Review of the NGV's *She-Oak and Sunlight:*
Australian Impressionism and its exploration of 'A Longer History' - First Nations histories and art

She-Oak and Sunlight: Australian Impressionism was an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria Australia (hereafter NGV), 2 April – 22 August 2021. The exhibition, guest curated by Dr Anne Gray AM and the NGV Australian Art Department, brought together over 250 artworks. While the exhibition highlights the work of Australia's most eminent Impressionists, it provides a critical lens to the centring of this work in national mythology, highlighting the work of previously underrepresented painters, including female and First Nations artists.

The Impressionists, otherwise known as the Heidelberg School, are often considered 'Australia's first school of art'.[1] This is due to 'the stylistic innovation associated' with the movement, and the Impressionists ability to accurately capture the Australian landscape on the canvas, unlike previous colonial artists of the European schools. However, the title of 'Australia's first school of art' is a fabrication. Instead, the Impressionists are but one phase in a much longer Australian art history, that stretches back tens of thousands of years with First Nations artists. 'A Longer History' is a themed section within the exhibition that displayed five artworks – paintings and drawings by Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung artist, Elder, and *Ngurungaeta* (leader) William Barak (c.1824-1903), from the NGV's collection. Of Barak's works exhibited, were *Ceremony with rainbow serpent* (c.1880s); *Untitled (Ceremony)* (1900); *Group hunting animals* (c.1890s); *Ceremony* (1898) (fig. 1); and *Figures in possum skin cloaks* (1898). Barak produced these works from the 1880s until the 1900s, at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve (1863-1924) near Healesville, east of Melbourne.

Barak's presence within the exhibition combats the idea that the Impressionists were 'Australia's first school of art', facilitating a discussion around the traditional mindset regarding Australian art history. The viewer is poised to reconsider conventional conceptions of Australian art, viewing the Impressionists as a recent addition to a rich and extensive history of Australian First Nations art. The exhibition also highlights that the Australian Impressionists were not working within a vacuum, but instead contemporaneously with First Nations artists, such as Barak. This notion is exemplified by the presence of a portrait of Barak at the beginning of the exhibition by Artur Loureiro, *King Barak, last of the Yarra tribe* (1900). This feature is part of a saloon-style display of portraits of the various artists whose works featured within the exhibition, entitled 'Friends and Rivals: Portraits of the Australian Impressionists'.

[1] National Gallery of Victoria, *A Longer History*, 2021. Information card. NGV Australia.

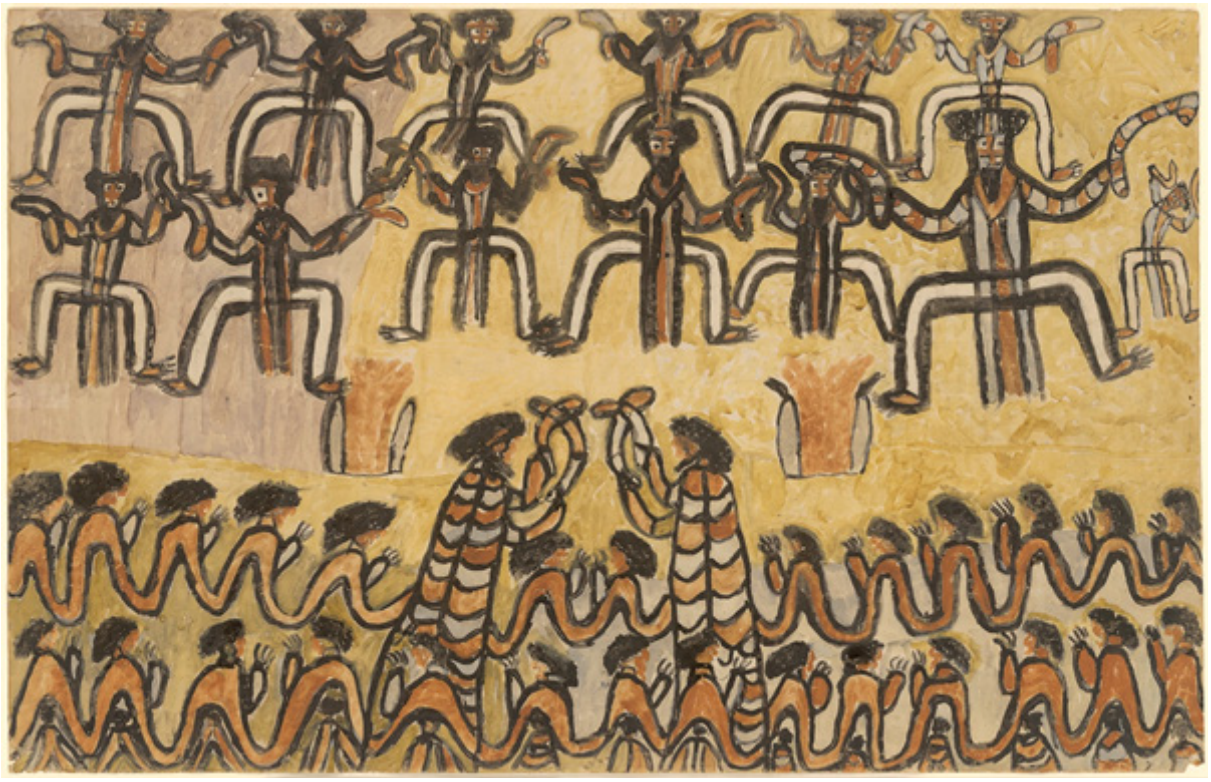

Figure 1. William Barak, *Ceremony* 1898, pencil, wash, ground wash, charcoal solution, gouache and earth pigments on paper, 57.0 x 88.8cm (image and sheet), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased 1962. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Barak's artworks within the exhibition hang opposite some of the most iconic Impressionist works, the great Heidelberg School narrative paintings, such as Frederick McCubbin's triptych *The pioneer* (1904) (fig. 2), and Tom Roberts' *Shearing the rams* (1890) (fig. 3). These works loom large in the national imagination, entering the national psyche in the late nineteenth century and becoming key visual iconography of Australian identity and narrative. *The pioneer* is a significant work contributing to traditional outlooks of the Australian settler mythology of *terra nullius*, where European colonists came to an untouched empty landscape, which they 'tamed', settled, and cultivated. First Nations peoples are conspicuously absent from Impressionist paintings and the narratives they project. Much of the visual iconography supplied by the Impressionists contributed to the absence of First Nations peoples in national histories, a deliberate omittance, what the anthropologist William Stanner labelled in 1968 as 'The Great Australian Silence'. Stanner described this silence as 'a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape', that became 'a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale'.[2]

McCubbin's three panelled work, *The pioneer*, painted at Mount Macedon on Woi Wurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung Country, is a parallel to Stanner's 'window', that is 'carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape.' Additionally, with Robert's *Shearing of the rams*, shifting the picture frame would reveal a scene illustrating the huge presence of First Nations peoples in the nineteenth century pastoral industry. Within the exhibition, Barak's works are juxtaposed with those of McCubbin and Roberts, speaking out against the selective imagery and silencing that Australian Impressionism has imposed on Australian history. When viewing these works together, observing

[2] W.E.H Stanner, *The Dreaming & Other Essays* (Black Inc. Agenda: Melbourne, 2009), 189.

this dialogue unfold, we can almost hear the noise and sounds of a *ngargee* (corroboree) - that Barak's *Ceremony* works depict, drowning the oppressive silence that the Impressionists impose. By pairing these works together, the curators project a more accurate image of Australian history, addressing both sides of the colonial frontier, and speaking to the Australian landscape's multivocality.

Figure 2. Frederick McCubbin, *The pioneer* 1904, oil on canvas, 225.0 x 295.7cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1906. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Figure 3. Tom Roberts, *Shearing the rams* 1890, oil on canvas on composition board, 122.4 × 183.3 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1932. Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

The multivocality of the Australian landscape is further explored within the exhibition. The idea of landscape and place is an important theme within *She-Oak and Sunlight*, expressed by grouping many of the paintings together based on where they were painted, such as the works produced at Melbourne's artist camps of Box Hill and Mentone. Throughout the exhibition, the artwork labels list where the artwork was produced, and whose Country it was produced on, e.g., 'Wurundjeri Country', for the Box Hill artworks, 'Boon Wurrung Country' for Mentone, and 'Gadigal Country' for the Sydney works. The NGV, in this act of decolonisation, acknowledges the multivocality of the Australian landscape, and that contemporary Australia resides on the continental patchwork of the unceded lands of First Nations peoples.

The NGV, in its powerful exhibition on Australian Impressionism, reinforces the role galleries and museums can play in facilitating discussion and reflection on Australian history and national identity.

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Biographical details:

Jack Norris, is an archaeologist and historian whose research interests are multidisciplinary and include archaeology, anthropology, history, art history, as well as material culture and museum studies. He recently completed his Masters in Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology at Lincoln College, the University of Oxford. His Masters research examined Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung cultural material in Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum.