THE AGE

Australian Museum gears up for most important show in its history

By **Ali Gripper**
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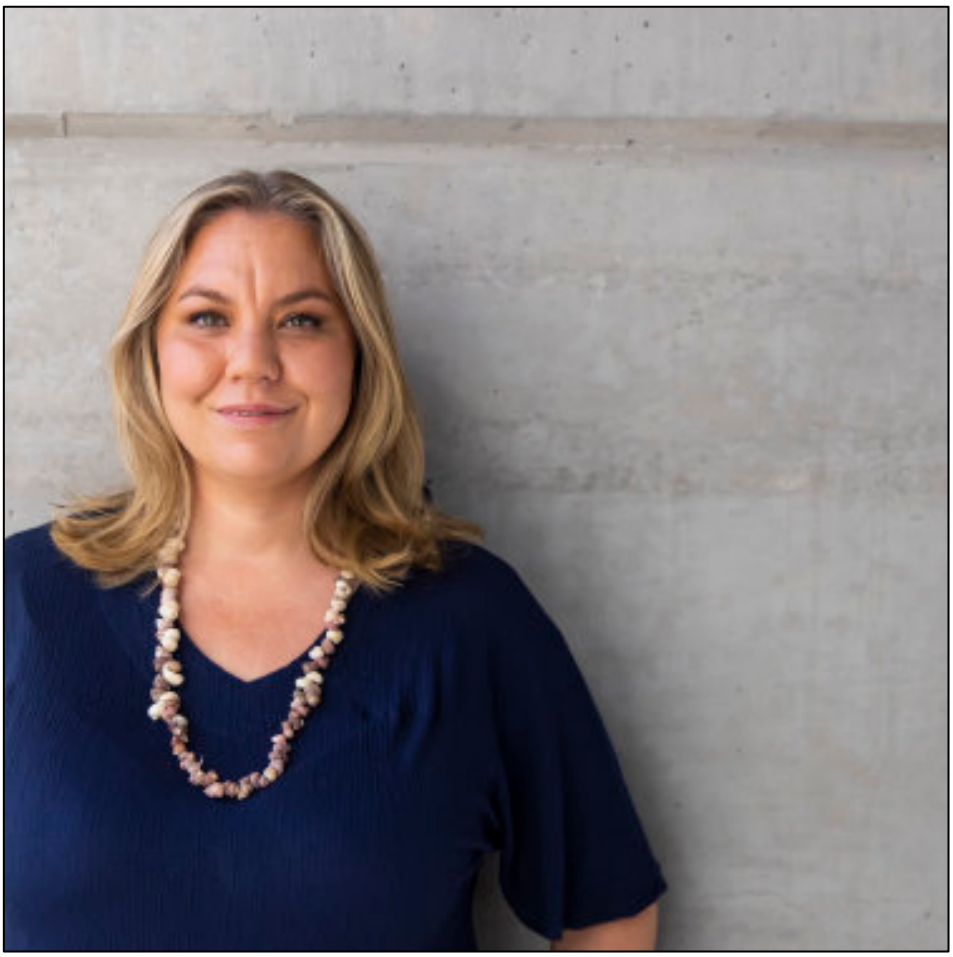
Laura McBride, the first Indigenous curator employed at the Australian Museum, is stepping over power drills and dodging ladders as workmen begin installing *Unsettled*, the upcoming exhibition about colonisation seen through the eyes of First Nations people.

There's a palpable buzz in the air as McBride and her team set up what the museum's CEO Kim McKay calls the most important show the museum has ever done in its 194-year history.

McBride's voice rings out loud and clear as she stops in front of one of the installations – one of many in the show that may have many people reeling back in shock. A wall-sized map of Australia is lit up in red, denoting where frontier massacres took place each year. In 1921, almost two-thirds of the continent is awash in red.



Laura McBride, Director, First Nations, at the Australian Museum.

Beside the map hangs a haunting black and white photograph taken by Brendan Beirne of Poison Waterholes Creek in Narrandera, where Aboriginal people were slaughtered. “We want people to feel what it was really like during colonisation, and not just look at the data,” says McBride, who was recently announced as Director of First Nations at the museum. “We want people to understand that the places in which they live, work and play have these hidden histories.”

Unsettled is, like its name, a visceral exhibition that may shake up everything we thought we knew about our past.

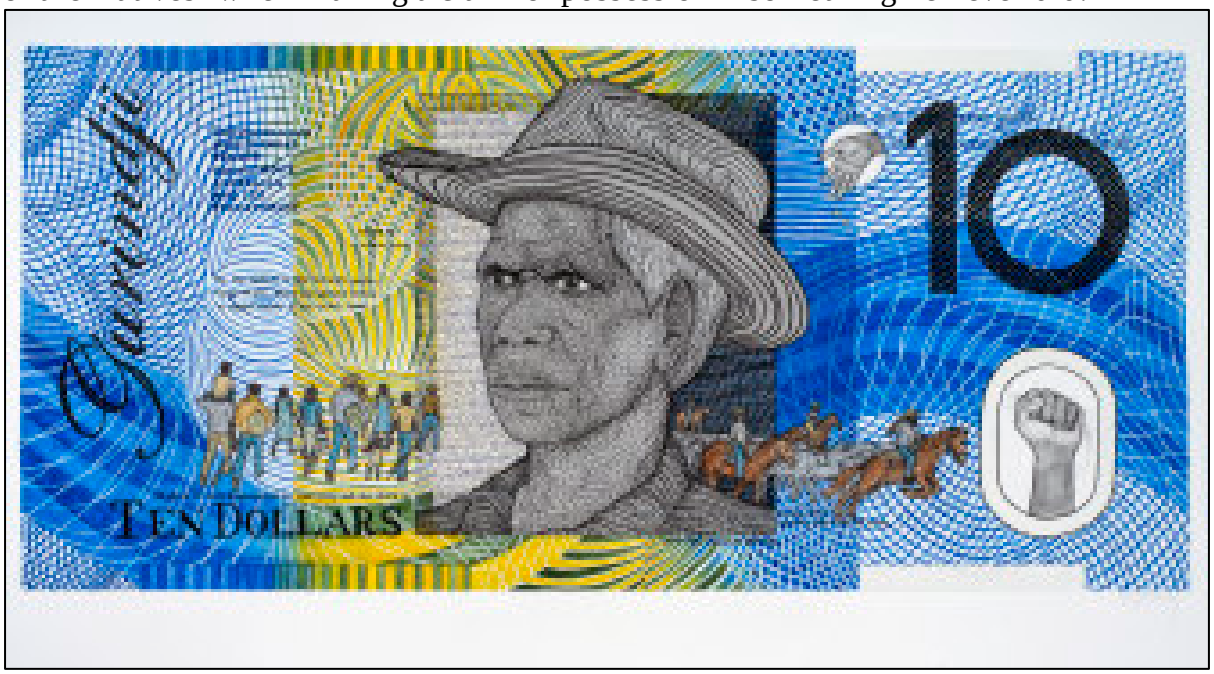
Poison Waterholes Creek, Narrandera NSW, where horrific atrocities committed by white settlers against the Indigenous people took place around 1820.

The extensive collection – it includes 30 new acquisitions, as well as historical documents and objects from the museum that have never been seen before – reveals the secret history that was not taught in school, or documented in textbooks.

Newly acquired items include the Death Spear, a replica of the one used by resistance fighter Pemulwuy during the Sydney Wars, made of plant fibre, resin and shell to emulate the distinctive barbs and shells of the Bidjigal man's lethal weapon.

Blood Money, a striking new acquisition by Indigenous artist Dr Ryan Presley, is a watercolour series presenting heroes and warriors of Indigenous history such as Pemulway, Truganini, and Gurindji activist Vincent Lingiari, on Australian banknotes.

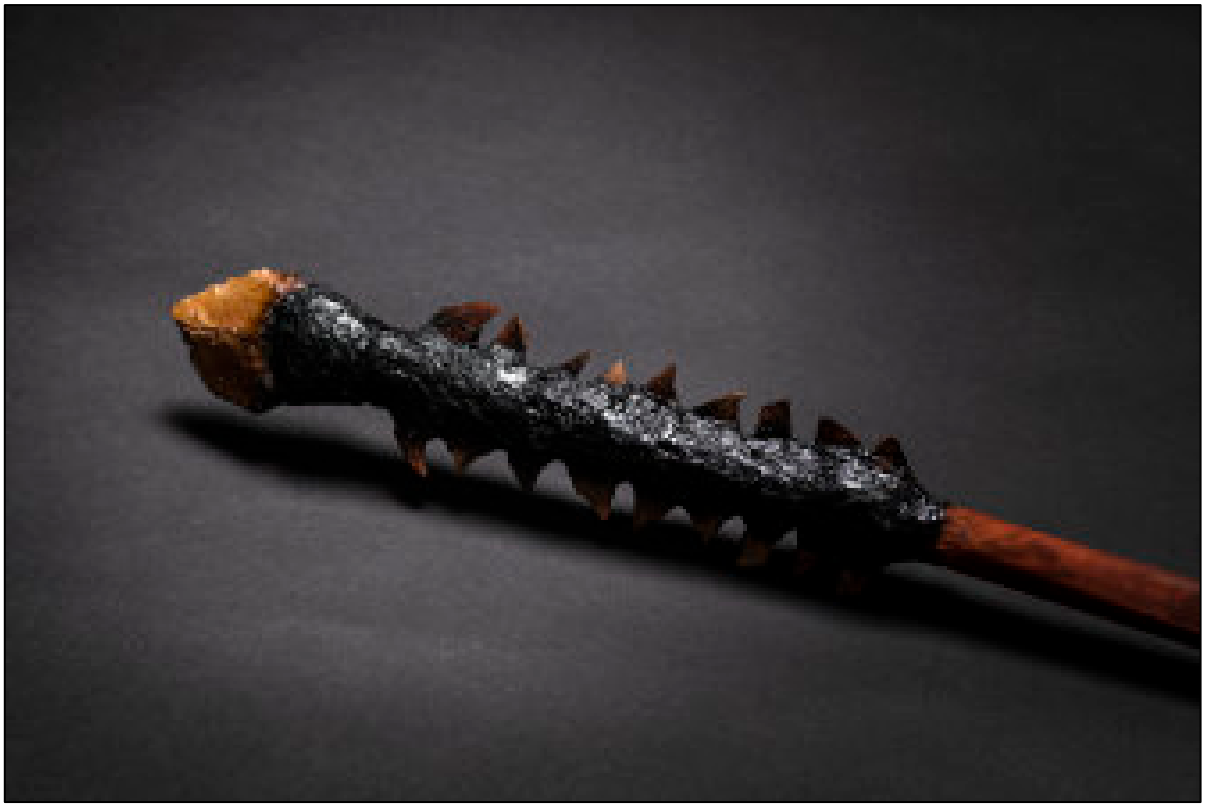
Documents that have never been shown before include sealed secret orders given to Captain James Cook by the Royal Navy, which he was ordered not to open until he left Tahiti in 1769 on his voyage to find the Great Southern Continent. The orders, on loan from the National Library of Australia, clearly state he was meant to gain "the consent of the Natives" when making a claim of possession – something he never did.



Blood Money – Ten Dollar Note – featuring Vincent Lingiari by Dr Ryan Presley.

Under the curatorship of McBride and Dr Mariko Smith, Indigenous Australians have a platform to control the narrative – one that might make us re-think our perceptions of colonisation. First Nations people have chosen the content and chosen what they say about it. They're in charge of the story.

McBride, a Wailwan and Kooma woman who has risen through the ranks at the museum over the last decade, says the exhibition may be confronting for many. "It's an undoing of what many people might know about their own country. People often have no idea about Indigenous people's experiences or the intergenerational trauma."



Death Spear by Raymond Timbery and Joel Deaves, a replica of Pemulway's spear.

A sense of foreboding is evoked by depicting what it was like for First Nations people when they saw the white sails of the HMB Endeavour arrive in 1770. "The Aboriginal people lit signal fires when he sailed up the coast, warning their neighbours of an unusual event," McBride says. "It was like ringing your neighbour to say there's trouble ahead." Although the crew of the Endeavour noted the fires, they were unaware they were seeing an emergency response.

As well as documenting what happened during colonisation, *Unsettled* simultaneously sings praises to the resilience of the First Nations people and the fact that this is home to the world's oldest living culture. On display is a 30,000-year-old Wailwan grindstone fragment from Cuddie Springs which shows how long Aboriginal people have been preparing food.

"It's a great honour for any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to work so closely with their cultural material," says McBride. "That hasn't been our opportunity historically. We were allowed to deliver the education programs and maybe give some opinions or facts within our own experience, but the program was constructed by others."

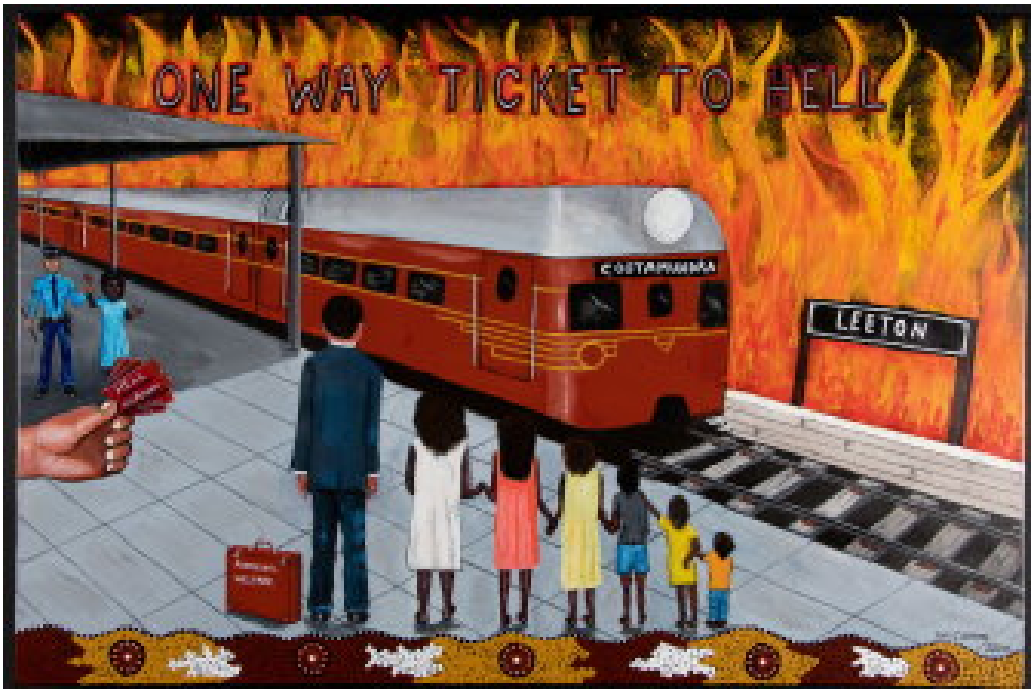
A fragment of a 30,000-year-old Wailwan grindstone used in food preparation.

What sets the show apart is the consultation involved; McBride and Smith travelled throughout NSW asking more than 1000 Indigenous people for their opinion. Some were not able to read or write. Others were given mail packs with a reply paid envelope. More than 800 people responded, while 130 First Nations people were involved in the selection, making and interpretation of objects and experiences.

“The exhibition was meant to be about the First Nation response to the 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook’s mapping of the east coast, but it became clear that they weren’t very interested in Cook. He is but a small footnote in Australia’s true history,” she says. What they wanted people to see, she says, is what happened to them: the frontier wars, the separation from families, the seizure of land.

“I knew this was going to be a very challenging project because Cook is seen as a hero to many Australians but he means something very different in our communities: destruction, pain and suffering.”

Many of the stories behind the newly acquired artworks are searing.



Aunty Fay Moseley's One Way Ticket to Hell artwork.

One of these, a painting by Wiradjuri Elder and artist Aunty Fay Moseley, depicts the moment she was taken away from her parents when she was 10 years old. *One Way Ticket to Hell* shows Moseley's mother standing on the station waving goodbye as she is sent to Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls.

"My father served as a Rat of Tobruk in World War II, and my parents both worked at the local cannery and sang in the local choir," says Fay over the phone from her home in Wagga. "I usually came close to the top of my class at school. But that didn't stop welfare coming to take five of the eight children when they were on the way to primary school one morning."

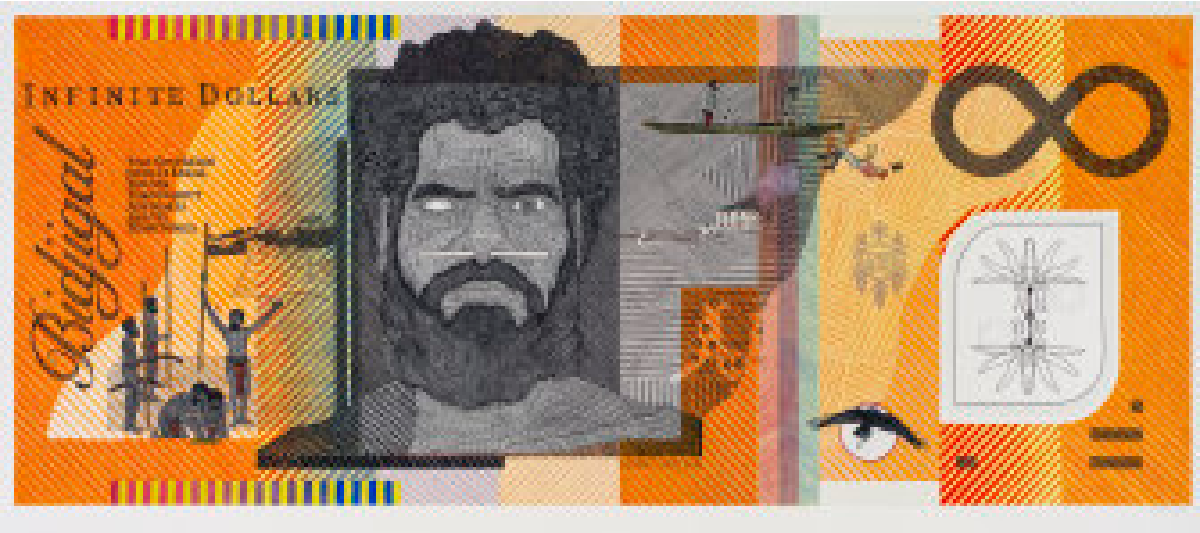
She didn't see her mother for nine years. "I used to miss my family so much, we used to look up at the clouds, and say that's them up there, there's Mum and Dad and Nan," she says.

At the Cootamundra Girls Home, she says, "they took me out of A class and made me D class, so instead of finishing school I became a domestic servant."

Moseley says she hopes many people come to the show and "have a really good look. A lot of it may be controversial, but this is telling the truth through art. It's only when we can acknowledge the truth that we can get on with our lives," she says.

Elder Uncle Waubin Richard Aken, of the Kaurareg First Nations in the Torres Strait Islands, took great pride in making Klakul spears for the show – replicas of those that armed warriors would have used to defend their land when Cook arrived. "The truth must be told," he said. "Captain Cook didn't discover Australia. There were real men and women living here, and the land and the sea were our real estate."

McBride seems destined for this role. She grew up in Sydney, spending most of the year living with her mother, going to school first at Leichhardt High, then Mitchell High School in Blacktown. For three months every year during the holidays she would live with her father in Coonamble, in Central West NSW.



Pemulwuy (c 1750-1802) features in Blood Money by Dr Ryan Presley.

"It was a very rich experience. My father had eight sisters and was always teaching me about Country, about language, about knowledge, wherever possible. I've always had that pride in being Aboriginal."

"I grew up in the '80s and '90s when others thought it was shameful to be Aboriginal but my father had an avid pride in being a blackfella. I had that ultimate confidence driven into me by him. It gave me a real backbone."

At university and school, she realised there was a big gap in understanding about Aboriginal culture. "I realised it didn't matter that Aboriginal people and others were speaking English, they weren't understanding each other. I felt I was able to help with that cross-cultural communication."

She started at the museum in the education program and then moved into curation, making a name for herself in 2019 with the *Gadi* exhibition, which unearthed Indigenous stories never heard before.

One of McBride's priorities after the show will be the repatriation of Indigenous ancestors. She wants to see hundreds of remains stored on the museum shelves returned to their communities for re-burial within the next decade as a vital part of healing. "They have the right for a dignified burial – they need to be returned to their country for them to be at peace.

"There are still bridges and roads and towns and universities named after people who executed violent murders. I'm very serious about getting these ancestors right."

McKay says that some people may not agree with the contents of the exhibition. "But things have really shifted in the past few years and a show like this is incredibly timely.

Until we are mature enough to embrace First Nations people and their knowledge, we won't be able to really shine as a nation."

When McKay began at the museum seven years ago, the Indigenous section was a "a rock wall with some spray painted hand prints, and an old Mission school house." Today, it has two highly regarded First Nations galleries, one of which was curated by McBride.

Australian Museum Trustee Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt, a Eualayai and Gamillaroi woman, says the exhibition is groundbreaking. "It changes the relationship between the museum and First Nations people. The museum has its own colonial history and we are now saying that we want that ...relationship... to change."

But there's still a long way to go, says McBride. "My eight-year-old daughter recently brought home a project at school about Captain Cook that had almost nothing about Aboriginal history."

So what does she hope First Nations people will feel when they walk through the show?

"Pride. And a sense of relief, that their stories are finally being told. For too long, it's been a matter of great forgetting."