Shared Sky

Shared Sky stems from a vision by the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) to bring together under one sky Australian and South African artists in a collaborative exhibition celebrating humanity’s ancient cultural wisdom. This vision embodies the spirit of the international science and engineering collaboration that is the SKA project itself, bringing together many nations around two sites in Australia and South Africa to study the same sky.

This exhibition reflects the richness of the artist’s ancestor’s understanding of the world developed across countless generations observing the movements of the night sky. Shared Sky explores how this sophisticated understanding of celestial mechanics resonates in the work of living artists that are sharing their insights with scientists working to unlock the secrets of the Universe.

Understanding what sustains the rhythms and patterns of the world around us continues to be one of humankind’s most enduring fascinations. The movement of objects across the night sky has been a profound source of inspiration for artists since time immemorial. The desire to understand has informed creation myths and stories amongst human populations across the globe for countless generations. It is what has inspired both groups of artists in this exhibition, and what drives the large international teams of scientists and engineers developing one of the world’s greatest scientific endeavours in Australia and South Africa: the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope project.

Shared Sky connects artists working in remote communities from either side of the Indian Ocean that have ancient cultural connections to the two sites where the SKA will be located. Both locations were specifically chosen for their radio-quietness and relative isolation – fundamental requirements for a successful radio telescope facility. Prototype ‘precursor’ telescopes are already active at each location, some of which will eventually become part of the much larger SKA telescope – the world’s largest-ever radio telescope. Through this global collaboration involving governments, scientists and engineers from over 20 nations, the SKA radio telescope will capture unprecedented levels of information, often from the farthest reaches of the Universe. By enabling scientists to see deeper into space, further back in time, and with greater clarity than has ever been possible, the SKA will greatly enhance humanity’s knowledge of the Universe around us, and may help answer some of the ancient questions that have been posed by people since they first looked up into the night sky.

Being located on similar latitudes on both continents, the two sites in Australia and South Africa present essentially identical views of the night sky to the peoples that have lived there for tens of thousands of years, and to whom some of the oldest known artwork on earth can be attributed. Shared Sky also embodies the idea that no borders exist in the sky and that the night sky is an increasingly scarce natural resource that belongs to and is shared by all humanity.

For Yamaji people – indeed many Aboriginal communities right across southern Australia – the appearance of the dark shape of an emu stretched out along the length of the Milky Way has heralded the season for collecting emu eggs for thousands of years. Since the times of ancient Egyptian and Greek civilisations, Western societies and generations of astronomers focused on the points of light in the night sky as the only indication of celestial objects. However, in the last two centuries, the discovery of gamma-ray, infrared and radio emissions – amongst others from the sky – has shown the need and importance to observe the Universe in more ways than just through visible light. This realisation has profoundly affected scientists, engendering a renewed respect for the insights developed by Aboriginal people over countless generations of what is now described as Indigenous Astronomy.

In Western Australia, the Yamaji and other Aboriginal artists who have created artworks for Shared Sky are descendants of, or connected to, Wajarri people that until the mid-19th century were still living a largely traditional way of life, hunting and gathering on the land that is now the site of the Australian SKA. This land is situated 700km north-east of Perth, at Boolardy Station in the Mid West region of Western Australia. Many of the artists have visited the Australian SKA site and have spent time talking with scientists on site, under the stars, sharing their stories about the night sky. Though most have
not lived on this specific land, they create artwork throughout the Mid West region to promote their culture and continue the process of teaching their own communities the stories of their ancestors, reviving dying languages and nurturing Aboriginal culture to maintain connections to their traditional Country. They are connected to Shared Sky through the auspices of the community arts organisation Yamaji Art Centre in Geraldton, Western Australia – a strong advocate for social justice and the promotion of respect and awareness of Yamaji culture. Some of these Aboriginal artists are children of the Stolen Generations, forcibly removed from their families in the 1940s and 1950s and denied access to traditional language and culture during periods of institutionalised policies of assimilation. Coming together through their connections at Yamaji Art Centre, many of these artists have become strong advocates for the healing powers that art can bestow within their communities that are working together for positive change.

The experiences of some of these Australian artists resonate with those of the South African artists who, working through the arts, address contemporary social and political issues. Loss of cultural identity is addressed by connecting with their roots through the stories told by their ancestors. San populations of the Karoo suffered from cultural suppression throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that eventually brought about the extinction of the /Xam language.

In South Africa, artists that are descendants of /Xam speaking San people and others of the central Karoo work communally to produce artworks at the First People Centre of the Bethesda Arts Centre in the small village of Nieu Bethesda, Eastern Cape. They mainly produce collaborative artworks in textiles that explore their own creation myths and celebrate the ancient culture of their ancestors that survived in the harsh environment of the central Karoo desert region for millennia. These large art quilts reflect a visual language that stretches back to a time of great antiquity. Fragments of ostrich eggs between 65-75,000 years old have been found which show evidence of decorative engraving a distant connection to the lost art of rock engraving so evident across South Africa’s central Karoo region. Art forms like these flourished from the end of the last ice-age approximately 12,000 years ago.

The tragedies of the last two centuries devastated the traditional hunter gatherer populations of the Karoo and the First People artists in Nieu Bethesda are trying to heal the suffering by connecting the richness of a past that has been lost, with the talent and inspiration of the present. The artists at the Bethesda Arts Centre find meaning in the ancient stories that are pertinent to their own lives, and to the modern world. They seek to share their vision through the work. In the story of the Creation of the Sun, for example, the sun is an old man, asleep in his house, shining for himself alone. It is a story about the dawning of consciousness both in the individual, and in humanity as a whole.

The story-telling traditions of these artists’ forbears would have remained largely a mystery if it were not for the comprehensive archive of the Bleek & Lloyd Collection. This extraordinary collection of stories was instigated by German linguist Wilhelm Bleek in the 1870s in collaboration with his English sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd. It comprises verbatim interviewed accounts of hundreds of traditional /Xam stories translated into English. Although little evidence exists of the specific purpose the rock engravings and paintings that are still in situ in the Karoo, they do afford tantalising glimpses of the culturally specific ritual significance of this extinct petroglyphic practice. As eminent archaeologist John Parkington observes:

Not a single karoo engraver has been observed in the act of engraving. Nor do we have the comments of anyone from inside the engraving tradition on the significance of engravings.

Shared Sky presents an unprecedented opportunity for these peoples, who share so much through their common colonial histories, to reflect upon the countless generations of proud custodianship of their respective homelands and draw strength and inspiration from each other. That these communities developed such rich and distinctive cultures over thousands of generations in absolute isolation – and an entire Indian Ocean apart – yet share so many deep concerns for the preservation of their cultural heritage, is fitting testament to the power of collaboration.

Stories passed on through meticulous oral traditions from one generation to another across the millennia, and the profoundly complex understandings of celestial mechanics common to both cultures, has been brought together in this way through the cultural agency of the Square Kilometre Array project and the willingness of scientists to reach out and appreciate alternative ways of seeing.

Shared Sky acknowledges how important the resilience of these cultures is to all human-kind. It builds upon the earlier work of the ongoing Ilgarijiri (Things Belonging To The Sky) project that began when artists from the Yamaji Art Centre who had already been painting their stories about the night sky, exchanged stories with scientists from Curtin University’s Institute for Radio Astronomy, that profoundly enriched each other’s understanding of the night sky. It is our intention to engage with communities around the world to increase awareness of, and appreciation for; the contribution that these ancient cultures have made to our understanding of the world and to reflect on the importance of preserving them amidst the never-ending fascination for new knowledge.
This catalogue supports the exhibition:

Shared Sky
Berlaymont Building
Monday 16 April – Sunday 29 April

Shared Sky is presented by the international Square Kilometre Array (SKA) Organisation, Manchester, UK; SKA South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa; SKA Australia, Canberra, Australia in collaboration with Curtin University’s Institute of Radio Astronomy and the John Curtin Gallery.

Shared Sky was developed in collaboration with Yamaji Art Centre, Geraldton, Western Australia and the First People Centre at the Bethesda Arts Centre, Nieu Bethesda, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Yamaji Art Centre artists: Nerolie Bynder, Catherine Bynder, Gertrina Bynder, Barbara Comeagain, Marion Dingo, Charmaine Green, Jenny Green, Sherryl Green, Tracey Green, Jonaya Jones, Basil Jones, Wendy Jackamarra, Kevin Merritt, Barbara Merritt, Gemma Merritt, Susan Merry, Bianca McNear, Gemma Maher, Debra Maher, Craig ‘Chook’ Pickett, Kyle Pickett and Margaret Whitehurst.

Bethesda Arts Centre artists: Sandra Sweers, Jeni Couzyn, Naasley Swiers, Julia Malgas, Gerald Mei, Yvonne Merrington, Maria Tamana, Frendoline Malgas, Felicity Tromp, Rentia Davidson, Esmerelda Tromp, Seraline Tromp, Merlyn Davidson, Rosie Jacobs, Angie Hendricks, Martin Lackay, Riaan Sweers, and James Hartlieb.

Shared Sky has been curated by Chris Malcolm, Director, John Curtin Gallery, Perth Australia.

IMAGE CREDITS
Above: Telescopes pointing towards the sky (artist’s impression), SKA Organisation.
Front: Milky Way, (detail), Sarah West, Derby District High School, photograph.
Inside Left: Ilgari Inyayimanha (Shared Sky), Yamaji Art Centre artists collaborative painting, acrylic on canvas.
Inside Right: Origin of Death, First People Artists, Bethesda Arts Centre, collaborative art quilt.

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In Belgium, the exhibition organising team included all the above as well as Alexander Cooke, Counsellor to the Australian Mission to the European Union; and Vinny Pillay, Minister Counsellor to the South African Mission to the European Union.

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