“BUSH WOMEN” AND “BUSH WOMEN: 25 YEARS ON”

Notes on Making and Re-Making an Exhibition

by Darren Jorgensen

Bush Women and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* were exhibitions held at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1994 and 2018, featuring six women from remote parts of Western Australia. The 2018 installation of the show reproduced the pastel-coloured walls and display boards, displaying the artist's exuberant and colourful paintings of Country. *Bush Women: 25 Years On* was, to borrow Francesca Leonardi's words, a "faithful restaging of a single exhibition already set up in the past" that did not change the original show by introducing new works or "riffing" on its theme with entirely new content.[1] The show was repeated by curator Erin Coates and the exhibition's original curator John Kean in 2018 because the six painters it featured—Daisy Andrews, Queenie McKenzie, Pantjiti Mary McLean, Paji Honeychild Yankarr, Tjapartji Kanytjuri Bates, and Tjingapa Davies—had since 1994 become Australian artists of some significance. *Bush Women* of 1994 had been ahead of the curve, catching some of the momentum of the rise of Aboriginal women artists in Australia's art world.

This essay discusses both *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* through the lens of exhibition histories that shift the focus from studying "curating" to the broader context of "exhibition making."[2] Rather than reinscribing the authorship of artists and curators, exhibition histories attempt a more inclusive history of the "many pairs of hands that go into the production of [shows], whether people who work in institutions, people who design the fliers and the printed matter to the kind of broader set of social and historical conditions."[3] The concept of exhibition histories, as distinct from art history and curatorial studies, is best represented by the Exhibition Histories book series published by the Afterall Research Centre at Central Saint Martins, London. Two features of this series go some way toward distinguishing the methodologies of exhibition histories. First, this interest in describing the relationships that make up an exhibition, and second, a focus on exhibitions that fall outside the conventional model of curatorship, such as *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chaing Mai 1992–98* (2018) and *Festac '77: The 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture* (2019). The exhibitions described by these books, and other books in the Exhibition Histories series, were less driven by a single curator than by the cooperation of many people over time.[4] These two approaches decentre individuals, and inform this study of the 1994 and 2018 iterations of *Bush Women*.

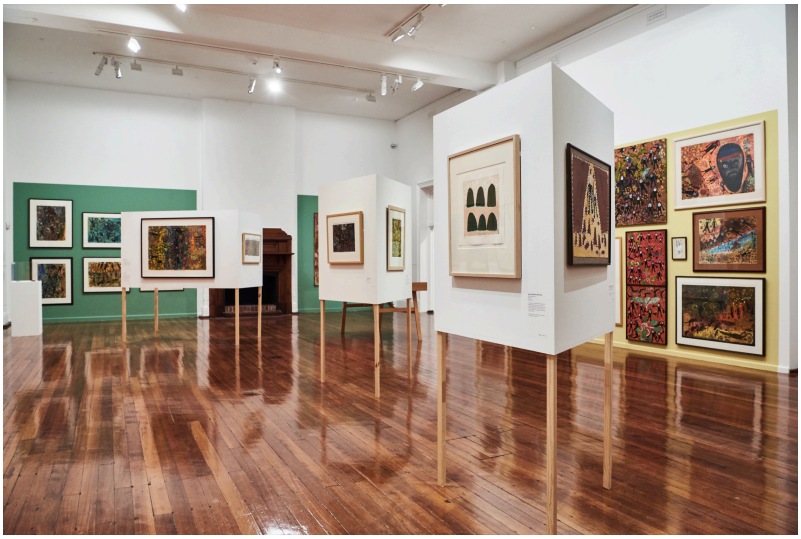
Both shows were enabled by the cooperative work of Fremantle Arts Centre staff and the representatives of artists from remote Western Australia, including art centre managers. In 1994, these workers and artist's representatives included Karen Dayman, Nalda Searles, and June Moorhouse. In 2018, they included Sheridan Coleman and Jim Cathcart. The organisation of *Bush Women: 25 Years On* necessitated extensive research on *Bush Women* of 1994, making it possible to map backward the work involved in both shows to name the many pairs of hands involved in the first exhibition and the collaborative nature of exhibition-making. Collaboration is conceptualised as work that rests upon a shared vision of exhibition-making that exceeds financial remuneration. Involved in both exhibitions as McLean's representative, Searles illustrates this aspect of the argument more clearly, as she has, without compensation, worked to support McLean's career while pursuing her artistic practice. This subsumption of one's own needs is also, I want to argue, implicit in the scale of projects that Coates took on at the Fremantle Arts Centre during her time working there. As we shall see, *Bush Women: 25 Years On* was one of several massive, administratively demanding projects. The historical consciousness that comes with doing a replica show enables the thinking of exhibition-making as a collective practice that has persisted through the decades. In this case, these are the two and half decades between *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On*, and yet the

argument here implies that exhibition-making is a collaborative and visionary process idea that extends beyond these shows and into the lives of artists and arts workers more broadly.

As an eyewitness to the development of *Bush Women: 25 Years On*, I can briefly explain how and why it was conceived. I had supplied the Fremantle Arts Centre with student interns from the University of Western Australia for a few years. Although unpaid, the Fremantle Arts Centre offered them a collegial environment to gain some experience in the operations room of a professional art gallery while under the supervision of curator Erin Coates. Their main task was to organise boxes of the institution's exhibition archives, which Coates remembers as "old silverfish infested boxes and lots of dust and little scraps of cryptically written notes."[5] When I was invited to view the newly organised archive, *Bush Women*, the 1994 exhibition stood out among the many shows at the Fremantle Arts Centre. There were two reasons for this. The first reason was John Kean curated it. He was the Exhibitions Coordinator from 1993 to 1995, and I had been following his scholarship on the artists from Papunya.[6] The second reason was that I had previously researched several artists in the show.[7] I pointed out *Bush Women* to Coates, who had been looking for a way to put the archive to work. She immediately recognised its significance and suggested recreating it in 2018 for *Bush Women*'s twenty-fifth anniversary.[8] For Coates, this commemorated the Fremantle Art Centre's exhibition history, while I committed to editing and writing for the replica's catalogue.[9]

Coates's reasons for holding a replica exhibition at the Fremantle Arts Centre were not so different from those of larger institutions that host "remembering exhibitions" to affirm their status more broadly in art history and the art world.[10] Scholars such as Lucy Steeds have been suspicious of these kinds of exhibitions, as they are used for "shoring up curatorial 'landmarks'" as they reproduce their host's institutional and historical significances.[11] However, as Gemma Weston notes, *Bush Women: 25 Years On* was not a typical commemoration of the "Anglo-centric historical canon."[12] Its artists were both Aboriginal and women, and their significance was established as remote Aboriginal art became more visible in exhibitions and publications through the 1990s and twenty-first century. Queenie McKenzie was the first woman to work within the ochre painting movement from Warmun (Turkey Creek); her first painting dates back to 1987.[13] Mary McLean remained the best-known artist of the Goldfields region of Western Australia and was the featured artist for the Perth Festival in 1996. McLean and Daisy Andrews won the Telecom First Prize in Darwin (now called the "Telstra") in 1995 and 1994, respectively. Introducing the 2018 catalogue, Coates and the Fremantle Arts Centre's Sheridan Coleman write that the artists of *Bush Women* had since become "known and esteemed as part of a wider history of West Australian Aboriginal art."[14]

FIG. 1



Bush Women: 25 Years On installed in the main space at the Fremantle Arts Centre, 2018. Photograph by Rebecca Mansell.

FIG. 2

Bush Women installed in the main space at the Fremantle Arts Centre, 1994. Photographer unknown.

At the time of the original *Bush Women*, Kean was inspired by how Aboriginal women in Western Australia had pursued their visions of painting and were not preoccupied with the dominant style of remote Aboriginal art, dot painting. As a reviewer of a 1993 exhibition of McLean's drawings and paintings at the Fremantle Arts Centre noted, "this was a major departure from the familiar "dot" paintings," something that is also true of the work of the other *Bush Women* artists.[15] Women painted from the beginnings of Aboriginal art centres founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Mangkaja Arts at Fitzroy Crossing, Warburton Arts Project in Warburton and Warlayirti Artists at Balgo, indulging in wild and colourful expressionism. *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* featured big gestural landscapes (Andrews), canvases crowded with animal tracks (Bates) and the bright shapes of desert waterholes (Honeychild).

Kean also argues that these artists broke with the Dreaming.[16] Instead of the Dreaming, these artists are said to be concerned with autobiographical narratives relating to childhood (Andrews and Paji Honeychild Yankarr), life before the arrival of white people (McLean), and everyday cultural life (Tjingpa Davies). With a proliferation of leaves, flowers, tracks, hills, and mountains extending off the edges of canvases, pages, and boards, the gaze is pulled outward, centrifugally, and implies an expanded

world of plenty. As Kean speaks of the works in 2018, in his opening address to *Bush Women: 25 Years On*:

> There is a very different understanding of time brought forth by the works in Bush Women—a discrete time evoked when looking into the works themselves—deep time. Take, for example, a painting of *jila* (waterplace) by Paji Honeychild. Her circular brushstrokes evoke the gestures of thousands of generations of Walmajarri women who have dug into the soft earth of the same wells across the Western Desert, cleaning out the detritus of zebra finches and dingoes before waiting for living water to give life to thirsty travellers. Similarly, the happy camps evoked by Pantjiti Mary McLean are not simply the recollections of her youth; they are images of people who have lived, given birth and died in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands for millennia. Children's calls across busy campsites are not merely the sounds of the twentieth century, before contact with Europeans; they are the sounds, the very words, that have circled through time with each generation. While Pantjiti's paintings are vernacular remembrances of her own childhood, they are also Tjukurrpa (The Dreaming), for Pantjiti shows us how people have lived on this land beyond contemporary whitefella imaginings.[17]

Here, Kean implies there is a politics to what can, at first glance, appear to be naïve paintings, bright with colour and country. This politics lies, for example, in the history of Mangkaja Arts, where Andrews and Honeychild paint. Mangkaja was founded from the Karrayili Adult Education Centre in Fitzroy Crossing by Aboriginal people wanting to learn to decode the "secret English" of non-Indigenous people who ran the town and its organisations.[18] Mangkaja was an extension of this pedagogical program, a way of empowering Aboriginal people with a means of representing their lives in painting.

Exhibition practice in Australian cities followed the lead of these remote women. A desert women's art show, *Karnta: Aboriginal Women's Art*, toured venues in Adelaide, Sydney, Darwin, and Fremantle between 1987 and 1989. In 1991 in Sydney, the independent Aboriginal gallery Boomali featured a women's show called *Kudjeris,* while later in the same year, the *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition* featured at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, this latter including some of McKenzie's earliest paintings, as well as five Mangkaja artists.[19] Crucially, women curated many of these early shows of Aboriginal art, with Fiona Foley curating *Kudjeris* and Hetti Perkins and Avril Quail curating the *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*. In 1990, Judith Ryan curated the women of Lajamanu into their own exhibition with *Paint Up Big: Warlpiri Women's Art of Lajamanu* at the National Gallery of Victoria. Later in the decade, in 1998, Margo Neale curated *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia* at the Queensland Art Gallery, while in 1997, Brenda L. Croft, Victoria Lynn, and Hetti Perkins curated Kngwarreye

into Australia's pavilion at the Venice Biennale, alongside Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson.

The resurrection of *Bush Women* from 1994 as *Bush Women: 25 Years On* in 2018 can also be interpreted after three Fremantle Arts Centre exhibitions of the 2010s focused on developing new artworks from remote Western Australia. These shows were collaborative, inviting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists to work together. The first of these shows, *We Don't Need a Map* in 2012 paired Martu artists with non-Indigenous media artists. A second 2017 exhibition, *In Cahoots*, organised collaborations more broadly across the country. Coates curated both shows, and their legacy continues to play out in the careers of the participating non-Aboriginal artists. Sohan Ariel Hayes, Trent Jansen and Lynette Wallworth continue collaborating with remote artists, including in shows at the Fremantle Arts Centre. Hayes's collaboration with Martu painter Ngamaru Bidu *Walyja Ngurra* was shown in 2016, while Jansen's furniture designs with Tanya Singer and Errol Evans, Yankunytatjara and Yalanji people, respectively, are on show in *Kurnpa Kunpu / Strong Spirit* in 2023.

We Don't Need a Map and *In Cahoots* represent collaborations between artists and staff in the Fremantle Arts Centre and remote art centres who co-ordinated these large projects on the ground. Similarly, the work of *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* involved teams of people. Although Kean is named as the sole curator of the first show, and Coates and Kean are jointly listed as curators of the second,[20] the two iterations of *Bush Women* involved artist's families and representatives of the artists, remote art centre managers, and collectors who held the work. Apart from eleven works that remained with the Warburton Arts Project, *Bush Women*'s works were with various owners across Australia. The Fremantle Arts Centre's Sheridan Coleman was crucial to tracking work down, poring over a sales file from 1994 to identify and find the owners of works through old addresses and phone numbers. Coates and Coleman write that:

> Unpicking twine that fastened the 1994 manila *Bush Women* sales folder revealed only the first clue in what came to be a treasure hunt to find purchasers. Hand-written and photocopied one too many times, the notes were strewn with confounding information. One painting had been sold to a "Hawkins", who was apparently so well known that they needed no first name or contact information. Another was acquired by a company with a generic name (think: Acme Holdings) that it was one of *dozens* of so-titled organisations internationally.[21]

Anyone who has worked on an exhibition will appreciate the extra efforts that went into replicating *Bush Women* of 1994 as *Bush Women: 25 Years On*, involving not only the administration around finding the works but organisation in negotiating their loan and freight to the gallery. Coates and Coleman ensured seventy works were found and arrived on time for the show, all the while managing the data around these works so that they could be returned intact.

Restaging an exhibition draws upon what Yu Jin Seng describes as the "shared collective memory in the present" of the original show.[22] For

Bush Women: 25 Years On, art centre managers and collectors were contacted, and their knowledge of where works enabled works from the 1994 show to be located. Research into the 1994 *Bush Women* revealed how many people, mostly women, brought the artists and work to Fremantle in time for the opening. Shows of art from remote Australia typically rely upon art centres and their managers to access gallery opportunities in Australian cities, and *Bush Women* in 1994 was no exception. At Mangkaja, the inaugural manager, Karen Dayman, answered the phone when Kean called to ask about artists for *Bush Women.* Dayman is one of a handful of women who spent long periods in these arts management positions and who, like many of these women, did not write themselves into the history of Aboriginal art. Brenda Croft describes the work of those behind the making of the Aboriginal art movement of the time:

> It is important to note the support of artists given by people such as Nalda [Searles] and John [Kean] when working as art centre co-ordinators/advisors (one of John's previous roles at Papunya Tula in the late 1970s) and curators in small contemporary art spaces and/or running community workshops.
>
> The last two decades of the twentieth century were an incredibly stimulating period in developing Indigenous visual arts throughout the country. A close, community-based national network existed amongst arts workers. It was exciting seeing and participating in the artistic vision emerging from disparate scenarios where a little funding, combined with a lot of enthusiasm, experimentation and encouragement, could go a long way.[23]

Winifred Hilliard was the first woman working on the ground with remote artists for long periods; she managed the Ernabella craft room from the 1950s for several decades.[24] Daphne Williams was also a long-term manager, working for Papunya Tula during the 1980s and 1990s, while Edwina Circuitt managed Warakurna Artists in the first decades of the twenty-first century. After over twenty years, Cecilia Alfonso and Gloria Morales remain at Warlukurlangu Artists at Yeundumu. Una Rey has historicised the deep involvement of women in art centres by describing the spaces they manage as a "cross-cultural studio" through which it is possible to glimpse "intercultural feminism."[25]

Although not employed by an art centre, artist Nalda Searles managed Mary McLean's career after meeting her during a community art project on the streets of Kalgoorlie. McLean was a Ngaanyatjarra woman who had moved to the camps of itinerant Ngaanyatjarra, Wongutha, Pitjantjatjara, Nyoongar, and Yamaji people living in Kalgoorlie. In the early 1990s, the population of these camps quadrupled, and there was little housing or even an adequate supply of blankets to keep them warm.[26] Amidst this crisis, McLean campaigned against the use of alcohol and maintained a distance from evangelical Churches preying on the vulnerable.[27] Searles recalls that "her presence encouraged a certain level of behaviour and participation by others" in Kalgoorlie.[28] Searles met McLean while running a street art project.[29] Searles provided cardboard and painting materials to Aboriginal people living in Kalgoorlie's itinerant camps in makeshift studios in local parks and streets by collecting cardboard from Kalgoorlie businesses. McLean painted at a distance from the group that was gathered in Searles's makeshift outside studio. Before meeting Searles,

McLean drew from the Western Desert style, decorating colourful canvases with leaves and vegetal forms. McLean also had an early supporter and facilitator in Don Green, who ran the Desert Art Gallery in Kalgoorlie. He also bought and sold her pokerwork carvings before providing her with paint and canvas.[30] Searles suggested that McLean developed naive figures from the U-shaped motif she used in her dot paintings. [31] This inspired her all-over pictures of people living in a kind of Arcadia surrounded by animals and vegetation.

FIG. 3

Mary McLean installation wall in *Bush Women: 25 Years On, 2018*. Photograph by Rebecca Mansell.

McLean also advocated for her community, as women needed to be during an era that had transformed life for remote people. Since the 1970s, remote communities and their politics and management have become the focus of Aboriginal life in much of Western Australia, taking the place of Christian missions and cattle stations. These communities demanded constant work to keep children in schools, negotiate access to customary lands, and campaign for the building and maintaining houses, shops, and other services. During the 1990s, women often stepped up to leadership positions as male leaders aged and died. Queenie McKenzie is also one of these leaders. After spending much of her life working on cattle stations, she moved to Turkey Creek in 1973 with other people who had been evicted from Aboriginal camps in the wake of the equal wage policies rolled out through the country.[32] McKenzie helped begin a school at Turkey Creek, teaching the Gija language there and was part of a political campaign against developing a diamond mine at Tayiwul (Barramundi Gap), a women's Dreaming site. After losing this battle, she advocated for a compensation scheme for distressed women because of losing this important place. With fellow artist Hector Jandany, McKenzie was also a founder of Warmun Art Centre in 1998, extending her community advocacy into creating this organisation that would provide Gija artists with the support of a local studio and administration.

Through the biographies of both McKenzie and McLean and a history of non-Indigenous women working in art centres and with remote artists, it is possible to glimpse how *Bush Women* of 1994 represented more than the rise of Aboriginal women artists in the Australian art world. It also represented women working to support their communities, labour typically invisible within histories of art that rely on artworks and exhibitions to tell artists' stories. The 1994 iteration of *Bush Women* was the product of a set of relationships extending across Western Australia between artists and their representatives, as well as with Kean and the Fremantle Arts Centre, who was supported in turn by the Fremantle Art Centre's then Director June

Moorhouse. In 2018 *Bush Women: 25 Years On* also relied upon the cooperation of a vast network of people, including Coates and Coleman and the institution's Director, Jim Cathcart. *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* depended on collaborative, working relationships that extended from the Kimberley to the Gibson Desert to Fremantle.

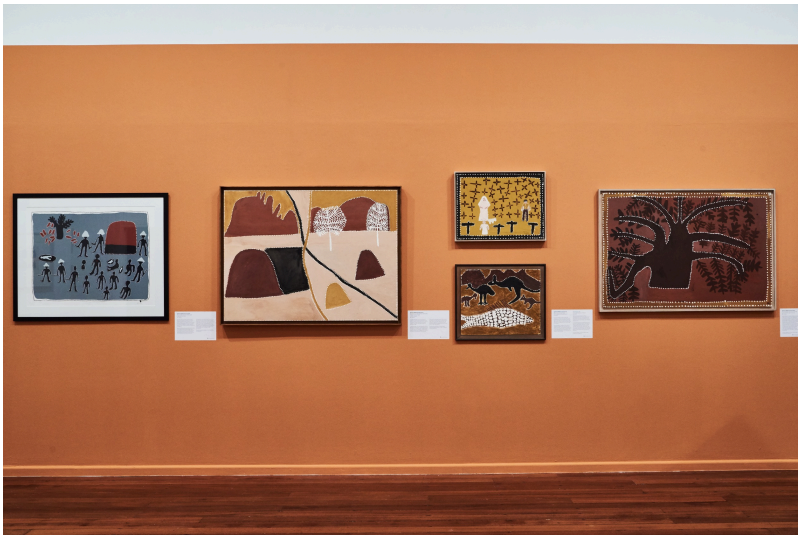
While the title of both exhibitions implies that the show was made up of only women artists, it is possible to revise this because of the individual works included in 1994 and 2018. In 1994, Kean included a small carved wooden sculpture of chained hands by the Karajarri and male artist Mervyn Mullardy. *Babirr / Wooden chained hands* (1988), from the University of Western Australia's Berndt Museum of Anthropology collection, sat prominently in the middle of the main gallery space in front of McLean's Arcadian scenes of people crowded into fertile land and McKenzie's vertical golden and pink views of the landscape. Kean recalls:

> I included the Mervyn Mullardy sculpture as it encapsulates, for me at that time, a reason why there was a range of amazing women emerging in Western Australia (and in particular, the Kimberley). I knew the history of the Kimberley to be particularly brutal, with men being the target of police and vigilante brutality. They were too often shot in massacres or taken to Broome or Derby in chains. Mervyn's sculpture of the chained hand stood for the men's absence.[33]

The sculpture anchored McLean's picturesque and McKenzie's sublime visions of the Aboriginal history of Western Australia that in both the Goldfields (McLean's home) and the Kimberley (McKenzie's country) were places of exploitation. For almost a hundred years in the Kimberley, generations of Aboriginal people were born into long days of labour on cattle stations. McKenzie was born on Old Texas Downs on the Ord River, where she worked as the station cook and with cattle.[34] After walking into the Goldfields from living in the Gibson Desert, McLean worked mustering on sheep stations and processing sandalwood.[35] *Babirr / Wooden chained hands* ensured that *Bush Women* could not be interpreted simply in terms of an Arcadian vision of the Aboriginal country. The natural plenty shown in its paintings was an effort to imagine a better life after an era of hard work.

Kean also drew from a history of working with remote Aboriginal women artists in 1994. He had been the inaugural exhibition manager at Tandanya, where, with Kerry Giles, he invited the women of Papunya to do a ground painting to show alongside men's paintings in *East to West: Land in Papunya Tula Painting* in 1990. He also held the inaugural Mangkaja Arts exhibition, *Karrayili*, another women's show and the first for artists Jukuja Dolly Snell, Nyuju Stumpy Brown, Purlta Mary-Anne Downs, Janyka Ivy Nixon, and Yata Gypsy Yadda. The artists came to the opening in a bus, having driven across the continent from Fitzroy Crossing to Adelaide. Through *Karrayili* Kean established a working relationship with Dayman, anticipating *Bush Women*'s inclusion of Andrews and Honeychild a few years later.[36]

FIG. 4



Queenie McKenzie works installed as part of *Bush Women: 25 Years On*, 2018. Photograph by Rebecca Mansell.

In the 2018 iteration of *Bush Women,* the Berndt Museum did not want to lend Mullardy's sculpted hands that had featured in the first show, ostensibly because the Fremantle Arts Centre is not climate-controlled. The loss of such a keystone for the show would have made it a different proposition for visitors, who would no longer have been reminded of the brutality of Aboriginal history amidst the bright paintings. To substitute, Coates commissioned Martu artist Curtis Taylor to re-carve them to reinstate this historical and male presence in a women's exhibition.[37] Taylor's new sculpture, *Chained Hands* (2018), is a deep, burned black, the hands folded into each other, an abyss of memory symbolising a brutal history of imprisonment and violence. These carvings are a counterpoint to the joy that animates the women's paintings, but they also politicise them. Their paintings of Arcadian bush life come from biographies in which these artists lived and worked on cattle and sheep stations (Andrews, Honeychild, McLean, and McKenzie). McLean mustered sheep on horseback in the Goldfields region. At the same time, Dayman writes that Andrews worked on Cherrabun Station in the Kimberley, "washing clothes, watering the garden, cutting the grass with scissors and cooking for the stock camp."[38] Rather than representing these days of labour, the paintings of *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* deliberately focus upon colourfully painted landscapes (Andrews, McKenzie, Honeychild), and scenes of plenty in the bush (Bates, McLean). They are political in the sense that they imagine the freedoms that came with the time before the invasion of the continent and when Aboriginal people were not subject to difficult working conditions or the violence of the invasion itself.

In this sense, the Arcadian paintings of these two exhibitions reflect something of the cooperative work that went into putting them on show in *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On*. McLean's scenes of Aboriginal people living happily alongside each other are, in particular, analogous to the cooperation described here between art centre managers, artists, artists and their families, collectors, curators, and Fremantle Arts Centre staff. The second aspect of exhibition histories reflected in the history of *Bush Women* and *Bush Women: 25 Years On* lies in the subaltern quality of the show in relation to other exhibitions in Australian art history. In 2018, the National Gallery of Victoria also held a restaging of one of their historical shows. *The Field* from 1968 was restaged as *The Field Revisited* (2018). Arguably, as one of the most celebrated shows in Australian art history, *The Field* did not need more attention paid to it. Compared to the National Gallery of Victoria, the Fremantle Arts Centre is a minor institution, and its exhibitions may

have been forgotten if not for the archiving work of Coates and her interns. By revisiting the history of this exhibition and its iterations, it is possible to glimpse another Australian art history, one that is not dominated by major artists, curators, and exhibitions but comprises minor institutions and projects driven by cooperative networks. This is particularly relevant to histories of remote Australian art since bringing artists and works from remote Aboriginal communities and regional towns depends upon a great deal of cooperation between people living in these places and galleries in the capital cities. Recovering such histories offers a glimpse of how remote artists are a part of their regional communities and how their artwork creates a community among arts workers across the continent.

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