

'Cultural cringe' alive in Qld says Badtjala artist

By RACHEL SCOLLAY



PROMINENT Indigenous artist Fiona Foley has followed up her public criticism of Queensland's 'cultural amnesia' with a key note address at the National Gallery of

Australia in Canberra on 24 January. Her initial 10 minute speech at the Creative Capital forum in Brisbane in December made headlines after she criticized the awarding of a \$1 million Qld public sculpture commission to Maori artist Michael Parekowhai.

Foley returned to the subject of the Premier of Queensland's Sculpture Commission in her recent speech titled 'The Elephant in the Room', re-litigating her point that South Bank, Brisbane could easily be substituted for South Bank, London, as it was 'visually barren' of Indigenous art.

Foley said the traditional land where Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) now sits, and where the sculpture will be situated - Kurilpa - is the site for the dreaming story of the water rat, Kuril. And when Qld Premier Anna Bligh unveiled the scale model of the intended Parekowhai sculpture on 26 November, she felt 'outraged'.

"With little fanfare at the event to celebrate GoMA's fifth birthday, Anna Bligh took the satin covering off the maquette (scale model), to reveal the intended five metre bronze elephant - upended with its backside in the air eye-balling a water rat," she said.

"The commissioned work has its beginnings in an African fable, better

known as 'The Mouse and the Elephant'.

"By substituting the mouse with kuril, the water rat, we now have a Maori artist referencing Aboriginal culture."

In December, Foley wrote to Michael Parekowhai, who is an associate professor at Auckland University's Elam School of Fine Arts, asking him to withdraw from the project as a show of support for local Indigenous artists.

"I intended public sculpture adds another layer in the writing out of Queensland Aboriginal artists, our stories, our voices, culture, philosophy, intellect, politic and history," she wrote.

Foley told the *Koori Mail* last week

acknowledgement of (internationally renowned photographer and filmmaker) Tracey Moffatt, there's no recognition of (Indigenous poet and activist) Kath Walker (Dodgeroo Noonuccal).

"But these have been major players culturally."

Following Foley's Creative Capital speech, Brisbane newspaper the *Courier-Mail* reported GoMA deputy director Suhanya Raffel saying the intention for the sculpture commission was always to secure an international artist.

The Parekowhai sculpture, *The World Turns*, will be unveiled in December this year to coincide with the seventh Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art.

"(The commission) is the Premier's initiative and that is what she wanted to link it to, it is an opportunity to look at an international artist," she said.

In a written response to the *Koori Mail*'s request for

comment, the Queensland Art Gallery said it had 'a proud record of working with Indigenous communities locally and nationally, and continues to be committed to the delivery of Queensland Indigenous projects and acquisitions'.

Foley told the *Koori Mail* that she had had a lot of positive response following her participation in the Creative Capital forum, with people from major Australian companies approaching her to congratulate her on her speech.

"I think it pricked people's consciences," she said.

At the time of going to print, Michael Parekowhai had not responded to the *Koori Mail*'s emailed request for comment.

'...we now have a Maori artist referencing Aboriginal culture'

that she had yet to receive any response.

In opening the Creative Capital forum last December, Qld Arts Minister Rachel Nolan, noted GoMA's claim to fame as the most visited gallery in Australia and amongst the top 20 most visited galleries in the world.

Foley told the *Koori Mail* that she believed a focus on trying to strategically place Brisbane as an arts hub of the Asia Pacific, had resulted in a degree of 'cultural cringe' when it came to supporting home-grown talent.

"But the flip-side of that is, what makes us unique is our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture...[yet] there's no memorial to Eddie Mabo, no work by Gloria Fletcher, no