

## Art returns Robyn's stolen heart

Before falling asleep, young **robyn mcinerney's** thoughts would drift into the world that lay within an old suitcase beneath her bed. It was here that the threads of her identity were held and the place from which her healing would begin.

### photographs

Jason McIntosh

### text

Jason McIntosh

Always near her side, the crayons, paints and paper inside the suitcase under her bed gave the young Robyn McInerney solace among the unsettling foster homes, orphanages and state care of her childhood.

More than 50 years later, the Charles Darwin University Alice Springs-based Bachelor of Visual Arts student continues to use her formidable artistic talent to expose the crisis of self-identity and to close wounds she accumulated while lost between Indigenous and white worlds.

### below

Robyn McInerney

Born near Oodnadatta, in South Australia's far north, to an Aboriginal mother and white father, Robyn's life was marked by upheaval. She lived with foster families across Australia and Papua New Guinea as a child, moved to Denmark as a young woman with her then husband, and many years later returned to her roots in Central Australia.

Robyn's recent exhibition in Alice Springs, titled "Shattered lives", attracted local acclaim, but beneath the vibrant paintings and sculpture was a woman trying to reconcile her past. It followed an earlier exhibition, titled "Bucket and brush", which represented the punishment of cleaning toilets while in children's homes.

"When I first did the installation I was crying inside, but as I continued with it I realised it made me feel good about myself," she said.

Her story echoes those of many Indigenous Australians who have been caught in the abyss between black and white cultures. Robyn's life of upheaval started when she was an infant and placed in the United Aboriginal Mission at Oodnadatta. At age six, she and three siblings were taken from the town and sent to a foster family in Adelaide.

But when her foster parents announced that they were expecting a child of their own, Robyn was removed. Her new world within Evangelistic Baptist families saw her move up the eastern states and later to a Christian Aviation Mission at Daru in Papua New Guinea. One of her clearest memories here was of propeller planes roaring in. She was now 11.

"The locals used to tell me they were 'mixmaster belong-em gods' in their pigeon English, named after the kitchen beaters," she said. "I remember my age because they gave me a Bible for Christmas and it was dated 1960," she said.

Handed to yet another white PNG-based foster family, Robyn was soon returned to New South Wales at short notice. Literally dumped in the state, she was taken on by the government.



“I got so institutionalised,  
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**right**  
An early record of  
Robyn McInerney's identity

“I didn't want to go back to Adelaide because it wasn't my home, so the courts declared I was a ward of NSW,” she said.

After another round of children's homes, Robyn was sent to a Sydney reformatory where she found solace without either foster parents or religion dictating her life.

“I felt free from a family unit where I didn't belong and had friends that became my siblings,” she said. “I got so institutionalised, I cried when I left because I liked the routine and felt a sense of belonging, but the other kids thought I was crazy wanting to stay because they were trying anything to get out.”

Many years later, Robyn gained access to government files that revealed a trail of lies about her background and heritage. “That really hurt me to think these people wrote these things that weren't true about who I was and where I was from. It really tore me apart,” she said.

“They warned me not to read it on my own because it was so full of lies and I was so depressed about that because half the time they just made it up.”

With no record of her birth and the use of adopted family names during her schooling, Robyn has always struggled for identity. “They gave me a certificate of citizenship that migrants get when they come to the country and I think, you know, I've been living here all of my life with an Aboriginal mother which is a total insult,” she said.



At age 18 she finally escaped when she met and married a Dane, but this also involved another battle through the court system with the help of Aboriginal Legal Aid. “The government gave me permission to marry and I was off,” she said.

After living in Denmark for seven years and mastering Danish, Robyn said her anxieties grew and she took the tough decision to return to Australia. Soon after, she met her mother in Alice Springs following a 20-year separation – a momentous occasion she cherishes. “My mother has now passed away, but when I walk the (Todd River) bridge to university I feel that she is there,” she said.

After flirting with various careers, Robyn said studying for a Bachelor of Visual Arts at CDU was giving her a “way forward” and helps her to share her stories with others.

She said it was equally important for traditional Aboriginal people to understand the stolen generation just as it was the wider society. “It's great when they come in from the communities because many relate to being downtrodden, but they don't always understand the stolen generation,” she said.

Robyn is inspired by the likes of painter Richard Bell and photographer Tracy Moffat who can carry their messages so well. “It inspired me to tell my story and I was so happy to see others appreciate and admire my work,” she said. “It's part of my healing process that makes me stronger.”

This new strength will help Robyn to face her memories as she visits her birthplace after more than 50 years. “My last dream is to go home and I feel my life is complete and it will make up for all the years I was away; like the last piece of my life's jigsaw.

“My life will be complete when I return home,” she said.

