transcended the purely ornamental, although there is no doubt that its decorative properties were, and in some places still are, highly appreciated. It is also prized for its functional and symbolic value.

In terms of its use-value, hair-string has been utilised in the following contexts:

- as string or rope, for purely functional purposes, for example for tying implements or binding major wounds, or for holding men's conical bells in place, as already discussed;

- woven human hair, possum skin and spun fur was tied together in the making of purija [a ball primarily made out of such hair-string] for a game similar to today's AFL. The game was played in Central Australia and the Western Desert. Involving teams of up to 100 men per side and characterised by a good deal of handpassing, this game, also known as purija (hair-string football) has now become hybridised with Gaelic football, and is thought to be an important forerunner of today's AFL—a truly Australian game!

Hair-string is also laden with symbolic value. When hair is spun into hair-string or hair-rope either by hand or with a spindle, the long strands created become imbued with a great deal of symbolic value. Whether it is attached or detached, hair has the capacity to 'survive' for quite some time after a person's death, unlike many other parts of the body. An individual's woven hair may therefore symbolise, inter alia, the desire for connection/attachment to—or alternatively, detachment from—the person in question.

It should be noted that different human cultures attach a range of symbolic meanings to hair. Sometimes, as is the case in Indigenous Australian societies, these are associated with lengthy narratives. Examples from other cultural groups include the Biblical Samson and Delilah; the Brothers Grimm story Rapunzel; the Medusa legend; and male Sikhs' prohibition against showing or cutting hair, and so on.

In the domain of love and romance, all cultures tend to attribute quasi-magical powers to certain objects and items. Sometimes the object acts as a love charm, against which the intended recipient is rendered powerless, or acts as a conduit or catalyst for 'falling in love'. The nature of the objects varies according to time and place. For example, in the dominant culture, one can point to many historical examples of fetishised objects that act as love charms, including Cupid's bow and arrow. Locks of hair or a 'dropped handkerchief' were sometimes imbued with significance or even fetishised. So all cultures have their own symbolic, often decorative, objects associated with love—for example, the engagement ring and the wedding ring in Anglo-European cultures.
In Indigenous societies, hair-string is used in the following contexts:

- **Initiation ceremonies**
  The precise use of hair-string in boys' initiation ceremonies cannot be discussed here.

- **Funerals**
  Hair can be closely identified with a particular person, living or dead, and thus can serve as a *memento mori* or way of representing a particular person who is not present for other reasons. In many Indigenous Australian societies, when a close relative dies, surviving relatives will not only shave off the head- and pubic hair of the deceased but also their own head hair to signify mourning. Often that hair is spun and used in future ceremonial contexts: in boys’ initiation ceremonies, for instance. I observed this while living at Lajamanu from 1982 to 1992.

  Hair is also sometimes associated with death in the dominant culture. Parents in the Victorian era wearing lockets containing hair locks of their dead babies or infants, sometimes for a lifetime, is well documented.

- **Love Magic (Yilpinji) ceremonies**
  As is the case in many other cultures, hair can be a sexual symbol. Just as locks of hair can be used by those who wish to do harm to the person to whose body it belongs, detached locks can be used to represent a person after whom one lusted.

  Hair-string is closely associated with *yilpinji* ['love magic'] rituals throughout Central Australia and the Western Desert. In Aboriginal societies, spindle-woven or human hair-string has a special place in love ceremonies. Men spin hair-string to 'lure' women into sexual relationships with the sorcerer. In this case, the string clearly has a metaphorical dimension, connoting sexual bonds and romantic attachment.

- **Sorcery**
  To some extent this category intersects with the 'love magic' category above, but this does not necessarily have a sexual dimension.

- **Healing ceremonies**
  An earlier example given documented the use of woven head-rings as a headache cure. Such practices also took place in the ceremonial context.

- **Various other ceremonial exchanges between and among groups**
  Hair-string is commonly used as a headband in yawulyu (women-only ceremonies) with cocky feathers or other kinds of feathers as additional adornment. It is also used in men's *Wili* ceremonies in which ceremonial foliage is bound to their limbs and to large decorative poles. Hair-string is sometimes sacred and therefore on occasion its uses are extremely secret in gender-specific ways.

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Woven Warlpiri hair-string. Lajamanu Northern Territory 1980s. gift to Christine Nichols, private collection, Adelaide
Photograph courtesy Christine Nichols
Part Two: Contemporary Indigenous Initiatives in Jewellery Making

In the following part of the presentation, I offered an overview and a sampling of some contemporary Indigenous group initiatives in jewellery making, all involving, to a greater or lesser extent, a fusion of old and new materials, techniques, motifs or designs. The influence of jewellery and other body ornamentation traditions introduced by successive waves of colonisation to this country (notably from Europe and, more recently, from Asia) varied markedly among these groups.

Significantly, these successful group projects all involve some level of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous jewellers or practitioners, which I have deemed a sufficiently important factor in terms of the success of these enterprises to warrant additional commentary. Collaboration should be regarded as a key concept and word in this context, and is mostly dealt with in the section on the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings.

In some cases these contemporary Indigenous jewellers use ‘tradition’ as the basis (to a variable extent) of their work, while for others who are less connected with their ‘country’, it is only an indirect influence. Such influences may be evinced in materials used, the designs, iconography or the motifs that they incorporate into their work. The number of such enterprises is currently proliferating, with many jewellery-making collectives and cooperatives springing up all over the country. There are also some individual practitioners throughout Australia. It needs to be emphasised that what follows is a mere sampling of current activity in this arena.

Before embarking on coverage of enterprises that are creating contemporary Indigenous jewellery, I alluded briefly to other contemporary Indigenous body wear and other forms of bodily adornment. The extremely successful Alice Springs Beanie Festival was offered as an example in this context. The Beanie Festival poses interesting questions about the extent to which the use of feathers in that context is indicative of cultural continuity or cultural change.

Feathers in the contemporary context: the Alice Springs Beanie Festival

Contemporary use of a single feather as decorative element on a beanie, Alice Springs Beanie Festival 2005
Photograph courtesy Siri Omberg

The Titjikala Jewellers

The Titjikala Jewellers were the first group that I discussed in this section, in which I provided an introduction to some successful joint Indigenous and non-Indigenous initiatives in jewellery making. Like the other enterprises dealt with in the same part of the presentation, the Titjikala Jewellery project involved collaboration between Aboriginal participants and a non-Indigenous art centre coordinator/mentor, Siri Omberg.

Titjikala, formerly known as Maryvale, is a small predominantly Aboriginal community located about 130 kilometres to the south of Alice Springs. Its population of approximately 300 mainly comprises people of the Luritja language/cultural group, although there are also some Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people living there.
The thriving Titjikala Art Centre is attended by many local women and more recently, also by one man. By pure happenstance, late in 2003 Siri Omberg arrived at Titjikala to become its second Art Coordinator. She is a well-known jeweller with a significant background in directing and managing private art galleries in Melbourne. Soon after Omberg’s arrival at Titjikala, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous local people, aware of her background as a jeweller of high standing, and knowing that she was still making her own work, began to quiz her about the possibility of introducing jewellery making to the Titjikala artists and constantly asked her when she would start teaching the artists jewellery making.

This prodding did not cease. Each time Omberg appeared wearing a new set of earrings that she had made for herself the subject was re-introduced. Caroline Lopez, the former manager of Alice Springs’ prestigious Gallery Gondwana, was especially enthusiastic in her encouragement of an Omberg-mentored jewellery movement at Titjikala.

So, after approximately six months’ residence at Titjikala, Siri Omberg began to envisage incorporating jewellery making into the centre’s art production profile. The initial Titjikala jewellery venture involved working with MDF (medium density fibreboard made from compressed pieces of wood that have been stuck together with adhesive) on which the Titjikala jewellers learned the use of the jeweller’s saw, making little wooden brooches that they then painted. When the local Aboriginal women first attempted to use the jeweller’s saw and the jeweller’s flame, quite a few did not like it, feeling fearful of the flame and the equipment more generally. A critical mass of women artists did, however, take to jewellery making with enthusiasm and considerable aptitude. People particularly enjoyed the paraphernalia and accoutrements that accompany the making of jewellery – for example, wearing protective glasses.

As has been explained, the first Titjikala jewellery works created using MDF wooden craft board were brooches, mostly cut into the shapes of small reptiles such as snakes, lizards and goannas, to which bright, cheerful, dotting (with an undercoat of acrylic paint) was applied. The makers would then glue on brooch clips and magnets. Alternatively, they would make rectangular brooches decorated with vivid paintings of local ‘bush Tucker’ such as bush bananas. These small colourful brooches are immensely appealing and they soon found a niche in the flourishing Aboriginal art market with retailers and buyers alike quickly snapping them up. Small explanatory cards created to accompany each brooch were another successful arm of the marketing strategy.

Early Titjikala Jewellery. In 2003, a year before beginning their work with silver, the Titjikala Jewellers began their ‘apprenticeship’ by cutting craft board using the jeweller’s saw and gluing on brooch clips and magnets. Photograph courtesy Siri Omberg.

After these initial tentative explorations, Stephen Anderson held a workshop for the artists. Over time Anderson conducted a number of inocut workshops in which each item created took the same basic shape. This uniformity in terms of shape was to some extent to act as a template for future artistic activity. By limiting the shape, the project was able to proceed in a very orderly fashion, with a focus on content. It needs to be added that such an approach falls within existing paradigms of traditionally orientated Indigenous art production whereby subject matter and design elements are circumscribed by a number of factors relating to Aboriginal Law. This may be one reason why the jewellery enterprise took off so exceptionally well.
As Siri Omberg describes it, the next phase Titjikala jewellery production began almost instantaneously on a particularly quiet day. Omberg deliberately chose a Wednesday, 'cheque day' at Titjikala, when few people were around, to launch the making of silver jewellery, not wishing to be inundated by large numbers of people all wanting to learn about working with sterling silver on the same day and at the same time. In other words, her conscious decision led to a manageable process.

Omberg had preceded this new venture by purchasing sheets of sterling silver and sterling silver wire. These 'makings' were placed in an office and showroom away from the artists’ main working area, a separate area from the art room where people painted on a daily basis. Quietly and unobtrusively, she placed jewellery-making tools in this office/showroom area. Initially only a few people began working with the art coordinator, learning the ropes of silver jewellery making. Omberg reports that, unsurprisingly, at that very early stage, the artists’ skill levels in terms of working with the new medium were demonstrably limited. People, not fully aware of sterling silver's worth, occasionally worked in uneconomical ways. If not closely guided at this early stage, they could ‘cut the shape and snip right through the middle of a five hundred dollar sheet of sterling silver, and although nothing was ever discarded it was a lot less economical’. Over time this would change.

In response to these early initiatives, the jewellery-making enterprise gradually gathered momentum, with the women making small pendants and earrings, following Omberg’s suggestion that they could most effectively take the oblong shape of coolamons. Again, limiting the shape to the basic coolamon form proved to be a critical factor in the project’s eventual success.

Coolamons are used by Aboriginal women and are predominantly flat wooden dishes with slightly conical surfaces especially around the edges. They are multi-purpose in nature, being used for collecting ‘bush tucker’ (flora and small faunal) and for carrying food; as baby carriers as well as babies’ beds; and as head rests for adults. In addition, coolamons can be used for winnowing and, finally and importantly, when painted or appropriately incised, they are transformed into ceremonial objects – often of considerable significance.

![Arrernte baby lying in a coolamon, with soft shredded bark in its interior, Alice Springs 1895](image)

Photograph courtesy Walter Baldwin Spencer

The women in the jewellery workshop added ceremonial designs to their miniature, oval-shaped, exquisitely curved silver coolamons by using traditional Pitjanjatjara/Yankunytjatjara carving and incising techniques (punu) traditionally practised on wooden objects and artefacts (also called ‘punu’). Punu is a generic Pitjanjatjara/Yankunytjatjara word and concept meaning wood or any wooden item or object. Thus, by semantic extension, the same terminology is applied to wooden carvings, incisions and designs created using hot wires or other media.

All of the practitioners thus began making mini-coolamon jewellery items and incising them with traditional designs simulating ‘traditional’ techniques using hot wires. Most of the women used a combination of different techniques, and there was considerable experimentation. Following the success of this project, Omberg liaised with Apecs Investments in Melbourne to cast the works with a view to facilitating future mass production if market forces so determined.

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Apecs Investments is a Melbourne-based company, of which Tony Eccles, now retired, has been the longstanding CEO. Apecs specialises in the custom casting of precious metals, including gold alloys, platinum, silver, brass and bronze, for jewellery while also dealing with allied statuary and promotional industries. Therefore, existing moulds can be used to recast popular items in the future. Thus the approach taken has the cleverly built capacity to generate future income for the Titjikala jewellers if future art coordinators are far-sighted enough to build upon earlier achievements.

Indeed, there was considerable market demand for the jewellery created. For example, Gallery Gondwana and other commercial outlets sold all of the initial Titjikala jewellery.

Jewellery making has been a significant generator of income for the Titjikala artists, although the initiative needs to continue to be nurtured now that Siri Omburg has resigned from her position as the full-time Titjikala Art Co-ordinator to devote herself to her own jewellery-making practice, and is currently working as an independent jeweller from her Alice Springs studio base.

One quite remarkable occurrence during the short history of jewellery production at Titjikala was the 'discovery' by a young woman, Lisa Wilyuka, of repoussé technique in the course of her experiments with sterling silver. Independently of any formal education or training in this technique or even a prior demonstration, Wilyuka stumbled upon the repoussé technique in the course of a workshop, thereby creating possibilities for another form of creative expression via jewellery making. Lisa is the only jeweller at Titjikala who continues to work using repoussé technique.

In all, there have been approximately 30 to 60 artists working at Titjikala Art Centre at any given time and up to 20 jewellers. Talented metalsmiths such as Lisa Wilyuka, who are prepared to take chances and to innovate with this medium, signal a successful and healthy future for the Titjikala jewellers so long as the project continues to be sustained by future art coordinators. The number of very young women involved is also very encouraging, auguring well in terms of the project's future potential sustainability. Among the prominent Titjikala jewellers are Marcia Alice, Susan Amungarra, Patricia Boko, Sarah Entata, Cora Meruntju, Doris Thomas, Janie Wells, Hazel Ungwanaka and the youthful Loreta Francis.

![Image of two pieces of jewellery, with captions: from left: Marcia Alice, coolson pendant, 2005, silver; Patricia Boko, Untitled, coolson pendant, 2005, silver; Titjikala Jewellers, Titjikala Northern Territory, photographs courtesy Siri Omburg.]

**The Imara Button Makers**

Since her days as art coordinator at Titjikala, Siri Omburg has conducted the occasional workshop 'out bush', going on sorties from her Alice Springs studio base. The most recent took place at Mount Ebenezer on the Lasseter Highway outside of Alice Springs. Mount Ebenezer boasts an Aboriginal-owned roadhouse that doubles as an art gallery, Imanta Gallery.

The Imara artists themselves are based at the Mount Ebenezer Roadhouse. They cater for many passing tourists, many of whom are 'grey nomads', mostly not interested in buying Aboriginal 'fine art'. Rather, they are disposed to purchase small, affordable souvenirs of their 'trip out bush'. Hence, the Imara artists have invested in a button-making machine that mass-produces buttons with designs with a 'local flavour'. Popular
among the tourists are Imanpa buttons featuring images of bush berries, outback scenes, cockies, honey ants and striking local rock formations.

In this case the enterprise is mainly pitched towards the lower socio-economic end of the Territory's cultural tourism market. The artists began this now entirely self-sufficient enterprise with a view to bettering their financial situation. At the same time the buttons serve as a means of asserting the artists' regional and group identity as local Aboriginal people. Siri Omberg was also behind the idea of button making as a means of building a more sustainable cultural and economic future.

Siri Omberg has assisted these artists to invest in a button-making machine (producing buttons similar to those used to proclaim political slogans and the like) for people to mass-produce their designs, then sell, thus strengthening their already flourishing cultural tourism enterprise. It is a self-funded and self-sufficient Aboriginal art centre – the art centre employs women who are paid by the hour to print T-shirts – and this is already a flourishing business. Ultimately, the aspiration is for these small Aboriginal communities to become self-sustaining both culturally and economically through their artistic practice. Imanpa Arts, which is now capably coordinated by art coordinator Sarah Harrison, shows every sign of being able to realise that goal. Successful practising artists include Kathy Mumu, Margaret Smith, Pollyanne Mumu, Lillian Inkamala, Phyllis Bulla, Carol Mumu, Barbara Mumu, Mavis Staines and Georgina Williamson Young.

![Vest covered with buttons produced by the Imanpa Artists, 2007, Imanpa Arts, Northern Territory. Photograph courtesy Siri Omberg/Sarah Harrison, former Arts Co-ordinator Imanpa Arts](image)

**The Saltwater Jewellers**

In this section, I provided a very brief overview of the jewellery made by the Saltwater Group, based in far Northern Queensland. Included among them are jewellers from the Torres Strait Islands. A common factor in all of the small jewellery enterprises discussed in this presentation, whether they involve the making of fine art or ethno-kitsch, is their assertion of regional, group identities through contemporary artistic practice.

The Saltwater jewellers are no exception: the jewellery in the Saltwater Collection involves a collective assertion of the makers' identity as a seafaring Indigenous people. A good deal of the contemporary jewellery in the Saltwater Collection has been inspired by traditional Torres Strait Island ceremonial headdresses. Among other visual images, I showed photographs of work by Kathryn Norris, a Torres Strait Islander. Norris, a member of the Saltwater Collective, makes silver pendants based on the remarkable traditional headdresses worn by male dancers. This work I compared with that of Ken Thaiday Junior, who is the most
famous contemporary exponent of Torres Strait Islander headdresses and has been almost single-handedly responsible for reviving that locally and globally endangered tradition. For the sake of comparison I also showed images of Thaiday’s *Tiger Shark* headdress, a mixed media work that is part of the Art Gallery of South Australia’s collection. It is clear from the Saltwater Group’s work that such headdresses are highly significant identity markers for these Islanders, differentiating them not only from non-Indigenous Australians but from other Indigenous Australian groups as well.

Like the Titjikala Jewellers, who specialise in miniaturised versions of coolamans, working in silver, the Saltwater group produces Lilliputian versions of the much larger Torres Strait Islander headdresses of yesteryear.

As is the case with the Titjikala Jewellers, the Imanpa Button Makers, the Maningrida women jewellers working with Alice Whish, and the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings, through their jewellery the Saltwater Group are expressing a powerful identity politics by which means they are seeking to fuse aspects of the past with the present. This points to a desire among these jewellers for self-definition in terms of their local and specific identities. Making jewellery with a distinctively regional ‘look’ is one aspect of a larger overall strategy for realising such aims, and is also an excellent marketing tactic.

**The Maningrida Women Jewellers and Alice Whish**

Currently, Sydney-based Alice Whish is working with women from north-eastern Arnhem Land to raise the profile of Aboriginal women’s craft via their shell and seed necklaces, through exhibitions, exchanges and conferences. Like all of the other groups discussed thus far, this is a successful collaboration between a group of Indigenous people who are drawing on powerful living traditions, and a practising non-Indigenous jeweller. Their work reflects an identity politics based on their proximity to the sea.

This section was very brief because this enterprise has already been well documented by Louise Hamby and others. Unlike some of the other jewellery endeavours under discussion in this paper, this group is well established with a sophisticated marketing strategy that should ensure its longevity. This is not necessarily the case with the other groups canvassed in this paper, some of which are not well established in the market and are also dangerously dependent on a number of external variables.

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*Rose Mannuniny, Shark vertebra necklace, 2005, single threaded dyed fig string with hammerhead shark vertebrae and neriita shells, Galpu people, Dhulu moiety*

*Private collection Louise Hamby, photograph courtesy Alice Whish, Sydney*
The Shiny Shiny Blak Blings

The 'Shiny Shiny Blak Blings' is a cooperative of Aboriginal silversmiths and jewellers who live in Victoria. The original group comprised Donna Brown (their unofficial leader and spokesperson), Gail Harradine, Sandy Hodge, Sonja Hodge, Kim Kruger, Kye McGuire and their jewellery instructor and mentor, Peter Eccles. Harradine and Sandy Hodge are now living in rural Victoria and so are no longer involved.

The group works in precious metal, most notably silver, although sometimes their work also incorporates gemstones such as chrysoprase, opal, garnet and other precious or semi-precious stones. Occasionally they also include other media, for example, feathers.

There is perhaps a degree of irony in the Blings' choice of precious metal as their preferred artistic medium, because BC ('Before Cook') Australian Aboriginal people chose to leave such precious metals in the ground. By contrast they traded with natural materials such as shells, pearl shells and with other precious materials like woven hair-string. This paradoxical nature of their choice of raw materials does not escape the group's members.

A chance meeting with Siri Omberg led Donna Brown, a gentle woman with a soul of iron, on a successful later-in-life pathway as a jeweller. Brown has been an important driving force in bringing the work of the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings to the attention of the Australian art world.

Equally, the willingness of Peter Eccles, the only non-Indigenous member of the group, to share his skills as a professional silversmith and jeweller and to act as their teacher and mentor, has been a crucially important factor contributing to their present artistic success. Eccles is not only recognised as an educator and jeweller, who most often works with gold, silver and various gemstones and crystals, but also exhibits his work alongside the Blings in their group exhibitions. Eccles has not only passed on his skills to the Blings, but also his passion and his fidelity to his craft. Group members recognise his guiding role and appreciate his unqualified commitment to their shared enterprise. Kim Kruger speaks on behalf of the group with her characteristically succinct, very Australian declaration that 'Peter's been a bloody saint!'

The Shiny Shiny Blak Blings' work is certainly 'shiny' and 'blingy', immensely appealing to women and increasingly, to men as well. At the same time their works articulate with the showier side of the world of high fashion, The name they have chosen for their group also obliquely references the makers' Aboriginality and their identification with 'people of colour' elsewhere in the world.

It is believed that 'bling' originated as Jamaican slang. While the term's etymology is contested, one explanation is that 'bling bling' refers to the 'imaginary sound' supposedly emanating from the light reflected by a diamond. First taken up by African American rappers some years ago, the word and the concept have since travelled. The notion of 'bling' has been widely adopted into popular culture in the West and has spread to many English speaking, and also to some non-English speaking, countries. Among the many nicknames given to the current French President Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, is the mildly disparaging 'Monsieur Bling Bling', on account of his predilection for flashy and expensive jewellery.
While the semantic range of the term has now extended to embrace any expensive or ostentatious jewellery or body wear, the close association with African Americans remains intact. Earlier this year at the 2008 Australian Open Tennis Championship in Melbourne Maria Sharapova commented during a television interview that it was impossible for the other women tennis players even to begin to compete with the ‘amazing bling’ sported by the Williams sisters, Serena and Venus.

A key member of the group, Kim Kruger, offers this commentary on the significant words that comprise the Blings’ memorably ‘flash’ collective moniker:

... I love language and find Aboriginal English very interesting. ‘Blak’ is a term coined by photographer Destiny Deacon and to me it’s about reclaiming a word that my grandparents found derogatory. My mother’s generation embraced it with the advent of Black pride. By spelling it our own way we invest it with our own meaning, which acknowledges both meanings for these two generations and empowers a third. It also references the fact that Australia is a British colony and English is the language that we’ve been colonised by. But as some of us don’t have access to our own tongues, by making use of the language we have at hand to reflect our selves and our experiences we make new culture that has its own validity. I’m interested in ‘bling’ being a Jamaican, or Black Pom word, because it echoes our experience of British colonisation. Also personally I look to Blak cultures all over the world for connections, resonances and differences to inform how my world is framed.

... The ‘Shiny Shiny’ [part of our collective name] came from Gail who had been working with silver for a while. To me it evokes the sense of achievement you get when you’ve given a piece its final polish. It was our way of denoting that we’re working with silver – and it also references our age group. Many of us were growing up in the ’80s – when the song ‘Shiny, Shiny, bad times behind me’ [also by Black Poms] was popular. Was it Haysi Fantayzee the band? It’s also playful in another way I think – the idea of the ‘shiny blak’ [refers to] someone who is flash and not quite connected with their roots. By repeating the word ‘shiny’ we’re drawing attention to it and in a way ironically pointing a finger at ourselves – more or less asking, what are we trying to prove?

Kruger makes work that expresses the complexity of her life experience and her identity. Many of her pendants, rings and brooches include figurative elements. By this means she makes reference to specific individuals who have been or are still influential in her life.

For instance, she has quite expressly created her ‘Blak Sheriff’ series of brooches and pendants to pay homage to her highly respected uncle, the original ‘Blak’ sheriff:

... I struggled for a long time to find a visual language that reflected my experience. I don’t have knowledge of traditional symbols to draw from and I am an urban Blak. The things that have shaped me are my family, our countries (I am proud of my Guru, Kanak, Sri Lankan, African and German ancestry), music, photography, writing, Australian history and politics, and the Melbourne community.

... The Blak Sheriff’s badge is based on [and a tribute to] my uncle. My uncle in turn reflects my grandfather who was a strong, hard, proud man. My grandfather was a South Sea Islander. His father was ‘blackbirded’ [a reference to the Islanders who were captured and forced into indentured labour on the sugarcane fields of Australia’s eastern states, particularly Queensland, from places as far afield as Fiji, New Caledonia and Vanuatu] from Vanuatu at the age of 13 to work on the sugarcane in Northern New South Wales. My grandfather’s mother was from Ceylon with African heritage and met my great grandfather in Australia. My grandfather worked as a cane cutter, a railway fettler, and later on the railway trains. He was a union man and, according to my mother, saw the unions as reflecting island culture where you live in a community, the strong protect the weak, and resources are shared for the greater good of the whole village. My grandfather moved to Queensland working on the sugar cane, where he married my grandmother. She was South Sea Islander and Guru [Australian Aboriginal person from Northern Queensland, whose country lies south of Townsville].

... My uncle was raised by those parents and took on many of my grandfather’s values. He was always around horses and ran off as a teenager to become a rising 1he didn’t like the word ‘cowboy’ – they were the children that looked after the cattle when they got to the yards. A ringer did the man’s work of droving and wrangling. His working life also saw him cutting sugarcane and working on the railways. By the time he retired he had made it to engine driver and worked the line up and down the coast and west to the mines. His life as a black man was made hard work, he married young, had four kids, two dying young, raised his sister’s kids when she died, was very responsible for his family. He is also a bit of a town hero. Loved in the pub, renowned for his fishing prowess, for his hunting [when visiting mates in the Gulf and Cape], for his tall yarns, for the practical jokes he played on his farmer mates – for example very obviously stealing watermelons or pumpkins off their farms and leaving a trail of dirt all the way back to his house. He loved his wife dearly and did everything for his family. He is also the strong man for our family. When
his sisters’ husbands played up, he’d go in and sort them out. Just like his father did for his sisters. Often this was achieved by violence, and I’m not proud about that. But when your formative environment is racist Queensland, everything is framed by one sort of violence or another.

My uncle comes from a different era – he was at the height of his powers in the ’50s, ’60s, ’70s and ’80s and is still going strong, holding court with his mates and his family. He is an unreconstructed Australian man but he knows stuff about the land from living on it for so long in all his work, and also cultural things handed down to him by his father. He loves his country music and ’50s and ’60s rock and roll – he was 14 when Elvis hit the airwaves and is a diehard fan. He also loves rugby, meat and beer.

Expanding on the underlying reasons for making this popular, ‘trademark’ series of silver Blak Sheriff’s badges, Kim Kruger writes:

The badge came about by reflecting upon my own experience. Sometimes I feel I need a champion – someone to uphold the law when people muck up, when people cross the line – someone to stand up for me when I can’t stand up for myself. It also came from my reflections on people who put themselves forward as leaders, or heroes or Elders. Sometimes people who nominate themselves in these roles aren’t necessarily what they say they are. As my Uncle as a leader but he’s known as one by his actions. Not by what he calls himself. The Blak Sheriff’s badge is a way of showing recognition has been earned. I like the idea of having to earn the badge. The badge also provides a way of looking at or examining the role of the Black Tracker or Native Police – a mixed role. Some see black trackers as betraying their own people – leading troopers to other Indigenous groups, often ending in massacres, dispersal, forcible removal [of children]. Others view the Black Trackers as men adapting their skills to serve the greater good – Tracker Riley using his tracking skills to find missing children and solve murder cases. I’ve often called myself a Blak Tracker when programming arts events – tracking people down to have the opportunity to perform, get work. But with the badge, Blakfellas are promoted to Sheriff, not ‘tracker’ or ‘deputy’. And they’re Blak Sheriffs, not black, so they are sheriffs upholding Blak law not White law.


Another of the Blingers, the quietly spoken Sonja Hodge, also expresses her Indigenous identity through her predominantly silver jewellery. Hers is a strongly regional identity based on a close affiliation with the Victorian Aboriginal people of the River Murray. Hodge’s 2007 work, Untitled; a fisheye brooch, silver with a garnet fish eye, exemplifies this enduring sense of connection with the Riverland, her homeland and heartland.

As Sonja Hodge writes:

Everything I do is an expression of my Aboriginality. I love working with silver – it seems to be a natural extension of my other artwork in different mediums. All my work is untitled. I feel very fortunate to have been involved in this project – like I’ve been given a gift.

Of all the Blingers, Donna Brown’s work seems to articulate to the greatest extent with the ‘upper’, fine art end of the market. Brown makes it clear, however, that this was not a conscious decision on her part, but rather an expression of personal taste. The ‘fine’, even ‘refined’, quality of her artworks is particularly evident in her
delicate, finely wrought, silver Coff (2007) and in her Untitled (2007) series of (mostly) gem-encrusted silver rings and pendants. These works also embody a tacit acknowledgement of the styles and influence of Brown’s mentors, the aforementioned prominent silversmiths Siri Omberg and Peter Eccles, both of whom have acted as catalysts in Donna’s career. She is generous in her acknowledgement of the pivotal roles played by both, not only with respect to her personal success, but also in relation to the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings’ triumph in the Australian art world:

I had been given a beautiful box bird necklace by Siri Omberg and only wore it on special occasions and on one of these occasions a friend was admiring the necklace as I was telling stories about the amazing Siri Omberg and how much I miss her not being around, and what an inspiring person and artist she is and how she still continues to inspire me today and will always.

... So whose idea was it? I think that it was Siri’s in terms of pure inspiration, Peter’s, with his skills and know-how, talent, patience and encouragement and that irreverent humour, together with Kim’s sense of the bigger picture and her deadly writing skills. This seriously great team effort is what brought it all together.

... Peter is our teacher and mentor ... and he is a saint. He has a wicked sense of humour which working with us mob you would have to have, and if it weren’t for Peter we would not be having this interview and the exhibition. He is really a great mate and very clever and inspiring and I feel we all owe Peter big time for his teaching workshops. Basically he is family to me now – before he was a great mate but now he is family.

Donna Brown’s beautifully wrought silver rings, pendants and brooches, often comprising precious or semi-precious stones, are a testament to her own talent, flair and remarkable spirit. At the same time these works collectively attest to the vitally important role of her supporters and mentors. The fact that Beverley Knight of Melbourne’s prestigious Alcaston Gallery and Adelaide’s SoMA Gallery have both facilitated exhibitions of the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings’ work has also been instrumental in putting the jewellers’ work onto the national fine art ‘map’.

Kye McGuire is the youngest member of the group (‘Baby Bling’). Again, her Aboriginal identity plays a significant role in her jewellery, which includes beautifully crafted silver pendants, sometimes adorned with feathers. Unlike the other members of the group, she was already working as a professional artist before her involvement with the Blings. In her Untitled, silver pendant 2007, fragile, practically translucent, mostly whitish feathers seem to float out of the work, contributing beautifully to the work’s dreamily poetic mood. Feathers are frequently used in ‘traditional’ Aboriginal artworks in many parts of Australia, including Western Australia, the artist’s homeland.

McGuire indirectly acknowledges this influence when she writes:

I am originally from the south-western region of Western Australia around Perth, but grew up in Broome, WA. My upbringing in Broome and my roots in Perth have influenced my artwork to great extent.

A major factor in the Blings’ perhaps astonishing success is the collaborative and cooperative nature of their enterprise. It is an example of a successful working relationship that has been forged between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to their mutual advantage. Whilst at one level it is a skills exchange, it also represents a good deal more than that. Their endeavour has the additional value of working as a ‘two-way’ professional, socio-cultural exchange in which parties are able to learn about and share each other’s perspectives while in the process working closely together, or ‘sharing the space’ as it were. In this regard such ventures have the capacity to enrich all participants in many different ways. Thus the Blings’ work could be seen as a template for future working relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, in more general terms.

For such enterprises to work well, it is necessary for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous players to bring certain professional and personal traits to the partnership. None is more important than the attitude of the non-Indigenous partner. Fortuitously, in this case Peter Eccles brings such qualities to the group. For example, in early 2007 while teaching the Blings a range of jewellery-making techniques, he made a gold and enamel pendant on sodalite beads solely to demonstrate the method of saw piercing. In return, the Blings give a lot back to Peter, which he acknowledges equally readily. In the presence of this group, their mutual respect is palpable.

As a result of historical factors, Australian Aboriginal people often quite justifiably feel a level of suspicion towards non-Indigenous people, based on past experiences, both individual and collective. They have all been on the receiving end of racism at some time or another. So people like Peter Eccles, with his level playing field approach, his genuine humility and ‘negative capacity’ (that is, an ability to stand back as a supporter, not to seek the limelight or any personal gain, but simply to ‘be there’ for the artists), bring much-needed attributes to such partnerships. Indeed, such human strengths are essential if there is to be any real hope of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Clearly, people in such teaching and mentoring roles need
to have acquired a range of appropriate skills as well as bringing successful practice and experience to the task. They must also have the desire and ability to pass on those skills. This is no job for the feckless or the inexperienced or those who do not possess requisite communication skills. In essence, this is what has been characterised as 'practical reconciliation', involving a skills transfer as well as a level playing field partnership that takes place at the grassroots level. As such this needs to be regarded as a model for future cultural action in other parts of Aboriginal Australia, particularly in remote communities, where people often wish to work as professional artists but sometimes lack the educational background or some of the necessary skills to fulfil their ambitions.

In Australia in 1991 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was initiated, with bipartisan political support. At that time the Council identified eight key issues as 'essential to the community's understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands peoples' past, their plight in the present and their hopes for the future'. The second key issue identified was that of:

...improving relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the wider community.
(Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1991)

Since then, support for reconciliation as a formal government process has floundered to some extent. Perhaps this is because from the outset it was wrongly titled as re-conciliation (which assumes that once there was a time when harmonious relations existed between parties, but those previously 'good' relationships have since broken down). No doubt it should have been called 'conciliation'. The notion of 'conciliation' is not based on any such false premise – the fiction that in the past positive relations existed between Australia's Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens. Its starting point is reality.

In the decade and a half following the original bipartisan initiative, the idea of 'conciliation' has been receiving successively less formal government and opposition support. On the other hand, it has metamorphosed into a 'people's movement', with a great deal of popular support at the grass roots level. This tendency has grown since 2001 when prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians established 'Reconciliation Australia' as a not-for-profit, non-government organisation. People who, like the Blings and Peter Eccles, are working closely and collectively are taking the idea of genuine 'conciliation' a step further.

Another important offshoot of this project, which has largely come about because of the Blings' success, has been to raise the group's collective self-esteem. Again, this is in part founded on the quality of the professional and personal relationships that have been forged between the Aboriginal members of the group and Peter Eccles.

When I asked Kim Kruger, 'Why have you chosen to work with silver jewellery? Is this a conscious foray into the 'upper end' of the fine art jewellery market?' she responded with a characteristically ready quip:

The 'upper end' seems daunting, but like Beyoncé and Jane Fonda say, 'Because we're worth it'.

Indeed, the entire project has been 'worth it' because it offers fresh formulations of an economically and socially beneficial future to be shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike.

Andrea Fisher: Independent, Urban-based Jeweller

Andrea Fisher is a young Brisbane-based Murri (Queensland Aboriginal) sculptor and jeweller. Unlike the other Indigenous jewellers discussed in this article, she does not work within the framework of an art co-operative, but is an independent player.

Born in 1981, Andrea Fisher is a graduate of the Queensland College of Art at Griffith University in South Brisbane. She also holds qualifications in Business Administration. With respect to the question of her national allegiances and citizenship, she describes herself as an Australian, a telling descriptor pointing to the identity politics that underpins her artistic practice.

Fisher's sense of identity has been forged by membership of a group that, both historically and in the present, has suffered oppression on the basis of race and the usurpation of their prior ownership of this country. The young artist's deep identification with her 'people' plays itself out in her artistic practice, ranging from sculpture (her large scale Gummi, or Shield works, for example) to installation (including her Windows of Opportunity) to body-wear and jewellery. Fisher's artworks are vehicles for her political agenda, sometimes covert but more often explicit. Land Plot and Just is our Land, for instance, both deal with yet-to-be-resolved issues relating to Aboriginal land rights; just tickin' the box to matters pertaining to the continuing sense of Indigenous disenfranchisement from mainstream Australian political processes; and Exotic Other confronts questions of historical and current representations of Indigenous Australian people. Fisher's tough minded, take-no-prisoners approach to the politics of representation in relation to Indigenous Australians is a theme that runs through all of her work.
As Black British activists Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien have observed:
... politics always involves a struggle over representation.

In a not dissimilar vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has addressed the question of 'how the third world subject is represented in Western discourse' and related questions. Citing Edward Said's cornerstone article, 'Permission to Narrate', Spivak discusses the difficulties of the (genuinely) subaltern subject in achieving self-representation. Fisher understands her people's position to be that of 'third world subjects' living as an enclave within the first world – hence her self-definition as an AustrAliEN.

It is for Indigenous people's rights of self-representation that Fisher is prepared to fight – not only by means of her artistic practice but also with words. Central to this artistic practice is the artist's own 'struggle over representation'. Actively seeking self-representation via her art, Fisher ought to be regarded first and foremost as an artist, but her approach is also consistent with Gramsci's conception of the 'organic intellectual'.

Despite her relatively tender years, Fisher is in the process of consolidating a successful practice as a professional artist. While working predominantly as a sculptor and jeweller she makes occasional forays into other areas of artistic practice, for example with her large, mixed media work Tidda, from her Joliffe's Girls series, created from water soluble oil paint with beads on canvas. Windows of Opportunity, a large-scale installation that includes glass and wood, exemplifies another genre of her work.

In terms of sculptural works Fisher's aforementioned, magnificent Shield series, relating to her own cultural heritage as an Aboriginal Queenslander, are in my view her most accomplished, trenchant and engaging thus far. Indeed, Fisher's entire oeuvre may be regarded simultaneously as an arsenal, a defensive weapon, and a resource. Thus Fisher's Shield works lead us towards a more comprehensive understanding of her overall body of work. As has been indicated, words and language in the more general sense play a significant part in a number of her works. Andrea Fisher is a great punster, deploying language as yet another defensive weapon in her considerable personal armoury.

Likewise, the naming of her work is always significant. For example, Fisher's Aboriginal Scar works collectively 'talk back' to earlier Aboriginal practices of ritual scarification whilst embracing contemporary colonial reality by referring to the less visible psychological scars borne by present-day Aboriginal people who, on a daily basis, must deal not only with present-day issues but also with the unsettled legacy of the past.

Having exhibited her work in numerous group exhibitions, Fisher has accumulated an impressive record of commissions and artists-in-residencies. Included among these was a recent and fascinating artistic residency in Canberra entitled 'reSkin Wearable Technology Lab', a collaborative project involving the Australian Network of Art and Technology (ANAT), Australian National University's (ANU's) School of Art, the Centre for New Media Arts (CNMA) and Craft Australia. In addition, she has acted as project officer for various artistic organisations and ventures and has worked as the Curatorial Project Officer for Indigenous Australian Art at the prestigious Queensland Art Gallery. Last year, for the first time in her career Fisher became a finalist in Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, or 'the Telstra' as it is colloquially known (the award's major sponsor is the Australian telecommunications company of the same name). Held annually in Darwin, the Telstra is Australia's highest-profile Indigenous art award, and until recently has been the most lucrative in terms of the prize money offered.

Recently Andrea Fisher moved into a new, shared studio space in Brisbane where she now works with artists of the calibre of Tony Albert, Jennifer Herd, Richard Bell and Judy Watson. Fisher is characteristically humble about sharing her workspace with such senior artists. While not regarding herself as being in 'the same league' as these eminent artists yet, she certainly aspires to their status and is prepared to work towards that goal.

During the Jewellers and Metalsmiths Group of Australia Conference in Adelaide in January–February 2008 Andrea Fisher exhibited her most recent work at Norwood's SoMA Galleries. SoMA is the latest and liveliest – and very promising – addition to Adelaide's Indigenous art gallery scene. The work that Fisher displayed showed the artist's high level of social engagement with past injustices and inequalities experienced by Indigenous people, and her resolve to demonstrate how these live on in the present.

JMG 2018 Dr Christine Nicholls
Andrea Fisher, 2007, *Aboriginal Scar*, from *Gummer* series 2007, etched copper patinated silver pin (brooch), 3 x 3.5 x 8 cm

Courtesy the artist

As is the case with many of Fisher's works, 'the medium is the message'. For example, with her *Shackle* series on display at SoMA Galleries, she goes to great lengths to replicate the actual materials used to shackle Aboriginal men and women. The latter group, frequently working as kitchen hands, cooks and domestic servants on pastoral stations in Western Australia, were from time to time shackled to ensure that they did not run off – a practice that continued as late as the 1950s, according to various personal communications. Fisher's *Shackle* bracelets and wristlets are screwed onto the wearer and may only be removed by the use of special tools. Hence, for the wearer there is an experiential component to this 'jewellery', taking it a long way from 'costume jewellery' or 'bling'.

Andrea Fisher, *Which Way?* from *Shackle* series, 2007, etched brass bullet casing patinated, 1.6 x 10 x 8 cm, courtesy the artist

Andrea Fisher, *Which Way?* from *Shackle* series (detail), 2007, etched brass bullet casing patinated, courtesy the artist
Andrea Fisher’s jewellery practice thus gives tangible and visible form to Indigenous political and social memory as well as what might be described as ‘body memory’. It is an artist-as-activist practice centred on those wounded places in the collective Aboriginal psyche or consciousness – wounds that remain unhealed and continue to fester because they have never been fully addressed by Australian governments of either persuasion and, probably more importantly, have never been adequately acknowledged by the majority of other, non-Indigenous Australians – who continue to arrive upon these shores in successive waves of migration.

As already stated, Andrea Fisher’s work is politically themed, offering an overt and often quite literal commentary on recent Aboriginal history. Speaking broadly, her work is an expression of what has been hailed as the ‘Black armband view’ of Australian history. This is a very unusual direction for a young, contemporary jeweller to be taking. Given the nature of jewellery, which as a genre does not readily lend itself to conveying political ideas or as a vehicle for agitation – certainly not to the extent that is possible in painting or even in some of the other plastic arts – Fisher’s approach is therefore atypical. It is even more curious when one takes into account the fact that the majority of contemporary Aboriginal artists are painters, with relatively few high-profile sculptors and jewellers among their number.

Taken as a whole, Andrea Fisher’s work comes under the *imprimatur* of ‘Blak Armband Art’ – a contemporary take on ‘black armband’ politics. Included among the works that demonstrate the veracity of such a claim are *Blak Armband* and *I Might Get Paid This Week*, referencing the fact that for many years Aboriginal Australians, particularly those living in Queensland and a number of other Australian states, were either not paid at all for their work or, when they were, were paid under-award rates, and also *Land Plot*, about the land grab that occurred when the British colonists first arrived but in effect has never ended.

Andrea Fisher, *I Might Get Paid This Week*, from *Cameo* series, necklace: clay, acrylic paint, emu feather, thread, semi-precious stones, beads, with copper backing, 3 x 10.5 x 40 cm (variable), courtesy the artist

The term ‘black armband’ in relation to Australian Aboriginal history first appeared on a protest poster in Alice Springs as early as 1986. The poster called upon people to wear black armbands during the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations to mark 200 years of white ‘invasion’, declaring 1988 to be a national year of mourning. It is worth noting that the expression was actually the brainchild of activists and graphic artists, although it seems that this has now largely been forgotten. The poster was produced in the lead-up to the 1988 Bicentenary ‘celebrations’ of what many Indigenous people and supporters regarded as the beginning of the illegal white occupation of their country. Although in the late 1980s Andrea Fisher was only a very young child, she regards that era as a watershed time in recent Australian history.
Some years later, in his 1993 Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture, the conservative Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey used the term ‘Black Armband view of history’ to describe and, moreover, to deride, the ideological position expressed in the scholarly work of certain Australian historians, social scientists and others. It is mistakenly believed in many quarters that Blainey actually conceived the notion of ‘black armband’ history. But while he actually coined the specific phrase the idea that informed it was already circulating. What is true, however, is that the term’s currency has since dramatically increased as a direct result of Blainey’s lecture.

In Blainey’s view, ‘black armband’ intellectuals and other commentators focused unnecessarily and unhealthily on a critical portrayal of Australian history. His remarks were specifically made with respect to accounts of ill treatment meted out to Aboriginal people, which he believed had been grossly over-emphasised. Blainey believed that many historians and other scholars were overly preoccupied with the ‘negatives’ of Australian history and that to a large extent they were just plain wrong. Instead he took what he called at the time the equally ideological ‘Three Cheers view’ of Australian history, in which Indigenous massacres, dispossession, loss of land, near cultural genocide, the Stolen Generations, racism and so forth were radically downplayed and Australia’s putative virtues including our ‘mateship’, ‘fair go for all’ and egalitarianism were highlighted.

Blainey’s inflammatory comments contained the seeds of what has since become known in Australia as ‘The History Wars’, in turn leading to the less well-defined ‘Culture Wars’, with claims and counterclaims on both sides of the political divide. Although the original debates took place largely in academic circles, they were taken up as a populist cause, particularly by the Australian media. Such polarisation in Australians’ interpretations of Australian history continues. The ‘Black Armband view of history’ is still used pejoratively with respect to those who are considered to be dwelling irrelevantly but detrimentally on the less palatable aspects of Australian contact history. In turn, Blainey and his followers have been charged with holding a ‘White Blindfold view of history’.

Blainey’s views received a considerable fillip by Australia’s previous Prime Minister The Hon. John Howard who weighed in on the argument stating in his 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture that:

The ‘black armband’ view of our history reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

Through her contemporary jewellery practice Andrea Fisher makes a significant and left-of-field intervention into this long-running discourse. As a conceptual artist, Fisher’s work belongs to an artistic genre that closely articulates with the burgeoning field of ‘memory studies’. Her recent jewellery includes the Shackle series. In part, this refers to the shameful history of shackling or placing in manacles, neck chains or ankle restraints, those Aboriginal men who did not conform to the colonists’ strictures. Most frequently this was punishment for relatively minor ‘misdemeanours’ rather than capital offences. Such ‘wrongdoings’ were frequently the direct outcome of Indigenous oppression, exploitation or sheer poverty. For instance, police in Western Australia continued to use neck chains as late as 1946, when they rounded up Aboriginal pastoral workers who were striking because they were being paid under-award wages. John Mulvaney and others have written about how the manacling of these men also involved forced marching. In these artworks Fisher uses the same materials that were used to create these shackles.

Andrea Fisher, Blak armband, from Shackle series, 2007, patinated brass, red acrylic sheet, battery LED electronics, 2.5 x 10 x 8 cm

Courtesy the artist
As has been explained, Fisher is insistent that the machinations of the dominant culture do not belong exclusively to the distant past but represent contemporary colonial reality. In this, she is equally as concerned with Aboriginal women's positioning in the Great Colonial Divide as she is about the place of Aboriginal men. In her body wear, she extends this notion of 'shackles' into the metaphorical domain, embracing ideas about unshackling and thereby decolonising the mind, and the notion of working towards freeing the spirit and unfettering the heart.

As already suggested, Fisher's succinct but incisive political commentary often hinges on her judicious choice of words, either strung together or sometimes as just one well-chosen word. This technique is highly effective especially in the work she has made for her Shackle series. Colin McCahon-like, the lexicon that Andrea Fisher selects to complement her works is always polysemic. For example, the words 'land plot' and 'always plotting' refer not only to the land-tiling practices of farmers in contrast to hunter-gatherers but also 'plotting' in the sense of out-manoeuvring, scheming or other kinds of less-than-candid interactions between Indigenous Australians and members of the dominant culture. There is an additional popular culture dimension to Fisher's choice of the words 'always plotting'. It is a reference to a snippet of dialogue in the 1995 American movie 'Higher Learning' starring Laurence Fishburne, who plays a professor at a fictitious university, 'Columbus University'. Among the film's significant concerns is that of race relations among freshmen, and relationships with the young undergraduates attending the university. Andrea Fisher writes that:

...there is a scene in the movie where Laurence challenges two young African-American students' ways of adapting to university life, by saying something along the lines of 'Look at you two, sitting together, always plotting, always plotting'. It's a complex relational joke that is fundamentally empowering — it works by turning a potential negative into a statement that is affirmative and encouraging — while affording respect to those involved. Underlying it is a blend of seriousness, wit and Blak humour.

Andrea Fisher, Always Plotting, from Shackle series (detail), 2007, etched brass bullet casing patinated, 1.6 x 10 x 8 cm
Courtesy the artist

Eschewing a 'victim mentality', Andrea Fisher makes it clear that the inclusion of historically accurate Indigenous narratives and themes in her artistic work is ultimately about self-empowerment, about claiming and re-claiming those spaces in the grand narrative of Australian history where Indigenous stories and perspectives have often been misrepresented or left out.

On first encountering Fisher's work the following lines from TS Eliot's Four Quartets came to mind:

- Time present and time past
- Are both perhaps present in time future,
- And time future contained in time past,
- If all time is eternally present
- All time is unredeemable.
- What might have been is an abstraction
- Remaining a perpetual possibility
- Only in a world of speculation.
Andrea Fisher's conceptualisation of time is not so different. In her artistic oeuvre she ingeniously deploys visual imagery from time past that continues to exist in time present, albeit in altered form. This is also a means of legitimating her present political positioning while addressing the interstices in 'the Australian story'. Such 'images of the past' not only play a critical role in such processes of political legitimation but also make for a unique and truly original contemporary jewellery practice. She writes that her artistic journey has involved:

... forming my own style, which does incorporate the inspiration that I've received from seeing traditional adornments, but it's also very much about the 'now' and what's real today for me, while at the same time it contains a notion of the past.

The specific media that Fisher uses to make her work are also significant:

... I know that the specific materials I use do have an important part to play in my artwork – I create works that keep to what I see as being authentic through a time base of 'the now' but there is always a connection to past. For instance I did a cameo series using clay, acrylic and semi-precious stones but also using found materials such as emu feathers and echidna quills, which have a strong connection to an emu farm and my childhood trips to Cherbourg. The emu farm – which no longer exists in Cherbourg – was a special place for me. Now if I make the cameos I use these same emu feathers but I also add something new too. I often add text to the centrepiece, which is a way of intertwining dialogues of today with older discourses. An excellent example of this can be found in the work I might get paid this week. With the Shackel series I created the shackle-jewellery with similar materials to those that had been used to round up Aboriginal people in the past, no doubt women as well as men but this is probably a hidden history ... but I do also use simple materials, such as beads and wire.

A sense of authentic personal vision arises from Andrea Fisher's body wear and sculptural works. As a young contemporary Australian artist, Fisher is a risk-taker, working in an idiom that is decisive and fresh. The work is heroic in its individuality, embodying with rather shocking originality what the French scholar Pierre Nora calls 'the memory-nation nexus'.

Conclusion/Discussion/Recommendations

In terms of understanding or 'positioning' the contemporary jewellery being made by Aboriginal jewellers in many regions in Australia, a number of questions arise. Included among these is whether such decorative body wear is to be understood as Aboriginal art, or rather, as art that is informed by and reflective of Aboriginal ideas and traditions? And where is a maker like Andrea Fisher, who has an overtly political agenda, to be placed within any overall schema?

Taking a contemporary and international perspective, very little jewellery or other body wear in Australia or elsewhere in the world today arises from cultural traditions that are completely 'pure', separate and/ or independent. Traditions and approaches tend to fuse, overlap and 'bleed' into one another. This is a global phenomenon, and certainly not restricted to the Australian context. Most jewellery today, including contemporary Indigenous Australian jewellery, is the product of the fusion of various cultural traditions.

Clearly, such observations have profound political implications for some Indigenous jewellers in the post-colonial Australian context. What can be said is that Aboriginal jewellers who are making work that they are selling into contemporary markets are all practising an identity politics based on history, and in some cases also on geo-politics, race, gender and, in some cases, age and language.

Currently, there are large numbers of small Indigenous jewellery enterprises flourishing as 'cottage industries' throughout Australia, only a small proportion of which have been discussed here. The majority of these involve some form of creative, grass-roots level collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. 'Working together' is an important thématique emerging from these endeavours, and one that should not be underestimated in this context. As such, these joint ventures can be regarded as templates for the larger project of reconciliation in this country. No doubt this trend will continue and such jewellery cooperatives will go on proliferating because they are valuable not only in terms of raising the self-esteem and mutual respect of all participants, but they are also economically and socially beneficial.

Finally, it is clear that there is room for a great deal more research support to be given to this burgeoning field. Already, important research has been undertaken by Louise Hamby and associates at ANU. JMG might like to consider the possibility of funding a three-year doctoral scholarship to support a young researcher who is prepared to write a PhD thesis on the collaborative processes involved in such productive and important joint enterprises. The time is ripe.
Endnotes
1 In the Warlipiri language hair-string spun by men with a spindle is called ‘purdumu.’ As Warlipiri linguist Paddy Patrick Jangala wrote in 1987: ‘Purdumu, ngulaji yangka kujakalayi yapangku ngurru-man yapa marnilajangka manu wakurluujangka yapalangka, manu kujakalayi ngurru-manu wampanalajangka yururrutjagnka – wirriji. Yangka kujakalayi karntan uwarri karnta kundu yarrimi warimi winurrinyi, manu purdumu.’

English translation: ‘Purdumu is what people make from human hair and what they make from the fur of animals like the Spectacled Hare-wallaby, It is what they tie around their headaddresses at corroborees and it is purdumu and winsi that the senior brother-in-law ties around the young initiates.’

2 The verb used by the Warlipiri people of the Central Desert for this process of rubbing red ochre (purdumu) onto the body, boomerangs, shields etc. or into hair-string is mupanu, which literally means ‘to anoint’. The religious connotations that attach to the idea of the English word ‘anoint’ extend to this process of rubbing ochre into Aboriginal hair-string and the like.

3 ‘Dreaming’ (sometimes rendered as ‘Dreamtime’) is a reductive, generic English translation of an exceedingly complex concept that has a wide range of different names in the 250-plus Indigenous Australian languages.

4 Conical buns are known as wawurlipa in the Warlipiri language of Central Australia, as Paddy Patrick Jangala wrote in 1987: ‘Purdumu karntu karruri karruri yarruji karnti wawurlipa.

English translation: They tie their hair up in a conical bun with spun string.

5 Sirri Ombeg, personal communication, January, 2008

6 Tony Eccles is the father of Peter Eccles, who is involved in the Shiny Shiny Blak Blings project.

7 Unfortunately SoMA closed its doors in November 2008

8 An excerpt from ‘Burnt Norton’, the first of TS Eliot’s Four Quartets [1943]

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