

# WESTERLY

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## WESTERLY

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Elizabeth Durack, *Flood on the Yule River* from the series *The Art of Eddie Burrup*, 1996, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 100 cm

## THE ART OF EDDIE BURRUP

Eleven years ago, the true identity of Eddie Burrup, an (apparently) indigenous artist from the North-West of Western Australia was quietly revealed in an article in *Art Monthly Australia* by Robert Smith.<sup>1</sup> Burrup's works had been included in the 1996 *Native Titled Now* exhibition and in the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in Darwin that same year, accompanied by extensive artist's notes written in Kriol and photos of his country. However, in March 1997, Elizabeth Durack, an eighty-one year old, white, female, third generation Australian from a West Australian pastoralist family, who was already well known as an artist and a writer, contacted Smith and asked that he make it publicly known that she was the true author of the Burrup works. Within a week of Smith's article, Durack was being heavily criticised in the national and international media and labelled as either the architect of the greatest artistic hoax in Australia since the Ern Malley affair or perpetrator of a fraud of the same ilk as author Helen Darville-Demidenko.

Hoaxer or fraudster, it was Durack's incursion into indigenous cultural territory that attracted the most vitriolic criticism. Djon Mundine, who was the Curator of Aboriginal Art for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney at the time, stated that Durack's behaviour was "a fucking obscenity"<sup>2</sup> and Wayne Bergmann from the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre described it as "the ultimate act of colonisation."<sup>3</sup> I'd like to closely examine Durack's actions and the accusations levelled at her in relation to the historical, social, political and cultural context in which the works were produced.

Well before the Eddie Burrup scandal became the talk of the town, Durack was a household name in Western Australia. Elizabeth, and her author sister Dame Mary Durack, were members of a well known pioneer/pastoralist family here. Their grandfather "Patsy" Durack established and

ran (later with the help of their father) “Argyle” and “Ivanhoe” stations in the East Kimberley. Although she was sent to Perth for schooling, Durack spent most of her twenties and thirties on the stations, even running “Ivanhoe” for some time in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Durack was well known locally as an artist. She held a staggering eleven solo shows between 1946 and 1950 and was one of only three women artists chosen to participate in the now significant 1961 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery in London that cemented the reputations of Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, Fred Williams and Brett Whiteley amongst others.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, critical opinion of Durack’s art practice prior to the Burrup scandal varied widely. Some argue Durack has been overlooked. For example, Christine Sharkey suggests that Durack pre-dates Guy Grey-Smith and Robert Juniper in her interest in depicting the dry, outback interior.<sup>6</sup> She also states that Durack’s watercolour paintings of rural or Aboriginal labourers from the 1950s and 1960s rival Harald Vike’s works. Janda Gooding agrees that Durack’s depictions of Aboriginal people were progressive for their time, stating that “few other artists were creating such powerful portraits of Aboriginal women in the 1940s.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, David Bromfield, noted Western Australian academic and art critic, was not particularly impressed. He felt that she “was not a great artist. Nor was she particularly innovative in the wider context” and stated that her painting “came uncomfortably close to a range of familiar styles, from utilitarian potboiler realism and outback social surrealism to a figurative version of Jackson Pollock.”<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to assume, especially from the vantage point of 2009, that a pastoralist’s relationship with Aboriginal people must have been patronising at best and exploitative at worst. But Durack’s relationship with the Aboriginal people she lived alongside was quite different. It is well known that her family were unusual in their protective attitudes to the Aboriginal workers on their properties. Whilst it is also easy to retrospectively describe that attitude as paternalistic, at the time it was understood and valued by these people. Smith learned from independent sources that those who worked for the Duracks made their connections to the family known, when on other stations, because of the protection it afforded them.

Many commentators described Durack’s use of the Eddie Burrup alter ego as a hoax. Debra Jopson and Kelly Burke compared it to the well-known Ern Malley affair of the 1940s. But as Smith explained, “a hoax is when you attempt to spoof people”<sup>9</sup> and many others, in the absence of an explanation by Durack, countered that the long history of respect and understanding for Aboriginal people by her family made it unlikely

that her intention was to hoax.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively Durack's actions could perhaps be understood as yet another example of outright plagiarism; the sort of appropriation that has resulted in Aboriginal images and designs appearing on everything from the one dollar note to souvenir tea towels.<sup>11</sup> Historically, white Australian artists have also appropriated such designs. For example, Margaret Preston once claimed that Aboriginal designs made splendid decorations, but she later modified her statements as she became aware of the deeper spiritual content of such motifs.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Burrup designs were not copied from another artist. As Robert Smith explained to Jane Freeman and Duncan Graham, "Elizabeth has not plagiarised anyone or taken anyone's motif or taken anything from any living person. It is all her own creation."<sup>13</sup> Durack herself was taken aback by the accusation of plagiarism; "The implication seem(s) to be that I sat down and copied Aboriginal dot painting or something like that. It was never like that – never."<sup>14</sup>

Durack did utilise Aboriginal designs in the 1950s but she fully acknowledged the sources of her imagery. In the foreword to *Australian Legendary Tales 1953*, a book of Aboriginal myths illustrated by Durack, she clearly states that the imagery she included in her compositions was taken from carved nuts, bark paintings, rock faces and other sources and belongs to Aboriginal people. Moreover, she explains how she was taught by one of her Aboriginal friends "to understand black man's [sic] pictorial art."<sup>15</sup> Her description of the traditions of bark painting and, importantly, the cultural significance of painting in relation to secret/sacred cultural life are sensitive and respectful.

To Durack, Eddie Burrup is a fully fledged artistic persona. She explained: "If I think things through, I would say that Eddie Burrup is a synthesis of several Aboriginal men I have known ...[but he is] a character in his own right with a life and career of his own."<sup>16</sup> As Smith explained, Durack "always talks of him as a third person, because, to her, he is a real person because he is a compound of people she has known."<sup>17</sup> Three senior Nyoongar Aboriginals seemed to understand. After meeting Durack, they released a statement that said "We the Metropolitan Nyoongar Circle of Elders accept that Mrs Elizabeth Durack is the Human Body, that her alter ego possesses spiritually to work his art ... so essentially her art is a spiritual form of expression of a present living spirit of an Aboriginal person."<sup>18</sup>

But it was exactly this suggestion of an Aboriginal alter ego that angered Djon Mundine. He said "It's like Kerry Packer pretending he's Mahatma Ghandi."<sup>19</sup> He went on, "saying that because your family has lived on the land for years you feel about it as deeply as Aboriginal people and can

pick up the culture is just absurd.” Durack’s supposed appropriation of a culture is at the heart of the most convincing criticisms of the Burrup works. Kaye Mundine, who was head of the National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Organisation, put it simply, saying “it’s cultural theft.”<sup>20</sup>

This was not the first time that Durack had produced work containing Aboriginal cultural material. In fact, she was once commissioned to do so. In 1953, Durack was asked by the Western Australian Government Tourist Bureau to produce a mural sequence of works; a ten-panel painting called *Love Magic*. The Art Gallery of Western Australia noted that whilst “to the uninitiated, these pictures appear as strongly-patterned semi-abstract works with aboriginal [sic] motifs, they are fully authentic expressions of aboriginal [sic] lore.”<sup>21</sup> But Durack’s use of this material, once perfectly acceptable, even desirable, in the 1950s when people here began to be genuinely interested in Aboriginal culture, started to attract criticism in the 1990s with the socio-political changes witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1995, the Art Gallery of Western Australia held a retrospective exhibition of Durack’s work which came near to being cancelled only days before it opened. An assistant Curator at the gallery, Tjalaminu Mia, suspected some of the works contained secret/sacred men’s business and alerted the Curator of Aboriginal Art, Michael O’Ferrall. The subject matter was reportedly confirmed by Aboriginal people who viewed the works and were deeply offended.<sup>22</sup> The works were a series of paintings, called the *Cord to Alcheringa*, that portrayed a dreaming story. They were owned by the University of Western Australia and had been hanging in Winthrop Hall for forty years. Nevertheless, it was only when a Kimberley Aboriginal man signed off that the works were “free to be seen by everyone” that the exhibition went ahead.<sup>23</sup> Bromfield felt that whilst these works were the most interesting in the show, perhaps the rituals that informed the works “should never have been seen or interpreted by an outsider.”<sup>24</sup>

But Durack is not considered to be an outsider by the Aboriginal group whose material she had utilised. It is clearly understood that she has a classificatory place in the Ord River Mirawong language group.<sup>25</sup> Consider for a moment that Durack, during the 1940s, would walk with her Aboriginal “family” on ceremonial business. Some journeys took over two weeks, as the group walked to “manage country.” Durack remembers once such journey undertaken to meet up with others and discuss unfinished wet-weather business. On these trips, Durack would spend her time sketching women digging for yams and seeking small animals for tucker or she’d make drawings of the men as they stood or sat around, painted up

for the ceremonies to be conducted at night.<sup>26</sup> These journeys and the life Durack shared with her Aboriginal “family” gave her an unusual degree of insight into Aboriginal culture.

Durack described the artistic “team” that produced the Burrup works as “mild old Eddie Burrup who has nothing in mind but reconciliation and old Elizabeth Durack who has been in contact with and overtly been working with the influences of Aboriginal life for over 50 years.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Burrup can simply be understood as a conduit for Durack’s vast reservoir of knowledge of and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture.

One ethical issue remains to be considered; that is the marketing of the Burrup works as Aboriginal artworks and their inclusion in indigenous-only art exhibitions and awards. Regardless of her connection with Aboriginal people, Durack is not indigenous. Durack’s daughter, Perpetua Hobcroft, managed the Durack Gallery in Broome through which the works were distributed. Gabrielle Pizzi recalls being approached by Perpetua to organise an exhibition of the Burrup works. “They were clearly promoted to me as Aboriginal work and one would presume that [Ms Hobcroft] knew they were painted by her mother.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Doreen Mellor who curated *Native Titled Now* explained that the exhibition “show(s) what Aboriginal artists and people feel about native title and in that forum... [it] is just an enormous betrayal and another breach of trust between black and white Australia.”<sup>29</sup>

The use of an alter ego is not new in art. In fact, it is a relatively common strategy employed by contemporary artists to direct or affect the meaning of their work in the viewer’s mind. It could be argued that a false or fictitious author operates much like a material or method in the same way that these contribute to meaning. For example, indigenous artist Gordon Bennett has produced a number of works under the name of John Citizen. Citizen is an invention of Gordon Bennett’s, a character without an indigenous identity used by Bennett as a device to further his investigation of identity.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to Mellor’s statement implying that Durack betrayed us all, black and white, for Durack the Burrup works are an act of reconciliation. Durack talks about the two mythic figures of Djanba, the spirit of co-operation and reconciliation, and Mulunga, the spirit of vengeance and retribution. She said that at the end of the 1800s, both cults were circulating widely but she believed Mulunga is dominant today. For Durack, the Burrup paintings and notes are produced in the spirit of Djanba. She said “I see it as working within the spirit of reconciliation – as *gissa-gissa* – arm in arm, within mutual respect, within progression together, within unity.”<sup>31</sup>

Durack's vast knowledge of Aboriginal life and the Kimberley was once called upon by the Northern Territory Law Department at the time when the whole area that "Ivanhoe" and "Argyle" stations were on came under a Native Title Land Claim. Ironically, it could be argued that Durack automatically qualifies, through her classificatory relationships, as one of the claimants.<sup>32</sup> This slippage between black and white in Durack's life and her art makes the Burrup works rare and rich reflections of our culture; one that needs to be understood as a product of complex histories.

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