

## **Transcript Peter Hylands Mossenson Gallery Marni Bura/Dawang opening**

I want to start by saying a very warm welcome to Loreen Sampson and Alice Guinness. It is wonderful to see you both here. We also acknowledge Pansy Hicks, the third artist in the Marni Bura Roebourne Art Group exhibition. I want to thank you for the wonderful work you have brought with you.

Welcome to all of you.

The other works in the gallery are from Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, one of the East Kimberly's oldest and most influential art centres. *Dawang: Our Country, Our Place, Our Home* features works from Peter Newry, Agnes Armstrong, Ronnie Yundun, Daisy Bitting and Carole Hapke.

Both the Pilbara and Kimberly share something in common, indigenous heritage and ancient lands are under threat.

Tonight I am going to talk to you about place and caring for place. The single most important idea that should have come from the Prime Minister's 2020 summit is the idea that the non indigenous residents of Australia should think much more about the place they live in, and in understanding this, to tread carefully on country.

I have always instinctively cared about place but I never understood why and how. It was not until I started to look at and think about the art work of Aboriginal Australia that I understood more fully.

In Dampier last year Loreen explained to me her feelings about what is happening to her own country:

*"It breaks my heart, everything will be gone"*

Each artist, each work, in the gallery speaks about place and connection to place, either through the acknowledgement of memory, of education, tradition and law or through the horrors of destruction. In all the works, caring for country. From Pansy's bush tucker paintings, Loreen's paintings about mining and the social issues in Roebourne to Alice's paintings about Bandut or dancing ground. The land sings. In

these works, nature and culture are brought together in ways which should speak to us of our own conduct towards the land we live on.

I want you to think of two very different types of human behaviour coming together some two hundred years ago. The aboriginal understanding that place must be cared for and maintained in equilibrium and the European (as it was largely then) idea that foreign lands should be conquered, we call it the tabula rasa, we get rid of the lot and start again in our own image, we wipe it clean. These separate notions of place still continue today.

What I am going to tell you about now describes this perfectly. The artists wish me to speak about this.

We go back to Roebourne, we go back to country.

The close by Burrup Peninsula, or in local language the Murujuga, contains an extraordinary collection of ancient rock engravings created by many hundreds of generations of aboriginal people over a period of about 30,000 years. The art includes the earliest ever depictions of the human face and the images of extinct animals.

The area of the Burrup rock art, which during the last ice age was some 150 kilometres inland, became a series of rocky islands as the ice caps retreated and sea levels rose. When people first started the engravings, the images of animals depicted species from far inland, as the ice age waned and the Burrup became a coastal land, the images were of fish, crabs and other sea creatures. The images of human ceremony continued throughout all this time.

There are more than one million rock engravings.

That's fantastic, aren't we lucky to have such a thing in Australia? Oh yea!

As we speak, the culture and nature of the Burrup continues to be destroyed. The Burrup, now shaped by industry forms a Peninsula, joined to the mainland by earthworks to create road and rail access for industrial development.

The sources of extraction of the mining and energy wealth are located well away from the Burrup.

The Burrup is still under significant pressure from even more industrial development in the form of industrial infrastructure – factories and processing plants, infrastructure for extraction industries whose source of supply is distant from the Burrup. What is remarkable is that the rock art precinct on the Burrup contains some of the hardest rock on earth and is surrounded by degraded pastoral land which is some of the flattest on earth, the later perfect for industrial development and infrastructure.

It probably costs 30% more to build on the Burrup as massive amounts of rock have to be moved to clear the sites for construction. This rock of course is some of the most precious in the world.

The question, therefore, is why is the Burrup being used for industrial infrastructure, given its enormously important and global cultural significance?

When the destruction first started the rock art was just bulldozed, no one knows how much, now an attempt is made to save and relocate the rock art. What is critically important is to ensure that as much of the rock art landscape as possible on the Burrup stays intact. Moving the rock art essentially destroys its relevance in time and place. As population pressure increases so does vandalism and the likelihood of theft. The rock art for the present remains largely unprotected and undocumented. Vandalism on the Burrup is now rife, more is discovered on every visit. There are many recent examples including the desecration of a fish engraving site with the use of power tools.

A greater scientific effort is needed.

There are now plenty of disparaging quotes from eminent persons around the world in relation to Australia's conduct on the Burrup. I will leave those for you to discover but give you two quotes from WA.

“Heritage is in a mess in Western Australia. If Stonehenge were in the Pilbara, it would no longer exist” *Sally Morgan, author, artist, academic, Sally's country is to the east of the Burrup in the central Pilbara region*

“We’ve dreamt of this area [the Burrup] becoming the most important industrial region in the southern hemisphere for twenty to thirty years, and finally the realization is starting to happen” *Fred Riebling, Speaker of the WA Legislative Assembly & MP for the Pilbara region*

Now to some recent government actions;

Australian Heritage listing, which does not protect the Burrup from development, was postponed three times by the Federal Government. Emergency Heritage listing in 2007 was also rejected by the Federal Government. These delays were constructed to allow the door of development to remain wide open and resulted in the approval of the Pluto B gas train extension.

In early July 2007, the Australian Federal Government did finally announced a Australian Heritage listing of parts of the Burrup Peninsula. The place is still being destroyed.

Well there has been a change of government in Canberra, hasn’t there?

The Resource’s Minister is now busy promoting, on behalf of the Federal Government, the development of a major Sassol Chevron plant on the Burrup. Meanwhile a number of companies have thought twice about the heritage and cultural issues on the Burrup and withdrawn from development plans. The WA Government, undeterred is now embarking on yet another round of encouraging new developments including an explosives plant and various small granite mining operations.

From a heritage and professional point of view the complete (and in my view, deliberate) lack of documentation of what actually exists on the Burrup is extraordinary. The WA government and its cultural institutions are to be condemned for this, as is the Federal Government for its compliance with these appalling standards.

So what is the answer to my earlier question? The Burrup rock art and landscape has been callously destroyed because its significance was never recognised by those doing

the destroying. This is now a source of great embarrassment which requires, because of increasing international attention, more cover-up and even greater spin.

The real answer, however, is the economic benefit to WA would be much greater if industrial infrastructure had not located on the Burrup but instead gone elsewhere. WA would then have had the greatest rock art site on earth and exactly the same revenues from gas, but with considerably cheaper infrastructure costs.

Not to be outdone in terms of reshaping the landscape, the Indian entrepreneur who has plonked his fertiliser plant on the Burrup, plans, according to the Perth media, to build a replica of the Taj Mahal in Peppermint Grove, now Australia's most expensive suburb, while another, again according to media reports, but unconnected to the Burrup WA entrepreneur, is building a replica of Stonehenge at Margaret River, using 2,500 tonnes of granite from Esperance.

I am sure you get my point.

*"I have always considered the Burrup and its rock art to be one of human society's most important cultural sites. In one sense I think of the Burrup as a barometer of the human condition. If we can destroy our cultural heritage, that is our past and our present, we have the capacity to destroy the future; a future that belongs to others, the future generations of this world".*

Thank you for listening and please continue to enjoy this beautiful exhibition.

*As a footnote in yesterdays media (13 May 2008, extract WA Business News)*

"Burrup Holdings Pty Ltd (BHPL) has announced its intention to establish a new joint venture with Yara International, Burrup Nitrates Joint Venture, to build a c. 350,000 tpa technical ammonium nitrate plant (TAN) on the Burrup Peninsula in the north west of Western Australia. Subject to final engineering studies, statutory and finance approvals the parties envisage a total investment c. \$500 - 600 million will be required to establish the plant at that location. Production is scheduled to commence during the fiscal year of 2011".

The destruction still continues.