



Possum Skin Cloak – You're wrapped in your Country

VICKI COUZENS
visual artist



In 1999 I was down in Melbourne attending a printmaking workshop and as part of that process we were taken to see some collections at the Melbourne Museum. We were out the back and they were showing us different artefacts and things and then they brought out the Lake Condah Possum Skin Cloak. Lake Condah is my grandmother's country.

You normally only see these cloaks under glass in display cases so when they lifted the lid off the box and it was right there in front of me, I was overcome. The tears started falling. It was like you could feel the old people, the ancestors close by and you could almost reach out and touch them. And this might sound a bit weird but that was when the old people channelled the idea to me that we should make cloaks again and that the knowledge had to come back to the people. That was the original vision.

I talked to Lee Darroch who's a Yorta Yorta woman and her cousin Treahnna Hamm and we started. The first cloaks were part of a regional project and then we were given the opportunity to work with all the language groups across the state to create cloaks for the opening ceremony of the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. There are about 38 groups and we ended up with 35.

We had four lead artists and we divided Victoria up into areas. Each community chose a local artist who would then work with their mob to develop their own cloak. We would just help that along and give advice on how to do things but it was all about them taking responsibility and having their own creative processes. The first step was gathering the stories, putting those stories into designs and, of course, getting permission. We had so many layers to negotiate, we had all these bits of bloody paper to sign, but we needed to protect the intellectual property and make sure the Elders had signed off.

Then we would go back to the communities and have a practical day about how to make a cloak and again, we would leave it to the group. We'd say, 'Here are the skins, here's the tools, this is how I did it, these are the different stitches. You can cut them up and sew them together and then put the designs on, or you can put the designs on first, whatever.' We left it entirely up to them. There was no imposition and the innovation and creativity that came with that was quite amazing.

The different way people went about things, you know? One lady Maureen, she did the cloak about Lake Mungo and she burnt these little circles all over it for the grains of sand. The possum skins we used came from New Zealand and they had the heads and the tails and bits still on when we got them. Maureen cut them all off at first but then she felt so sorry for them that she sewed all the heads back on along the seams. That looked incredible.

Some people had a big picture that went across the whole cloak and others had separate stories on each individual panel. Some used acrylic paints with all the colours of the rainbow, others went all traditional. Aesthetically, some people might not go for all of it, but it was amazing!

And all the time, there was all the knowledge coming out of it. Just having to go and ask, 'Uncle, how do you mix the ochre up to paint it on?' If they hadn't been doing the cloaks, they might never have asked. And there's the healing aspect too. One of the aunties, she did the Wadi Wadi cloak I think, she knew there was a sister girl who hadn't been well and had problems and she took her cloak round and the sister girl just sat in it for half an hour and felt so healed.

The vision is spreading now. We've got lots of contacts in New South Wales and Queensland and South Australia who are using possum skins. Aunty Matilda wore Treahnna's possum skin cloak at the opening of Parliament when Mr Rudd did his speech. So it's like the smokings and the welcome to country, it's all pretty much normal ceremonials now. Accepted. If you don't use your traditions and your cultural practices, they go. You use it or you lose it.

This was a huge project and it didn't go through without glitches and a bit of politics and all the rest of it but when you're doing something like this, it always brings those things out. And we learnt a lot along the way. People, even our mob, are used to working on projects where someone's the boss. But this time, we put the responsibility fairly and squarely back on the community.

I've got my own personal possum skin cloak project where I'm making a cloak for each of the clans in my language group. That's 21. So my house is still full of possumy stuff in the lounge, on the kitchen table and it stinks when you're burning. So my kids are going, 'Aw, can't you do that outside?' But I think I'll be doing it the rest of my life.

The best thing is that every Aboriginal person that tries on a cloak, stands proud and tall. They can't not. You're sort of wrapped in your Country. That's the feeling.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Uncle Wally Cooper wearing the Keramin possum skin cloak at the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games
PHOTO: MICK HARDING

Aunty Carmel Barry, Dja Dje Wurrung, Aunty Pat Ockwell, Woiwurrung and Aunty Phoebe Nicholson, Wadi Wadi
PHOTO: DREW RYAN

The Latji Latji possum skin cloak
PHOTO: MICHAEL CARVER