



## PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP  
OPENING OF UTOPIA - A PICTURE STORY COLLECTION  
AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY, PARIS - 8 JUNE 1994

Thank you for inviting me to open this exhibition of works by the women of Utopia.

I will pretend to no expertise in these works of art: but I will say this.

The art and culture of indigenous Australians is a wellspring of the national culture, and the more we make it so the richer will we all be.

Increasingly, I think, we respond to Aboriginal art and music and iconography, not out of curiosity, but out of recognition.

However limited our understanding of their meaning, we see something in these paintings which is familiar to us - whether it is the colours, or the abstracted landscape, or simply the "aboriginality" or "Australianness" of the themes and design.

A change has come about in our response to Aboriginal art and I think that means our hearts and minds are opening up to the place and the people. I think it means that we are learning.

In a sense that is what is meant by "reconciliation" of the indigenous people with other Australians.

It means not just making amends for past wrongs, great as the wrongs have been.

Nor is it just a matter of compensation, though compensation is certainly due.

Reconciliation means recognising how much we have to give each other.

It is more than the giving and receiving of material aid - important as that is. It is more than the goods of our culture in exchange for the destruction of theirs.

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I think we will know we are making progress when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike find themselves thinking less about what can be given Aboriginal Australians, and more about what they can give us.

This exhibition might help to get us thinking along these lines.

These works of art by the women of Utopia shape our image and understanding of the Australian landscape - and remind us how much they have always been shaped by Aboriginal culture.

They tell us something about who we are and where we fit in the story of the continent.

They are a reminder that it is important for all of us, to have a story.

And from that we might reach the conclusion that all our stories will be richer if we bring them together.

We non-Aboriginal Australians have a lot to learn from the Aboriginal story which is inseparable from the land itself.

It has taken us a long while to read the lesson in that, but I believe we are reading it now.

There is also a contemporary lesson for us in the way Aboriginal people pass on their stories - and the lessons they contain - from generation to generation. Australian society generally will be stronger if we do the same.

In turn, the lesson is that the best thing we can return Aboriginal Australians is a connection with the land.

At one level, this exhibition is a testament to the resilience of Aboriginal culture - a reminder that for all the destruction Europeans have wrought on it, their story and their art is stronger.

It is therefore a reminder of just how important culture is in the scheme of all things - and why governments and communities must make it a central concern.

It is all the more appropriate I suppose that we should be reminded of this in Paris.

At another level, the exhibition simply reminds us that at Utopia we have some great artists producing images of intriguing beauty and power.

Either way, we are reminded of the heritage late twentieth century Australia has been delivered. It is a living heritage of immense benefit to our culture and to

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our future, and we have a great responsibility to preserve and nurture it.

That is why the late Robert Holmes a Court, Janet Holmes a Court, and the Holmes a Court Foundation deserve our thanks for the support and encouragement they have given Aboriginal art and artists over the years.

It is also why I am proud that the Australian Government helped to bring this exhibition to France through the International Cultural Relations program.

I might also say I take a little extra pleasure this evening from recalling that two years ago I met one of Utopia's great artists, Emily Kngwarreye, and had the privilege of presenting her with an Australian Government Creative Fellowship.

This evening I should also thank the Curator of the Holmes a Court Collection, Anne Brody; Alan Brown, the Australian Ambassador; and Lyn Tuit, the Director of the Australia France Foundation here in Paris.

Finally, I would like to thank you all for coming, and welcome in particular Nancy Petyarre who at very short notice has made an epic trip from one artistic capital to another.

It is now my pleasure to declare this exhibition open.

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