

**The Opening of *Tarnanthi***  
**Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait**  
**Islander Art**  
**Remarks by PJ Keating**  
**Art Gallery of South Australia**  
**8 October 2015**

- When, as Treasurer, I first put an image of an Aboriginal man on the \$2 coin, I was trying to do something.
- I was encouraging the Australian people to begin taking account of Aboriginality. And not just taking account of it, comprehending it
  - that Aboriginal culture and images of Aboriginal Australia were central to informing the broader Australian narrative as to who we are as a people
  - that our own ‘people-ness’ had necessarily to include the resonances of Aboriginal Australia – for without this – we could never be truly integral to this land.
- We had seized the land so violently and dispossessed its inhabitants so shamelessly – that our only way back – back to being at one and at peace with ourselves, was to identify more with Aboriginal Australia, while atoning for our opportunist and brutal behaviour
  - to strive for a genuine reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians but one which took aboard their view of the country they had lived in for so long

- where gradually we could have a blending of our two very different cultures and where gradually, a true and truly composite Australian identity would emerge
- an identity – both black and white communities could identify with.

All this meant traversing old ground – indeed bad ground – but I thought we could make a start with that element so central to Aboriginal culture – the land.

We had taken and appropriated much of the land and alienated the nature of it to make it unrecognisable to Aboriginal people.

- but we had not taken all of it – particularly large parts of it, where people maintained a traditional life.

The Native Title Act, on which I spent a large proportion of my period as Prime Minister - enshrines in the law of the land – the notion of Aboriginality, not only in its ownership but in lifting the relevance of culture and the virtue of customary tradition.

- the relationship between Aboriginal people and the landscape, the birds and the animals and of their storytelling.
- their songs and their dances.

And of course, with these things, Aboriginal art – the imagination's reflection of it all.

Aboriginal art and the land are essential each to the other and are inseparable.

This has produced the greatest and longest collective memory of any continuous culture and is still largely uncompromised.

So there has been movement. Some real movement and as people here know, over time, the Native Title Act will return well over half the continent to its rightful owners.

Aboriginal art and its expression will be important in this. It is already important.

Contemporary Aboriginal art still carries sacred messages through its symbols and materials – still managing to hold its secrets while speaking to a broader audience.

My great hope is that over the next half century or so, Aboriginal art will become so integral and so central to Australian art and representation – that it will require no separate showing.

Indeed, in a society like this, even to be known as an Aboriginal artist is to be positioned, to be pigeon-holed.

Even this important exhibition – *Tarnanthi* – positions itself as quintessentially Aboriginal.

- thus perpetuating the void between the anthropological ‘us’ and ‘them’ – that is, the rest of them.
- within a form of community bonding the white artist is simply never subject to.

And there is another force at play.

- contemporary Aboriginal art is pinned by its commercialism
- the need of most of it to be inherently commercial - to fund community income and community service obligations.
- denied the right, first to breathe and expand and grow in its own terms – in public galleries or specialised collections – it is pushed straight out to earn a dollar.
- while white artists are supported by all those non-commercial things, after which, by choice, they can sell into a kind of ‘afterglow’.

Aboriginal art centres have given much to Australia in bringing forth this cornucopia of the Aboriginal imagination, but much has been asked of them too.

Nevertheless, this exhibition, *Tarnanthi*, does something else.

- it puts 300 works side by side
- urban indigenous artists and community artists shown together
- the first time this conversation has been had – urban vs community
- where urban artists tell contemporary dreaming stories in the context of works from places replete with the old knowledge.
- the Festival is a great thing.

And shown not only in the Art Gallery of South Australia – but across venues. Multiple mediums across multiple venues.

I applaud the fact that the Premier and the Government of South Australia, along with BHP and the Art Gallery of South Australia have supported and have underwritten this festival.

Aboriginal art has, since the 1970s, been a conduit, a medium, first of curiosity, then of a greater understanding of the aboriginal people.

It has been a method of translating an entire culture and of understanding an entire continent and has been a major influence in obliging Australians to come to terms with the question of who and what we are.

Contemporary Aboriginal art moves us further along that road – both describing while revealing the journey.