

which focused on representing Aboriginal people and she said that there was a tendency to see Aboriginal people as smudges and shadows as if they were part of the landscape itself. I am not so sure I agree with her. In the past Durack painted portraits of Aboriginal people she had known from her life, growing up alongside them in the Kimberley region. At the time, portraying Aboriginal people as individuals was not a popular or particularly marketable concept and it could be argued that Durack "suffered" as an artist because of her subject matter.

Marcus also mentioned another interpretation of Durack's motives which suggested she may have had a significant relationship with an Aboriginal man and the creation of Eddie somehow speaks of that which she cannot otherwise acknowledge. In questions afterwards, art writer Susan McCulloch queries whether Marcus had spoken to Durack. She had not. McCulloch has, extensively, and also to Aboriginal people in the Kimberley.

I am intrigued not so much by Eddie's art as by the whole creation of the persona of Eddie Burrup whose biography grew more and more elaborate and particularised as the projection grew. It seems to serve a deep need of Durack's to become Aboriginal, and interestingly, not an Aboriginal woman but an Aboriginal man.

Watch for further instalments in this riveting story as Durack herself speaks in various panel discussions on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I long for a psychoanalytic reading of the case. There's more than meets the eye and I suspect that art is not really what is at stake here.

## Never a borrower or a lender be

*Suzanne Spinner*

### *From Appreciation to Appropriation*

Flinders University Art Museum  
City Gallery, March 6

*From Appreciation to Appropriation—Indigenous influences and images in Australian Art* curated by Christine Nicholls is a valuable insertion in the visual arts program which focuses on contemporary Aboriginal art. Its title is deceptively benign as it acknowledges that appropriation is often the end result of appreciation. Artists, as Nicholls said in her floor talk on Monday, have always reserved the right to smash and grab; to be open to influences from other cultures and the 20th century has been a happy hunting ground for artists from Picasso and Matisse to Cezanne who liked nothing more than foraging in other cultures. The real issue ultimately comes down to power as the traffic is usually one way, with artists from the dominant culture appreciating, then borrowing/taking, incorporating and reworking imagery from Indigenous and often marginalised art cultures.

The exhibition includes works by Margaret Preston an artist whose appreciation of Aboriginal art in the 1940s was not questioned, her motives less sullied. She studied Aboriginal art in museums in Sydney and then made a number of trips to the Northern Territory to see it for herself. She began from a position of arguing that Aboriginal art had intrinsic aesthetic merit even if you did not understand what it was all about. Later, after more study and travel, she argued that the meaning needed to be appreciated as well. She was looking for

a position from which Australian art could be both invigorated and made truly national, particular and unique, and exhorted her generation "to be Aboriginal." As Nicholls says, Preston was really onto something—seeing the future of Australian art as Aboriginal—and yet for all her forward thinking she also missed the point. Preston did not contemplate the notion that 'Aboriginal' Australian art would be made by Aboriginal artists, and in that she was the victim of her historical epoch where many thoughtful people believed Aboriginal culture was in its death throes.

Jump forward 50 years to the current epoch and you find the extraordinary situation of Eddie Burrup aka Elizabeth Durack, a white Australian artist, daughter of a pastoral dynasty, someone at the centre of the dominant culture, who has taken Preston's exhortation literally and "become" Aboriginal. The Durack case is as fascinating as it is bizarre and from Preston's standpoint, would have been not just unimaginable, but perverse. For Preston, there would have been everything to lose—power, status, credibility and, of course, her market—whereas for Durack the decision to become Eddie has an acknowledged element of self-interest. Her art dealer daughter suggested to Durack that had a new series of paintings been done by an Aboriginal artist, they would certainly sell and be popular. Durack's daughter thought they "looked" Aboriginal and she knew how to market Aboriginal art whereas strange atypical work from an older white woman artist with a fading reputation was much more difficult to position in the market these days.

I don't think these Durack/Burrup works look particularly Aboriginal or particularly like earlier Durack work—what is intriguing is why she did it. There are so many layers of explanations and rationales. At Monday's seminar, Professor Julie Marcus offered her explanation arguing that contrary to Durack's later stated intentions, this was not an act of reconciliation but rather an act of stealing the only real power Aboriginal art has: its spiritual value which is the source of its considerable marketability. Marcus alluded to Durack's earlier work

## Eddie lives

Suzanne Spinner

*From Appreciation to Appropriation*

Flinders University Art Museum  
City Gallery, March 5 - April 16

The curator of *From Appreciation to Appropriation—Indigenous influences and images in Australian visual art*, Christine Nichols, states that the clear intention of this exhibition is “educational” and, to that express end, 6 floor talks and panel discussions were programmed. I attended 4 of these at which Elizabeth Durack was to be present to tell her side of the Eddie Burrup story. However, Durack only made herself available for the final panel session.

However, as the week progressed terms were teased out, queried and re-defined. Lester Irabinna Rigney, an Indigenous academic, called the term “Indigenous art” scandalous. “Indigenous knowledge” should be used, she said, when referring to the politics of exhibiting other people’s cultures. Doreen Mellor, the curator who was gulled by the Burrup fiction, said that the issue is about professional relationships and trust, and that it is broken when a bona fide gallery, the Durack Gallery, provides false information about an artist they represent. Mellor described the affair as a “private obsession or even neurosis” which then crossed over into the public domain. Later, Mellor took issue with Professor Julie Marcus’ comments from an earlier panel. Mellor argued that the issue is less about power and more about mutual respect, more to do with the lack of an actual exchange, a question of ethics rather than of power.

At the final session, the tension was palpable—Elizabeth Durack and Perpetua Clancy sitting next to the Chair, Professor Gus Worby, and flanked on

each side by Indigenous curators and artists. Clancy was critical of what she had been listening to during the week, arguing that the focus had been on the persona of Eddie Burrup and the person of Elizabeth Durack rather than on the paintings. She also contended that the exhibition and talks program had not been “educational”, because they had been “one-sided.” Clancy said their whole aim in entering Eddie Burrup in Aboriginal art exhibitions and competitions (at Tandanya and in the National Aboriginal Art Award) had been to “get the work noticed on its own merits.” She said the art of Eddie Burrup had been “applauded and hailed as the work of genius”, whereas the work of Elizabeth Durack had been “vilified.” In her conclusion, she referred to “I myself, as the son of Eddie Burrup”, which left us all gob-smacked at her audacity. The fiction expands, it does not retreat.

While Indigenous and many non-Indigenous speakers began their addresses by acknowledging and thanking the custodians of the land we were on, Elizabeth Durack began in a strange way by speaking about how delighted she was to be in Adelaide and praised its charms as a city and a place where there was “a special relationship between the races.” Durack talked about her life in the Kimberley more than 50 years ago and concluded saying she “been in this game for so long” that she had “no intention of defending (her) life work—let it stand.” Later on in discussion she made it clear that she had no intention to stop painting as Eddie Burrup. It’s Eddie or nothing—“even to myself there are elements of mystery in the creation of Eddie Burrup.” Durack speaks as if she is possessed by Burrup, as if there is no conscious choice involved. Both she and Clancy claimed theirs was “a bold, audacious act done without a lot of thought.” There must have been a “lot of thought” forced on them since, but they have not resiled from the original, impetuous impulse. Durack made it clear that she is completely mystified by the notion of asking permission. It would have seemed to her “like asking for the right to walk into your own home.” She persists in portraying her decision to become Eddie Burrup as simply the act of an artist taking on a nom de plume.

Christine Nichols responded to the Durack charge of “one-sidedness”, saying

that not only had there been the programmed appearances of the artist in the panel discussions, but also that Durack was the only artist in the show whose voice was heard in the gallery, in an extensive Film Australia interview which was playing on video.

The real question was posed by Djon Mundine when he asked why it was necessary to pretend to be an Aboriginal person if (as the Duracks contended) the work was so good? She replied that it was not easy to explain but that, in short, “I can no longer paint or draw as Elizabeth Durack.” She spoke of “looking for a way to get him out. It’s not easy to get Eddie out.” When she was further questioned by Duncan Kentish about why she had chosen a male persona and why her daughter calls herself Eddie’s son, Durack responded that “androgyny is so much a part of Aboriginal mythology”—an interesting deflection in itself.

So the story goes on. Elizabeth Durack has been unmasked but Eddie Burrup will continue painting. I wonder who buys ‘his’ work?