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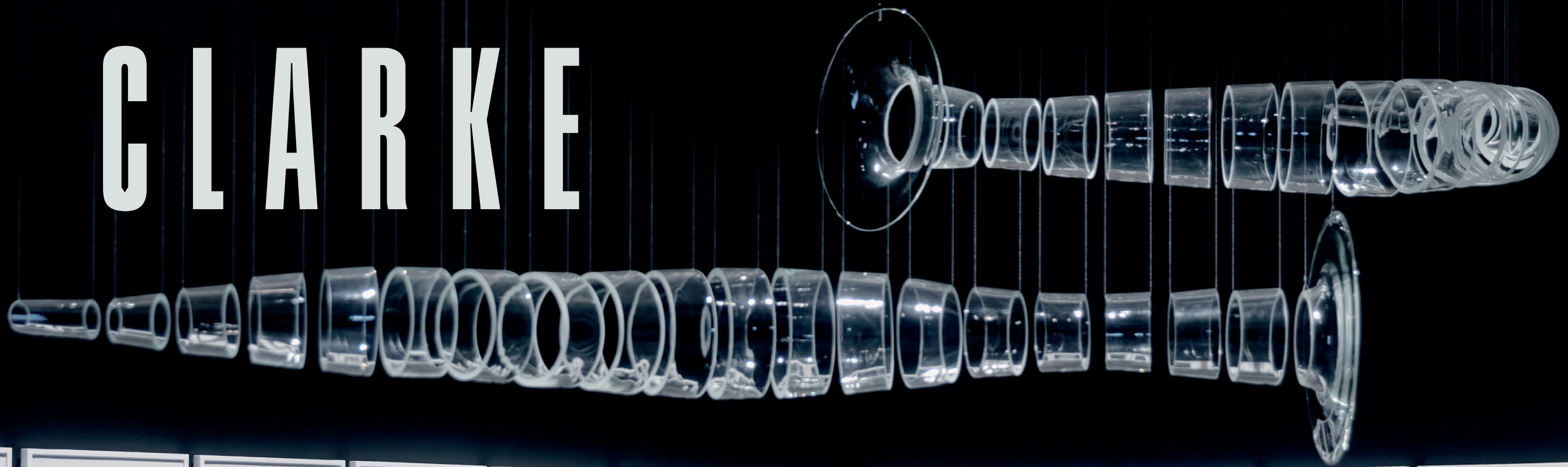
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MAREE CLARKE



REMEMBER ME

VAULT explores the work of Maree Clarke, whose major solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria is the first by a living Aboriginal artist with ancestral ties to the Country on which the Gallery stands.

FEATURE *by* JESSICA CLARK

"Maree is the favourite aunty we all wish we had. She is generous, funny and warm; her home is welcoming, with her four-legged babies barking; and there is always a good story to be shared. She is also an outspoken rebel who only wears black and will stand up for what she knows is right."¹

Maree Clarke is a proud Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti, Wemba Wemba and BoonWurrung woman with an artistic and curatorial practice spanning over three decades. She is also one of the most dedicated, passionate and generous people I know, a dear friend, Aunty and mentor.

Her major retrospective exhibition *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories* has recently opened at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and surveys Clarke's creative output to date, "documenting her life and legacy as told through her art."² The exhibition, curated by Myles Russell-Cook, also marks the first solo exhibition by a living Aboriginal artist with ancestral ties to Naarm (Melbourne) presented at the NGV.

"I just love it when my work moves people to tears, including myself. It hadn't happened like that before ... It was just so incredible seeing the exhibition for the first time and going in with my family was so very special too – like me, they got quite emotional."

"[It was really special] seeing my documentary photography from the 1990s at that scale – you can see my mum and brother on the left side as you walk in, and my family opposite in *Ritual and Ceremony* (2012) – and to see the progression of work like my jewellery, from the early pieces I made in the 1980s right up to the 3D-printed 18kt kangaroo tooth and echidna quill necklaces created in 2019."

Clarke's brother Peter introduced her to artmaking. She remembers how "he used to cut out beautiful timber shapes and paint them to make earrings and brooches and taught me. My smallest brush had two or three hairs, that's how fine my work was."

After working as an Aboriginal educator in Mildura for nine and a half years, and establishing a professional jewellery-making practice, in 1987 Maree set up a retail shop through the Mildura Aboriginal Corporation to support local and interstate Aboriginal artists. She also started taking up a range of opportunities in Naarm.

"I went from painting miniatures to painting the first green and gold tram advertising the Koorie Heritage Trust in 1988 with my sister Karen and brother Peter. After that tram I went straight back to Mildura, packed up my flat and moved down here. From there I painted



Page 62–63, and 64–65
All images
Installation view of
*Maree Clarke:
Ancestral Memories*
at The Ian Potter Centre:
NGV Australia, Melbourne
Photo: Tom Ross



All images
Installation view of
Maree Clarke:
Ancestral Memories
at The Ian Potter Centre:
NGV Australia, Melbourne
Photo: Tom Ross

a 12-metre billboard, started getting into public art commissions and training in photography, and I've been working as an artist and curator ever since."

In addition to a growing art and cultural practice, in the mid-1990s Clarke started a new role as the first Koorie Art Officer at the City of Port Phillip. While there she established a Koorie Arts Unit and, together with Kimba Thompson and Len Tregonning, initiated *We Iri We Homeborn* (1996) – a state-wide arts festival featuring five exhibitions that marked "the largest ever concurrently running series of exhibitions of Aboriginal Art."³

"In the lead-up, myself and Jackie Geia travelled around the state giving artists materials like canvases and paint brushes, and encouraging them to create. Kimba, Len and I then hired a three-ton truck and drove to every Aboriginal community throughout Victoria to collect artwork for the exhibitions – they were just brilliant, and every opening was packed."

Working with community has underpinned Clarke's practice from the very beginning. Her continuous drive for sharing cultural knowledge and creative processes – with family and friends, but also anyone willing to lend a hand – has ensured a community-centred

and collaboratively-driven practice, pivotal to the reclamation and regeneration of southeast Aboriginal culture.

"I think it's really important to involve family and share knowledge and experiences in the hope that one of them will pick it up and run with it. I love that I am sharing this space with my family through my art and cultural practices. In bringing my works together, the retrospective exhibition is honouring all my family, community and collaborators too, everyone involved in the making and creating."

"One of my most proud moments would have to be the *Ritual and Ceremony* series (2012) – working with those 84 Aboriginal people, taking their portraits and documenting their stories of loss, sorrow and mourning. When making the kopi caps, you could see the transformation in their faces ... But also, the state-wide collaborative possum skin cloak project for the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games. To be able to take designs to community from their own Country, give them back this practice that hadn't been happening in community for many years, was so exciting! Now, community in Victoria are making and using cloaks for baby naming days, funerals, ceremony, a whole range of things. It's embedded in life again."

Clarke's extensive exhibition history has taken her to many places – artist residencies and cultural exchanges from Shepparton to Canberra, Havana to Brooklyn, Prato to London, to name just a few. "I've travelled overseas quite a bit," she notes, "so I have this amazing international network."

"I think one of the most incredible international projects would have to be *Wrapped in Culture* (2017-22), which started when Len Tregonning and I met Rosalie Favell – a First Nations artist from Canada – at a possum skin cloak workshop we were running for Wyndham City Council. Rosalie came and experienced the workshop and wanted us to go to Canada and recreate something similar. Unfortunately Len passed away, but I ended up taking my niece, nephew and Vicki West with me to Canada. We worked with First Nations artists over there, teaching possum skin cloak making and working on a buffalo skin robe. The whole cultural exchange was brilliant, we visited communities in Ottawa, shared the cloak and the robe at different community events, and then they were exhibited together with photographs of us all wrapped in them at the Ottawa Art Gallery. *Wrapped in Culture* has since travelled around Canada and now to Australia – it opened

"I HAVE ALWAYS PHOTOGRAPHED EVERYTHING I DO, THE PROCESS FOR ANY ARTWORK THAT I'M MAKING. THE ARCHIVE WILL BE A REPOSITORY THAT COMMUNITY CAN ACCESS AND LEARN FROM, WHICH IS JUST BRILLIANT FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION. IT'S ALL ABOUT GIVING BACK."



in Launceston earlier this year and right now it's at Footscray Community Art Centre waiting out lockdown."

If not for the global pandemic, Clarke would have been in Tokyo celebrating the opening of *Reversible Destiny* at the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum – a major international photographic exhibition featuring a cross-section of her work from 2011 to 2020.

"It feels great to be part of this exhibition around time, space and place. My photo-based works from four different series were all created in different times and places. I remember when shooting *Long Journey Home* (2018) with my nieces and nephews at Altona Beach, a woman walking her dog came around the corner and gasped, "OMG! I thought I had stepped back in time!" I had painted my family with white ochre in the carpark and the boys carried the canoe we had made down to the water. It really did look like they had literally just pulled up on the shoreline in another time and place."

Despite the continuing lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, Clarke's live-in studio in Yarraville is as busy as ever. "If there was ever only one thing, I would get totally bored really easily ... Right now, I'm making new work for Tarnanthi and the Lorne Sculpture Biennale, I'm collaborating with Blanche Tilden on a new jewellery collection for Radiant Pavilion, curating an augmented reality exhibition for Open Land Museum, working on three public art commissions with Broached Commissions and developing five public art commissions for Melbourne Metro."

"I'm also working with the University of Melbourne on *The Living Archive of Aboriginal Collections* project. Over the years I have created this incredible archive of 1000s of photos! It includes all my documentary photography from when I started out photographing NAIDOC marches, community events and landscapes. We'd also go down to the Aborigines Advancement League and photograph the Elder's lunches. I have always photographed everything I do, the process for any artwork that I'm making. The archive will be a repository that community can access and learn from, which is just brilliant for the younger generation. It's all about giving back."

In reflecting on her 35 years of practice and the current retrospective, Clarke says: "I've been pretty lucky in the opportunities that have come before me and steered me in the right direction. I've had a really good time over the years and it's still going – there are still so many roads to travel, stories to tell and experiences to have. I have always had the biggest dreams and I've been following them from the start. I love what I do and wouldn't swap it for anything." **V**

Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories is at the National Gallery of Victoria until February 6, 2022.

ngv.vic.gov.au

Maree Clarke is represented by Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne. vivienandersongallery.com

Jessica Clark (palawa AU) is an independent curator and current PhD candidate at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

1. Hannah Presley, "Art and Family" in *Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories*, edited by Myles Russell-Cook (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2021), 115.
2. National Gallery of Victoria, "Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories," 2021.
3. City of Port Phillip, "We Iri We Homeborn," edited by Maree Clarke (Melbourne, 1996), 1.

Top to bottom
Maree Clarke, artist
and designer working
in her studio
Photo: Julian Kingmar



Portrait of Maree
Clarke, artist and
designer in her studio
Photo: Julian Kingma

