



'biganga wollert dallong 2013' (possum skins, cotton, ochre, tree gum, 180 x 180 x 75cm). Photo courtesy of Mick Richards.

Cloaks reinforce cultural identity

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Carol McGregor

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Two Indigenous artists from the Queensland College of Art have collaborated to produce contemporary versions of the traditional possum cloaks familiar to Aboriginal communities in South-eastern Australia prior to the 1820s.

Glennys Briggs and Carol McGregor worked throughout the year on individual projects before deciding to share their stories to complete and show the only cloaks of their kind in Queensland.

Both artists have cultural ties to the region of Victoria, Briggs as a Taungwurrung/Yorta Yorta woman and McGregor being of Wathaurung descent on her father's side.

The duo explains that the aim of this collaboration was "to represent their shared connection to place, reclaim their suppressed histories and convey the resilience of Indigenous cultural identity."

"Before the arrival of Europeans, possum skin cloaks were an essential part of Australian Aboriginal tradition in Victoria, not only for the protection they gave but also as a means by which we

were positioned in our culture,” they state.

“The complex, carefully etched designs on the inside of the skins were not random, but carried meanings and significances that were understood to their original creators and wearers.”

Both women, like many people belonging to Aboriginal communities in South-East Australia today, actively counter the false belief that there are no surviving Indigenous traditions in this area, and that the art and identities of urban Aboriginal people are unauthentic.

“Our work reflects a strong and united front and also the deep emotion and affect the cloaks have on individual and community identity,” says Carol.

Glennys graduated this month with a Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art and Carol with her honours having completed her Bachelor last year.

Carol hopes to continue her research next year and is considering a PhD with the hope that there is a resurgence of contemporary cloak making within Victorian South-eastern communities and among their descendants.

“When you put on a cloak and have one in your family life it immediately generates a feeling of self-empowerment – it’s an

emotional experience,” she relates.

“The continuation of this traditional practice has the potential to uncover and etch into history our personal stories for generations now and those yet to come.”