

artwork

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C O M M U N I T Y A R T S N E T W O R K S A



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The Community Arts Network of SA is a member based organisation. It forms part of a national network of sister organisations in most capital cities across Australia.

AIM
 The Community Arts Network aims to support arts development and creative expression at community level towards the ideal of diverse and vibrant community cultures.

COMMUNITY ARTS
 Arts practice and creative expression are at the heart of a community's vitality. People have always come together to sing, tell stories, enact rituals, to celebrate, to mourn and to mark significant events in their lives. Besides being able to see great art, people need to actively participate in these activities. This is what is meant by the term community arts, it might be a new name but it is not a new idea.

LOCAL CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT
 It is through the things we do together as groups and communities that we gain a sense of collective identity, a sense of place and a sense of belonging. When we value these things a positive concern for our social well being follows and we begin to take charge of our present and shape the future to meet our aspirations.

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white



apron

black



hands

ALEX PRIOR

From 7 July – 4 September 1994 Brisbane's staid and echoing City Hall was occupied by *White Apron – Black Hands*, an oral history–visual arts exhibition which explored the lives and domestic service of seven Aboriginal elders.

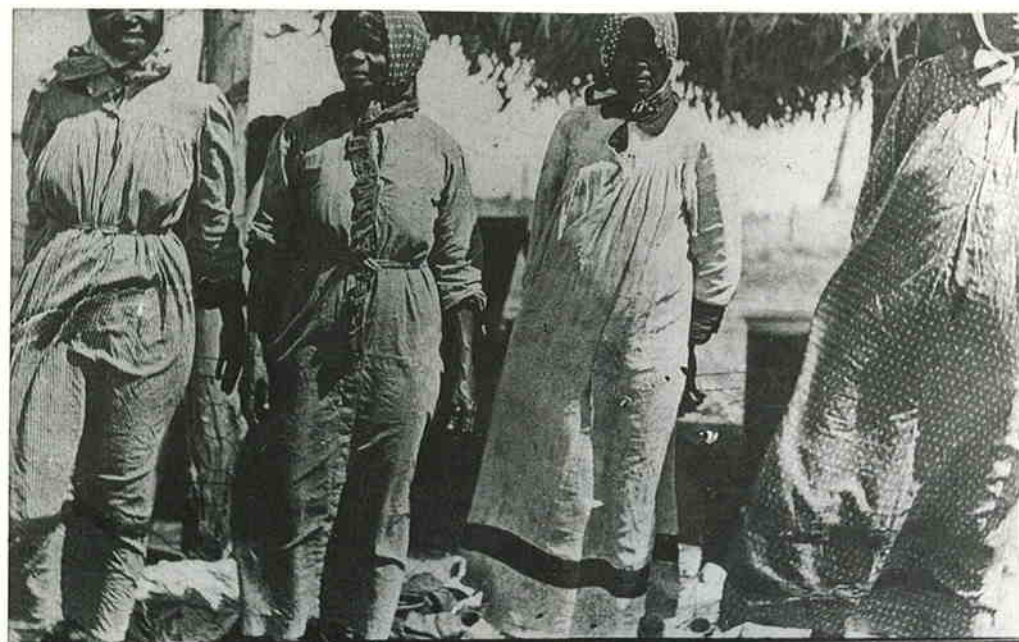
The twelve-week oral history project and exhibition was organised by Black Day Dawning, a Brisbane-based Aboriginal women's arts organisation. The exhibition later travelled to Melbourne and Rockhampton, and is planned to tour regional Queensland in 1996.

Part exhibition and part installation, *White Apron – Black Hands* uses photographs, transparencies, photographs of antique domestic appliances, a large cyanotype sheet, and the recorded voices of the participants — to tell a story of servitude and human rights abuse which continued into the second half of the twentieth century.

Under the *Aborigines Protection and Preservation Act 1897 (Qld)*, Aboriginal people were bonded to the state, which could contract their services to white people. Most Aboriginal people were not offered a choice.

When project coordinator Lel Black first had the idea of honouring black women workers, she and her sister (visual artist Leah King-Smith) had only the vaguest idea that their mother was one of those people who had not been given the choice.

Her mother smiles. 'I never thought it was relevant', she says.



Aboriginal housemaids

Headingly Station. Photo courtesy of the State Library of Qld

just plonking something on a wall. While I get angry, I've tried to find a more harmonious way of speaking out about it.'

The emotional intent of the exhibition is to give strength, rather than arouse anger. Historical photographs of women working are layered with thin transparencies of Brisbane landscapes. The effect is to fuse the historical narrative with a sense that the women are spiritually about the earth, and life. They become figures of strength, competence and power.

As King-Smith says: 'It's humorous and tragic. Like hearing a very human story. Where emotions are brought up, the project provided healing through expressing pain. It gives people strength. That's the nature of the show'.

The layering process is repeated throughout the exhibition. 'Normally, when you look at a photograph it's very objective. There's a Cartesian consciousness and a sense that what you are seeing is three-dimensional. To me that represents an old way of seeing. Layering subverts that and becomes a metaphor for another form of vision.'

Similarly, none of the individual pieces are framed, which is part of a deliberate choice to remove images of containment. Where historical photographs are used they are layered with bright colours and lack neat edges, creating a sense of immediacy and destroying the feeling of distance which often accompanies old photographs.

At the spiritual centre of the exhibition there is a transparency of a pair of hands clutching a crystal. The photograph was taken by Leah King-Smith during the recording process, and symbolises the intense emotion which the project generated. The piece is uncatalogued and unnamed. 'It is a sacred space. Something holding the energy of the whole thing; a centre-piece that allows people to enter it and that holds the energy of the whole thing.'

Black nods: 'A white journalist asked me why these stories hadn't been heard before. But people don't talk. Everyone's in the same boat, so you're only talking to people who share the same pain. Who would you tell? Everybody's Mum and Auntie worked as a domestic. These women deserve honouring. We do it the easy way — women before us paved the way.'

Mrs Pearl King shakes her head and smiles. 'Because we were considered second-class citizens; in our minds we had the thing that they [white people] were better than us. We had put them there, in our minds.'

Lel Black chimes in, 'They went to great lengths to impress the idea that they were the elite; the ruling class'.

For Lel Black, her mother and sister, the project became very personal. 'We were crying during the interview. It felt like someone had died. It was like a new emotion; something I'd never felt before.'

Because of the intensely emotional nature of the women's memories, writer Jackie Huggins chose to bring the women together as a group, to tell their stories over morning tea and often over lunch as

well. Family members were also welcome to attend these workshops, to hear their mothers and grandmothers speak about their lives — often for the first time.

As Black says: 'When you stir up people's emotions, you have a responsibility to know what to do with them. Telling stories together is very tribal. The group does it together and you support each other, too. The exhibition is not just a piece of art, it's people's lives'.

It is the strength and emotional power of traumatic memory that gives the exhibition its power. It has, Black says, a life of its own. It probably won't stop touring.

The sense of the exhibition as a living thing is shared by all the artists and participants, and it was this sense that Leah King-Smith took into account when designing the exhibition. Leah King-Smith says that she was trying to find a place for Aboriginal people: 'Without going into political territory, I went into spiritual territory.'

'It was important to be as informative as possible without the exhibition looking like a museum piece. It had to allow people to enjoy the information. You have to engage people in more ways than