

KAREN CASEY

LET'S SHAKE



The Koorie Heritage Trust acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Narrm, the Wurundjeri of the Kulin Nation, on whose lands we operate. We pay respect to their community, their Ancestors and their Elders, past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge Karen Casey as a Palawa woman and pay respect to the Palawa community, their Ancestors, and their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this publication contains images, names and stories of deceased persons.



CONTENTS

- 6 Introduction
- 10 Karen Casey
- 16 Let's Shake
- 22 Artwork Details

Cover: **Let's Shake** (detail)
2006–2011
plaster
Photo: Christian Capurro

Left: Karen Casey in her studio
c. 2006
Photo: Damian Smith

INTRODUCTION

Wominjeka (Welcome)

Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) is proud to present Karen Casey's *Let's Shake*, generously donated to the Koorie Heritage Trust Collection by Daniel Young in memory of his mother, internationally recognised artist and Palawa woman, Karen Casey (1956–2021).

Karen Casey was born in Nipaluna, Lutruwita (Hobart, Tasmania) and moved to Narm (Melbourne) in 1986, where she developed a career as an interdisciplinary artist that would span over 30 years.

Casey's early works boldly addressed gender, environmental and social justice issues. Later in her career, more experimental works redefined expectations of First Peoples' artistic practice and focused on nurturing empathy, understanding and connection.

Casey stated, "initially conducted in the context of Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Let's Shake* has since come to encompass the broader context of peace, trust and solidarity amongst marginalized communities and societies worldwide." (Karen Casey, *All of Us* exhibition catalogue, Blindside, Narm, 2018).

Artworks such as *Let's Shake* need to be experienced now more than ever, fostering deeper understanding through empathetic exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds.

KHT's motto is "GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI", bringing together Gunditjmara and Yorta Yorta languages. It translates to "Give me your hand my friend". KHT's logo incorporates clasped black and white hands, representing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people joining in goodwill and cooperation. The logo represents the bridging of the cultural gap and reflects our belief that through education and promotion, we can raise awareness and appreciation of the cultural diversity of Victorian First Peoples, and work towards the broader goal of reconciliation for all Australians.

Karen Casey's *Let's Shake* is an artwork of immense power and embodies this ambition, making visible the act of two people coming together to create a physical form that reminds us of our shared humanity, and of what can be achieved through solidarity, connection and empathy.

Ngoon Godjin (thank you)



Karen Casey in her studio
c. 2006
Image courtesy of Daniel Young



Let's Shake (detail)
2006–2011
plaster
Photo: Christian Capurro

KAREN CASEY

The late Karen Casey (1956–2021) was an interdisciplinary artist of Palawa and Anglo-Celtic ancestry, born in Nipaluna, Lutruwita (Hobart, Tasmania). With a career spanning more than three decades, Casey explored the intersection between the arts, science and society. Casey worked across a wide range of media in her artistic practice, including painting, printmaking, installation, video, performance art and public art. From the late 1980s, Casey exhibited widely nationally and internationally, and is represented in significant private and public collections both in Australia and overseas.

Early in her career, Casey studied fine art at the Tasmanian College of Advanced Education before taking up silversmithing and part-time graphic design. In 1986, she moved to Narm (Melbourne), where she began her arts practice in painting and printmaking, soon becoming one of the groundbreaking First Peoples artists to exhibit in Australia and overseas during the late 1980s and 1990s.

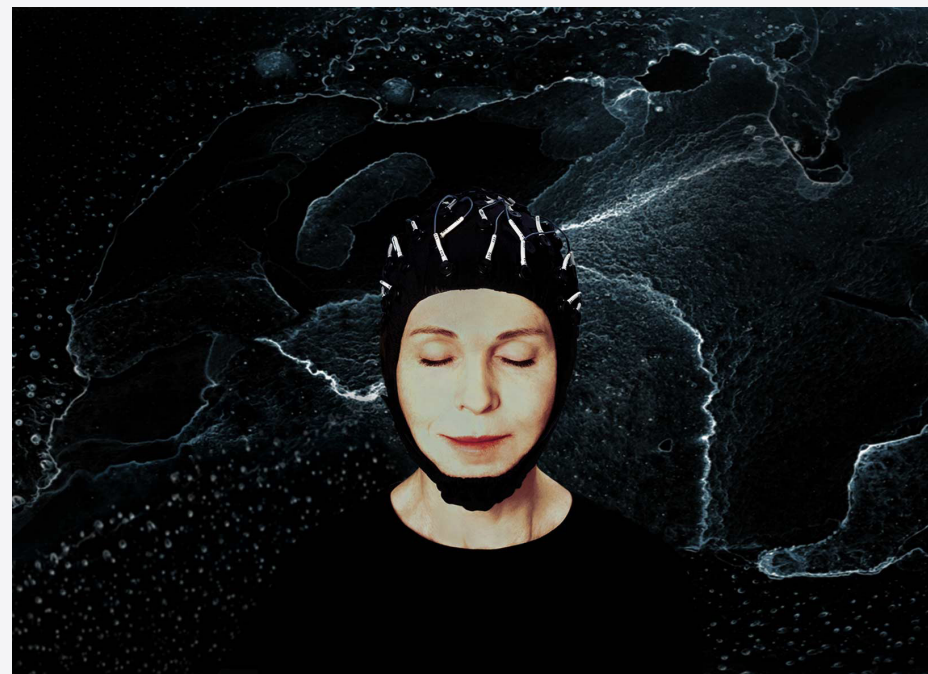
Casey valued the relationship between various cultural and spiritual traditions and aspects of contemporary western science. Casey's artistic practice is informed by an ongoing interest

in metaphysics, evident in a number of works that explore consciousness and interconnection. Casey's interest in the human mind and social interaction led to the development of various immersive and participatory projects, designed to induce altered states of mind and elicit emotional responses from audiences that relate to positivity, empathy and connection.

Casey's early figurative paintings and prints unapologetically addressed gender, environmental and social justice issues. These were often raw, confrontational and politically charged works of art. As her career developed, a more contemplative, philosophical approach emerged, resulting in works that are deeply rooted in spiritual and environmental connection and her First Peoples heritage.

In a defining moment in 1993, Casey exhibited an immersive multisensory work titled *Transformation* at the 5th *Australian Sculpture Triennial* at the National Gallery of Victoria. By the late 1990s she had moved away from painting to focus exclusively on installation and digital media.

Casey developed a reputation for pushing boundaries and



Global Mind Project
2010
Image courtesy of Daniel Young

redefining expectations and assumptions around First Peoples art, through her continual experimentation and innovation, drawing on a range of technologies, techniques, and both digital and analogue formats to create complex multisensory works of art.

In 1999, Casey's artwork *Dreaming Chamber* was presented in the 3rd *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* at Queensland Art Gallery. This work exemplifies Casey's development of an artistic approach that favours multisensory experience

over the purely visual. In *Dreaming Chamber*, Casey invited her audience to go on a transformative journey – a journey of the spirit rather than mind – embracing sound, lighting, projection, sand, water and smell, along with other visual and sculptural elements.

From the late 1990s, Casey also started to produce public artworks, as both a commissioned artist and collaborative consultant working with architects, urban planners and developers, on both corporate and civic projects.



Wadaloada Dreaming
2017
video still

From 2001, following her involvement in the design of Reconciliation Place, Ngambri (Canberra), Casey worked on various public art projects promoting reconciliation and First Peoples' culture – including the ongoing public participation event *Let's Shake* (2006–2011), initially conceived for reconciliation and later as a gesture towards peace and solidarity.

In 2003, Casey was appointed artist in Residence for the City of Melbourne, working with the Urban Design branch, while also completing a Masters degree in Public Art at RMIT University, Narm.

At this time, Casey also completed a major commission titled *Heartland* (2003), a

permanent three-story art installation in Docklands, Narm. The artwork consists of a 15 metre (height) photographic print with a programmed rear projected lighting sequence. *Heartland* was developed from an original fabric relief print taken from the ground at Docklands, using natural ochres from the surrounding area – Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, Bunurong and Boon Wurrung Country.

Collaboration is a key aspect of Casey's artistic practice and throughout her career, Casey worked with a variety of artists and non-art professionals from diverse fields and disciplines. In 2004, Casey initiated a research project with the Brain Science Institute at Swinburne University, Narm and embarked on an

ambitious ongoing project with computer software designer Harry Sokol, to develop an interactive interface for creating art generated from brainwaves.

Casey was the instigator and artistic director of Global Mind Project an arts/neuroscience initiative, launched in 2010 with a public performance event under the title *Spectacle of the Mind* at Federation Square, Narm. As an ongoing project, Global Mind Project has resulted in various exhibition, performance and research outcomes, including the 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art (2011), Istanbul, Turkey; *National New Media Art Award 2012*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Meanjin; and in 2014, she was invited to present at the Open Innovations Forum, Moscow, Russia.

In 2021, KHT formed a renewed connection with Karen Casey, through the exhibition *Seen and Unseen: Expressions of Koorie Identity*, a group exhibition that honoured groundbreaking First Peoples women artists of the 1990s. Casey was approached to loan a digital video work titled *Wadaloada Dreaming* (2017) for the exhibition and generously offered her large painting *Temporal Tracing* (2000) for inclusion. During the process of planning the exhibition, KHT developed a closer relationship with Casey and her son Daniel Young.

Throughout her artistic career of over thirty years, Casey has participated in numerous residencies, workshops, symposiums and conferences in Australia and overseas. She has also contributed to government arts strategies, arts curriculum development and held various positions on peer review panels. In 2008, Casey took part in the Australia 2020 Summit at Parliament House, Ngambri; in 2012, she was shortlisted as a finalist for the National New Media Art Award at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Meanjin; and in 2014, she was invited to present at the Open Innovations Forum, Moscow, Russia.

Casey's works have been included in major publications and exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Her artworks are held in all state art collections within Australia, the National Gallery of Australia collection, and numerous public and private art collections, both in Australia and overseas.



Installation view
Contact/Converse
2008
Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia,
Fed Square, Narm
Image courtesy of Daniel Young

LET'S SHAKE

Presented for the first time at Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT), Karen Casey's *Let's Shake* (2006-2011) is an installation of over 200 plaster casts (from a total of 476 plaster casts) representing the tangible residue of an ongoing series of public participatory events titled *Let's Shake*, conducted by the artist between 2006 – 2011.

Casey described these gatherings as “public art connection and communication events” during which participants of different cultural backgrounds and ages came together in a shared experience. During the gatherings, participants were asked to sit opposite each other and shake hands while holding wet plaster, making conversation until it solidified enough to be removed as a solid form. The cast objects forever carrying the unique marks of the two individuals and the energy of their encounter.

Casey conceived of the idea for *Let's Shake* in 2006, during the development of *Reconciliation Touchstone* (2007), a public artwork made in collaboration with sculptor Darryl Cowie, commissioned by the University of Adelaide. In the process of creating the sculpture, handshake castings were made by 120 participants during a public

event titled *Handshake Ceremony*, which was held in the university grounds as part of Reconciliation Week. These castings were later compiled and used to form the mould for the cast granite sculpture, unveiled at the university in 2007.

Casey continued to conduct handshake events until 2011, including as part of NAIDOC Week celebrations, Sorry Day, Reconciliation Week and St Kilda Festival. Casey collected handshake plaster casts from these participatory events, to be used for various installations under different titles and in a range of unique gallery and site-specific contexts.

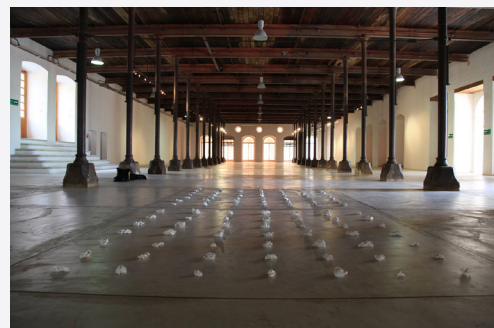
In 2008, the work was exhibited under the title *Contact/Converse* at the Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia at Fed Square, Narm.



Reconciliation Touchstone
2007
University of Adelaide
Photo: Sam Roberts



Installation view **Contact/Converse**
2008
Ian Potter Centre, NGV Australia, Fed Square, Narm
Image courtesy of Daniel Young



Installation view **Let's Shake**
2011
Oaxaca, Mexico
Photo: Damian Smith

The installation was comprised of approximately 290 plaster casts, installed in diagonal rows on a large square plinth.

In 2011, Casey presented the work in Oaxaca, Mexico, as an installation of 98 plaster casts presented on the concrete floor in an evenly spaced grided

rectangle (7 plaster casts wide by 14 plaster casts deep). In the same year, Casey also exhibited the work at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Aotearoa.

In 2018, Casey exhibited the work under the title *Let's Shake* in the group exhibition *All of Us* at Blindside, Narm. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Casey recalled;

“It was interesting to observe people’s responses and how they embraced the 20 minutes long casting process. What I had assumed would be a potentially awkward and uncomfortable situation proved quite the opposite. Initially people connected through the feel of wet plaster in their hands, so the encounter became less about the handshake rather than the space in between. A bonding occurred at a subtle level as their conversation and connection unfolded and the plaster warmed and firmed between their hands. People seemed to genuinely connect with each other, some on a deep personal level and the resulting object represented a tangible physical manifestation of a moment shared. The energy from each person’s hand, the connection, had been absorbed in that moment so it became much more than just an object.”

There is a kind of sacredness to these unique shell-like forms marked by the individual handprints that captured those intimate exchanges.

Initially conducted in the context of Aboriginal Reconciliation, 'Let's Shake' has since come to encompass the broader context of peace, trust and solidarity amongst marginalized communities and societies worldwide." (Karen Casey, 2018).

Casey sadly passed in October 2021 and, in 2022, the work was presented under the title *Reconcile* at the Lorne Sculpture Biennale, Victoria, as a small installation in memory of the artist. Following this presentation of the work, Daniel Young, Casey's son approached the KHT in 2022, offering to donate the work in its entirety (476 plaster casts) to the Koorie Heritage Trust Collection. When offering the donation, Young stated;

"Karen's dedication to the concept and meaning behind 'Let's Shake' is testament [to] the fact that it was the final project she was working on before her passing in 2021. 'The Campfire' was to be a handshake event and exhibition as part of the Lorne Sculpture Biennale 2022. With Karen planning on tackling the complexities of the pandemic and

social distancing by trying to engineer a COVID safe way to participate in the handshake event. It was very import to her to try and encourage people to explore our similarities more than the differences, through conversation. The works that remain and have been donated to the Trust have significance as they have been created by many people, in many places all with the same goal – to reach out and try and bridge the gap for reconciliation."

Presented at KHT for the first time in 2024, *Let's Shake* is exhibited as a unique installation tracing the perimeter of the gallery, creating an immersive space surrounded by a linear horizon line of over 200 unique plaster casts. This visible horizon line echoes the notion of an intangible space in-between, which Casey made visible by facilitating the creation of each plaster cast. Collectively, the work embodies the memory of human exchange, momentary interaction and the continuing legacy of the artist, who embraced *Let's Shake* as a platform to advocate for peace, trust and solidarity.



Let's Shake casting event
2006–2011
Image courtesy of Daniel Young



Let's Shake (detail)
2006–2011
plaster
Photo: Christian Capurro

ARTWORK DETAILS

Karen Casey

Palawa

Let's Shake

2006–2011

plaster

installation dimensions variable

476 parts, 12 x 9 x 4 cm (approx. each)

Collection of Koorie Heritage Trust

Donated by Daniel Young in memory of Karen Casey

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