OBJECTS AND SPECIMENS

Conservative politics and the SA Museum’s Aboriginal Cultures Gallery

MY RELATIONSHIP with the AACG—the South Australian Museum’s Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery—is a complex one. A curator working with the Aboriginal collections for about fifteen years, I left in 1997 after several years of turmoil surrounding the Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Island) issue. I was deeply disturbed by the way that the Museum’s collections and exhibitions had been used as an authenticity template against which contemporary Ngarrindjeri people’s beliefs were judged (see Hemming 1996; Bell 1998; Hemming 2000). In many ways, this experience clarified my understanding of the political functions of museums and in some cases, their continuing, colonising relationship with Indigenous Australia.

Regarded as an ‘encyclopaedia’ of Australian Aboriginal cultures, the AACG has been characterised as a ‘stubbornly’ brave example of a traditional, ethnographic and artefact-based approach to the display of Indigenous cultures (see Kean 2001). It is seen to celebrate the “highest standards of conservation and scientific enquiry” and is favourably compared with the “more than a touch of political correctness” found in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney galleries (Megaw 2001: 119). During the 2002 Museums Australia conference, Philip Jones, the curator responsible for the AACG’s original brief, made the point that he had pursued a traditional, artefact-based approach as opposed to what he believed was a more politically influenced approach being taken in the eastern States.

Yet Jones’s approach is itself anything but politically neutral. The AACG is a powerful, political act of representation. The discourses that suffuse the gallery mediate and limit public understanding of complex and important contemporary issues. The AACG and the scholarship that produced it provide more than just the influential backdrops in current public debates, particularly those that have swept through the new exhibitions of the National Museum in the guise of ‘history wars’ (see Artwood & Foster 2003).

In 2001, after a lengthy Federal Court case, Justice von Doussa found that the Ngarrindjeri proponents of what has been called by the media ‘secret women’s business’ are credible witnesses: upon the evidence before this Court I am not satisfied that the restricted women’s knowledge was fabricated or that it was not part of genuine Aboriginal tradition (Von Doussa 2001: 4).

Yet the two principal curators of the AACG, non-Indigenous conservatives Jones and Philip Clarke, played a central role in the perception of a fabricated ‘secret women’s business’, arguing to the 1995 Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission (Stevens 1995) that the Ngarrindjeri restricted women’s business was a recent invention. The AACG has been strongly influential in reinforcing the authority of non-Indigenous institutions to tell Australians what ‘Aboriginal Cultures’ are. It is a ‘politically correct’ gallery at a time when the favoured readings of Australian culture and history are determined by a conservative Federal government.

THE AACG LOCATES ‘real’ Aborigines in a spatially and temporally remote space. It reinforces a sense
of western culture as technologically superior, modern and further down the teleological track of progress. This is the narrative that flows through the gallery. Assimilation—rather than sovereignty—is the political message embedded in the complex array of texts. Non-Indigenous visitors meet their old friends: the boomerangs and spears that have long stood as symbols of Aboriginal culture in Australia—symbols of the 'primitive other' that underpin an understanding of whiteness. As Chris Healy has pointed out:

As non-Aboriginal people have tried to know the other, they have imagined themselves as not 'primitive', not part of 'nature', not 'Stone Age', and so on. It is only through knowing blackness in Australia that whiteness has been felt to be real (Healy 1997: 95).

The Australian public and overseas tourists are encouraged to think of the AAGC as an encyclopedia of Indigenous Australia. Sold as a 'gateway to the outback', a gateway to authentic cultural tourism, it is seen as a place where you might still experience 'classical' or 'traditional' Indigenous culture. The former Premier of South Australia, John Olsen, wrote in the AAGC's exhibition catalogue:

The new Gallery provides an ideal gateway to the outback as well as a fascinating insight into Aboriginal Australia. The South Australian Government congratulates the Museum and all involved.

I wonder if the former Liberal State Government would have supported a gallery developed by Indigenous people with themes that addressed issues of invasion, dispossession, sovereignty, survival (in a colonised land) and a history of political 'activism'?

In its avoidance of key political and historical debates, its uncritical use of western scientific traditions as a framework for authorising a representation of what is described as Australian Aboriginal cultures, the AAGC is by definition 'politically correct'. Philip Clarke (Clarke 2000: 6) states in the exhibition catalogue:

The Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery is the most comprehensive Aboriginal cultural exhibition in the world, with over three thousand objects and hundreds of photographs on display in a contemporary and ethnographic setting.

This claim of encyclopedic status rests comfortably with the Museum's historical role as a natural history institution. Constructing an authoritative, ordered view of the world, a view from the position of the dominant western 'centre' (see Pratt 1992), the gallery is obscured inside what is essentially a natural history museum containing representations of exotic cultures from the colonial space. The encyclopedia informing the AAGC is the South Australian Museum's Anthropology Register, with its scientific language of museum classification developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the exhibition labels have been taken directly from the register.

In a paper delivered at the 2001 American Association of Museums Annual Meeting, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill investigated the relationship between "museums and cultural politics" (Hooper-Greenhill 2001). Taking her understanding of culture from what she describes as "the intellectual field of cultural studies" she argued that:

Cultural politics ... concerns itself with issues and morality, sociological questions of exclusion and inclusion, advantage and disadvantage, and these concerns are of extreme relevance within the museum. Questions need to be asked about access to culture and cultural production. Who has the power to create, to make visible and to legitimate meanings and values? And what stories are being told? Museums have the power to affect lives by opening up or closing down subjectivities, attitudes and feelings towards the self and others (Hooper-Greenhill 2001: 4).

Created in an era of Social Darwinism, influential categories or subjectivities, such as 'traditional' go unchallenged in the AAGC. They continue to shape visitors' understandings of Indigenous people and their apparently tenuous relationship with contemporary Australia. Early black and white photographs of 'traditional looking' Indigenous people from remote areas fix a particular version of Indigeneity in visitors' minds. In the most direct way, Indigenous people are reduced to objects by the Museum's 'old-fashioned' exhibition approach. What are characterised as the cultural achievements of Indigenous people have been judged by a non-Indigenous panel of experts and measured against a materialist, scientific world-view.

Indigenous voices in the AAGC are trapped inside small video screens and seldom make it out
into the main exhibition. They have no influence on the shape of the exhibits that frame them. They have an inter-textual relationship with the rest of the gallery; a context through which the visitor makes sense of what they see and hear. The often quietly spoken black face talking to the visitor is not the usual face of authority for non-Indigenous Australians or many overseas visitors. It may provide a stamp of authenticity, but only within the context of the powerful, western institution of the museum.

In the main part of the exhibition, labels written in a scientific voice provide visitors with a material bedrock of ‘fact’ on which to judge the voices of Indigenous people on the video screens, and, importantly, other Indigenous people encountered in contemporary Australia. There may be multiple voices in the AAGC, but it is the dispassionate, scientific, curatorial voice that dominates and directs the story. This voice remains unidentified, masked, naturalised and authoritative.

In a climate of ongoing struggle among Indigenous people to assert the validity of their oral traditions (for example, in the Kumarangk issue, and in native title and land rights cases), oral traditions have been cast against the empiricist, factual, written records of the non-Indigenous institution. The AAGC reinforces the perceived ‘superiority’ of the written, the documented, the scientific and scholarly. This is not, as Kean argues, ‘... a healthy tension between the ‘classical culture’ that has been captured by the museum and the lived experience of contemporary people’ (Kean 2001: 9).

A version of the Ngarrindjeri people’s Ngarunnderi Dreaming is included in a strangely undisciplined textual form—the text layout does not follow the orderly lines of authoritative, printed material. Described as being “told by Albert Karloa [Ngarrindjeri elder] to Ronald and Catherine Berndt [anthropologists]”, it carries the following label: ‘The Ngarunnderi Dreaming is a well-documented example of a South East Dreaming’. Does it need to be well documented to be authentic? Well documented by whom? Is this in opposition to something that is not well documented such as women’s beliefs? Providing very little of an Indigenous woman’s perspective or experience, it would be hard to determine from the exhibits whether women play much of a role in religious life or indeed whether or not they have initiations.

The South Australian Museum sits on north terrace, Adelaide’s cultural boulevard, alongside other authorising institutions such as the University of Adelaide, the Art Gallery and the State Library. These institutions construct influential representations of Indigenous people and they form, with the Museum, a nexus of power fundamental to the dominant discourses of contemporary Australia. The Museum, with its galleries of natural history and exotic, colonised ‘natives’ has traditionally been the place to learn about ‘Aboriginal culture’. Not only has Indigenous material culture been ‘collected’ and displayed by the Museum, but Indigenous people themselves have been collected as ‘human remains’—part of the natural science collections that have traditionally explained the ‘unfamiliar’ environment of the Australian continent. Indigenous people’s skeletons were on display in the Museum until the 1970s.

During the recent Adelaide Festival, ‘art activists’ replaced the Victoria Square signs with Tarndanyangga—the Kaurna name of the area. The power of the Victoria Square site to generate negative images of Indigenous people as ‘fringe-dwellers’, vagrants’ and ‘alcoholics’, not ‘real’ Aborigines like the ones in the Museum, has been recognised and challenged by attempts to re-name and by the permanent location of an Aboriginal flag in the square (Hemming 2001). What role could the AAGC have played in this crucial cultural debate? An exhibit dealing with the historical, cultural and social complexities of this issue could have made a positive contribution.

Over the last few years a number of places around the City of Adelaide have been re-named with their Kaurna language names (see Amery 2000). The South Australian Museum didn’t follow this trend by finding an Indigenous name for the AAGC.

As YOU MOVE towards the entrance to the AAGC there is a large photomural with Ivariiti (Ivariiti is unidentified), a female Kaurna elder, alongside the explorer, Sir Douglas Mawson—they are both wearing animal-skin clothing. What the general public makes of this contemporary juxtaposition would be the subject of an interesting survey. Has Sir Douglas Mawson ‘discovered’ Ivariiti? Or would visitors see Ivariiti as Mawson’s ‘native wife’—rescued from her Indigenous culture? The powerful theme of the European discovery and reconquest of Indigenous Australia is not here. The ‘Australian Aboriginal’ category is not here. Of course, the audience of Indigenous people visiting the AAGC and seeing portraits of Ivariiti and Mawson would challenge this presentation of history.

The interpretation, the viewpoint of the Ivariiti, the ‘original canoe tree’ visitors to the AAGC in the 1960s. The Pilbara side of the entrance has been abandoned by the frequently discovered Norman Tindale. The interpretation and gave them a space to reflect. Now, in a natural history museum, labels do not include Indigenous people who were here. The interpretation, the viewpoint, the history, the landscape, the land of the Pilbara.
Many Indigenous people would not agree with this perspective of origins, but Indigenous voices are seldom quoted.

due of Indigenous cultures frames the entrance to the AACG. As you enter you walk past the ‘Aboriginal canoe tree’ rescued by the Museum in the 1960s. The Pilbara tin masks that surround the inside of the entrance are described as having been abandoned by their Indigenous makers and subsequently discovered by the museum anthropologist, Norman Tindale. He rescued them from destruction and gave them new life as anthropological specimens in a natural history museum. The Museum labels do not include information from the Indigenous people who made and used the tin masks. The interpretation is entirely, uncritically from the standpoint of the 1950s anthropologist. The masks reinforce what is perhaps the main underlying theme or ‘mythology’ of the AACG—the power of western science to rescue and authenticate Indigenous culture.

Once inside, the visitor is met by a display of what would be read by many as ‘traditional’ Aboriginal faces, the same nameless ‘Aborigines’ that have occupied so many displays and publications. Included are a couple of small video screens with moving pictures of contemporary people but without sound—the people are unidentified and have no voice (see Bellar 1996: 41). Where are the faces and voices of Pat and Mick Dodson, Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton or Lowitja O’Donohue? Even sporting heroes don’t make the grade—there is no image of Cathy Freeman, Jason Gillespie or Andrew McLeod. Local Indigenous leaders such as Gladys Elphick, Doreen Kartinyeri or Yami Lester are also absent. Perhaps most disappointing is that there is no context within which to understand contemporary Indigenous experience. The visitor is given few clues as to why Indigenous people have been arguing for land rights for so many years, why native title has been a battleground and why so many Indigenous people are calling for an apology from the national government over the Stolen Generations.

The AACG’s regional exhibits are largely based on shared environmental features and aspects of material culture. The local Indigenous people of the Adelaide Plains area, the Kaurna people, have a specific section near the gallery’s ground-floor entrance and the Tiwi people have a separate area on the second floor. There is, surprisingly, no traditional Kaurna welcome to country at the entrance of the gallery.

The gallery itself is very dark and in many cases it is impossible to read labels or properly see objects, adding to the impression that Aboriginal cultures are something in the past. Most of the text in the AACG is written in the past tense. This is particularly the case when exhibits deal with regions that are popularly characterised as rural or urban. The introductory label sets the scene for the gallery—the curatorial voice tells the visitor that “Aboriginal people arrived in Australia over fifty thousand years ago”. This is a political statement of origins based on archaeological research (questioned even within its own discipline). Many Indigenous people would not agree with this perspective of origins, but Indigenous voices are seldom quoted. When they are, they are without a profession or authority label such as senior elder, Rupulli (Ngarrindjeri) or law-man.

Much of the language of the object labels has been taken directly from the old museum register. The language of the era in which the specimen was ‘collected’ is used uncritically to make sense of its meanings and cultural value. Often the information is very sparse and limited to European, technical descriptors such as, ‘container, bark’ or ‘spear, two rows of barbs cut from the solid’. There is little discussion throughout the gallery of the meanings that Indigenous people have for the ‘objects’ on display. Nor is there an examination of the history of the power of the European classification of material culture and its relationship to the ranking of what were seen as the ‘races of man’, with Indigenous people at the bottom of the ladder.

In the themes and technologies sections there are few photographs of people—the focus is fundamentally on material culture, and ‘traditional’ practices from the past. The photographs that are included are mostly black and white and from remote areas. The section called ‘Webs of relatedness’ appears different from the rest of the exhibition.
Not only has Indigenous material culture been ‘collected’ and displayed, but Indigenous people themselves have been collected as ‘human remains’—part of the natural science collections that have traditionally explained the ‘unfamiliar’ environment of the Australian continent.

While it deals with social themes, the language used is complex and anthropological. This feature, combined with the dense, lengthy and extremely small-fonted labels, and the very poor lighting, makes this part of the gallery almost impossible to follow. In the background are a series of archival films playing. Norman Tindale’s voice-overs can be heard and his stilted, formal style seems to have flowed throughout the gallery into all levels of text.

JOHN KEAN, IN HIS REVIEW OF THE AACG, makes the point that the exhibition has a “dispassionate intellectual structure”. The language of science or the bureaucracy is often dispassionate as part of a strategy for masking what Lowitja O’Donohue referred to as ‘reality’ in her keynote address at the 2002 Museums Australia conference. When the language of powerful discourses is not recognised for what it is then it is at its most powerful and dangerous. The AACG naturalises a non-Indigenous, scientific and anthropological view of Australian history and Indigenous ‘cultures’. A view that is often characterised as non-political, but is just as political in its aims as the Bunjilaka Gallery and perhaps far more powerful in its influence.

Vincent Megaw concludes his review of the AACG on a surprisingly positive note given some of the serious criticisms he raises. He clearly prefers the old-style museum exhibition to what he categorises as exhibitions in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney that are “liberally assisted by more than a touch of political correctness, not to be confused with sensitivity towards indigenous concerns, a sensitivity which clearly suffuses much of the AACG” (Megaw 2001: 119). I am not sure to which Indigenous concerns Megaw is referring.

Visitors to the AACG should be able to find well-documented evidence of the link between anthropology, government policy and the genocidal policy of child removal—particularly in the South Australian Museum where the research of anthropologists such as Norman Tindale became influential in the development of Australia-wide ‘Aboriginal policy’. Australians should be made aware of the powerful discourses that operate in the AACG and continue to oppress Indigenous people. These discourses restrict and control the general public’s understanding of issues facing most important contemporary Indigenous communities.

In 2002 RICHARD WEST, the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), part of the Smithsonian Institution, presented a paper in the South Australian Museum’s Pacific Gallery entitled, ‘American Museums in the Twenty-first Century: By Whose Authority?’. His question is equally relevant for Australian museums. In his paper West outlined the process undertaken by the NMAI in its exhibition development. Indigenous creativity was the driving force right from the conceptual beginnings of the process. He told us that:

... the NMAI developed five guiding principles that were based directly upon its consultations with Native communities regarding exhibitions and were to inform its development. The five Exhibition Principles are the following: (1) community: our tribes are sovereign nations; (2) locality: this is Indian land; (3) vitality: we are here now; (4) viewpoint: we know the world differently; and (5) voice: these are our stories (West 2002: 11).

The Jumbanna Gallery in the new Melbourne Museum is an exhibition developed more along the lines of the Smithsonian example. Its main themes, ‘Koori Voices’, ‘Belonging to Country’, and ‘Two Laws: Indigenous Knowledge, Law and Property’ have much in common with the principles outlined by West (see Russell 2001). Importantly, Jumbanna (part of the Bunjilaka centre) incorporates insights and perspectives developed in contemporary cultural and postcolonial theory and makes them ac-

OPINION

More on...
OPINION / Naomi Parry

More on Windschuttle

THE DEBATE SURROUNDING Keith Windschuttle’s The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume I, Van Diemen’s Land 1803–1847 is infuriating for historians. Firstly, it is extremely time-consuming to prepare historically robust answers to his claims. Secondly, few historians have a rigorous understanding of Tasmanian frontier relations. By setting this book in Tasmania, Windschuttle has deliberately picked a soft target. The only people alive who have done sufficient research to rebut his accusations are Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds, whose reputations he has determined to destroy. Few others can speak with authority about the primary sources he says have been corrupted. Consequently, Windschuttle has been able to build quite a head of steam in the press, with-