



Safe keeping

A deep respect for working with the holders of cultural permissions is at the heart of Katie Breckon's *Safe Keeping* project.

In 2015 I bought my first property, a four-hectare bush block on Warrwa Country outside of Derby township in the Kimberley. The previous property owner was a well-known Kimberley character, Vic Cox. Cox was an avid sailor and crocodile hunter living much of his life exploring the Kimberley coastline through Bardi Jawi and Woddordda (Worrorra) territories. In 1987, he famously retrieved the body of American model Ginger Meadows from a tidal creek after a saltwater crocodile attacked her at Cascade Falls.

It seemed every Derby local had a story about Vic Cox, including Woddordda Elder and artist Yorna (Donny) Woolagoodja, who remembers the second-hand six-metre sailboat Cox gave to his family.

'Vic Cox respected my father. He gave that boat as a present to my father, Sam Woolagoodja... Windsong was a good-sized boat without any motor, just a sail. I did two trips with my father... I was about sixteen or seventeen and I was learning about sailing, using the tides and the Country.'
Yorna Woolagoodja

When we acquired the Savannah Way property, it had been several years since Cox died, and as first homeowners we were naive about the workload required to sort through and clear his belongings. Cox was a bowerbird. Strewn throughout his property, we found a mixture of keepsakes, junk and usable materials archived into piles overflowing and sharing space with the advancing Kimberley wildlife.

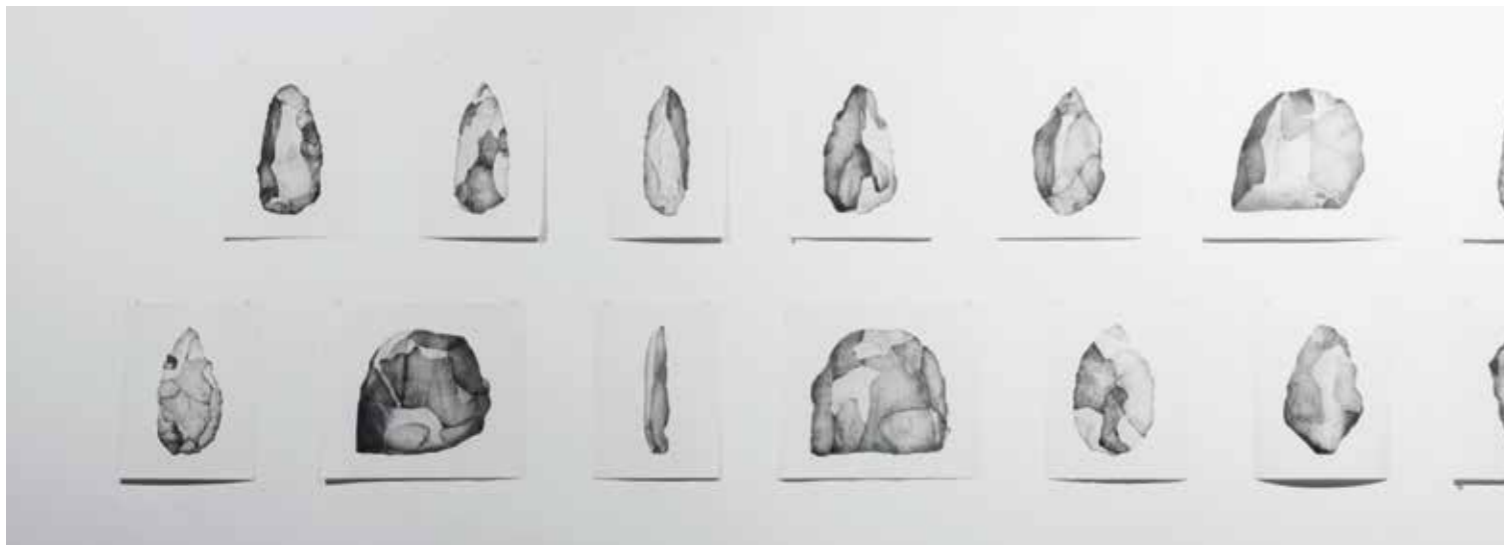
Sorting through his sheds, I found an extensive collection of stone tools. Although many of the tools looked rough and unfinished, they bore distinctive flake scars on their surfaces, indicating someone had shaped the stone by hand. Cox had labelled some of the stone tools with the place and date of collection indicating Strickland Bay and Shoals Bay in Dambimangari Country, home to Woddordda people.

In 2012, several years before acquiring the property, I moved to Derby to begin a new job at Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre. My role was to establish a keeping place for materials and recordings of cultural significance to Woddordda, Ngarinyin,



(left)
 Katie Breckon preparing printing plates at Baldessin Press.
 Photography: Silvi Glattauer

(opposite)
 The printing plates were laid out in the bush around the property which is mostly native bush.
 Photography: Katie Breckon



(above left)
Yorna Woolagoodja and Matthew Martin
 look through the Vic Cox Worrorra stone tool collection to select which stones will go on permanent display in the Mowanjum Museum.
 Photography: Katie Breckon

(above right)
Katie Breckon, Worrorra stone tool,
 2017, monoprint on 350gsm Hahnemuhle paper, 78 x 106cm, edition US 1/1.
 Reproduced with permission of the artist.
 Photography: Katie Breckon



(top)
 On display at PS Art Space, Fremantle, a series of small prints show the variation of Worrorra stone tools in the Vic Cox Collection. 2018.
 Photography: Bo Wong

Wunambal and Gaambera peoples. Elders called the keeping place Dolord Mindi (the deep cave). While caring for materials in the Mowanjum Collection, I regularly accessed stone tools deemed non-restricted through a consultation process with cultural advisors. Stone tools considered restricted were boxed and labelled by the appropriate people and I did not access them. We set up this process to protect all arts workers from seeing something 'mamaa'. Mamaa is a word commonly used in Woddordda and Ngarinyin languages to describe something that can be dangerous and therefore is out of bounds. These places or things are culturally sensitive and usually have special protocols for who can look, touch, speak for and listen to stories or recordings about these things. I feared that any number of stone tools on our property could be mamaa. Over time living in the Kimberley, I heard stories of people becoming sick or tormented by materials they acquired. I felt uncomfortable having the Woddordda stone tools on our property without knowing their provenance or intended purpose.

I invited Woddordda Elders and friends Yorna Woolagoodja and Janet Oobagooma to visit the property to see the stone tools. Geologist Joh Bornman and anthropologist Kim Doohan, who work with Woolagoodja and Oobagooma on heritage protection surveys, also came to see the collection. They determined the stones were not mamaa, but domestic tools for hunting, harvesting and food preparation. Many were unfinished and discarded by the makers.

With the stone tools spread in front of us, our conversation turned to the prevalent unauthorised and undocumented removal of artefacts from Aboriginal cultural sites. Removing cultural materials erases evidence and changes how one reads the landscape. Clearing sites can jeopardise heritage protection efforts and the teaching and learning of cultural stories.

'Our Countries are full of objects and special sites that were created by our ancestors. When they are taken, they lose their meaning. Taking one stone can change the story for our landscape and remove a piece of our culture. They need to stay where they are... Some rocks and stones might not look significant, but they are very important to the descendants of the people who worked them.'
Mowanjum Museum, Vic Cox Collection display²

'Stone tools have long been collected, or taken, by scientists in the study of people and place. Archaeological collection stores around the world are full of these displaced objects. These are however, far more than just objects, they are important cultural tools that emanate with the energies of ancestors, of ceremony and of song. Embedded within each tool are both archaeological and cultural histories, they hold stories of this continent and its First Peoples.'
Curator Glenn Iseger-Pilkington³

As tourism and mining industries continue to access Australia's most remote and significant sites, how do custodians protect their cultural heritage? Rangers and traditional landowners warn us not to take anything from Country, but do we hear their message?

The *Safe Keeping* series questions the unauthorised removal of stone tools from Aboriginal keeping places and shares educational messages from Wandjina Wunggurr peoples explaining how they expect us to behave in their Countries.

If a visitor to our Country finds a stone tool in the bush, what should they do?

If people find something, it should be left where it is. Take a location of where it is, contact the local rangers and they will go there and put it in a safe place. It must

stay on Country, because that is where it came from.

(Pete Myadooma O'Connor, Woddordda)
 Just leave it and move on. Don't touch it.
(Steven Puemorra, Wunambal)

Don't touch. Seek advice. Seek permission from the traditional owners of the place you are on.
(Gordon Smith Jnr, Ngarinyin)

Put it back where you found it and let everyone know not to pick it up.
(Edmund, Woddordda /Ngarinyin)

They shouldn't take it, what was left there from the old folks who died, just leave it there.

(Janet Oobagooma, Woddordda)
 Leave it where it is
(Maitland Ngerdu, Woddordda)

'It's like going into someone else's house and taking their belongings. Do not touch what is in our Country. What is there is meant to stay there.'
(PB, Woddordda)

Why do people remove rocks, stones, cultural materials from the landscape without permission? Do we feel entitled to keep what we find? Do we think these things are unclaimed because they are not boxed, photographed and accessioned?

Caves are living archives and invite the same respect and care. We do not walk into museum archives and help ourselves; there are protocols and processes and people who oversee the space. It is much the same in Wandjina Wunggurr cultural sites. Woddordda artist Leah Umbagai once shared with me that Traditional Owners have a duty of care over their Country and the people who visit it. Aboriginal ranger groups in the Kimberley support the monitoring and protection of cultural sites and occasionally hide cultural materials deeper in caves and crevasses, making them less visible and vulnerable to theft.

“Rock art shelters and caves are like our library; they show us younger people what has happened, what is in the country. It gives us hope for our future generations.”
Leah Umbagai⁴

Looking over the stone tools with Yorna Woolagoodja at Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, Ngarinyin songman, Matthew Martin said, ‘These spearheads are for survival. These things here belong to life. They saved lives. If they didn’t make tools, they would spear nothing, and they wouldn’t have lived. We made spearheads for survival.’

My experience is, if invited by Traditional Owners, then we will be guided and physically and spiritually protected, our learning will be more profound and authentic. With the permission of Yorna Woolagoodja and Janet Oobagooma, I began to look closely at the construction and craftsmanship visible in the rocks. The collection’s domestic nature meant there were no concerns about drawing the stones. They were described as knives and forks by Neil Carter, the cultural heritage officer at Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC). Carter reiterated Mathew Martin’s sentiments that the tools were functional materials that demonstrate the ingenuity which allowed traditional Aboriginal society to sustain itself. I asked Carter whether the artworks were offensive or disrespectful. He responded that ‘these tools are not sacred and for Katie to be drawing them is no offence’.

As the tools were made by Woddordda people, my artistic representation needed to maintain the tools’ form and integrity. Painting focused my attention on the construction and surface markings, worn scratched and smooth in sections, with strong lines defining each flake scar. I mapped the individual flake scars seen in each stone tool, then cut the shapes out of metal sheets, creating a puzzle. I then scratched the printing plates back into the earth, leaving them exposed in the bush. The salt air and rainwater naturally etched some of the aluminium plates, while kangaroos and other animals investigated the shiny plate surfaces.

With the support of Regional Arts WA, I travelled to Canberra for a two-week residency with printmaker Basil Hall in his Braidwood studio, where I learnt how to print multi-plate monoprints. Hall’s expertise and training gave me the skills and confidence to print independently, which is important to me as an artist.

I printed the *Safe Keeping* series over six weeks at Baldessin Press tucked in the bush above St Andrews country Victoria, a residency supported by Culture and the Arts WA. Using the late George Baldessin’s motorised press, hours of preparation culminated into a few minutes of printing,

back and forth through the press, piece by piece rebuilding each tool, working quickly before the paper dried and cracked. The result was always a surprise, organic, a mapping of the original stone tool.



Vic Cox labelled some stone tools with a place name and date referencing where he found the tools. This tool was found in Strickland Bay in 1997. Photography: Katie Breckon

‘Through the creation of each large-scale etching of a stone tool, Breckon pays tribute to its maker and to the Country from which it heralds. Most importantly, Breckon has worked with custodians in the creation of these works, knowing that she is a visitor, and that even in that role, she too has a responsibility in the safe keeping of the Country she is on, and all that is held within it.’

Curator Glenn Iseger-Pilkington⁵

The *Safe Keeping* exhibition was opened by Wadjuk Noongar cultural advisor Barry McGuire at PS Art Space in Fremantle. McGuire shared with me that the theft of cultural materials was a concern he also experienced. Yorna Woolagoodja approved the actual stone tools travelling to Perth to be displayed alongside the monoprint artworks and community quotes, while McGuire approved their entry and display on his Country. In his opening address, McGuire explained that the tools had travelled from Derby to Perth to deliver an important message and would then return.

Asking permission to make and exhibit the stone tool monoprints was not a one-step process. My approach remains open-ended, allowing Yorna Woolagoodja and Janet Oobagooma space to reconsider their decisions, or for other people to raise questions or concerns throughout the years of production. Woddordda artist Leah Umbagai, who managed the Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, made it clear that if the project were inappropriate, they would have told me so initially. Still, I felt it was important to have broader cultural approvals outside of the Woddordda language group to cross-examine my creative practice and ethical processes. Having never worked creatively with this content before, I felt nervous but encouraged to talk openly about my creative practice, relinquish control, develop relationships and strengthen community engagement and participation.

‘Many artists have looked to Aboriginal Australia for inspiration. Historically, many have done so through the lens of the voyeur, the outsider looking in, which has often resulted in pictorial, social and political misrepresentation. Breckon’s approach is not one of being on the outside. Instead, her important relationships with Worrorra people, her sense of responsibility, and her willingness to be instructed by custodians on doing things the right way, have informed a highly complex body of work.’
Curator Glenn Iseger-Pilkington⁶

When I asked Yorna Woolagoodja what he wanted to do with the Vic Cox Worrorra stone tools, he directed me to deposit them into the Mowanjum Collection stored at Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre. The stones are now in a permanent display, which I co-curated at the new Mowanjum Museum. The display is part of the rock art education space and promotes the *Safe Keeping* ‘leave it where it is’ message to Kimberley visitors, many of whom will embark on camping trips along the Gibb River Road into Wandjina Wunggur Countries. We hope they listen.

Notes

1. Woolagoodja, Yornadaiyn, *Yornadaiyn Woolagoodja*, (Broome: Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, 2020), 113.
2. Cultural Advisory Committee or Mowanjum Cultural Advisory Group, *Wandjina Wunggur: People, Spirit, Culture: They Belong where they are*. (Derby, Western Australia: Mowanjum Art and Culture Centre, 2021).
3. Iseger-Pilkington, Glenn. *Safe Keeping*, exhibition catalogue, (Perth, 2018).
4. Mangolamara, Sylvester; Karadada, Lily; Oobagooma, Janet; Woolagoodja, Donny and Karadada, Jack., *We Are Coming Too See You*, (Perth: Fremantle Press, 2018) 21.
5. Iseger-Pilkington, Glenn. *Safe Keeping* exhibition catalogue, (Perth, 2018).
6. Ibid.

Kate Breckon is an artist, educator and community arts worker living in the West Kimberley region.

