



CITY OF MELBOURNE



Sisters, we are  
our own heroes.

This exhibition shares the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists that recentre 'her-stories' from a sovereign woman standpoint. Themes of cultural revival, healing, activism and future imaginings of the patriarchy are woven through the exhibition, highlighting the many roles women play in supporting a healthy community and in maintaining culture. Quandamooka woman Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson states:

*As Indigenous women, our lives are framed by the omnipresence of patriarchal white sovereignty and its continual denial of our sovereignty. But, as Indigenous women, we are not powerless. Our lives are also constituted by us through the simultaneousness of our compliance and resistance as we deploy a 'tactical subjectivity'*<sup>1</sup>

This tactical subjectivity is important to consider when viewing *Recentre; sisters*, as all the artists employ resistance to historical patriarchal dominance through a space of female empowerment and assertion.

Acclaimed Melbourne-based G'ua G'ua and Erub/Mer woman Destiny Deacon is a seminal figure in the movement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women artists. In the early 1990s, Destiny developed the term 'Blak' to reclaim and move beyond the racialised, stereotypical and historical associations of blackness, so Australia's First Peoples could own and assert their Blakness through their lived experience. Destiny's work repositions Blak female identity and challenges assumptions of Australian indigeneity. For example, in her work *Moomba Princess* (2004) Destiny placed her niece as the princess of Moomba festival; with the Moomba 'monarchs' historically being predominately non-Indigenous, *Moomba Princess* places a young Blak woman in the centre of this space. This photograph was produced as part of a curated exhibition in which Blak women artists responded to the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection to address the lack of Blak voices in the collection. Using the regal robes of Moomba, Destiny dressed her niece and nephew in the regalia and photographed them in front of portraits of past Australian Moomba Queens and Kings. *Moomba Princess* looks away: is she imagining what it might be like to be a princess? Or perhaps she is uncomfortable and feeling the weight of the royal blue dress and its colonial oppression.

Art as a form of activism presents strongly in the work of Paola Balla, a Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara sovereign woman. A multidisciplinary artist and writer, Paola is driven by concerns of social justice and she addresses the impacts of colonial trauma, particularly on women

1. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Indigenous Methodologies in Social Research', in Maggie Walter (ed.), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 172



**LEFT**  
 Destiny Deacon  
*Moomba Princess*  
 2004  
 light jet print from  
 Polaroid original  
 100 x 80 cm  
 Edition of 15  
 City of Melbourne Art  
 and Heritage Collection

**ABOVE**  
 Paola Balla  
*And the Matriarchs Sang*  
 2015  
 Ecoboard, house paint,  
 dirt, ground bark,  
 charcoal, paper,  
 pages of 1930s'  
 art-history book  
 80 x 101 x 4 cm  
 On loan from the artist



2. Blak Dot Gallery, in Brunswick, is an Indigenous-run contemporary art gallery and performance space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and International First Nations Peoples. See [www.blakdot.com.au/about/](http://www.blakdot.com.au/about/)

and children. She is currently completing her PhD, which looks at ways in which Aboriginal women artists and activists speak back to settler Australia. Her work *And the Matriarchs Sang* (2015) disrupts the paternalistic narrative of history through the deeply personal reflections of the matriarchs in her life and their journeys. It is an ode to Blak women and a response honouring those who have come before, and it is a call to sisters to raise their fists and continue the fight for our people, our wellbeing, our cultural safety and our children's futures.

The photographs by Kimba Thompson, a Wiradjuri curator, artist and owner of Blak Dot Gallery,<sup>2</sup> are recent and candid images of Melbourne women marching in protest at the closure of Aboriginal communities. They tell a story of resistance that has been influenced and led by Blak women for hundreds of years. The women follow the legacy of the matriarchs that protected families and culture, birthed children and petitioned and wrote letters to the government to plead for the children's return when stolen. They follow the legacy of the front line of protest for representation in parliament, and they follow in the footsteps of the women that marched on the streets, arms raised for our rights in the constitution, for land and for equality. It is the current generations that continue this fight. They are bold and proud.

Tara-Rose Butterworth-Gonebale is a young Wagiman woman and an emerging artist. Her work *Mayiwa* (2016), meaning sisters, was created as part of the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency's arts mentoring program, a development program with Koorie arts practitioners for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Tara-Rose created the portrait of her little sister Elisa to support her in feeling proud in her identity, and in response to her sister being bullied at school because of the colour of her skin. Tara-Rose says the portrait is to 'remind her [Elisa] of her amazing culture and how beautiful she really is'.

Resistance to colonisation through practices such as weaving and cloak-making is a fundamental part of the living Aboriginal culture in south-eastern Australia today. The role of women in awakening practices of our Ancestors is integral in keeping the fire going. Artists Lee Darroch and Lorraine Connelly-Northey are cultural warrior women who have contributed to revitalising customary traditions in a contemporary context. Lee has been a vital artist in the revival of Victorian possum-skin cloak-making, and in 2016 she held a Regional Arts Australia institutional fellowship at the Koorie Heritage Trust, creating a body of work titled *yenbena biganga, gaiyimarr biganga: Stitching Together the Songlines. The Bogong Moth Kangaroo Cloak of Healing* (2016) came out of this fellowship. Lee states: 'The creative concept was to create a body of kangaroo and possum-skin cloaks telling the songlines of South-eastern Australia. These cloaks will be a gift back to the future generations to be used by young people for ceremonial purposes.'<sup>3</sup>

Lorraine Connelly-Northey uses found materials, bending and twisting them into forms representing items made and used by her Ancestors and that remain important to her and her people. The works in the exhibition were made from the waste metal that litters her country; they are sculptural realisations of precious belongings such as a string dilly bags (*narrbong* in Lorraine's Waradgeri (Wiradjuri) language), coolamons (shallow carrying dishes) and a women's digging stick. Belongings that were once made of carefully woven fibres and hand-crafted wood are here formed through white pressed tin, perhaps discarded from an old homestead and a not-so-distant memory of settler imposition on her country. Lorraine reclaims this material and creates objects that embody Waradgeri (Wiradjuri) knowledge and presence, a strong reminder that women's work and culture continues in many forms.

3. Lee Darroch, *yenbena biganga, gaiyimarr biganga: Stitching Together the Songlines*, exhibition catalogue, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, 2016, p. 4



**LEFT**  
 Lorraine Connelly-Northey  
 Koolimans, Narrbong  
 and Digging Stick  
 Rusted pressed tin,  
 enamel paint, nail  
 dimensions variable  
 City of Melbourne Art  
 and Heritage Collection



**ABOVE**  
 Lee Darroch  
*Bogong Moth Kangaroo  
 Cloak of Healing*  
 2015  
 white ochre, red ochre,  
 kangaroo skins, waxed  
 polyester thread and  
 homemade wooden toggle  
 68 x 120 cm  
 On loan from the artist



**LEFT**  
Hannah Bronte  
*Still I Rise*  
Video Still  
2016  
On loan from the artist



**ABOVE**  
Kimba Thompson  
*Together we will create change*  
*—for our future generations*  
2016  
32.5 x 48.5 cm  
On loan from the artist



4. Hannah Bronte and Hannah Gutchen, in conversation with the curator, 2017

A new form of cultural expression is seen in Hannah Bronte's video work *Still I Rise* (2016), which explores future imaginings of the patriarchy through a Blak feminist perspective. Through hip-hop, language and textiles, using 'oestrogen camouflage' designed by Hannah, the video presents a female parliament made up of diverse women of colour, the leaders of a new wave of feminism and with a new voice. Hannah's practice is centred on female empowerment and the changing role of women, particularly young women today. Although influenced by hip-hop and protest culture, she also incorporates weaving and textile design in her work. Evoking the strength of her Aboriginal Ancestors and the sisters that inspire her, Hannah challenges the viewer to consider the current discourse of Blak feminism and representation, and what the future can be.

Hannah Gutchen is a proud Torres Strait Islander and Jewish woman based in Brisbane. As well as working in the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as an exercise physiologist, she has a practice in weaving and body adornment. Grounded in her Torres Strait Islander culture, Hannah has worked with coconut leaf from a young age, collecting the leaf and other natural found objects and weaving these into new creations. In a new commission and collaborative installation, *Awol Bones* (2017), Hannah Gutchen and Hannah Bronte have created a work that embodies the land and the sea, and acknowledges the cycles of resistance, loss, mourning, strength and rebirth that many Blak women go through in life. Intricate weavings, shell and natural materials form a poignant representation of female

being, and in *Awol*, meaning deep, dark waters, 'Shell is the centre of this work. We have woven this in as a protective shield to our wombs, showing that, although our Ancestors have for so long been in battle, we are impenetrable throughout.'<sup>4</sup>

To recentre is to reflect and to move from the periphery or margin to the centre. The works in this show have the interconnectedness of the matriarch at their core. It is through our lineage and continued cultural ways that we stand strong as sovereign women. Country, Ancestors, the patriarchy and our living identities ebb and flow through a range of temporalities that are not bound to one period of time.

*Our belonging is based on bloodline to country. As such, Indigenous women's bodies are tangible evidence of our sovereignty, and our embodiment as Indigenous women is evidence of our ontology; it is born of the interrelationship between ancestral beings, humans and country*<sup>5</sup>

Thousands of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have come before us, and thousands more will follow. As we raise our communities, practise our culture and support each other, united in sisterhood, we are our own (s)heroes.

5. Moreton-Robinson, op. cit, p. 173

A most resolute  
woman.

*Women are not the silent partners in history; we are gugungdjaleek murmindeek, leewurruk, baban, murmurndik, manggeep... strong sovereign women; we have a voice and many have defined and will continue to define history.*

Carolyn Briggs and Caroline Martin, 2017

I am a great-granddaughter, granddaughter, daughter, sister, niece, partner, mother, aunty, cousin and friend. But in order to hold that space for the significant people in my life, I am first and foremost a proud Yalukit Willam woman of the Boonwurrung. My ancestral lands extend from the Werribee River to inland Melbourne, Port Phillip and Westernport Bays, and along the Mornington Peninsula coast to Wilsons Promontory.

I have been gifted with significant cultural memory that has been handed down to me from my great-great-grandmother Louisa Briggs, my grandmother Carrie Briggs, my aunt Eva Briggs and my mum, Carolyn Briggs. Through their many and continued adversities, they have persisted and continue to persist. The absolute strength and pride of who I am today comes from these strong and resilient *arweet murni-gurrk* (old wise women).

My journey into defining who I am began on my 16th birthday, when my mum shared the significance and many sacrifices of her mother, my grandmother Carrie Briggs. She explained the huge impact Carrie had on her life and Carrie's continued legacy. My mum, the strongest, most resilient woman I know, also taught me two of the most significant lessons in my life: that I should never be put in a position to deny my identity, and I should never feel I have to justify it. These two lessons, which carry the humble weight of strength and pride, have guided my life since that day. But it did not start there; it started with the impact of colonisation.

My Boonwurrung Ancestors were among the first of Victoria's First Peoples to have contact with Europeans. In 1803, Lieutenant-Colonel David Collins arrived in Port Phillip Bay from England with 299 male convicts, 16 convicts' wives and 50 marines. He established a settlement on Boonwurrung country, at what is now known as Sorrento, on the Mornington Peninsula. That was 214 years ago. Before then, my Ancestors had lived and prospered on their country for more than 2000 generations.

In living memory, my genetic journey begins with my great-great-grandmother Louisa Briggs. Louisa was born into the Yalukit Willam clan of the Boonwurrung in the early 1830s and lived until 1924. When only a child, Louisa, her mother, her grandmother and her aunt were kidnapped by sealers at Point Nepean and taken to the Bass Strait islands to work as slaves, catching seals, processing their skins and rendering their oil for the well-to-do in London.

In 1858, Louisa returned to her country with her husband, John Briggs (son of Woretemoetyenner and grandson of Mannalargenna). After a time, they found that many of her relatives had been relegated to Coranderrk Aboriginal Station near Healesville, where they eventually settled. Louisa and John had nine children and one adopted son. Louisa was a strong matriarch who supported her children and made them two-way strong by ensuring they maintained their cultural identity while also mastering the systems of the colonisers, including learning to read and write in English. Louisa was known as a vocal activist, described in an 1872 edition of the Melbourne *Argus* as 'a most resolute woman'.

In 1876, Louisa led a rebellion against government plans to sell Coranderrk and relocate its residents. As an activist, Louisa was known as a great orator. She had learned to read but not to write, so her children acted as scribes, writing her numerous letters of protest to

the Aborigines Protection Board. This campaign lasted for two years before she and her family were forced off the station. Louisa sought asylum at Ebenezer and Maloga Missions, and finally lived for many years at Cummeragunja Mission, until her passing in 1924. Louisa was often spoken about as being strong-minded and hard-working, and she was known for her kindness and love of children and for her humour, fearlessness and courage.

In 1911, my grandmother Carrie Briggs was born on the Moonahculla riverbank of Wemba-Wemba country, her mother Maggie Taylor's country. Carrie was also known as a hard-worker, who valued the importance of education and of keeping our history and culture alive within her children. Carrie passed away when Mum was 20 years old and I was only three. To this day, I feel her presence surround me and I often call on her for strength and guidance. Carrie was one of the last speakers of our language and she often repeated stories of her past and our family genealogies to Mum, who continues to do the same with me.

Mum often shares that, at the time of Carrie's passing, she began to realise the importance of her own legacy. Since then, and for almost 50 years, my mum has dedicated her life to supporting individuals and communities connect to their heritage through mapping their genealogies, understanding their histories and their culture, and caring for our waterways and country. She has a lifetime of achievements and awards, and she continues to spend her life tirelessly promoting our culture and connection to country as founder and chair of the Boonwurrung Foundation.

Mum has worked throughout Victoria and developed many significant cultural and educational programs that continue today. She has been appointed a conciliator for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and as an investigator/researcher for the Royal



Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–91). My mum has also been given many significant achievement awards: in 2005, she was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women; in 2011, she was awarded National Female Elder of the Year; and in 2013 and 2014, she was included in the *Who's Who of Australian Women*.

On reflection, I note that my advocacy for strength in culture and community development began when I was almost 18 years old and was volunteering at the Dja Dja Wurrung Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Bendigo. At the young age of 19 I was elected deputy chairperson for this organisation. For more than 30 years I have held many executive roles and committee memberships for a vast number of boards of management. I have been employed as a senior manager and senior policy adviser in a broad range of professional fields, including arts and culture, tourism, early childhood, education, employment and the Victorian public sector. However, my proudest and most significant achievement is being mother to three proud warriors – Jaeden, Marbee and Ngarra.

A recent achievement was to successfully advocate for the history of Koorie Victoria to be told at Melbourne Museum and to manage the involvement and engagement of the Koorie community in the development of the *First Peoples* exhibition at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum. This groundbreaking work ensured that the history of Victoria's First Peoples was told from an original and authentic voice – ours. This permanent exhibition opened in September 2013 and has since won numerous national and international awards as a leading model of best practice in community engagement.

In December 2015, I resigned from my position as manager of Bunjilaka, after 12 years in the role, to create my own cultural strengthening business, Yalukit Marnang. My company was established to create a legacy for future generations, with the support of Cabrini Health, an organisation that believes in my vision. I am blessed to be in a position to follow this journey on my own terms, with the continued guidance of my Elders and esteemed Ancestors. My focus is to assist mainstream services to become culturally competent and culturally safe for individuals from our diverse communities. While I love this work, my absolute passion is facilitating women's gatherings and cultural camps for young girls, who don't always get an opportunity to engage in culture. My programs are grounded in strengthening identity and connecting to country. I don't view this as a job but, rather, as an opportunity to give back for all that I have gained by having strong sovereign women guide my life.

I come from 'resolute women'. I have a genetic responsibility to ensure that their sacrifice and our connection to country is never forgotten, but always maintained. This will ensure that my *arweet murni-gurrk's* (old wise women's) legacy is carried forward for many generations: just as it has been, so may it continue to be.

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## Paola Balla

*Gunditjmara, Wemba-Wemba*

Our women's stories are part of the living narrative of our nation, and they inspire me daily.

My work is a response and love letter of respect and awe I have for my Wemba-Wemba family matriarchs, strong and beautiful, proud women. Our women stand strong through genocide, rape, violence, trying to protect our children and families, land, culture and our bodies, both historically and continuing daily as sovereign warriors.

They keep family stories, genealogies, connections, nurturing ways, child raising, teaching, singing, language and culture, and teach me how to be a sovereign Aboriginal woman. I respect these lessons by trying to listen as deeply as possible, passing on knowledge to my children and creating works that reflect the strength of our women, so they are never forgotten.

My mother, grandmothers and aunts taught and teach me how to survive as an Aboriginal woman living with trans-generational trauma, resisting and speaking back to whiteness and colonisation, and asserting our sovereignty as Wemba-Wemba and Gunditjmara family peoples of the Day and Egan families.

This work is a statement of resistance, sovereignty, black beauty and womanly pride. It grew from the images and stories of my grandmother working as a domestic for white women in their colonial homes in Echuca, changing their babies' nappies whilst being banished to the back step to eat her meals and then being banished to give birth on the veranda of the Echuca Hospital, segregated from the white women.

Stories of Nan Rosie and my mother, Margie, picking tomatoes and potatoes and working in a fruit cannery, my great-grandmother Nanny Nancy being spat on by white school boys as she walked to work at the Echuca laundromat to starch white people's clothes stiff and pristine, my great-great-grandmother Papa Mariah Day driving a horse and buggy to deliver Aboriginal women's babies in the bush and travelling to the first Day of Mourning alone from Moonacullah to Sydney.

The image of my grandmothers and countless other Aboriginal women keeping compacted dirt floors clean enough to eat off, sprinkled with river water and swept with brooms of eucalyptus branches, their walls papered with newspaper, mattresses stuffed with gum leaves, making do with mission manager's rations of flour, sugar and tea.

I thank them, I honour them, and I will never forget them.

## Hannah Bronte

*Wakka Wakka/Yaegel*

For me, in terms of my thinking and Mobbed-out female strength, I'm inspired by Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Her book *Talkin Up to the White Woman* really changed my perception of feminism and understanding of how female empowerment is deeply layered.

Learning from Indigenous voices explaining and expressing the frustration and anger I'd felt but couldn't articulate deeply informed my practice, and I recommend everyone get their hands on this book! Plus I met her last year and was flat-out fan girl-ing. She was incredible.

## Hannah Gutchen

*Meraum tribe, Erub, Torres Strait*

My Aka Inkia, I have always and will always deeply respect her. She held herself with such wisdom and strength. Our matriarch of the family who wove us altogether. She mothered anyone who needed her and made sure no one felt left out. I look up to her strength at raising fifteen children of her own, not including the following generations as well. This level of determination and loyalty to family is something I value and hope to continue in our matriarchal line.

## Lee Darroch

*Yorta Yorta, Boon Wurrung, Mutti Mutti*

*The Bogong Moth Kangaroo Cloak of Healing* is dedicated to Auntie Matilda House, senior Ngambri Elder in Canberra.

I have known Auntie Matilda since about 2001 when she performed a Welcome to Country and opened our possum skin cloak exhibition at the National Museum of Australia. She is a strong local and national leader, a matriarch, activist, healer, cultural warrior, artist, mother and grandmother to a large family. Auntie Matilda is the person that all Aboriginal visitors to Canberra have turned to for a bed, feed, emotional support, cultural guidance and ceremonial leadership over the years.

Auntie Matilda was the woman leading the prime minister and leader of the Opposition into federal Parliament following a smoking ceremony and dance. She is often at the forefront and never afraid to speak out. Auntie Matilda remembers the first Tent Embassy as a beach umbrella on the lawns of Old Parliament House; she was there.

She believes in the value of lifelong education for the young ones coming through now. Auntie Matilda has worked in many different roles throughout her life.

For me Auntie Matilda has been a cultural advisor, emotional support, strong leader, keen supporter and most importantly a great laugh. To go to Matilda's home and be cooked her Johnny cakes or damper and roo tail is a privilege and an honour. This kangaroo cloak of healing is dedicated to her. Love you, Aunt.

## **Tara-Rose Butterworth-Gonebale**

*Wagiman*

I have been so fortunate to have so many beautiful and inspiring women in my life, but no one has ever compared to my mum. She's strong, brave, intelligent, kind-hearted and so loving. Not only is she an amazing mother, but she's my best friend. My whole life she has encouraged me to follow my heart, to never give up on my dreams, to believe in myself and to never let anyone stand in my way. Being so young when she started motherhood, she has had to make a lot of sacrifices for her family, but she has never given up and continues to strive and achieve goal after goal, regardless of the problems she faces along the way. She continues to inspire me every single day and I hope that one day I can be just like her.

## **Kimba Thompson**

*Wiradjuri*

The women who inspire me are those who have walked before me, those who walk beside me, and those who will walk ahead of me. Three of the most important women in my life are my grandmother, mother and my daughter they inspire me everyday.

My grandmother has come through some of the hardest times and she is my rock, raising seven children by herself. My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer just over a year ago and underwent surgery and weeks of radiation, not once did she complain, "We just got to get on with it". The strength and resilience I draw from these two women in my life is unquestionable. My daughter continues to inspire me everyday.



**Recentre; sisters**

5 May – 5 August 2017  
City Gallery  
Melbourne Town Hall

[melbourne.vic.gov.au/  
citygallery](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery)



**YIRRAMBOI  
MORROW**

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**THANKS TO**

Thank you to the artists, the Yirramboi festival and its creative director Jacob Boehme and designer Stephen Banham.

Thank you to my Yorta Yorta Matriarchs both with me now and in spirit, your strength runs through my veins. Thank you to my Grandmother, Mother and Sister, and thank you to all the sisters who continue to inspire, create change and stand proud in culture and community.

**THE CURATOR**

**Kimberley Moulton** is a Yorta-Yorta woman and visual arts and museums curator and Senior Curator of South Eastern Aboriginal Collections at Museums Victoria, Melbourne Museum. Her practice is centred on the intersection of contemporary Indigenous art and cultural material in museums with a focus on collaborative research and access for community. Kimberley is an alumni of the National Gallery Australia Wesfarmers Indigenous Leadership Program, the 2015 NGA International curatorial fellow USA, and alumni of British Council ACCELERATE Program UK. Kimberley is an Australia Council for the Arts emerging Victorian Indigenous Curator for the 2017 Venice Biennale Italy.



**Recentre; sisters**

5 May – 5 August 2017  
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[melbourne.vic.gov.au/  
citygallery](http://melbourne.vic.gov.au/citygallery)



**YIRRAMBOI  
MORROW**

**OPPOSITE**

Tara-Rose Butterworth-Gonebale  
*Mayiiva* (sister)  
2016  
54 x 36.5cm  
On loan from the artist

**Recentre; sisters** presents the work of eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women artists: Paola Balla, Hannah Bronte, Tara-Rose Butterworth-Gonebale, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Destiny Deacon, Lee Darroch, Hannah Gutchen and Kimba Thompson.

They bring together new and existing work that voice Aboriginal women's roles in activism, healthy communities and cultural maintenance, centring Matriarchal narratives and celebrating sisterhood.