

Shane Pickett: Djinong Djina Boodja (Look at the Land that I Have Traveled)

Faculty Guide

Shane Pickett (1957–2010) was one of Western Australia’s most significant contemporary Aboriginal artists. *Djinong Djina Boodja (Look at the Land that I Have Traveled)* features abstract work from the latter and critically acclaimed part of his career and is the first major exhibition of Pickett’s work in the United States. Pickett’s paintings capture both his connections to and the transformations of his homeland near Perth in the south-west of Australia. Through his artmaking, Pickett developed a new visual language that represents the cornerstones of the culture of his Nyoongar people: the pathways of ancestors, traditional healing practices and places, and the six seasons used by the Nyoongar to divide the year.

Pre-Tour

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, and define some key terms. Consider these words from an Australian and Aboriginal perspective. For guidance visit <https://www.noongarculture.org.au/glossary/noongar-word-list/>.

Noongar (Nyoongar)

Aboriginal

Indigenous

Creation or Dreaming times (*Nyitting*)

Healing

Country

Bush

Abstraction

Gesture

Landscape

Season

Travel

Land

During your Visit

Djinong Djina Boodja (Look at the Land that I Have Traveled) can be explored through one of the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more to focus a conversation in the gallery, and/or to develop student assignments. Below you will find a brief summary of each theme, related questions to drive dialogue, and a prompt for consideration that goes beyond the exhibition.

Theme 1: Health, Wellbeing, and Art

Shane Pickett suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, and holding a brush eventually became difficult for him. This, and a desire to find more accurate expression through abstraction led him to use his hands to paint his canvases. He talked about how the act of painting was a healing process, and his hands were relaying his spiritual connections. Simultaneously, Pickett talks about the parallels between healing the body and healing the land; he compares a mother applying salve to a child's scraped knee to a storm that washes across over-farmed land, for instance.

- Where do you see Pickett's hand in his painting? Where is less obvious?
- What might be healing about the physical act of making art? What about the emotional or spiritual component?
- When you read Pickett's words that accompany his paintings, you can glean how profound Pickett's connection is to the environment. For him, and perhaps many Nyoongar people, the health of the land and body is one in the same. What is your own relationship to the natural world? How does your personal connection change or influence the way you view Pickett's artwork?

Theme 2: Cultural Identity and a Link to Ancestry

Shane Pickett was Nyoongar which is an Aboriginal group from southwest Australia. Within the Nyoongar community, family is a vital part of maintaining identity because, in part, it connects a person to heritage and oral traditions. For Pickett, artmaking was a spiritual act that connected him to his heritage and traditions.

- Without reading the label copy associated with a painting, consider your initial impressions of a work. After doing so what does the label say about Pickett's intentions? What aligns with your instinct and what is different?
- How does the connection of identity express itself in Pickett's paintings?
- What surprises you about Pickett's painting? What do you find familiar?

Consider Pickett’s print series that goes through the six Nyoongar seasons. How do those visual representations of time periods relate to your understanding of the calendar? How does it differ?

- In the words of Henry Skerritt, the curator of this exhibition, Pickett’s paintings ‘show the persistence and adaptability of Aboriginal ways of seeing the country in the face of colonization.’ Discuss how artistic expression can be a form of sovereignty or social activism for Indigenous creators.

Theme 3: *Djinong Djina Boodja*

For a Nyoongar person, like Shane Pickett, land (*boodja*) is an inseparable part of one's identity. Caring for country and maintaining a connection to place is as important as caring for and connecting with family and oneself. In fact, they are the same thing. Land is connected to spirituality and seasonality to the journey of life. In many Aboriginal cultures, including the Nyoongar culture, this is known as “the Dreaming.” The term is difficult to translate but refers to Creation time when the world was made. The Dreaming explores the interrelation of all people and things, the origin of the universe, and the connections between nature and humanity. This exhibit only features selections from Pickett's abstract work, though he also worked figuratively. By moving to abstraction, the artist alluded that he felt it relayed his connection to nature more deeply. With that in mind, consider Pickett’s paintings and prints. Each one is a landscape, a narrative, and a journey through time.

- How do you respond intuitively to Pickett’s paintings? What do they relay to you on an emotional level? What does that suggest about Pickett’s relationship to the natural world? Do you see connection, movement, time, nature? What do you think Pickett mean when he says “Nature is honest?”
- Choose one and think about it as a landscape, then a story, then a passage of time. How does your perspective change? Does it change?
- How and where do you see evidence of the passage of time in Pickett’s work? What about a story or journey?
- How does Pickett’s painting match or defy an Americanized or Western understanding of “abstraction”?

Beyond the Exhibition

- During our current pandemic, many of us have struggled mentally and emotionally because of the countless difficulties and stresses that have been impacting almost all aspects of society. For reprieve a lot of people have turned to creative endeavors. Cooking, artmaking, craft, music—were and are outlets, coping mechanisms, and ways to connect. Consider

your relationship to making or consuming art. How has it changed during the pandemic? How has that impacted your mental health and well-being? Why do you think many of us turned to artistic pursuits in a time of duress?

- Colonization has had dramatic impacts on Indigenous people across the globe. In Canada, the United States, and Australia there are grim parallels due largely to the legacy of Britain's imperialistic colonizing 'style.' Upheaval has lasted well into contemporary times through systematic, government-led programs. In Australia, one such upheaval is that of the Stolen Generations. Learn more about the Stolen Generation and its profound repercussions on Nyoongar and other Aboriginal families, communities, and cultural heritage. Consider its ongoing impact. Now turn to similar stories here in the United States or Canada to research, learn more, and better comprehend their impact on community, identity and even environment.
- Language among Aboriginal communities in Australia is critical as a benchmark and bond for cultural identity. As the land was colonized, it became more crucial even as it was outlawed or socially shunned. Consider the repercussions of shunning and outlawing a language on a group of people or culture. What does language signify? Because it originates from an oral language with several distinct dialects, *Nyoongar* has many spellings. In fact, this is the version used by specifically Pickett and his close community. Consider how oral verses written language could serve as commentary for Aboriginal and colonizer relationships. What additional impacts may this diversity of language and dialect have and how could it serve as a metaphor for other effects of colonization? Now consider the use of language here—on campus, in Knoxville, in Tennessee, in the United States. Where do you see Indigenous language and what does it signify? Explore the relationship between colonization and language in your community.

Additional References

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