# First Nations artists lead Australia’s cultural diplomacy amid domestic political tensions



For several decades, First Nations artists have played an outsized role in shaping Australia’s cultural diplomacy, serving as powerful ambassadors of the country’s complex identity and heritage. Figures such as Archie Moore, Tracey Moffatt, Warwick Thornton, Deborah Mailman, William Barton, Tony Albert, Judy Watson, David Gulpilil, Christian Thompson, Ivan Sen, and Emily Kam Kngwarray have garnered international acclaim, winning accolades that transcend the arts and influence cultural discourse worldwide. Their works and stories have helped reshape perceptions of Australia, presenting the nation as one striving to honour its Indigenous roots amid ongoing political and social reckonings.

However, despite the international celebration of these artists, domestically Australia faces a fraught and often contradictory relationship with its Indigenous peoples and their legacies. This tension was thrown into sharp relief following a referendum almost two years ago, where most Australians rejected meaningful constitutional recognition of First Peoples. The silence surrounding national truth-telling initiatives, the contentious political debates over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, and government reluctance to address findings such as institutional racism within Northern Territory policing all paint a picture of a nation struggling to truly reconcile with its past. Recent federal court decisions acknowledging the wilful destruction of Torres Strait Islander culture and environment further underscore this dissonance—recognition without corresponding remedies.

Within this context, the role of cultural diplomacy led by entities such as Creative Australia—now chaired by Wesley Enoch—becomes paramount yet challenging. The organisation has placed First Nations stories at the heart of its strategic priorities, backed by governmental support reflecting the persuasive power of Indigenous heritage spanning more than 65,000 years. Exhibitions and recognition through platforms like UNESCO, celebrating sites such as Gunditjmara and Murujuga, have extended Australia’s soft power on the world stage even as domestic political debates falter.

The international cultural sphere, embodied by prestigious venues such as London’s Tate Modern, offers a revealing lens on both opportunity and irony. The current major exhibition of Emily Kam Kngwarray’s work is one of three significant Indigenous showcases in London this summer, marking a moment when “Indigeneity” is globally spotlighted. Kngwarray, who only began painting in her seventies, presents stunningly layered canvases that evoke a profound sense of “everywhen”—a concept invoking timelessness and ancestral dreaming. Her three-dimensional use of paint invites audiences into a unique Indigenous worldview that challenges and expands conventional artistic narratives.

The exhibition, curated in collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia and the women of Alhalker country, was conceived shortly after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced plans for a referendum on First Nations recognition. It premiered in Canberra with a poignant backdrop of political disappointment. Yet in London, the atmosphere is less burdened by this context, allowing new viewers to engage with Kngwarray’s work on its own terms. The presence of other Australian artists such as the flamboyant Leigh Bowery, whose history intersects with queer culture and outsider identity, frames a broader spectrum of Australian cultural energy and possibility, posing a compelling contrast and complement to Kngwarray’s contemplative art.

This juxtaposition suggests that cultural diplomacy, despite its complexities and the slow pace of political progress, remains a vital arena where deeper understanding and change can begin. It is a space where Indigenous stories, experiences, and creativity may lead the way forward, offering different worlds of meaning and connection. While Australia grapples with internal contradictions and setbacks, its First Nations artists continue to command global respect, challenging the nation to live up to the potential their work embodies.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/41901155-5221-4941-8269-e4e8d6bc982a), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/ef0f6d42-4759-4ce8-8e40-acd83f0c64f1)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning), [[3]](https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-at-tate-modern-review-b1237673.html), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-at-tate-modern-review-b1237673.html), [[7]](https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-at-tate-modern-review-b1237673.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/20/australia-first-nations-art-artists-indigenous-people-reckoning> - This article discusses the significant role of First Nations artists in Australian cultural diplomacy and the challenges faced by the sector. It highlights the contributions of artists like Archie Moore, Tracey Moffatt, Warwick Thornton, Deborah Mailman, William Barton, Tony Albert, Judy Watson, David Gulpilil, Christian Thompson, Ivan Sen, and Emily Kam Kngwarray. The piece also addresses the leadership of Wesley Enoch as chair of Creative Australia and the need for reforms in the sector.
3. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-at-tate-modern-review-b1237673.html> - This review of Emily Kam Kngwarray's exhibition at Tate Modern delves into the artist's unique style and the cultural significance of her work. It discusses the motifs and colours prevalent in her paintings, providing insights into her artistic evolution and the exhibition's impact on understanding Indigenous cultures.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/41901155-5221-4941-8269-e4e8d6bc982a> - This article provides an overview of Emily Kam Kngwarray's artistic journey, from her beginnings in batik textiles to her transition to painting on canvas. It highlights her major works and the themes of connection to land and ancestral stories, emphasizing the significance of her first major solo exhibition in Europe at Tate Modern.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/ef0f6d42-4759-4ce8-8e40-acd83f0c64f1> - This piece highlights the top art exhibitions in London, including Emily Kam Kngwarray's major solo European debut at Tate Modern. It discusses the exhibition's focus on her spiritual connection to the land and contrasts it with other notable shows, providing context to Kngwarray's work within the broader art scene.
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/exhibitions/emily-kam-kngwarray-at-tate-modern-review-b1237673.html> - This review of Emily Kam Kngwarray's exhibition at Tate Modern delves into the artist's unique style and the cultural significance of her work. It discusses the motifs and colours prevalent in her paintings, providing insights into her artistic evolution and the exhibition's impact on understanding Indigenous cultures.
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