

ROBYNE

THE ABORIGINE IS PRESENT



LATHAM

Aboriginal Australia takes centre stage at Federation Square with an exciting new exhibition and a new location for the Koorie Heritage Trust.

The creative process is different for every artist. For Robyne Latham, the inspiration for her latest work struck as she sat in her studio, thinking about the place of Aborigines in contemporary Australia, media debate about the right to identify as Aboriginal and the daily stereotyping of Aboriginal people.

It was set against this backdrop that the idea for *The Aborigine is Present* first emerged.

The title is an allusion to the work of pioneering performance artist Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, a 736-hour silent piece, performed at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2010.

Visitors who entered the famous gallery's second-floor atrium encountered a small plaque which read: 'Sit silently with the artist for a duration of your choosing'.

Out in the centre of the space Marina sat at a simple wooden table, her face immobile, as a stream of visitors took turns sitting opposite her – being present with the artist.

In contrast to Marina's original performance, *The Aborigine is Present* is the product of Aboriginal culture, which is, at its core, a collectivist culture. The 'artist' is no longer the focus of the work, instead the performance is about the interface between cultures: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Robyne will share the role of the Aborigine with other Aboriginal participants, who will sit opposite a non-Aboriginal participant. 'They will sit in silence, in full presence of each other, in recognition of their shared humanity', she said.

It was a story Robyne's partner told her about his limited exposure to Aboriginal people, while growing up in a white middle-class Melbourne suburb in the late 60s and early 70s, which helped stimulate her thinking about the stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For Robyne it brought up a lot of questions: 'How many Australian 'non-indigenous' people have actually met an identified

Indigenous person? How many 'non-indigenous' Australians would be able to identify an Indigenous person in the street? How many 'non-Indigenous' Australians have a stereotyped image of what an Indigenous person looks like?'

'People of Aboriginal and Torres Straits descent share with 'non-indigenous' Europeans, a wide range of skin colour, shape and size, eye and hair colour, social status, wealth and educational level. We are comprised of nations. And like all cultures, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are of mixed descent.

'So *The Aborigine is Present* is my attempt, as an artist, to help dismantle the stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples in a way that is free of guilt, shame, and blame', she said.

Robyne also received endorsement for *The Aborigine is Present* from Marina Abramovic herself. In an email response she wrote:

'Your letter about the work you want to create touched me very deeply. I'm very honored to be contacted by you, an Aboriginal woman, because living with Aborigines in central Australia literally changed my life. I was living there with my partner at the time Ulay, and living with those people really changed my approach to the concept of reality and my artwork. The lived completely in the present in the real sense of the word and the entire dream time stories were not happening in the past, or future, but always happening in the here and now ... You have my blessing and support'.

Robyne's instinct about the timeliness and relevance of the performance was reinforced when she pitched the idea to the CEO of the Koorie Heritage Trust, Tom Mosby.

'For us *The Aborigine is Present* works so well with our vision, which is to show that there is a thriving contemporary Aboriginal

community living in Melbourne and regional Victoria, despite all the injustices which have happened in the past and despite the different shades of skin colour you might see in this region', he said.

The Koorie Heritage Trust, which has long been tucked away at the northern end of King Street, was at same time planning a relocation to the beating heart of Melbourne, with a piece of prime real estate earmarked for them in Federation Square.

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'Looking at our move to Federation Square, *The Aborigine is Present* is also about announcing our presence on the site', said Tom.

Robyne Latham's *The Aborigine is Present* is the first in a program of new work for the Koorie Heritage Trust, funded by the City of Melbourne's Triennial Arts Grants. The performance will take place over several weekends in July to coincide with the opening on the Koorie Heritage Trust's new gallery space and Naidoc Week – a celebration of the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Aborigine is Present will be performed in the Yarra Building, Federation Square, from 1 to 15 July.