

**EXHIBITION: ANCESTRAL MEMORY**  
**6 MAY - 11 OCTOBER 2019**  
**OLD QUAD, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**  
**ARTIST AND CURATOR: MAREE CLARK**  
**CREATIVE CONSULTANT: JEFA GREENAWAY**  
**PROJECT CURATORS: SAMANTHA**  
**COMTE AND JACQUELINE DOUGHTY**

The reopening of Old Quad has been a long time coming, almost two and a half years' worth. Considering the age of the building itself however, two and a half years is a mere second in its life. Though perhaps a relatively short amount of time, the recent renovations have the potential to alter approaches to — and understandings of — the building itself, and its historical ties to the University of Melbourne more generally.

Holding many guises over its 165 years, Old Quad's recent makeover gives it new life as an exhibition space focused on displaying cultural collections at University of Melbourne in its halls. Far from providing a so-called 'white cube' space for the display of works, the exhibition space at Old Quad will not let you forget you are walking through a significant building on campus, both for its age and its look. Inescapably colonial in its Tudor Gothic style, it was modelled on similar iterations in Ireland and Wales erected around the same time.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Tibbits, *The Quadrangle: The First Building at the University of Melbourne* (Parkville: The History of the University Unit, The University of Melbourne, 2005), 15-16.

This was the very first building that inaugurated the University of Melbourne back in 1856, as an institution and knowledge centre. Its halls once housed all the professors of the University, and all of its 57 students would have walked through — and studied in — its interior. In essence, the Quadrangle, as it was known then, stood for the University declaring its place and its own importance in what was considered new land and a new colony. James Waghorne's essay celebrates the recent opening of the space by looking in detail at the historical continuity of the building, its progression from professor residencies to the law library and everything in between.<sup>2</sup> He states that Old Quad is a 'symbol of renewal within an evolving institution'.<sup>3</sup> The onus on this new space, then, is to symbolize current attitudes and debates as well as to expand on and interrogate the building's history. Specifically its undeniable colonial foundations, with the purpose of bringing the conversation out to wider debate.

Walking into the space, viewers are met with a veneer of the building's colonial heritage, in the new oak floors and wood paneling encompassing the entire south face gallery space. This space is aptly named 'Treasury' for its

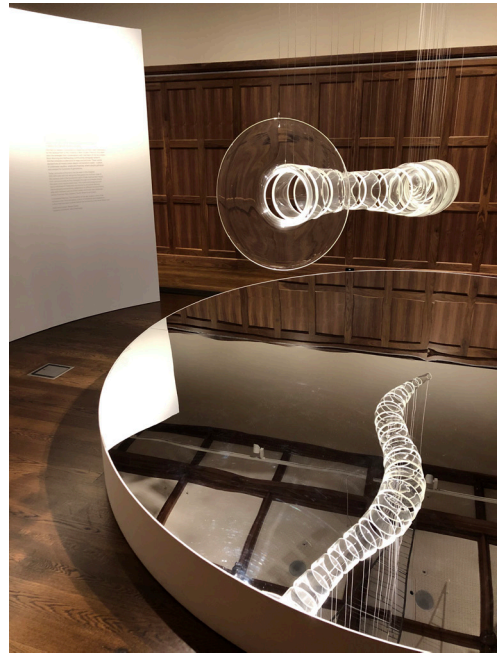
<sup>2</sup> James Waghorne, 'The Quadrangle', in *Old Quad Catalogue*, (Parkville: The University of Melbourne, 2019), 12 – 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

new purpose of displaying cultural collections. Behind one of the walls, the old council tables and chairs are on full display, their carpentry matching the arches of the gothic windows in the bay room. The inaugural exhibition, *Ancestral Memory* meets the loaded messaging of Old Quad's space with the curatorial rigor of Boon Wurrung, Mutti Mutti, Yorta Yorta Wemba Wemba artist Maree Clarke. Clarke brings works into the space that can be seen as an attempt to challenge, or at least to puncture, preconceptions and colonial constructs on multiple levels.

Partnering with First Nation's architect Jefa Greenaway, Clarke hinges the show on the eel, or more specifically the eel trap. This is a recognition that the lands on which we stand while in this space, the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, play host to an epic migration conducted by the short-finned eel yearly. They use waterways throughout the region to make their way inland. This forms a large premise of the show, as we gain insight into the long hidden or unacknowledged presence of the eel, long thought to have been deterred and barred from its journey due to the destruction of its natural water passageways. As we are told, this resourceful creature still passes through this land, under our feet, using stormwater drains as its new creeks.

The way the works and objects interact in the space brings attention to the ties between heritage, space, memory and hegemony. Presented next to three eel traps made by elder Gunditjimara woman Connie Hart and elders Patrick Bellamy and Edith Terrick, is an early map of Melbourne, created around 1832. This displays what we now know as the Melbourne CBD and its surrounds, with an early iteration of the 'Hoddle grid'; a city planning tactic Melburnians now take for granted. This juxtaposition seems to be a jarring choice, with the map blatantly representing the dispossession of First Nations land, and the brutal realities of colonial structures as imposed on landscape. Yet, in setting up this relationship, Clarke essentially undermines and critiques the certainties that maps are meant to lend to lived experience. It is the colonial mentality of this map that the eel traps target, as they speak to a thousand-year-old practice conducted in areas all over Victoria, a practice that very much disrupts and invalidates the claims made by colonisers of terra nullius, of unoccupied land. Weak justifications for these claims were based on perceptions of uncultivated land, where colonisers would argue that First Nation's people were not using the land in their narrowed perception of what this entailed. In fact, eel traps were placed in strategic points in waterways, where sometimes the waterways themselves would be



**Figures 1-4:** Ancestral Memory, the University of Melbourne, photographed by Ada Coxall.

shaped and directed, indicative of First people's intimate knowledge of land and country.

The eel and the eel trap thus become indicative — symbolic — of the resourcefulness and resilience of First Nation's people in their continuation of practice, despite the violence inflicted by colonial structures. Maree Clarke's focus on the eel trap widens out the story of the eel to bear on the violence and control inflicted on the practice of First Nation's People by the Australian government. She pays due attention to those who guaranteed the continuation of cultural practice despite the infliction of violence on Indigenous Australians, represented in the eel traps of elder Connie Hart. A Gunditjimarara woman from around Lake Condah, West Victoria, Connie grew up in the hostile climate of 1950s Australia, where communities lived in constant fear that their children would be taken away from them by a government bent on eradication and assimilation, rather than celebration, of Aboriginal cultural practice. Her mother, her grandmother, and other elders in her community were master weavers, able to construct beautiful and practical eel traps from the native bung o'ort grass (spear grass) that grows in the area. Any eel trap created was added to the many thousands that have been woven in that area over thousands of years, a knowledge passed down, continued, from generation to generation.

Yet, Hart's family did not want to teach her, as the fear that the government would take her away from them was very real. Despite this, Hart took it upon herself to watch from afar, to weave a line or two while her mother and grandmother were not looking. Hart went on to become a master weaver in her community, retaining the knowledge that was denied her. This knowledge she would keep throughout her life, and ultimately pass on to her community. Teaching weaving to her descendants, keeping the tradition alive for following generations.<sup>4</sup>

Next to Hart's eel traps are Clarke's own river reed necklace works, setting up a connection between the two First Nation's women, as both keep their culture alive in unique ways. Maree Clarke refers to herself as a cultural 'revivifier'.<sup>5</sup> She looks into the practices of her ancestors, where the river reed necklaces speak to a mode of welcome to visitors, using native river reed from around Clarke's home on the Maribyrnong river. These necklaces, though, are not of the wearable type. Instead they are made large scale in order

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<sup>4</sup> Emily Bissland, 'Act of rebellion as 'naughty girl' Connie Hart wove against oppression' *ABC News*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2018. Accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-07/act-of-rebellion-as-naughty-girl-wove-against-oppression/9943694>.

<sup>5</sup> Fran Edmonds 'Maree Clarke: Glass eel trap and river reed necklaces' in *Ancestral Memory Catalogue* (Parkville: Old Quad, 2019), 9.



to embody and demand a cultural presence. Clarke uses artistic means to seize an agency in representation of traditional practice that was so often denied. This finds ultimate embodiment in her glass piece holding the same name as the exhibition: *Ancestral Memory*. The work asserts itself within contemporaneity, with a minimalistic and streamlined form. Divorced from its context, the work could take on many meanings. Yet, its presentation in this show provokes an understanding between this form and the forms of the woven eel traps on the other side of the room. This contemporary construction still owes its existence to traditional modes, providing an essential continuity.

Despite the potency of these works and the powerful curatorial visions of Clarke and Greenaway, a question still remains. Will the reimagined Old Quad continue to provide a space that effectively engages in contemporary debate and responds to the still overt signals of heritage and hegemony? As *Ancestral Memory* was only a temporary exhibition, it is incumbent on successive exhibitions to engage with a similar rigor of thought. The way the nineteenth century map was used in this exhibition offers the Old Quad a way to do this; by displaying long held cultural collections with an intent of opening up conversation, or by revealing the active structuring of history. The exhibition's focus on place, and its reminder to question,

or at least acknowledge constructed narratives and to offer alternate ones, is an important curatorial method for this space. The Old Quad should continue to stage similar exhibitions if it is to truly be considered the heart of an institution that prides itself on intellectual rigour and forward thinking. Through creative interrogation and reassessment of cultural heritage, the space has the potential to engage visitors in discussions regarding how our history is taught and received from the past all the way to today.

**Reviewed by Ada Coxall**