



Portrait of a Native Australian

## Incident in Swanston Street

'An Incident in Sturt's Trip Down the River Murray in 1831', c.1930, by the painter William Rowell (1898-1946) documents an 'incident' of great significance to the acclaimed Captain Sturt, and to unnamed Aboriginal peoples of the Murray River. In 'exploring' the Murray and charting its path, close to the junction with the Darling River, Sturt and his men encounter a large group of Aboriginal men painted up, ready for battle.

Rowell's painting has made some journeys of its own. It has graced Melbourne Town Hall, crossed the Murray River to go on display at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, and then come back again to Melbourne. Yet for all its travels, Rowell's painting remains rooted in the European historical narrative tradition and tells only one side of the story.

As a Koorie woman and artist, I was struck by this painting from the moment I first saw it. Having grown up on it on Yorta Yorta country at Echuca I felt connected to the river it depicts but conflicted at the emerging narrative. I asked my seven year old son what his impression was and he replied, 'Intense'. Indeed, though the painting is dappled in the soft earthy tones typical of when it was painted in the 1930s, the intensity he refers to is evident in spades. Its narrative content is fraught with tension, history and a 'hidden' story.

The painting clearly accepts the claims in Sturt's journal that he had 'full control' of the situation. The pictorial result is that Sturt, after averting imminent disaster for the exploration party armed with rifles, and for the Aboriginal men armed with spears, is depicted extending a gum leaf peace-offering to the intervening Chief of the gathered tribe, who wades out to Sturt's boat from the bank. Both Sturt's journal and Rowell's depiction ignore and deny the presence and actual 'control' of the Chief in protecting his land and his people – and most likely also saving the lives of the interloping white 'explorers'

In gratitude for his life saving actions, the Chief was offered a tin kettle.

This exhibition, *Incident in Swanston Street*, encompasses a selection of contemporary artworks and historical artefacts from the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection juxtaposed with responses of contemporary Koorie people to Rowell's painting and the story it contains.

By returning the painting to this place, you are invited to reconsider its meaning and stories. This re-installation repositions the European take on settlement, 'discovery,' development and its subsequent cost to Aboriginal peoples of the Murray. It re-appropriates Rowell's painting and uses it as a historical marker, referencing the seemingly perpetual wait by Aboriginal people for justice, land rights, equality and acknowledgement.

Meanwhile, outside City Gallery, Swanston Street flows past like an urban river, busy with the ebb and flow of everyday life and heavy with the tide of history, truth and story.

**Paola Balla**  
**Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmarra**  
Artist and curator, February 2012

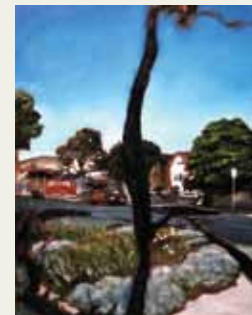
Being a part of the City of Melbourne's first Indigenous Arts Festival is an honour and I am very proud as a Wemba Wemba and Gunditjmarra woman and artist to have had the opportunity to curate *Incident in Swanston St* for City Gallery and contribute to the cultural landscape of our city.

## Works

1. **An Incident in Sturt's Trip Down the River Murray in 1831, c.1930**  
William Rowell  
*Born Carlton 1898*  
*Died Melbourne 1946*  
Oil on canvas, 142 x 203 cm
2. **Swanston Street, c.1930**  
Photographer unknown  
B&W photograph, 16 x 21 cm
3. **Swanston and Flinders St intersection, c.1979**  
Photographer unknown  
Colour image on board, 65 x 65 cm
4. **Untitled (In Response to Place series), 2007**  
Ricky Maynard  
*Born Launceston 1953*  
Chromira prints, 102 x 76 cm
5. **Moomba crowd taken outside Flinders Street station, c.1960**  
Photographer unknown  
Colour transparency, 6 x 6 cm
6. **Emu Feathered skirt**  
Lyn Thorpe, Yorta Yorta  
*Born Echuca, Victoria, 1957*  
Emu feathers, leather  
50 x 50cm (framed)



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## Acknowledgments

In the development of this exhibition, I wanted to gain responses specifically to the Rowell painting and the 'Incident' story from Koorie people who had cultural affiliations with the Murray River and people who were part of the local Melbourne Koorie community.

Much gratitude & thanks to the following Elders, local Koories & Murray River people;

Aunty Walda Blow  
Uncle Colin Walker  
Aunty Margy Tang  
Bryan Andy, Katen Balla  
Rosie Kilvert  
Rebecca Gerrett McGee  
Karen Jackson  
Mat Jakobi Ngarra Murray  
Megan Cadd Van Den Berg

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Janina Harding, City of Melbourne Indigenous Arts Program Manager, and Sarah Jane Bond, Producer, Indigenous Arts Festival.

Design by Round

## Exhibition dates

9 February – 30 April 2012

## Gallery hours

Monday 10am – 2pm  
Tues to Thurs 11am – 6pm  
Friday 11am – 6.30pm  
Saturday 10am – 4pm



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# Incident in Swanston Street



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"The plains were open to the horizon. Views as boundless as the ocean. No timber but here and there a stunted gum or a gloomy cypress. Neither bird nor beast inhabited these lonely regions over which the silence of the grave seemed to reign."

## Charles Sturt

*Proceedings of an expedition into the interior New Holland 1829 and 1830*



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# City Gallery



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