

Crossing a line with Indigenous culture and design

Trent Jansen

I AM A furniture and object designer, so you might think that I design highly functional objects, conceived to enhance our lives through ergonomic considerations or beautification. Looking back through modernist furniture books, it is clear that we have all of the beautiful, functional chairs and lights we could possibly need.

So, instead of re-visiting these same tired criteria, I use the discipline of furniture and object design to communicate ideas that I feel are important.

These objects are often underpinned by narratives that sit on the line between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian culture.

Recently I have begun to work on a series of objects that explore another point of cultural collision in Australia's history. This new furniture collection begins with the stories of mythical creatures told in and around Sydney during the early years of colonisation.

Creatures such as: "the hairy wild man from Botany Bay" – a creature myth that began in England before the First Fleet had even left for Australia; or the bunyip, which is said to have evolved from the yahoo or yowie through a linguistic misunderstanding between Eora people, who thought that bunyip was a British word, and British settlers who thought it to be a local term.

According to Australian author Robert Holden, a fear of creatures like these became a common ground between Aboriginal people and British settlers, and these stories were a point of conversation between individuals from both cultures, a catalyst for personal connections.

Prior to understanding all of this, I put Robert Holden's theories to the test without knowing it. I was staying in Alice Springs on and off for a period when I was introduced to a Western Arrernte man by the name of Baden Williams. Baden took me to his hometown of Hermannsburg and on the way there we got talking about Western Arrernte creatures.

Creatures such as: *Nyipi barnti*, who has a pungent smell, like sweat, dust and ochre and is known for abducting young women; or the creature that captured my imagination most of all, *pankalangu*.



Trent Jansen (R), with Western Arrernte man Baden Williams (L)

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Greg Lehman

According to Western Arrernte story telling, *pankalangu* is a territorial being that lives in the scrub and is completely camouflaged in the desert and bush. *Pankalangu* can only move with the rain, and is made visible when the light catches the rain that falls on him, defining his form in a glistening silhouette.

I hope these narratives will once again become part of the common myths associated with Australian identity, perpetuating an identity that is inclusive of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture.

I have received cutting criticism for this approach. I have been called a carpetbagger, and told that I am using these culturally sensitive stories for my own benefit. As a result, I've

thought very carefully about surrendering and leaving this sometimes controversial subject for others to address.

Perhaps this is not my line to cross, but then whose line is it to cross? Individuals from one side or the other must be the first to act.

Is this a division that I want to perpetuate through inaction? Or is this a line that I can help to dissolve?

As a non-Indigenous Australian, I have developed a love and deep respect for Indigenous Australian cultures through research, my projects and through involving myself with these cultures. I now understand some of the beauty and mysticism associated with the ancient traditions of the hundreds of Indigenous nations, occupying this continent for millennia before my Oma and Opa arrived from Holland on a boat in the 1950s.

If I can share this love and fascination with my audience, perhaps they can cross this cultural line with me.

I think that Indigenous visual art historian Greg Lehman put it best:

"White Australians cannot continue to place Aboriginal culture on a shelf, afraid to touch it. This only cements the divide that already exists between white and Indigenous Australians. It is important for people from all backgrounds – artists, musicians, designers etc. to respectfully take Aboriginal culture into their own expressions of culture, and communicate these ideas to new audiences."

Only then will this divide begin to disintegrate and only then will Aboriginal culture be loved and embraced by the mainstream.

I will continue to cross the cultural line between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian culture, and will encourage others to cross it too. Hopefully all of the foot-traffic crossing this line in both directions will abolish the divide. ○

This article originally appeared on news website The Conversation, and was republished with the author's permission. Designer Trent Jansen recently spoke about this subject on Friday November 14, as part of the Australian Design Biennale at MONA, Hobart.