

ART IN CONFLICT

This education kit has been designed for Secondary and Senior Secondary students in conjunction with the *Art in Conflict* exhibition presented by the Australian War Memorial, or as a standalone study of contemporary art and history.

Curriculum links

The activities in this kit support the Secondary Australian Curriculum (version 8.4) learning goals, drawing on the Year 9 and 10 [Visual Arts](#) and [History](#) curricula, as well as goals of the as well as goals of the Senior Secondary curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Australian War Memorial

The Australian War Memorial combines a shrine, a world-class museum, and an archive. The Memorial's purpose is to commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war or on operational service and those who have served our nation in times of conflict. Its mission is leading remembrance and understanding of Australia's wartime experience.

Art in Conflict

Art in Conflict is a touring exhibition of contemporary art from the collection of the Australian War Memorial. Contemporary artists' responses to conflict bring to light untold stories, reveal neglected histories, and deepen our understanding of Australia's experience of conflict. Supported by research from an Australian Research Council Linkage Project, the exhibition highlights how war art can lead us to consider different ways of thinking about current and recent conflicts, inviting us to consider new perspectives.

Contemporary Art

Contemporary art is one of the most complex artistic periods to pin down. Defined chronologically as the period we are in today, and have been in since at least the 1970s, contemporary art is otherwise diverse, dynamic and defined by a lack of uniform definition. Artworks stand for themselves and speak to the world around them, using traditional and experimental materials, techniques and ideas.

CONTENTS

Khadim Ali	Page. 2
Betty Muffler (Pitjantjatjara people)	Page. 5
Megan Cope (Quandamooka people)	Page. 8
Robert Campbell Jr (Ngaku people)	Page. 11
Angelica Mesiti	Page. 13
References and Bibliography	Page. 16

ART IN CONFLICT



KHADIM ALI

Khadim Ali (b.1978)
Transition/Evacuation 2015
gouache, ink and gold leaf on
wasli paper
71 x 56 cm
commissioned in 2015
ART96910

ART IN CONFLICT

About the artwork

Transition/Evacuation presents the war in Afghanistan through the allegory of Rostam, a mythical hero from the 10th century epic poem the Shahnameh (Epic of Kings). Rostam (on the right) is depicted in a great struggle surrounded by lions. Normally depicted as a warrior, here he and his enemy appear as demons. Rostam's enemy wears green and white, the colours of Pakistan's flag (noting that Pakistan supported both the Taliban and the US-led War on Terror), while Rostam wears red, white and blue: the colours of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and France, who fought the Taliban. Traditionally viewed as a symbol of pride and strength, lions are here depicted as obedient circus animals.

"When refugees came to Pakistan, a lot gathered in our house and my grandfather would sing for them, stories of heroes and demons, the bright and the dark sides of humanity. I always thought of myself as a hero. But then when the story ended the hero gets killed and this was very painful for me. What survived in the book [Shahnameh] were the demons." – Khadim Ali, 2021¹

War in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan, fought between 2001 and 2021, began following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks that killed 2,977 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania in the United States. The attacks were perpetrated by Al Qaeda, a broad-based militant Islamist organisation founded by Osama bin Laden in the late 1980s, who cited US activities in the Middle East, including support of Israel, as motivation.

The US and their allies believed bin Laden was operating within Afghanistan. After the Taliban – an ultraconservative political and religious faction that ruled Afghanistan – refused to hand over bin Laden, the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan and deposed the Taliban.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard invoked the ANZUS Treaty (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty) in support of America's invasion, and from 17 September 2001 members of the Australian Defence Force deployed to Afghanistan.

Roughly 30,000 Australians served in Afghanistan, 45 of whom are recognised as having died as a result of this service. Their names appear on the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour. More have suffered physical and psychological trauma as a result of their service. With an initial goal of stopping al Qaeda operations and preventing the Taliban from reclaiming power, as the war continued Australian focus shifted to training and strengthening the Afghan National Army, and reconstructing Afghanistan.

About 2.6 million Afghans fled the country as a result of the war; more than 10,000 came to Australia as refugees.

By August 2021, the US and its allies, including Australia, had withdrawn from Afghanistan. The country was quickly recaptured by the Taliban. The war in Afghanistan was the longest war in which Australia has participated.

ART IN CONFLICT

Biography

Khadim Ali grew up in Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan. His family came from Afghanistan, but faced persecution due to their ethnic Hazara heritage, causing them to flee the country in the 1890s. Ali grew up finding inspiration in traditional Persian miniature painting, which he went on to study at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. After continued conflict and persecution, Ali emigrated to Australia in 2009, obtaining a distinguished persons visa due to his talent as an artist.

Ali's work utilises the style of Persian miniature painting to express Afghan myths and histories in a contemporary context. Ali presents the Afghanistan war within the history of Pashtunistan, the region containing Afghanistan and Pakistan.

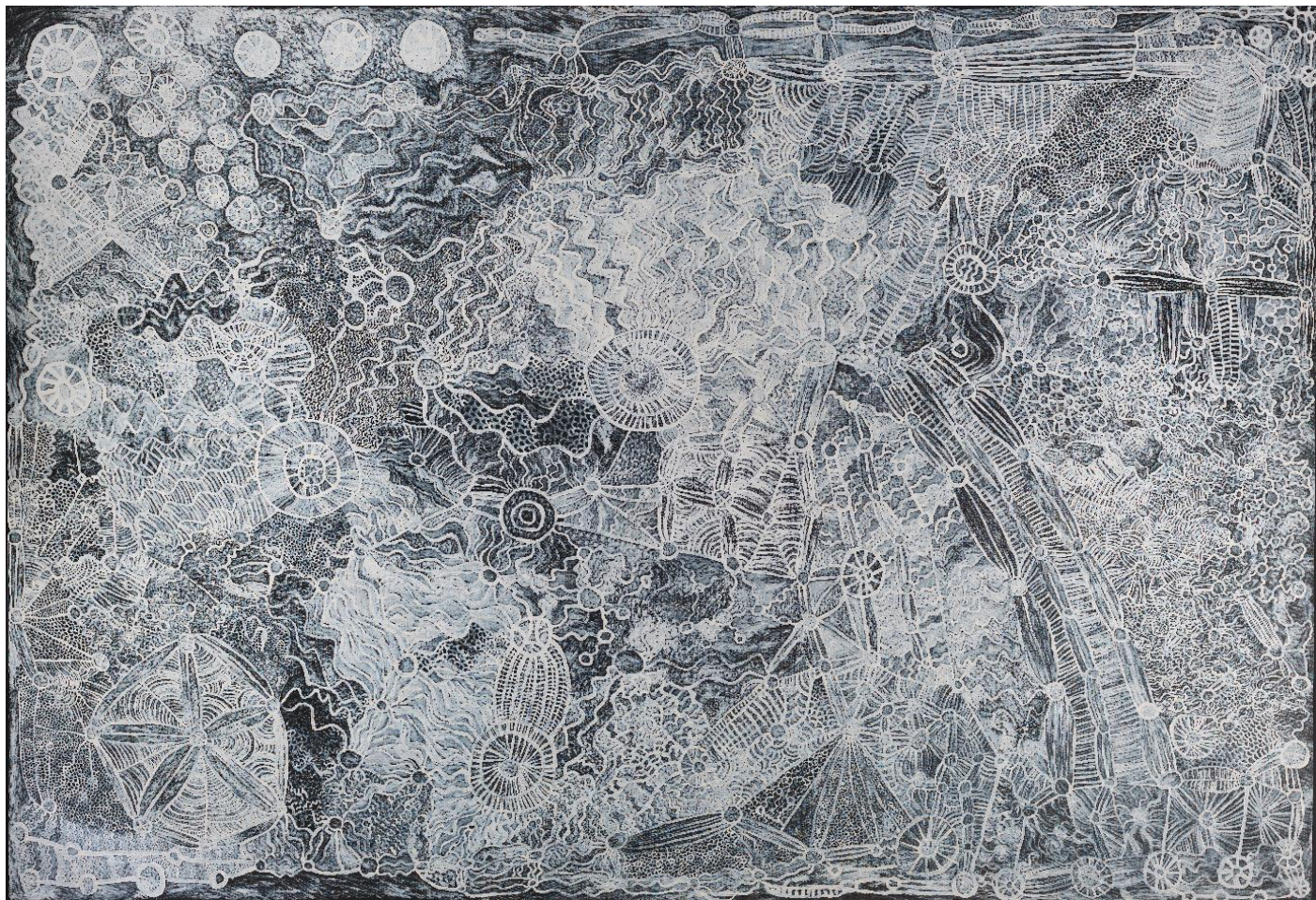
Activities

- Discuss why Khadim Ali has used demons and circus lions in his artwork. What do you think the artist is saying about the war in Afghanistan? What does Ali say about heroes and enemies?
- Research the paintings [Ben Quilty](#) made as Australia's official war artist in Afghanistan. Compare and contrast Quilty's and Ali's work. Discuss the similarities and differences and how each artist's experiences have informed their artworks about the war in Afghanistan.

Space to reflect:



ART IN CONFLICT



BETTY MUFLER (PITJANTJATJARA PEOPLE)

Betty Muffler (Pitjantjatjara people) (b. 1944)
Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country) 2017
acrylic on linen
168 x 245 cm
purchased in 2017
AWM2017.1296.1

ART IN CONFLICT

Biography

Betty Muffler is a Pitjantjatjara woman who lived on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Country destroyed by British nuclear weapons testing programs in Australia. She lived through the testing as a girl, was separated from many of her family members, and witnessed some of their deaths. The trauma of this experience inspired Muffler to devote much of her life to healing Country. She is a renowned *ngangkari* – doctor or healer – a role she inherited from her father’s family and was trained for by her aunties. As well as being a *ngangkari*, Muffler is a painter whose work depicts Country that has been wounded by colonisation in Australia, but is in the process of healing.

“This is my Country, this is Ngangkari Country – it’s healing, it’s good ... I’m a strong kungka (woman) I survived the bombings at Maralinga, but many of my family didn’t. It’s a terrible and sad story. We need to heal this country and give more respect to the land. My painting shows many of the good places in my Country.” – Betty Muffler, 2019²

“Your memorandum discloses a lamentable lack of balance in Mr MacDougall’s outlook, in that he is apparently placing the affairs of a handful of natives above those of the British Commonwealth of Nations”. – Letter from Alan Butement, Chief Scientist of the Commonwealth Department of Supply to the manager of Walter MacDougall, 1956³

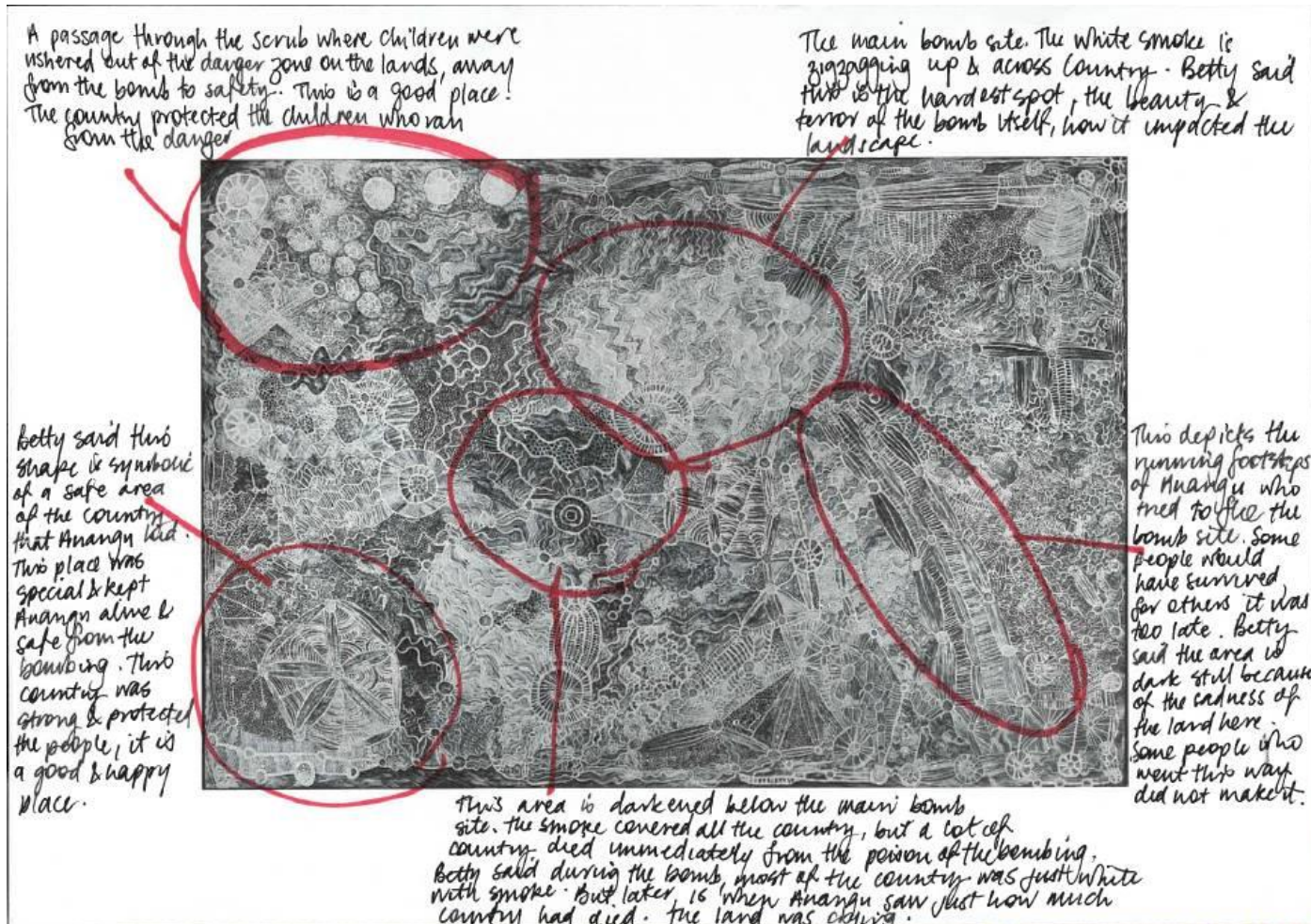
Nuclear Testing in Australia: The Cold War

At the end of the Second World War, the world found itself in a conflict of ideology. The Western Bloc, led by the United States (US) and including the United Kingdom and Australia, were increasingly concerned with the influence of the Eastern Bloc, led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The US and USSR began a race to develop and stockpile nuclear weapons. In an effort to further develop atomic weapons, Australia and the United Kingdom conducted a program of nuclear testing in Australia from 1952 until 1963.⁴ Testing had a devastating impact on the lives of Aboriginal Australians who lived near Maralinga and Emu Field on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Country in Central Australia where tests were conducted. Many were moved off their homelands and separated from Country and their families. Within weeks of testing, those not evacuated began to fall sick and die. Nuclear fallout, known locally as the “black mist”, became synonymous with sickness and death.

Australian and British governments of the time denied or ignored the claims of those affected. A 1984 Royal Commission revealed that the British clean-up effort had not decontaminated the area, as had been claimed, and many Anangu Pitjantjatjara people were still living on radioactive land. In 1996, a new, four-year clean-up effort began. The effectiveness of this clean-up is disputed. Nuclear engineer Alan Parkinson has pointed out that Indigenous Australians living in or visiting zones deemed safe for access would be exposed to radiation levels five to 13 times greater than that allowed for a member of the public.⁵

It is difficult to estimate the ongoing medical impact of nuclear testing at Maralinga and Emu Field. To this day, Anangu Pitjantjatjara people and personnel involved with the testing suffer significantly higher rates of cancer than the general population. These rates of illness are contested, however, and many who have suffered cancer are denied their claim that nuclear testing was its cause.

ART IN CONFLICT



Activities

- Analyse this breakdown of the symbols in Muffler's painting. What can this painting tell you that you couldn't learn from other sources?
- Can the painting be used as a historical source? Why or why not?

ART IN CONFLICT



MEGAN COPE (QUANDAMOOKA PEOPLE)

Megan Cope (Quandamooka people) (b. 1982)

Flight or Fight #1 Old Rivers, Deep Water (Lake Qadisiya & Lake Assad) 2018–2019

engine oil, ink and acrylic on paper and linen, mounted on North Stradbroke Island blue gum
121 x 103 cm

acquired under the official war art scheme in 2019

AWM2019.58.1

ART IN CONFLICT

About the artwork

Megan Cope's interest in maps and mapping defines the body of work she completed as an official war artist. *Fight or Flight* is a series of seven works featuring historical maps of the Middle East with symbols and references painted over the top. Cope was inspired by a ten-hour flight on an RAAF KC-30 air transport tanker refuelling Allied jets mid-air over ancient and conflicted land in the Middle East.

Flight or Fight #1 Old Rivers, Deep Water (Lake Qadisiya & Lake Assad) combines a historic map of the Middle East with iridescent blue paintings of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The work is framed at the top and bottom by timber harvested from the artist's Country at Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island) in the style of an old-fashioned school-room map.

Since ancient times, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have supported the development of sophisticated civilisations, their immense size and richness making them a defining feature of the landscape and the identities of those who live alongside them. After the First World War and European imposition of borders in the Middle East, the rivers have been dammed, polluted and fought over by neighbouring countries. While previous generations defined their lives by the flow of these rivers, they are now denied access due to arbitrary borders and industrial-scale dams.

In painting the river on top of the map, Cope reflects on the nature of knowing places and highlights how power, politics and industry risk cutting people off from their land, culture and heritage.

"Kids today probably won't ever know what those maps look like, but I really wanted my maps to have that weight, and to reflect that time of how we learn about the world ... I've been so challenged by those sorts of maps and that knowledge that was prescribed onto them" – Megan Cope⁶

Official War Artist Scheme

The Memorial runs the official war art scheme, which embeds artists with Australian military forces during wars or peacekeeping missions in order to create informed and personal artworks about conflict.

One of the longest running and largest commissioning art programs in Australia, the scheme was established during the First World War and has continued for every major conflict (and peacekeeping operation since International Force East Timor in 1999) in which Australia has been involved.

Official war artists explore the visual, sensory and conceptual dimensions of war often absent in written histories or other forms of reportage. The works produced by official war artists display a diverse range of materials, styles and perceptions of conflict.



Shoulder title, 2007. AWM REL35763

ART IN CONFLICT

Biography

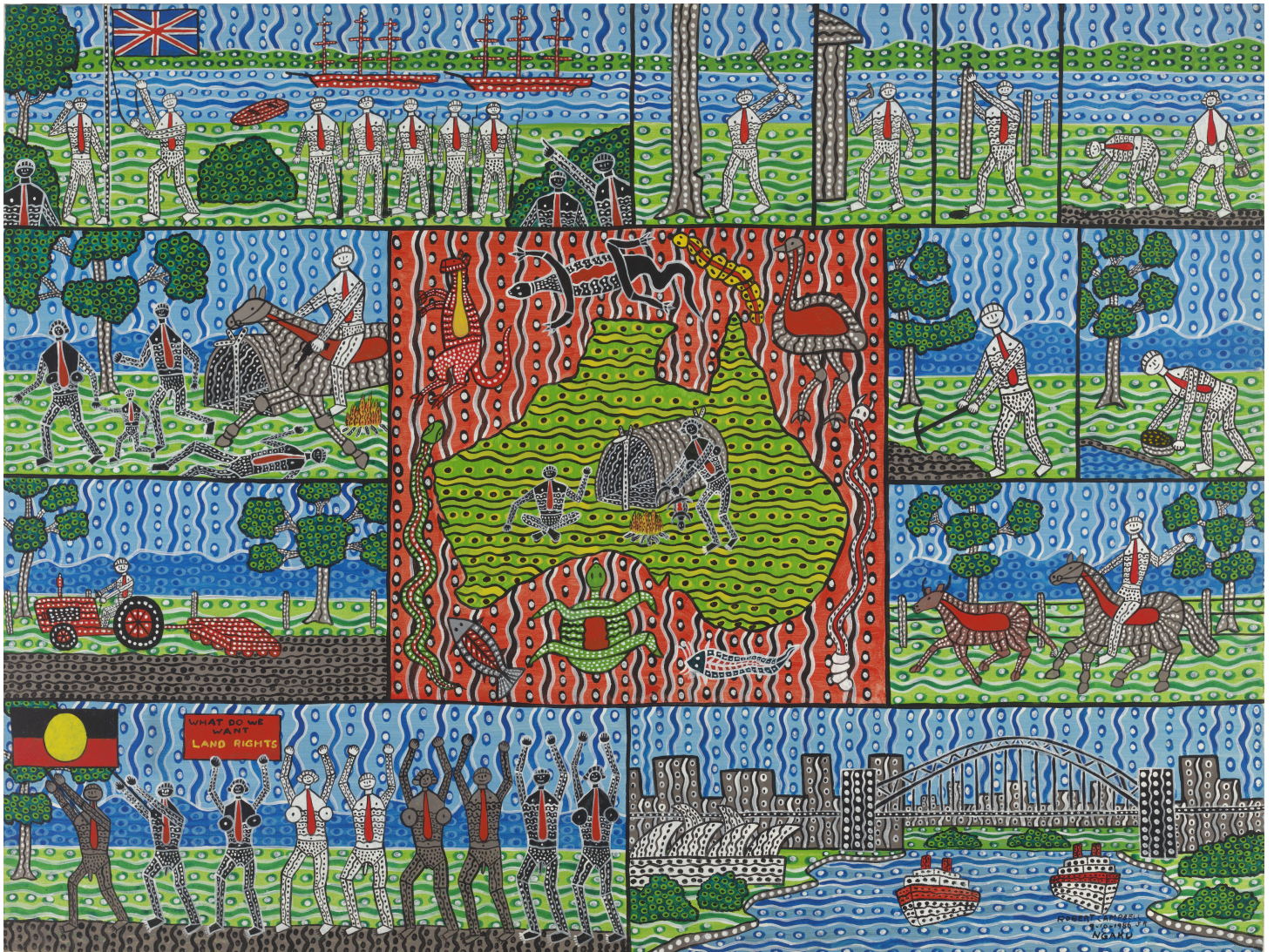
Megan Cope was Australia's first female, Indigenous Australian official war artist. She deployed to the Middle East Area of Operations in 2017, accompanying Australian Defence Force units participating in Operation Accordion. Cope is a Quandamooka woman whose work uses multiple mediums, linked by themes of identity, mapping, language and the environment. Her practice investigates contested places and histories, and resists the idea that Australian history began with Lieutenant James Cook landing at Botany Bay.

Activities

- Design a map of somewhere you know using three major landmarks that you use to navigate.
 - Were the landmarks you used natural or constructed?
 - What does this tell you about the way in which you relate to your environment?
- Research a historical map, such as the Sykes--Picot map or the Blaeu map (Archipelagus Orientalis, sive Asiaticus / Apud Ioannem Blaeu) held in the National Library of Australia. Research why and how these maps were created.
 - Consider what they failed to include, and the consequences today.

Space to reflect:

ART IN CONFLICT



ROBERT CAMPBELL JR (NGAKU PEOPLE)

Robert Campbell Jr (Ngaku people) (1944–1993)
The Past and Present of 200 Years 1986
94 x 123 x 4 cm
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
purchased in 2020
AWM2020.721.1

ART IN CONFLICT

About the artwork

In this work, Campbell Jr condenses 200 years of Aboriginal Australian life, subjugation and resistance in Sydney into one painting. The centre of the composition features an Aboriginal family at home, surrounded by animals with spiritual significance to the Ngaku clan of the Dhungutti nation, to which the artist belongs. Around this central panel is a timeline of European interaction with Aboriginal people, beginning with the arrival of the First Fleet. The timeline carries through to the Frontier Wars and the gold rushes, the industrialisation and destruction of the environment, onto the land rights movement which is still active today.

The designs in this painting are based on traditional patterns from shields by Ngaku makers in the northern coastal region of New South Wales. Ngaku shield designs feature patterns of parallel and wavy lines alternating with lines of dots, which are translated into waves that animate the picture surface. A recurring image in Campbell Jr's paintings is the depiction of the oesophagus of all living creatures, human and animal in the Aboriginal x-ray style of image-making. Campbell Jr carries these artistic traditions into the present to highlight how they are adaptable and alive.

Biography

Robert Campbell Jr expressed an Aboriginal historical perspective through his work to ensure that the generations that followed him weren't taught from a solely colonial perspective. An Ngaku man and a self-taught painter who grew up experiencing and witnessing discrimination, Campbell was motivated to speak up and identify the roots of bigotry against Aboriginal people through art. He saw Aboriginal Australians as having been separated from their cultural identity and memory, and used his career to try to repair this break. Contributing to the growth of an Aboriginal collective consciousness was his way of restoring the power of Aboriginal Australians within their Country.

"My images are created from my environment, both past and present, the people, the landscape, and my own relationship with both. My art is a personal response to these stimuli, wherever I may be. Aboriginal culture naturally becomes a part of my work as a reflection of my heritage and ancestry, but my message is to all people, that being, rather simply stated, my response and interpretation of my world." – Robert Campbell Jr, 1991

Activities

- Why is this painting included in an exhibition about war and conflict?
- Discuss the relationship between the Aboriginal defence of Country and the role of the Australian Defence Force in defending Australia. In what ways are they similar or different?

ART IN CONFLICT



ANGELICA MESITI

Angelica Mesiti (b. 1976)
A hundred years (video stills) 2022
single channel video
21:25 mins
acquired under commission in 2020
AWM2019.57.1

ART IN CONFLICT



Angelica Mesiti (b. 1976)
A hundred years (video stills) 2022
single channel video
21:25 mins
acquired under commission in 2020
AWM2019.57.1

ART IN CONFLICT

About the artwork

Angelica Mesiti was invited by the Australian War Memorial to create a work of art commemorating the centenary of the end of the First World War. She created a video installation that takes the audience on a tour through the Somme battlefields in France, which have mostly returned to farming. The Battle of the Somme was one of the most devastating battles of the First World War. In 1916, over the course of 141 days, there were over one million French, British, Australian and German casualties, of whom 300,000 lost their lives.

A hundred years transitions through changing seasons, from the dead of winter into summer.⁷ The video traces across the earth, where some trenches are still present, while other scars are barely detectable. Rhythm is created by pauses focusing on symbolic details, such as grass appearing through the frosty ground and a bee pollinating a red poppy. The tour finishes at Lochnagar Crater: a gaping hole in the earth caused by a British mine. This crater is like the mouth of the hungry beast of the Somme, which swallowed so many lives 100 years ago. Mesiti presents the First World War as a part of a natural cycle: a great destruction which provided fuel for regrowth. The tour ends with a young man playing a tin whistle (one of the few forms of music soldiers had in the trenches) while ambling through the landscape, as if in a gesture of peace.

“[I was] preoccupied by the idea of an earth whose soil has been nourished by the fallen. An environment where over a 100 year period, great numbers of dead young men have been digested by the earth and been transformed and regenerated into a forest or a field of wheat for example. The way nature continues to yield new life.” – Angelica Mesiti, 2021

Biography

Angelica Mesiti is a contemporary artist from Sydney who lives and works in Paris. She primarily creates video installations that explore alternative modes of expression and how they are tied to history, tradition and culture. For Mesiti, performance, body movement and music are as much a language as speech and the written word. Mesiti attempts to break down the barrier of the screen in order to provide an intimate experience between performer and audience.

Activities

- Research/brainstorm some ways in which the First World War affects Australian society today.
 - Categorise these effects as either scars or regrowth.
- Discuss what Mesiti is expressing about the relationship between people, war and nature.

ART IN CONFLICT

References

- ¹ Michael Young, “Khadim Ali: The Pleasures and Perils of Colliding Cultures,” COBO Social, April 9, 2021, www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/khadim-ali-invisible-border-institute-of-modern-art-brisbane/ (accessed 26 May 2022)
- ² “Betty Muffler - Biography,” Short St Gallery, www.shortstgallery.com.au/artists/353-betty-muffler/biography/ (accessed 5 May 2022)
- ³ Walter MacDougall was a Commonwealth Government-appointed Native Patrol Officer who tried to protect the safety and rights of Aboriginal people living near the Emu Fields and Maralinga nuclear testing sites. John Summers, “The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia and Indigenous Peoples 1901-1967”, Parliament of Australia, February 18, 2013, www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp0001/01RP10 (accessed 5 May 2022)
- ⁴ Most testing took place in Maralinga in South Australia, while other testing occurred on the Montebello Islands off Western Australia, and in Emu Field, South Australia.
- ⁵ Alan Parkinson, “Maralinga: The Clean-Up of a Nuclear Test Site”, *Medicine and Global Survival* 7, no. 2 (February 2002): pp. 77–81.
- ⁶ “Fight or Flight - Australian War Memorial Series,” Megan Cope, 2021, www.megancope.com.au/works/fight-or-flight-australian-war-memorial-series
- ⁷ This seasonal change skips spring, as filming of the work was shut down for a period due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bibliography

- “Appendix B – The ANZUS Treaty.” Home – Parliament of Australia, 9 January 2014. www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Completed_Inquiries/ifadt/usrelations/appendixb
- “Betty Muffler - Biography.” Short St Gallery. Accessed 5 May 2022. www.shortstgallery.com.au/artists/353-betty-muffler/biography/
- “Fight or Flight - Australian War Memorial Series.” Megan Cope, 2021. www.megancope.com.au/works/fight-or-flight-australian-war-memorial-series
- Parkinson, Alan. “Maralinga: The Clean-Up of a Nuclear Test Site.” *Medicine and Global Survival* 7, no. 2 (February 2002): 77–81
- Summers, John. “The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia and Indigenous Peoples 1901-1967.” Parliament of Australia, 18 February 2013 www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp0001/01RP10
- Young, Michael. “Khadim Ali: The Pleasures and Perils of Colliding Cultures.” COBO Social, 9 April 2021, www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/khadim-ali-invisible-border-institute-of-modern-art-brisbane/

To access additional classroom resources, education publications, and information about onsite and outreach programs at the Australian War Memorial, visit: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools