

## Miegunyah Student Project Award Summary

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Upon submitting my research proposal, I endeavoured to interrogate the relationship between the *aesthetic style* and *cultural significance* of the collection through the creative medium of ekphrastic poetry. I was deeply interested in understanding the place of the title of the collection, 'Miegunyah' – an Indigenous Australian word for home – in the midst of many works that were illustrative or representative of colonialism. Whilst studying poetry at The University of Melbourne, I was introduced to the ekphrastic poetry form: poetry that is a direct response to a piece of artwork. Ekphrastic poetry allowed me to explore a multitude of ideas that sprang from an array of works with which I could connect and infer its messages, hidden meanings and stories. This style of poetry is inherently involuntary or instinctive, as the process of viewing and responding to a piece of art requires an element of spontaneity. Whilst maintaining this element of spontaneity, for this particular project I wanted to keep in mind several prompts that may indicate the cultural significance of the collection: how the works of various cultures navigated, changed or adapted their identities within Australia; how Indigenous Australians are portrayed within colonial works; and how the dark reality of colonialism influenced my viewing of the works.

As I would be on an overseas exchange for the duration of the project and could not, unfortunately, view the pieces in the flesh, I would be relying on the photographs of the collection that exist in the Ian Potter Museum of Art database. Prior to this project I had not written ekphrastic poetry on photography and was intrigued to explore the form in a completely new way. I was acutely aware that I would be perceiving each piece of work through the eyes of another artist; the photographer; and therefore my own interpretation of the works would be influenced by how each piece was shot. A camera possesses entirely different abilities to the naked eye, so I was extremely pleased to view the pieces in close detail and zoom in and out of certain features to gain alternate perspectives. I began sifting through hundreds of works of art and was stunned by the variety of cultures that comprised the collective works. I initially selected 20 works that I felt a connection or intrigue towards and wanted to get to know further. Each day I worked on drafting my folio I would select a new piece out of my chosen 20 to examine and write on freely. Firstly, I would examine its physical and aesthetic qualities and if need be, consult an array of online sources to learn

more about its practical uses or historical significance, as I often found myself drawn towards strange or unfamiliar objects and scenes. Afterwards, I would often search for a voice or narrator to direct the story that I believed each piece brought forth. I believe that voice strongly directs each of the poems in my folio. My poems were also developed with my pre-conceived questions in mind; I wanted to know what each piece had to tell me about the reality of its past, its present and its future. Eventually, I was able to bring my folio down to just ten poems that, I believe, investigated the core of each of my key questions and prompts.

As I mentioned previously, ekphrastic poetry requires an element of spontaneity. Spontaneity allows me to unconsciously draw on themes that I may not have previously intended to bring into my work. Prior to drafting I did not make the conscious decision to draw on cultural attitudes towards women however, I found that the past, present and future roles of women in Australia wove itself into many of my works. *Wedding Cup*, allowed me to utilise the traditional German matrimonial object (a wedding or wager cup), to explore the past and present roles that marriage has played in transforming the identity of a woman. *Paperweight* brought forth and explored the identity of a women in the domestic sphere. I also found that by selecting works created by artists from different cultural backgrounds, I was able to explore multiple perceptions of identity, colonialism and cultural genocide or white-washing. Poems such as *Crystal squatting duck with head titled backwards*, *Some Contributors to Punch*, *South End of Tasman's Island* and *First Arrival at Fitzroy*, each explore, from the point of view of land, animals and inanimate objects, the effects of colonialism and cultural genocide. As a Nation with a long, rich Indigenous history and in contrast, a rather young colonial history, I believe that there is a deep struggle to pin down an identity that is uniquely Australian. However, I strongly oppose the notion that each person living in a multi-ethnic nation such as ours need to define themselves in the same or similar ways. I don't believe that a *typically Australian* person exists in our country. Australia is the *miegunyah*; the home; to so many hundreds of cultures and ethnic groups, and it is important to see the value in all cultural and ethnic groups in order to allow this to become a truly *multicultural* nation. Together, uniting under mutual values of respect and acceptance, we can build the country of “envy” that Indigenous activist and former public administrator Lowitja O'Donoghue envisioned in 1984.

Thank you to Russell and Mab Grimwade for piecing together a collection so diverse,

confronting and representative of many groups living within Australia. Thank you for urging us not to forget Australia's dark history. Thank you to the Ian Potter Museum of Art and The University of Melbourne, for providing students like myself with a platform to explore and discover a part of our histories and identities.