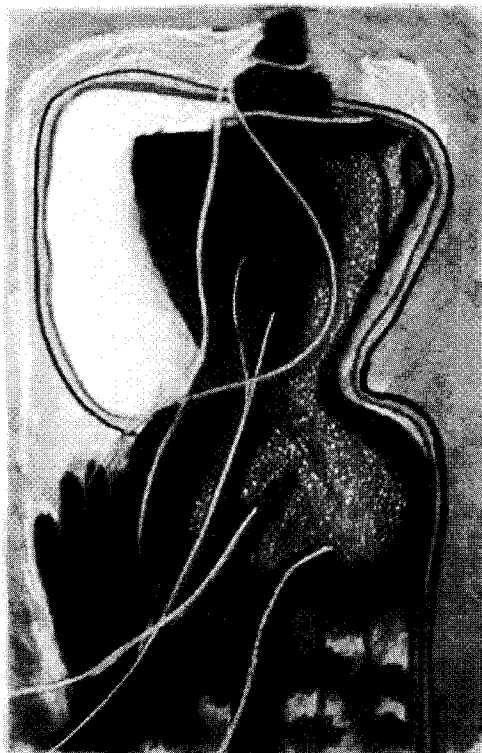


# Talkin' Up Sport and Gender

## Three Australian

BY BRONWYN FREDERICKS, PAMELA CROFT AND NATASHA LAMB



Pamela Croft, "Once We Mount Armour: 1",  
Lithograph print, mixed media,  
700 x 1000 cm, 1996.

*Il nous est donné de percevoir dans cet article la façon dont trois femmes aborigènes d'Australie ont exploité le sport, les genres et l'aboriginalité par le biais de l'écriture et de l'œuvre artistique de Pamela Croft. Dans cette exploration, les auteures mettent en évidence une association d'idées avec l'idéal de beauté australien, le racisme et les privilèges accordés aux Blancs.*

### Australian concepts

The concept of beauty in what is termed "modern

Australia" has always been tied to whiteness and been expanded upon over the years. The beauty ideal in contemporary Australian society is uniformly white, thin, young, energetic, fit, healthy, sexualized, smooth-skinned and "glamorous." At times it is also tanned but not "black" or Aboriginal. This beauty ideal is adopted and promoted, sometimes unwittingly and sometimes with clever subtlety within the realm of Australian sport. There are few Australian women who could meet this standard let alone Australian Aboriginal women. In reference to what is considered beautiful within the Australian context, race, culture and gender sit Aboriginal women in a cultural context of exile. A flick through an assortment of texts, novels and journals will reveal that Aboriginal women are often portrayed as lacking in complexity, with little depth, exotic and mysterious beings. More often than not Aboriginal women are defined as down to earth and practical creatures of the mundane. Historically, there are many racist and classist stereotypes of Aboriginal female identity

and few if any references that can be found that describe Aboriginal women as beautiful. A number of these stereotypes are still found within modern contemporary Australian life and they are most certainly found within the Australian sporting world.

The artwork, which is a lithograph print and mixed media, portrays an image of the female body. The body is painted black depicting the artist's body and essence. The image is presented as a western image of the body and is taken from a 1930s dressmaker's mannequin. The skirt at the base is attached to the mannequin which represents a cage. We as Aboriginal women are fully aware that the adoption of western images of the body can cage us, trap us, if we allow ourselves to become focused on the western image of what is considered beautiful in the Australian context. In being careful of not being caged or trapped we need to protect ourselves. We need to almost wear an amour to protect ourselves when we venture out. The amour being self-talk, mental imagery, strategies, tactics support people and fortifying our spirits. The body image we also know has changed over time, it is unstable. The 1930s image is no longer the popular image of today in terms of shape, however the image is still white. The white aspects on the body within the painting depict those elements that are part of our heritage and colonization.

Pamela's imagery brings to the forefront that when most Australian mainstream eyes look at body images, they look at the exterior of the body. When looking they may or may not determine from their gaze that the person who "owns" that body and the image is healthy, well, young, fit, energetic, sexy, glamorous, and white. We as Aboriginal people look at the whole person within the context of that person's life to determine whether that person is balanced and healthy and well. The artwork gives us a powerful message that it is not what you see on the outside that is important, it is what is on the interior that is vital. We need the interior because this is what balances us, our health and well-being. Our Aboriginality and being strong within our Aboriginality is what makes us healthy and well. It is about the whole, inside and outside, our emotional, intellectual, social, mental, spiritual, sexual, sacred and physical selves; all that we are as Aboriginal peoples. If this is happening in a good, strong, empowered and respectful way then this is what makes us beautiful.

# Aboriginal Women Speak

## Incorporating us

We believe that the sporting world does not have a comprehension of how we view ourselves, our bodies and our lives. We question whether it even cares how we view ourselves. We additionally believe that most people within the sporting realm have no idea of the way in which the politics of white supremacy has shaped and informed the Australian sporting world. We constantly see how the sporting world selects in Aboriginal sportswomen in ways that call attention to the specificity of race and gender.

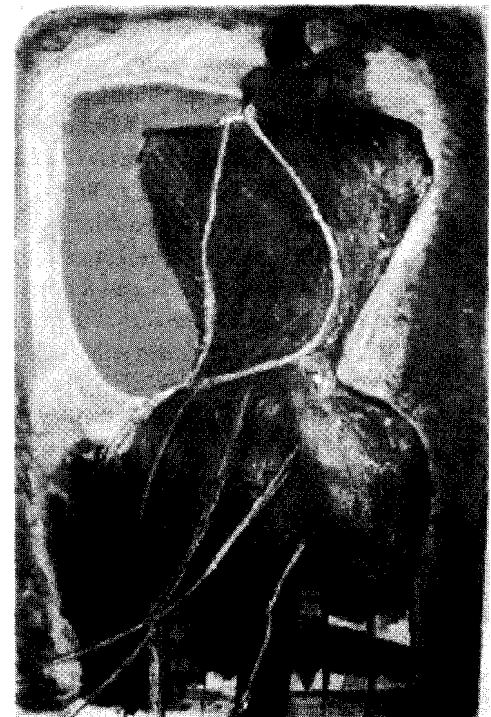
Aboriginal women are more often than not portrayed only in the sport in which they are engaged and not outside this arena. Further to this, they are at times invited in based on their sensational appeal to the Australian public. Certainly this is the case of late. This is despite Aboriginal people being asked to engage in a landscape which calls on us to look beyond race and to recognise the body as a biological machine like everyone else's. Furthermore, to recognise the sporting achievements that the biological machine can accomplish. Unfortunately, the failure to move beyond the Australian cultural practices associated with participation, commentating and imagery that confines Aboriginal sportswomen within a discourse that is always about racial otherness, will always mean that we are locked within this landscape dilemma. The dominant viewing gaze needs to change how he or she sees us because if the only form of critique is from the lens of the colonizer, then the universal dimension to sports will never be truly discussed or recognised.

We need to question the images presented and the commentating within the sports realm. It at times seems as if the images are only there to only "serve the interests of the white masters." Even when they call out, bring in or discuss Aboriginal sportswomen it is often in comparison to non-Indigenous white Australian sportswomen. We are still "measured up" next to other Australians or we are "accommodated" within this sphere as we are within other spheres. We become commodified, objectified and in this we can become imprisoned. Thus there is danger that we may only ever be what the colonial oppressors want, the images we make for ourselves may never be self-actualized. The process of representation of Aboriginal women within sport may therefore continue to be at the hands of others. There will continue to be distorted messages given to us and everyone else through the institutions of sport which

have the capacity to repeat the hurts of Australia's colonial past.

## As Australian Aboriginal women

We as Aboriginal women are very diverse in our histories, in our bodies and in our beings. We are multi-dimensional. We in our own ways need to break apart from the gaze of white supremacy to look at ourselves, who we are. We also need to look at ourselves, away from the colonizing eye. The question remains for us, Bronwyn, Pamela, Natasha and other Aboriginal women, how do we find a cultural space within the sports world? We must first hold our hands up like the hand on the left side of the painting which is a statement by the artist that we need to stop and reflect before we get trapped within the image. We need to remember who we are and be careful that we don't forget who we are, this is depicted through the use of the ochres in the painting behind the woman's image. Ochres being used for a range of purposes including ceremony, they connect us with our history and ourselves. We need to protect ourselves, who we are while being part of the bigger world in which we live. We need to ensure we wear our amour, the amour of who we are as Aboriginal women. We know that we can be seduced by white race privilege. We have seen others become consumed by comfortability with Australia's capitalist society, the privileges it brings and the rewards from being "good little Aborigi-



*Pamela Croft, "Once We Mount Armour: 2",  
Lithograph print, mixed media,  
700 x 1000 cm, 1996.*



Pamela Croft, "Once We Mount Armour: 3",  
Lithograph print, mixed media,  
700 x 1000 cm, 1996.

nal women". This is shown through the white lines scratched onto the paper that symbolise ropes, that can bind us. We can be bound by white race privilege and in this the true nature of our Aboriginality is also bound. In the end the ropes can kill us, not necessarily physically kill us but kill us in spirit.

Where do we find a space within the world of sport as three Aboriginal women? Where do we find a locality to undertake some form or forms of exercise to meet our needs as three Aboriginal women with-

in a location which more often than not encompasses the politics of denial, like the culture of shame that keeps us in our place. We are in a locality where we are faced with images within the history of sport where ideals of human strength, endurance and beauty have all been represented as nude figures or sporting clad figures which have almost exclusively been white. When they are black bodies they have tended to be those belonging to African American people. It has not been and it is not easy.

We have all tried gym rooms, pools, track and field and competitive team sports. We have all been postgraduate students within universities and utilised those sporting facilities. Bronwyn and Natasha have both studied within a School of Health and Human Performance. These experiences and the sites of them have all been experiences and places that needed to be negotiated at all times on the mainstream's terms of reference. In our internal and physical negotiations we know that they do not necessarily fit within the contexts of the materiality of our bodies. In our physical negotiations we know that it is about how we look in our Aboriginality and it is about how we sometimes look in terms of being perceived as overweight or obese as Aboriginal peoples. When we are within our localities of family, friends and the Aboriginal community we do not feel we are in conflict, we do not feel we are overweight or obese. When we have interactions with external influences, enter the sports domain of gym rooms, public pools, places with mirrors or get on bikes with little seats we can feel that we aren't acceptable because we don't fit in with the audience that the sports world chases and

seeks. This places us sometimes within a cycle of wanting to improve our health and well-being through some form of exercise and yet negotiating the barriers, the conflicts. That is the materiality of our bodies may be in conflict with the materiality of the spaces. We have reached points where we are now more able to negotiate the terms of reference and the materiality of our bodies and the spaces. It has been a long, individual journey for the three of us, that few non-Indigenous people within the spaces in which we have engaged have any comprehension.

We have attempted to provide through our exploration an insight into how we see issues around sport, gender and Aboriginality. The reader must see how we continually struggle with a paradox of health and wellness, beauty and fitness as it is defined for us as Australian Aboriginal women by others. There are other aspects that are within this domain such as sexuality, subject/object and master/slave which we have not touched on here but are worthy of further exploration. We do not anticipate that the broader issues around sport, gender and Aboriginality will be dealt with by the Australian sports world within our life times. We do wish that racism and white race privilege would be addressed in earnest and that those within the sports sphere would work towards erasing the conscious and unconscious racism and concepts around white race privilege from their minds and hearts.

*Bronwyn Fredericks is of Aboriginal, invader and immigrant histories. She has a Dip.T (Secondary), B.Educ. M.Educ, M.EducStudies and is presently completing a Phd in the School of Health and Human Performance at Central Queensland University, Australia. She has been Chairperson of the Bidjerrai Aboriginal Community Health Service for six years and has a long history of working in the health and human service industry. Bronwyn is known as an educator, writer and activist.*

*Pamela Croft is a Kooma Aboriginal woman. She has a B.Arts (Fine Art) and is in the final stage of a Doctor of Visual Arts at Griffith University, Australia. Pamela is the Director of the Sandhills Studio and Studio Collective. She has worked as an educator for the past 15 years. Pamela has been an Indigenous representative on local, State and National Boards. One of her most recent appointments was to the State of Queensland's Indigenous Art Advisory Committee for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) being held 2001/02.*

*Natasha Lamb is an Aboriginal woman from the Mount Morgan region of Queensland. She has a B.Arts (Psych.) and has just completed a Master of Human Movement at Central Queensland University. Natasha works as a lecturer with Nulloo Yumbah, the Place of Indigenous Learning and Research at Central Queensland University. She has been employed previously within the health arena in the Rockhampton region.*