

LOOK GOOD FEEL GOOD

■ Jenny Fraser

The art of healing

Storytelling Aboriginal people are not without hope, for we are strong peoples. We have overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in our long and painful histories, because our creator has given us the tools necessary for our survival. We must not be shy to use them. We must no longer feel the shame and fear that our grandmothers and grandfathers felt about what we are and where we have come from. We must look to ourselves for our own guarantees, for we are the only ones that we can trust to ensure that our needs are met.

Canada, 1989

Long before the official Apology by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to the victims of the residential schools system, the previous Canadian Government had handed over \$350 million compensation for those Aboriginal people who suffered abuse as wards of the state. This was wisely invested into culturally significant initiatives such as talking circles, language revitalisation, digital storytelling and other projects. Such arts initiatives are not only for the good of those individuals that endured horrific treatment under the government, church and the dominant mainstream population, but their descendants, families and tribes, along with the wider community. This is a suitable model for Australia to follow in attempting to address the impact of the horrendous wrongs of the past on an individual and collective level, perhaps allowing us all to move forward with a healthier mindset. However, we wait for that type of meaningful ‘money where your mouth is’ gesture of commitment from the Australian Government in retrospect.

Meanwhile at the community level, some artists from around Australia are proactively making headway into maintaining what I like to call the ‘Healing Arts’, highlighting the processes and issues regarding the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and also the inter-relatedness of others. The Healing Arts have the expressive potential for us as a multitude of Aboriginal cultures to enable and effect change for ourselves, while also participating in the mainstream social constructs known as ‘health’, ‘culture’ and ‘the arts’. Some of those leading the way in both ancient and newer forms of Aboriginal expression are Gulumbu Yunupingu, Emma Donovan and myself.

In recent years Gulumbu Yunupingu has been rejuvenating the Dilthana Yolgnu healing method, also known as ‘bush

sauna’. Her ‘patients’ are wrapped in paperbark and leaves, with hot coals creating a steaming for their body, which along with massage, eases aches and pains. She was taught the technique by senior women including Gunyngulu Yunupingu and has successfully used traditional healing on her own daughter after she fell into a coma from a serious car accident and became paralysed, seeking and gaining permission to treat her with a traditional sauna on a beach in Darwin.

Since then Gulumbu has put her own prolific and innovative visual art career on hold in order to benefit others, co-founding The Healing Place, or Bush Hospital in Yirrkala, North East Arnhem Land. According to the Government’s recently founded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Working Group, healing is ‘a spiritual process that includes recovery from addiction; therapeutic change; and cultural renewal’.¹ So isn’t it a shame that those communities that are literally left high and dry under the Government’s Intervention and subsequent bans, don’t have such healing initiatives supported for people going through alcohol or kava withdrawal? They are left without the benefit of such a responsible and effective form of detoxification as the bush sauna technique provides. Where is the Government’s Duty of Care after such outlandish, pointed and discriminatory measures?

Similar types of traditional healing techniques are also being used alongside mainstream medicine as a norm in places like Bali in Indonesia, but in Australia we tend to deny the importance of a both-ways philosophy. With his own needs for healing, Murrungun multi-artform practitioner Tom E. Lewis reminds us: ‘I’m very lucky. I can enjoy the two cultures of this country. I can use the whitefella culture and the blackfella culture. The more we cross our paths and make a better pathway for us, through music and through our art, it’s a good medicine.’² Utilising the potential of the *Healing Arts*, by using the old ways, making art and putting a high value on storytelling as a way of bringing cultural values into the mainstream, is a holistic approach towards wellbeing, as well as a way of participating in society and having an authentic Aboriginal voice.

My own artwork *unsettled* is an online interactive project that digitally retells nine stories of my old people through a mix of oral history and ongoing research, celebrating the people and place of Yugambeh in South East Queensland and my



family's movements beyond. Following on from *other[wize]* these interactive digital stories mark place and time and are offered through the use of old family photographs, Yugambeh language, sound, along with contemporary documentation of country and re-membering. Native Canadian Curator Ahasiw Maskegon Iskew originally commissioned the work for *Storm Spirits*, an Aboriginal New Media Art initiative in Canada. Ahasiw wrote in his curatorial essay: 'The *Storm Spirits* premise arises out of Aboriginal concepts of the intersecting animist relations that inhabit the realms stretching from astronomy to meteorology, geology and down into microbiology, and offers them as new rhetorical designations of the relations that are evolving in the multiple streams of contemporary Aboriginal media art production. *Storm Spirits* focuses on Aboriginal artists whose work inhabits and maps out these intersecting spheres of influence and who contribute unique forms of vitality to the dynamic and essential interplay between Indigenous traditional knowledge and contemporary Aboriginal culture.³ A vital aspect to the development of *unsettled* was a process of revisiting and an exploration of country, learning and using Yugambeh language and other opportunities for re-connection to make sense of lived experience and also understand the extent of trans-generational trauma derived from massacres and the many other injustices of the day. Through engaging in this process, and gaining strength from my family's own inner

The senior Gumatj clanswoman, healer and artist Gulumbu Yunupingu (left) and her grand-daughter (right) treat a stroke victim at Gulkula in north east Arnhem Land. Photograph by Jenny Fraser and courtesy of the Yothu Yindi Foundation.

knowledge and solutions, the project stands as a legacy that allows my family stories to be offered up as an alternative to the mainstream Queensland version of the history of colonisation.

As an annual follow-on to the Australian Apology, so far the current Rudd Government has announced that an interim team would assist with the development of a Healing Foundation. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team recognises cultural renewal as part of a spiritual process towards healing. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to properly heal, they will need to re-connect to, and strengthen their sense of cultural identity. This may involve language, dance, song and custom, but this does not have to be only in a 'traditional' context.⁴

Australia looks to Canada, where they already have a Healing Foundation. Interestingly, it was established as an Aboriginal-managed, national, not-for-profit private corporation that was independent of Government, yet representative of Aboriginal organisations. If Australia is genuinely interested in 'closing the gap' on the appalling health statistics that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the Government may look at relinquishing control, allowing Aboriginal

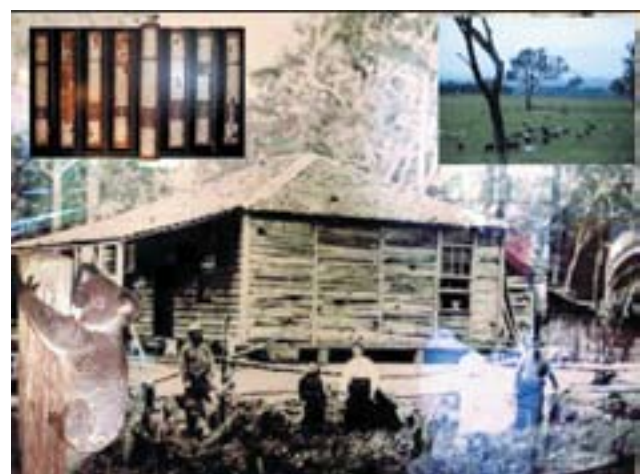
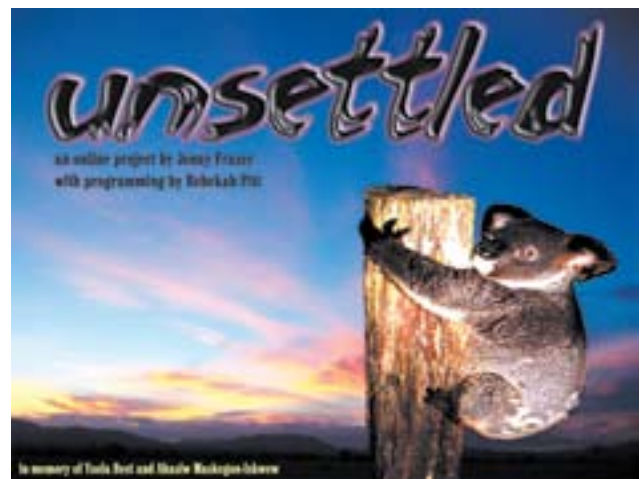
management to drive the proposed development of the Healing Foundation.

So far however, Australia's current commitment of \$26 million to be used only towards a consultative process for the Healing Foundation follows on from extensive reports over the past decades including the Women's Taskforce on Violence Report, The Gordon Inquiry Report, The Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce Final Report, The Western Australian Child Health Survey, the *Little Children Are Sacred* Report and the *Bringing Them Home* Report among others. The findings in these reports should be enough to provide the basis for the alarming need for commitment towards compensation, especially given the importance of 'moving-on' in the public discussion about the Apology. As Chairperson of the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group, Gracelyn Smallwood has commented post-Apology: 'My expectation was that culturally appropriate programs would be put in place to address the trans-generational trauma that has been passed down. That day opened up a lot of wounds. If you're going to make such an incredible statement you've got to have infrastructure in place to follow on. They did this in Canada and South Africa. Unfortunately we're not seeing any of those fruits'⁵

We need to cast Aboriginal voices into the struggle for recognition and ownership of wellbeing, which risks becoming exclusive in various ways – a domain defined narrowly through access, availability, technology, funding, privilege and policy-driven barriers. As Nunga Director Lee-Ann Buckskin reflected about the Carclew project Working Towards Celebrating Healthy Communities: 'Everyone had an idea of how that should be done and as an Indigenous person and an arts worker, one of the greatest struggles I have is about people not listening and making assumptions about what people need. Understanding doesn't have to be a battle. It shouldn't be a battle. Just opening up to another way of thinking is a good start! And I tell you what; if we do that someone might actually teach us how to do something different.'⁶

The Healing Arts is an emerging notion in itself in Australia, producing scattered and tentative projects and critical writing, but unfortunately there is little Aboriginal input, reflection, discussion or representation and ownership. More Aboriginal artworks and projects mindful of healing need to be produced, exhibited, promoted, and written about; or at least provided with an injection of meaningful monetary investment towards a health and wellbeing revolution in which Aboriginal cultural practice will naturally be the spearhead. ■

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Team Discussion Paper, 2009 FaHCSIA, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous>
 2. Tom E. Lewis, *Nexus, Australia Network*, 2008. <http://australianetwork.com/nexus/stories/s1994299.htm>
 3. *Storm Spirits – Aboriginal New Media Art*, 2007 http://www.stormspirits.ca/English/latest_developments.html
 4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Team Discussion Paper, *ibid*.
 5. Condon, M. 'The Hardest Word', *Q Weekend Magazine* Feb. 7/8, 2009 p22.
 6. *Arts for Healthy Communities, Big Story Country: great arts stories from regional Australia* 2008, Regional Arts Australia, p46.
- See: unsettled <http://www.cybertribe.culture2.org/unsettled>



Jenny Fraser *unsettled* 2007, screen-grabs from online interactive, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.