



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

DR VANESSA RUSS APPOINTED FIRST ABORIGINAL HEAD OF THE BERNDT MUSEUM

The University of Western Australia is proud to appoint academic, artist and Ngarinyin /Gija woman Dr Vanessa Russ as Associate Director of the Berndt Museum. A UWA graduate born and raised in the Kimberley, Dr Russ will now head up one of the most important research collections on Australian Aboriginal art and culture in the world.

Dr Russ is the first Aboriginal director of the Berndt Museum in its 40-year history.

Founded in 1976 from the personal collection of noted anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt, the Berndt Museum has grown to comprise more than 11,500 objects and 35,000 photographs from throughout Australia.

A number of works in the collection are recognised internationally on UNESCO's Australian Memory of the World. Sir David Attenborough describes the Berndt Museum as "a collection the world needs to see".

Growing up in the Kimberley, Dr Russ' first gallery experience were the rock art paintings of the Wandjina and memories of the old people crafting objects, singing and storytelling using drawings in the sand as inscriptions that have stayed with her throughout her life.

Later, she undertook her PhD through UWA, studying Australian Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In 2014, Dr Russ became one of just 13 Western Australians selected for a Churchill Fellowship, in which she investigated the affects of national identity in mainstream art museums on Indigenous populations, travelling across the US, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Dr. Russ says, "The Berndt Museum not only provides access to a world class collection, but sets out to celebrate difference as something to aspire to and not something to be afraid of.

"The challenge of questioning whose identity we nationalise, is not a local phenomenon but an international paradigm that will need to be addressed by all nations. Especially if the world continues to move towards a unifying set of ideologies. It will be our differences that celebrate our uniqueness in the world and that is best reflected by Indigenous peoples globally.



Image: Dr Vanessa Russ

“This collection allows us to recognise the amazing contribution that Aboriginal Australia has made to the arts and culture through the simple act of making, from stone tools to high art. It provides a very clear historical path from objects of use - to works of art that can be seen to define the contemporaneity of the art world itself.

“Most importantly, the collection provides UWA with an opportunity to create something that has not been fully achieved – an Aboriginal-led university museum on a truly national scale with its own collection holdings.

“Australia has an opportunity to lead the way as a nation that seeks to raise the respect of Aboriginal people, through active innovation and the capacity to seek out excellence. The challenge of creating a museum that is focused on an Australian Aboriginal continent in the Asia Pacific should be seen as a priority, as it will provide a dynamic and multi-purposed campus facility for all Australians to learn about the first peoples, while engaging young Australian Aboriginal people in new ways of accessing cultural knowledge.”

BIOGRAPHY IN BRIEF

- Dr. Vanessa Russ is a Ngarinyin /Gija woman from the Kimberley.
- Graduated in 2009 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from the College of Fine Arts (Art + Design) UNSW before returning to Western Australian to pursue a PhD in Fine Arts from UWA 2013.
- Awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2014, in which she investigated the affects of national identity in mainstream art museums on Indigenous populations, travelling across the United States of America, Hong Kong and Singapore.
- As an artist, her work has been featured in the Third Space and the Revealed: Emerging Aboriginal Artists from Western Australia exhibitions in Perth. At the end of 2015 she held her first solo exhibition Memory and Trace at Seva Frangos Gallery in Subiaco.

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The Cultural Precinct maintains an extensive library of professional-quality photography. To request an image, contact Clare McFarlane on 08 6488 7806 or clare.mcfarlane@uwa.edu.au



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