



## James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series

### Fiona Foley *as interviewed by Louise Martin-Chew*

**Fiona:** I have a love for Aboriginal culture, and I see the richness that's around us here. I have a strong sense of justice, and wanting the history of Australia to be told honestly. And so when I unearth these hidden histories, I really like researching in that way, but also, I get a pleasure out of an audience seeing that work and not knowing this particular history. And then sort of for them this sort of "ah-ha" moment, where they see something about their own culture and their own sense of what Australia is. I've been an artist for over 20 years, so that's how I identify myself.

**Louise:** And how did it all start? Did you always think you might become an artist?

**Fiona:** I think I started to take an interest in my great uncle's book – Uncle Wilfie – who wrote *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*. And it was illustrated by my great auntie. They were brother and sister. And I was fascinated by her drawings of some of the legends inside the publication, and I had a real affinity with that work, because it felt so much a part of my being.

**Louise:** Was being indigenous an important part of your childhood? You know, I know some people, it was an issue that was suppressed, but your mother was a proud Badjala woman from ...

**Fiona:** It wasn't really ... you know, when you look back now, it wasn't really a big deal. We just knew who we were and we grew up surrounded by it. But what was ... what I appreciate now is my father, who's non-indigenous.

**Louise:** Yeah, he certainly was a man ahead of his time.

**Fiona:** Yeah. And to this day, my father, you know, still speaks, you know, fondly and highly of our culture, and, you know, has such a ... he's got a good intellect and he understand, like, how important Aboriginal culture is, you know, to his children, but also to the broader Australian community.

**Louise:** And so talk to us about the ... your early experiences on Fraser Island.

**Fiona:** You would just get lost in this world for a whole month. We'd be over there and it was just bliss in the beginning because there was hardly anyone there. It was untouched and a tourist hadn't discovered it. So when we were young we used to hear a vehicle go past down on the back beach and we'd run over the sand blow and wave to the vehicle, because they were that rare. We used to collect a lot of pipis. In our language they're called wongs, or properly, they're called waw-wongs. And so we'd sort of remember sort

of some of the Creation stories related to that, or how the coloured sand came into being. So we'd go to like Lake McKenzie and mum said, "Oh, your grandfather swam across to the other side". And so, you know, there would be stories that would pop up in the conversation.

And then my uncle Horrie would come across with us sometimes, and there'd be more stories added to that layer. What we were doing that was creative was we were making bottles of coloured sand, and all of us would get into it, and try and make them as pretty as we could. And then you'd get ... you'd fill them up with different layers of coloured sand and then you'd get a wire and push it on the inside of the glass and make different patterns.

**Louise:** Yes, yeah. Yeah.

**Fiona:** And so we'd do that.

**Louise:** And once before we were talking about this and you mentioned that there was often a sense that you were being watched?

**Fiona:** Going to Fraser Island, you have a sense that you're being watched all the time. And, you know, it's like our ancestors who've gone before us, so we just refer to them as "the old people". And many Aboriginal cultures would understand what I'm talking about when we refer to the old people – it's the people who've passed away and who are watching over us now. It's not a figment of your imagination; it feels very real to us, and that you carry on a responsibility as a custodian.

My mother used to have some classic sayings for us kids, and I can remember a lot of them. She used to say to us, "You can't fight them with boomerangs and spears anymore". So it meant that we had to get an education and compete on an even level. There was about five of us who sort of liked the idea of coming together. And some of us were still studying at Sydney College of the Arts. Definitely, I was, Brenda Croft and Avril Quail. Because we were operating as individuals, we knew the system was also operating against us. So we thought to get more strength, we needed to come together as a group.

We wanted to develop a way of looking at urban Aboriginal art that hadn't really been focused on before. But we did have, like a fire in our belly to make a difference, to make a change, and to say things that were a little bit controversial, or to challenge people's perceptions of what Aboriginal art is. Like at the State Library of Queensland, where I'm talking about the use of opium in Queensland, and how rife it was, right across the State, from, you know, the State Government issuing licences to the layperson who was distributing it in the districts.

**Louise:** I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about *Dispersed*, which I saw in the new indigenous hang at the NGA recently?

**Fiona:** That particular year, I read two publications, and both of them overlapped in terms of, like, how the Government reporting was being done on the native police, and the people who were in charge of the native police. And these words kept coming up, because they didn't actually want to use the words that had taken place where they'd killed or massacred Aboriginal people, so they ... in Government reports, it was spoken of in terms of "dispersed", "dispersing" and "dispersal". And I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to highlight that particular word, dispersed?" That potency that I have with art and politics is clearly illustrated in that work.

When I take on fights about public spaces and public art, it's really for the betterment of Australian society that I do that.