

Australian Art Review

Eloquent intersections

Posted: 18 May 2012 | By: [Stephanie Radok](#)

Margaret Preston has had a lot of flak off and on for her advocacy and practice of drawing from Aboriginal art, the art of this country, the art that she saw clearly as belonging to, arising from and about this country. And thus, the place to learn how to interpret and understand it.

In recent years that most knowledgeable and open-minded of anthropologists who has been very influential on current Australian art history, Howard Morphy, has quoted from Preston, using her words as the epigraph to the preface of his 2008 book *Becoming Art: exploring cross-cultural categories*: “The ladder of art lies flat not vertical. Art never improves only changes.” Coincidentally, in 1984, I painted the first of these sentences as a mural on the outside wall of Bitumen River Gallery in Canberra.

Artists are often at the forefront of change, of understanding where to go and how to engage with new possibilities in history and in society. In *Roads Cross: contemporary directions in Australian art*, three curators — Fiona Salmon, Anita Angel and Vivonne Thwaites — have brought together a selection of artists whose work has, in the last ten years, engaged with Aboriginal art and with Aboriginal society in what, they suggest, are new ways pointing to new possibilities in Australian art. The artists are widely dispersed both geographically and in their mediums.

Each of the artists’ paths has been different. Some have worked many long years for — and with — Aboriginal communities, while others have briefly passed through. Some, like Therese Ritchie and Alison Alder, have been inspired to make political works about the circumstances of the lives of Aboriginal people that they have witnessed in remote places and of which many Australians are unaware.

Two artists are represented by collaborations with Aboriginal artists, but while Hobart-based Jonathon Kimberley, who has worked as an art centre manager in Central Australia, collaborated with poet puralia meenamatta (Jim Everett) during many bush camps in Tasmania (they first met when Kimberley was painting in the middle of a river), Sydney-based Ildiko Kovacs, who has made paintings with Molly Nampitjin and Yaritji Connelly, travelled out to Central Australia expressly in order to sit down with the women as they painted in their home country. Aboriginal art and society are frequently surrounded by gatekeepers telling people what they can and cannot do. The exhibition *Roads Cross* is bound to be controversial. But it will surely show that the ladder of art is still flat not vertical.

Artists: Alison Alder, Robin Best, Angela Brennan, Jonathon Kimberley in collaboration with puralia meenamatta (Jim Everett), Ildiko Kovacs in collaboration with Molly Nampitjin and Yaritji Connelly, Pamela Lofts, Nyukana Baker, Una Rey, Tobias Richardson, Therese Ritchie, Nalda Searles, Quentin Sprague, Hossein Valamanesh.