

Wyndham Art Gallery

# muka

By Vicki West



Vicki West – Untitled - Photography by Andrew Green

November 16 to 21<sup>st</sup> Dec 2016



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The first reported sighting of Tasmania by a European was on 24 November 1642 by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, who named the island Anthonij van Diemenslandt, after his sponsor, the Governor of the Dutch East Indies. The name was later shortened to Van Diemen's Land by the British.

At the time of the British occupation and colonisation in 1803 the Indigenous population was estimated by the British at between 3000 and 10,000. The combination of the Black Line campaign, which was enacted by the British as a means to eradicate the island of the Indigenous population and, from the late 1820s, the spread of infectious diseases to which they had no immunity, reduced the population to about 300 by 1833.

Almost all of the Indigenous population was forcibly relocated to Flinders Island by George Augustus Robinson. Until the 1970s, most people thought that the last surviving Tasmanian Aborigine was Trugernanner, who died in 1876. However this "extinction" was a myth.



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Vicki West is a trawulwuy woman from north west Tasmania. She is a survivor of the brutal and violent practices of colonization and evidence of her peoples amazing resilience.

Her work as an artist is a contemporary expression of age old traditions that her ancestors practiced for over 2000 generations. Vicki has been a part of a movement by Aboriginal artists of the southeastern states of Australia to reclaim traditional practices. The parts of Australia that were occupied earliest by the British have the longest journey to rediscover and revive lost practices as they were disallowed by missionaries and governments who took control of the lives of Aboriginal peoples.

Vicki conducts research through museums and archives as well as by listening to stories and knowledge from family members, and has uncovered methods that have been dormant for several generations due to the disrespectful attitudes of the colonizer who didn't take the time to understand or appreciate the sophisticated culture that was already on the land they had claimed for their own.



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Sculptor, weaver, installation artist, Vicki is breaking new ground with this exhibition moving into photography and video. In a bold move she has placed herself in the frame and portrayed herself wrapped in her kelp. Braving the cold weather of the northwest of Tasmania she is intimately connected to the environment she comes from.

In some images she is clothed in kelp, literally hugging it to herself in a way that evokes the emotion of things lost and then found. The preciousness of her culture is evident in these works. She grinds the ochres that are then painted on her body, some red and some white, in the same way that her ancestors have done before her.

She sits on a colonial chair wearing a crown made from vestiges of the sea, claiming back the position of pride and dominance that was taken by the crown of a country so far away that her people could not have imagined the damage they would do when first encountering them over 200 years ago.



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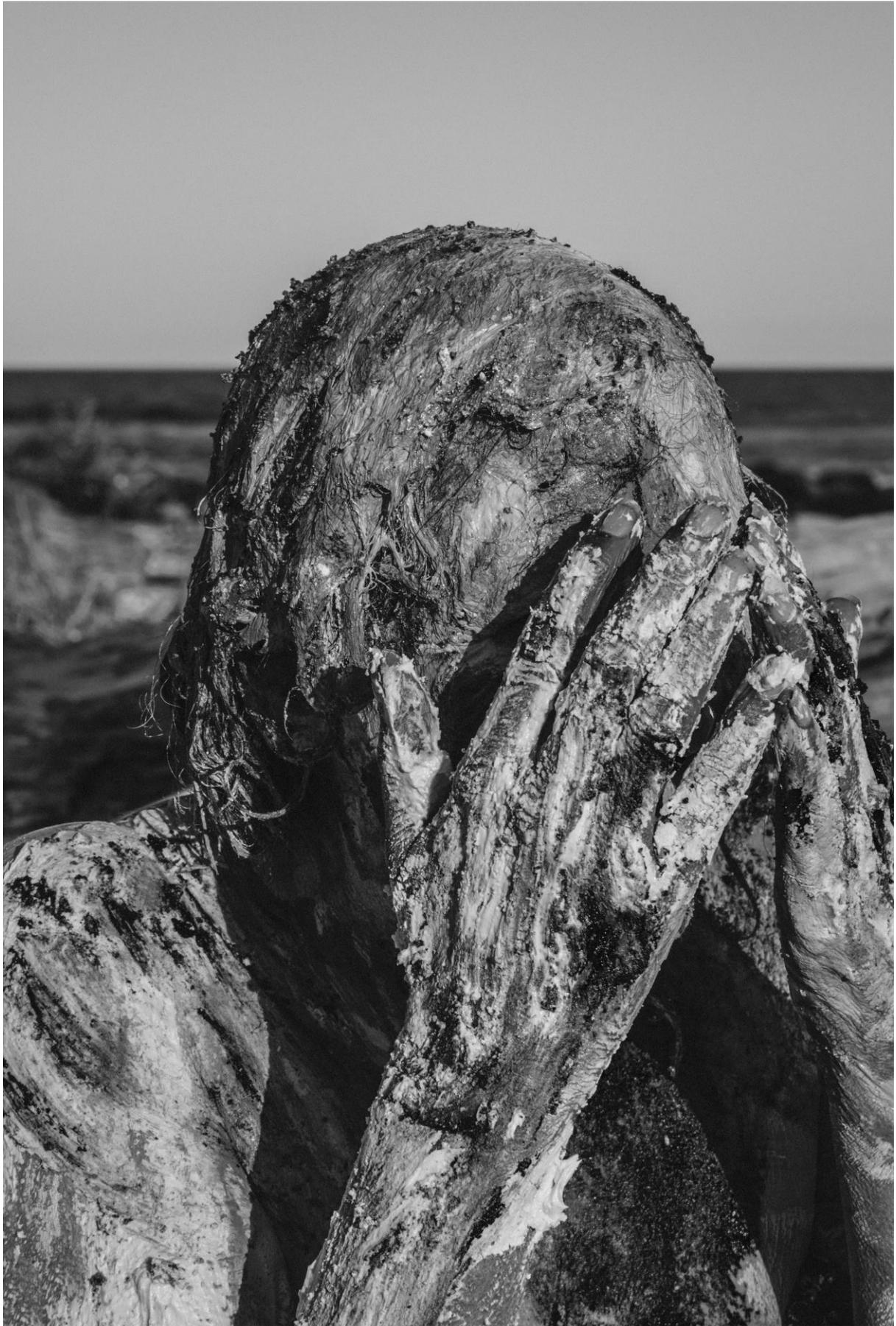
It is hard not to view most contemporary art done by Aboriginal people inside the context of the dispossession of their land and culture over two centuries ago. This is because the history of that dispossession has not been told, particularly in Tasmania. Until very recently the popular understanding of Australian history told by Europeans is the story of the total annihilation of Tasmanian Indigenous people, and yet descendants of those traditional owners were alive and well. It is hard to imagine the difficulty of growing up in a culture that denies your very existence.

That is why Vicki West's work is so powerful and important. She not only revives lost arts that are a part of Australian culture but she rewrites history to include herself and her ancestors.

One of the ways she intervenes in the dominant culture of contemporary Australia is in the way she spells. The use of lower case in her naming of culture and language is purposeful. It is a defiance of the English language that was forced on her people and in a way a mourning of the loss of the language of her mother tongue.



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Vicki is also very committed to and concerned about the environment but perhaps with a different focus from relative new comers to the country. Her people were the ultimate caretakers of the landscape and most of their traditions were related to this care through a responsibility for the natural environment. In fact there was no distinction between the 'natural' environment and humans, they were all one.

In many of her works this relationship still resonates despite the generations of distance since that culture was fully cherished. Thankfully due to people like Vicki, Aboriginal culture is well on the way to becoming more represented in Australian culture, demanding to be noticed, finding new and contemporary expressions, flexible and strong as it always was.

Dr. Megan Evans  
Visual Art Curator



WYNDHAM ART GALLERY  
177 Watton St, Werribee, Vic 3030

PH: +61 3 8734 6021

Visual Art Curators:

Maree Clarke [maree.clarke@wyndham.vic.gov.au](mailto:maree.clarke@wyndham.vic.gov.au)

Megan Evans [megan.evans@wyndham.vic.gov.au](mailto:megan.evans@wyndham.vic.gov.au)