Dale Harding, his legacy to the Colony; their ongoing privilege, 2015, mixed-media installation, 100 x 140 x 40cm; image courtesy the artist

Carol McGregor, journey cloak, 2012, acrylics and natural fibre on recycled boards, 250 x 450 x 3cm; image courtesy the artist
To the fore: The growing legacy of QCA’s Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art

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When we look at them we recognise something of ourselves, and when they look to us they recognise something of themselves.¹

The opening quote is how Vernon Ah Kee articulates the relationship between his colleagues in the Indigenous artists collective proppaNOW and the students of the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (BoCAIA) at the Queensland College of Art (QCA) in Brisbane. There are few visual arts degrees in Australia that can claim to have nurtured such a strong relationship between students and practising artist who are at the pinnacle of their careers. Since its inception in 1994, this course has consistently nurtured compelling practices, including well-known names such as Ah Kee, Tony Albert and Megan Cope, and those soon to be known: Robert Andrew, Dale Harding, Carol McGregor and Ryan Presley.

Founding coordinator Jennifer Herd recalls her early meeting with Marshall Bell, Richard Bell and Michael Eather about establishing a course for Indigenous art in Brisbane in the early 1990s, and how they felt that they couldn’t be allowed to claim anything of note if they couldn’t make this work. And of course they did, and they have gone on to lay claim to many things. Senior lecturer George Petelin and director Ian Howard were instrumental in securing the course within the the beginning, and Herd, with her background in Murri education, became the convenor, stepping down from this role only recently. Modest about her influence, Herd notes that the course was immediately successful because it was both wanted and backed by the community. Not only did Herd foster a strong sense of connection between the small group of students, she brought numerous practising artists into the fold through informal mentors, the same names recur: Ah Kee, Albert Bell, Herd, Gordon Hookey and Judy Watson.² Who else but Queensland artists could support these emerging voices that are telling stories about Queensland families, cultures and politics? Prior to the establishment of the BoCAIA, Ah Kee says that artists would move to Sydney and Melbourne to further their careers, and so stories remained un(der)told.

Of Bidjara, Garingbal and Ghungalu heritage, Harding has gained significant recent exposure through the exhibitions ‘My Country: I Still Call Australia Home’ (Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2013–14) and ‘string theory’ (Museum of Contemporary Art and other venues, 2013–15), and he is currently producing a major work for the forthcoming exhibition ‘GOMA Q: Contemporary Queensland Art’ from July. Harding’s most recent work, entitled his legacy to the Colony; their ongoing privilege (2015), is a vintage shotgun inscribed with ‘William Fraser / Queensland Native Police / With Impunity / 1857 1914’. When describing the work, the artist has said that he is creating objects such as this shotgun that carry the legacy of colonisation in order to give it to its rightful descendants so that they can take ownership of such history.

Of Wathaurong and Scottish descent, McGregor has been actively researching possum-skin cloaks since 2002. To produce journey cloak (2012), the artist covered recycled boards with indigenous seeds, which create a mottled effect that mirrors fur. Each panel represents different facets of McGregor’s life, which come together to create a large-scale contemporary interpretation of the possum-skin cloak, which traditionally was grown with rows of added skins as the wearer matured and their stories were incised onto the underside of the garment. Despite their cultural significance, only a handful of possum-skin cloaks exist in Australian and international museum collections. The artist believes that this is because they were a women’s artform, and ponders what other objects may have not made it into museum collections.

The role of who collects and what is collected is a keen interest for McGregor, and is line of inquiry she will deal with in her forthcoming works.

An urban artist with Indigenous heritage, Andrew has become known for his elaborate mechanical devices that slowly over the course of an exhibition plot out an image or text in ochre on the gallery wall. The materials of slick metal and seeping ochre often sit in stark contrast within their white-cube setting.

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denied (2013) gradually prints out ‘n-g-a-n-g-a’ while streams of ochre pool below. The artist compares this process to the way that Aboriginal histories, which were forced to become invisible, are slowly coming to the fore. The work also speaks to the privileging of the printed text by settler culture. This issue is also addressed in Andrew’s more recent work Information Transfer (process #1) (2015), in which ochre slowly leeches through layers of 1920s newspapers, overtaking the text and images over the course of the display. To create such works, the artist uses open-sourced programmable technologies; the limitations that these have on his ability to determine the final outcome is key to his practice.

Hailing from Alice Springs, Presley is a descendant of the Marri Ngarr people who calls Brisbane home. He is renowned for his ‘Blood Money’ watercolour series from 2010, in which he replaced the official figures on Australian currency with Aboriginal resistance fighters. For Next Wave Festival in 2014, Presley created an interactive installation, entitled Lesser Gods, which comprised a dance floor (with Andrew’s technical expertise), animation and thumping soundtrack, playing off Christian iconography, Australian colonialism and cymatics. He has recently returned (with Harding) from a workshop at Sydney’s Cicada Press, where he expanded his standing interest in printmaking with master printer Michael Kempson. Most recently, Presley has been transforming elements of his workshop print into Bed Burner (2015), a repeat-pattern fabric work to be presented at this year’s Cairns Indigenous Art Fair from late July. The work is a critical statement about Australia’s treatment of refugees, police brutality and self-immolation. With a sharply honed political instinct, Presley deftly moves between mediums according to the needs of each project to create arresting works.

Each of these four emerging talents and BoCAIA alumni have won the Griffith University Graduate Art Show Award, and are currently undertaking postgraduate study at QCA. The BoCAIA course facilitates the transference of Indigenous knowledges within the university context, and this importantly takes place through both formal and informal channels. With increasing pressure within Australian universities to streamline courses and reduce costs wherever possible, the question remains whether the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art can continue to facilitate the education of future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners to the standard it has to date. If it is unable to maintain its integrity, it will undoubtedly put into question the future of art in this state.

1. Interview with author, 28 March 2015.
2. Others mentioned, but not repeated, include: Fiona Foley, Laurie Nilsen, Debra Porch and Simon Wright.

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Robert Andrew, Information Transfer (process #1), 2015, newspaper, ochres, chalk, water, technology, steel, board, 250 x 120 x 200cm; image courtesy the artist