

## Limina: a Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies

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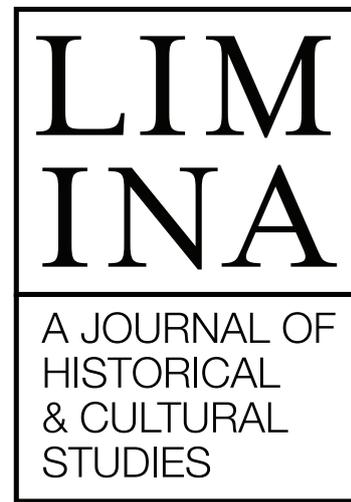
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### Submitting to Limina

Information regarding the journal and how to submit can be found at <https://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/future>.

### Cover Image

UWA Japanese Garden, Perth, Western Australia. Photograph by Rebecca Repper.



**Noris Ioannou, *Vernacular Visions. A Folklife History of Australia: Art, Diversity, Storytelling*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2021; pp. 292; RRP \$79.95 hardback**

Montaigne was the first to define the aesthetic phenomenon of the coffee table book or, rather, its class-conscience predecessor, the parlour window book. Somewhat amused by the philosopher's effete classification, Laurence Sterne, the author of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, would tread a more open minded line in the balance between populism and high-art when he quipped that he wished his book to 'be no less read than the Pilgrim's Progress itself – and, in the end, prove the very thing Montaigne dreaded his Essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour window.' Norris Ioannou's *Vernacular Visions* is a book full of the lush visuals of a standard coffee table tome, a fascinating photographic record of Australian folk art that fulfils every requirement of a handsome display, an easy browse to stimulate the visual imagination on one level. Yet the textual content of *Vernacular Visions* is the result of what Ioannou calls 'elaborate institutional and human highways.' *Vernacular Visions* was written after Ioannou won a Churchill Fellowship to tour the U.S.A, where the academic study of folk art has been established since the 1860s. Turning the lens back to Australia, where scholarship on folk art has only commenced as recently as the 1980s, Ioannou's first concern is to 'dispel persistent and constricting notions around folk art – sometimes called "Australiana".'

The art represented in the book covers an incredible spectrum, from flour sack aprons to the kind of kitschy glazed ceramics from every grandmother's cabinet and garage sale. To Ioannou, folk art is nuanced phenomenon to define. On one hand, while the author admits all art must take influences from the community it comes from, folk art is a form of expression more closely tied to the world of its maker, 'a creative product that flows from the experiences of everyday life.' Though folk art's relation to 'naïve' or 'outsider' art is acknowledged as a type of 'self-taught creativity', it remains apart as a kind of 'social document' that inherently conveys something about stories and standards of the cultures it arises from.

Consider the images throughout *Vernacular Visions* – a mother-of-pearl shell and button-on velvet board rendering of the Australian coat of arms made by a professional pearl diver in 1916; a mixed media diorama of football supporters talking as they use a common urinal after a Richmond game from 1985; a proclamation in five-panel cartoon form issued by Governor Arthur in the late 1820s, meant to threaten the violent consequences of the new colonial law to the First Nation audience that law was being imposed on. The historical context of these individual pieces as they relate to their society provides an 'aesthetic locus' in anthropological terms, or 'a characteristic aesthetic standard specific to each society' which can be identified in 'cultural productions as far-ranging as garden design, architecture, and decorative arts.'

Ioannou's thesis centres on the stories of folk art's producers as much as it deals with theories of anthropology and art-critique. The now-ubiquitous tradition of bush-wood furniture is traced to an enigmatic 19th century bushman, Jimmy Possum, whose style of rough cottage chair is exemplified in the Deloraine district of Tasmania as the 'Jimmy Possum chair'. The original furniture was crafted from locally available materials with minimal tools, but continued in culture and informed new creativity, such as the blue-gum walking sticks of Vic Ridgeway. Ridgeway collected fallen branches from remnant trees on his family farm and the woodland around

Bordertown, South Australia, and seasoned them using European methods to produce distinctly polished pieces with the colours and, sometimes, natural shapes of local woods.

The cultural renaissance of Aboriginal art provides one of the best illustrations in Vernacular Visions of the ways in which folk art cannot be confined within a low-culture estimation often evoked with the term 'Australiana'. Gradually, and with significant resistance at times, the post-colonial works of Australia's First Nation artists, containing motifs of authentic community aesthetics and tradition – yet imbued with the creativity of the individual producer – became accepted as one of the nation's highest expressions of visual art and was launched in the global fine art collectors' market. The post-colonial character of First Nation art is identifiable in both the introduced media, such as canvas and acrylic paint, and the Eurocentric art critics' comparison to 'abstract' and 'primitivist' forms of visual expression. Ioannou argues that First Nation art is often a religious expression in traditional terms, but that 'much of the revival of contemporary Aboriginal art is arguably due to critical political and social pressures caused by colonisation, and with more recent and ongoing issues, including the stolen children generations, Aboriginal deaths in custody, and land rights.' A character is drawn out of First Nation sculpture and painting that is, at once, in the vernacular of its own cultural traditions and a powerful use of artistic voice as an innovative method of protest and testimony.

Vernacular Visions is a coffee table book in aesthetic form and weight (literally – it's about a kilo); and it is also a strong and convincing recommendation for the growth of scholarship on Australian folk art. Ioannou's visual presentation is a mirror of the many worlds present in contemporary Australia, their common and particular creativities. In Vernacular Visions, we see ephemeral moments in culture trapped in the record of cultural artefacts, complimented by the creative quirks of each particular artist – their often obscure and marginal voices are elevated by the power of their works and their stories.

Alan Fyfe

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