

Damper is a language word for art



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Libby Harward
Ngali Ngariba – We Talk, 2018
Garden of Earthly Delights
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Festspiele, Gropius Bau Museum
Image courtesy of the artist
Photo: Mathias Voelzka

Ngami-lda-nha / looking

In our past/present/future continuum, we can look simultaneously to the potential of what is and what can be, acknowledging that what we are currently seeing and experiencing is also that which is ‘not yet’. Friend and fellow Gamilaroi Countryman Joshua Waters speaks to the sight/foresight of our ancestors through a story of *Garruu Winangali Gii*/Uncle Paul Spearim, pointing out to him a *barran*/boomerang in a tree. Joshua recounts how he spent minutes ‘foolishly looking ...for a literal boomerang’, only to realise later that what Garruu was talking about was the ‘future potential state’ of a particular branch that had the perfect curvature from which to shape a *barran*¹. Looking to the future, in the now, we also acknowledge and deeply *winangali*/listen/understand/ respect the past work and words of other Blak artists, authors, and thinkers who have generously shaped and progressed what is—in terms of Indigenous art and art criticism, our ongoing agitation for autonomy, agency, and the re-centring and de-homogenising of our art practices amidst constant mainstreaming pressures and perspectives.

Always in motion, contemporary dialogue by Blak artists and writers is happening now. And rightfully so, many have taken a long deep pause to reflect upon where we’ve come from, in terms of Indigenous art framing and criticism, and importantly, where and how we want—and need—to go from here. Wehbal Bundjalung art critic and curator Djon Mundine OAM, who has spoken to the emergent dynamics of Indigenous creative practices within fine art contexts for over four decades², retrospectively considers the defining ‘phases’ of Indigenous art, mostly on non-Indigenous terms. Now in an unfolding ‘sixth phase’, Mundine highlights our position within the ‘centre of the gallery’ but cautions the increasing commodification and co-opting of Indigenous art within mainstream, capitalist cultural systems, and the slippage of our autonomous and culturally rigorous positionality.

Bundjalung and Kullilli arts writer/critic Daniel Browning, along with Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidinji and Gugu Yimithirr artist Vernon Ah Kee, speak parallel to this in past and recent *Artlink* issues³, unpacking how an accelerating lack of critical engagement within

the space of Aboriginal art promotes tokenism, and the ‘watering down’ of the meaning, standards, and efficacy of Aboriginal Art—producing works that Ah Kee playfully refers to as ‘mediocre’. As an alternative, Browning and Ah Kee call for the reckoning of ‘bad’ Aboriginal Art, through a critique that is grounded in intracultural ‘blak-on-blak’ accountability, engagement with community, and the ‘social and relational context in which the art is created’⁴. And this, in conjunction with the ‘best of what western art critique has to offer’⁵.

How we navigate, thrive, disentangle and determine ourselves within the mainstream—whilst simultaneously maintaining our sovereignty, is a 234-year-old yarn. Like all things that are vital and complex, it transmutes with the contexts of time, place and people. As a Gamilaroi woman, creative practitioner, and lecturer in contemporary Australian Indigenous art, it is hard to see beyond/through the pressing, external influences of colonial art institutions and structures, that try to coerce us into western frameworks of time, exchange, process, and the expectation, relevance, and value of our art—regardless of how much we input our Blak critiques within the system. If we are required to take the ‘best of what the western critique’ has to offer, should we not also be asking what the critique is taking in return? Or could we instead, radically shift our view...to an Indigenous art/critique that exists more holistically in our contexts and frames of reference? A practice/critique more visibly situated in relationships, in reciprocal exchange, in strengthening our connections with Country and with each other. And with its own critical rigour and contemporary contribution, on our own terms and in our own contexts.

Damper is a language word for art

In this durational performance work, three urban black women are sitting around a fire owning their own ways of doing and being. Together, they collect ingredients and tools for bread-making—Bangwal fern, Bonyi nuts, water, and honey—and set about the process of making a damper together. ...As they prepare the food, they talk, sharing experiences; remembering ideas, knowledge-offering and taking suggestions; seeking and giving advice.



This is the *-baa* (place/time) of Libby Harward's duration work, *DAMPER IS A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART* and the place/time of our yarn. An us/we yarn, acknowledging that it comes from a together exploration, and a relational, ongoing conversation, between myself, a Gamilaroi yinnar, and Libby, a Ngugi woman from the Quandamooka, as friends, practitioners, and neighbours, talking-up here on Jinibara Country. *Yaama nginda minya dhaay gaa-waa-nhi?* Who are you, and what brings you here? I state this relationship with purpose, to reclaim and recentre the personal within the arts/art critique, providing a foundational, cultural departure point from the western values of objectivity, anonymity, institutional/positional

hierarchies and power dynamics, and a general lack of personal accountability, in current critical discourse.

DAMPER IS A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART was made/shared as part of a Master of Visual Arts critique for the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art, Griffith University—the context and purpose, a fertile ground to explore our critical reimagining. When we ask (require) an Aboriginal artist to participate in a critique, the terms of reference aren't always clearly determined, reciprocal and shared. Whose terms? Whose values? Whose space? While we can make 'art' and demonstrate/practice aspects of culture endlessly within this institutional framework, we are still operating within the relational power dynamics and values of the university/gallery/institution/colony and its contexts. Libby said she needed to make a work that revealed this territory—and it's underlying, assimilatory dynamics and intricacies, before she could meaningfully respond. Different to other course critiques that are emplaced within the classroom/institution, the work was purposefully moved to the location of the artist's life/work—a repatriated block of land on her partner's Jinibara Country, to disarm/shift the institutional container and its pre-established modes and expectations of experiencing, engaging, and understanding. Shifting the critique to the artist's determined 'territory', to the visceral presence of Country—as place/site, but also as the locus of belonging, identity and power.

The work/critique began with a clear statement of permission, and a generous invitation for mutual exchange. In a reimagined critique of Aboriginal art, it seems appropriate that we must ask/exchange consent in order to grow/share our agency:

Through this relational act I invite you to share a part of my life as a Ngugi culture woman and I give permission for the experience to be assessed for the institution...

.. As we walk together around Dja Be:nja, I ask your permission to participate in the relational work DAMPER IS A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART where I will use my established identity as 'artist' in Western terms to prioritise ancient Ancestral practices and share with you for our own wellbeing and that of our people and the planet, in a symbiotic relationship.

In a conscientious way, the work was framed heavily by written didactics, that were hung on the caravans, fence posts, and sitting places of the work's 'performance'. In one sense, directly parodying the requirement for written art discourse to give 'art' status to a lived, cultural experience, and in another, allowing for a shared arts language, to be a touchstone of mutual understanding as we move through the threshold together. The didactics were read aloud by the artist, embodied, self-determined and self-narrated. Those present—including the critics as participants—were conjured into the critical framework, in their real time, real life, performance.

Materials:

caravan, road cone, fire pit, pots, woven mat, swag, singing sticks, weaving, gas bottle cooktop.

Participants:

Libby Harward Ngugi of Mulgumpin in the Quandamooka (present)

Bj Murphy - Dungidua, Dala from the Jinibara Nation (present)

Overlooked by our joint ancestral Mountain, both Ngugi and Jinibara, our Mother Beerwah (present)

Our Ngugi and Jinibara Ancestors who walked this country together and were considered 'proppa'-way kin (present)

Our children, our family and our Elders (absent)...

What ensued was an immersed, natural and unpretentious creative elevation of relational life/cultural practice—or 'art', in action. By providing a space for the critics—all strong, Blak, cultural women, to 'be' inside the work, permission was there for them to be more 'culturally authentic' in their role, and to highlight the nature of their capacity and autonomy, within the system and extended arts discourse. The critical discourse that unravelled, while in that moment, making damper together, on Country—in the liminal space, between re-applying the institutional lens, and knowing/reimagining a new one, were some of the most rigorous, critical and nurturing for those present. A generous critique, only possible, through the relational, creative process of being and doing.

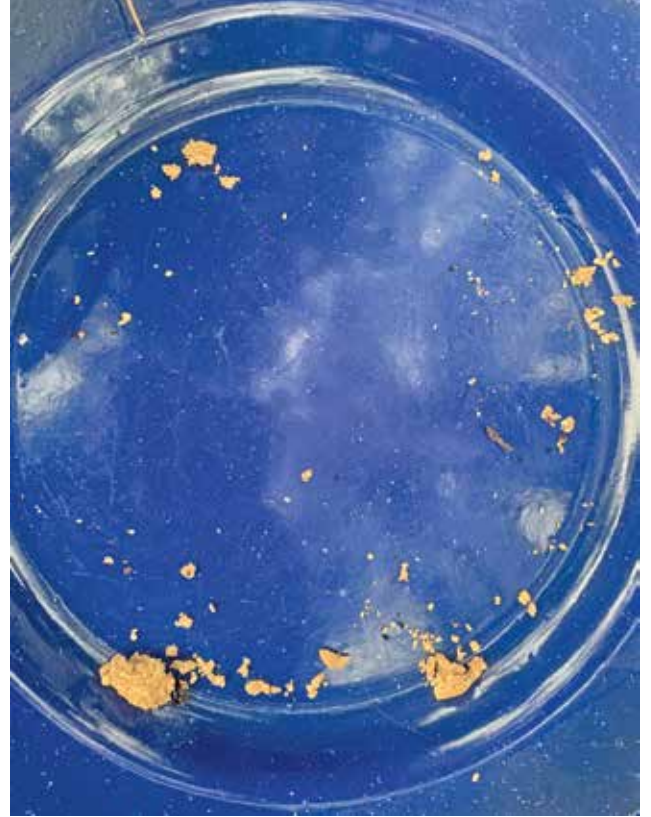


...Then, they knead the bread. Hand-kneading dough is an inescapably intimate practice, one that brings the participant into constant tactile contact with the raw dough. In order to become bread, the dough must be pummelled, turned, spread, stretched and rolled. Damper is not kneaded as long as some breads, but nevertheless the wet and dry ingredients must be manually combined.

The re-centred critique then—one that is culturally emplaced in both a physical and ideological sense—is consenting; personal and conversational; accountable; reciprocal; and that held more holistically and visibly by cultural contexts, protocols and values, and is perhaps open to a generosity and impact that we are yet to fully comprehend within current fine art contexts, that are predominantly driven by the exchange of cultural ‘capital’ and power. A new expression of art/critique, with a broader function, conscientiously ‘outside’ of the institution, doing the work for each other, for kin, and for Country. Perhaps this may become critical to

mainstream arts discourse as well. And in the meantime, a shared language might be found to talk together ‘through’ the space, while we come ‘back’ to our centre, to the relational power, purpose and value of our art practice, in this country, since time immemorial. Documentation of *DAMPER IS A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART* was limited, photographs as record taken only after the critique had ended. The exchange here—as determined by the artist, and accepted by the critic/participant, was the gift of time, connection, Country, and culture, and like all meaningful art—brought about an emergence, understanding/insight, and transformation.

Critical art/life can and should be inclusive, dynamic and generous—a positioning that may not only broaden/ deepen the conceptual possibilities of our art, but also bring the critical conversations more fully into our communities, and with Country. Mununjali, Yugambeh and South Sea Islander academic, Dr Chelsea Watego’s contribution to this year’s Invasion Day discourse, was a poignant reminder to not waste energy on an unrelenting colonial system, but to acknowledge and stand in our own power⁶. *DAMPER IS*



A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART is a sovereign work that exists, before, during, after—and in spite of, the critique. The radical revisioning of an Indigenous art/critique will undoubtedly be uncertain, muddy and awkward, as we look to re-sharpen our focus. And perhaps without the fear of making neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ Aboriginal art, learn through the transient and transformative processes of ‘doing’. For after all, the future of Indigenous art is happening now, and always has been, if only, in the words of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, we can learn to ‘school our eyes’⁷, to perhaps one day see what we are looking for.

¹ Joshua Waters, “Vision, Strategy and Foresight: Through the eyes of my Elders”, Baayangali, n.d. <https://baayangali.com/blog/2021/vision-strategy-and-foresight-through-the-eyes-of-my-elders?fbclid=IwAR1eFHH9Gv-p6CgrWL8in67eYSJi452cBJRxcEwFZxSdy-qkEjJDbjydU> accessed 2 February 2022. ² See Artlink’s September 2005 edition, *Stirring*, and *Awaye!* Djon Mundine on 21 years of Aboriginal art, 2005, ABC Radio National, Sydney. ³ For further discussion see Daniel Browning, “Nothing if not uncritical: Revisiting re-visions and Indigenous art criticism”, *Artlink Indigenous: Visualising Sovereignty*, 41:3, December 2021. ⁴ Browning, 16. ⁵ Vernon Ah Kee in David Garneau, “Toward Indigenous Criticism: The Ah Kee Paradox”, *Artlink Indigenous: re-revisions*, 33:2, June 2013. ⁶ Chelsea Watego, “Each year the Invasion Day cry gets louder. Each year we add names to the list of our dead”, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/commentisfree/2022/jan/26/each-year-the-invasion-day-cry-gets-louder-each-year-we-add-names-to-the-list-of-our-dead> accessed 2 February 2022. ⁷ Vivien Johnson, *Streets of Papunya: The re-invention of Papunya Painting*, (Sydney: NewSouth, 2015). See also <https://youtu.be/Mw5SEHGmqoE> accessed 2 February 2022.



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Libby Harward
Site and materials of *DAMPER IS A LANGUAGE WORD FOR ART*, 2021
Artist’s documentation of the traces left behind (bunya, bungwal, raspberries, honey and charcoal).
Dja:Benja/ Cederton/ Jinibara Country 2021
All images and photos courtesy of Libby Harward