

PITT RIVERS: INSPIRING THE CREATIVE



John Cairns/University of Oxford Images

Transcription of an interview with Christian Thompson, graduate in Fine Art, undertaking doctoral studies at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art

'I really did not know where I was going and what I was going to do next, and for some reason I just stumbled upon the Charlie Perkins foundation offering scholarships for Aboriginal people to go to Oxford University, and I had a little light-bulb moment and thought, "That's where the Pitt Rivers Museum collection is."

I was invited to do a project there which is part of an art grant looking at the repatriation of Australian photographs from European collections. I am making work and exhibiting it while I am studying. So I feel as though I am actually making a real and material and tangible contribution to the living culture of Oxford University – a very critical contribution that artists can make, stimulating ideas in other areas and getting people to perhaps feel things, rather than just always thinking of them.

I am not a researcher in the sort of formal sense of the word. It is much more about the experience, and you have to render yourself free of those kinds of expectations and just allow the collection to become part of your experience, and consequently

part of your art. The curator, Christopher Morton, said, "Do you want these images on CD? You can have them to look at whenever you want." I thought, "No", I would rather just come in and look through the folders intermittently and just spend an intense period of time with them.

For me, I think the fact that I am here on this scholarship, and that I am an Aboriginal person at Oxford University today, and that the collection is here, is not an accident. I think that I am here for a reason. I think artists play a very important role in the spiritual repatriation of these collections. The uncanny nature of the work, I hope that can actually provoke people in positive ways. For me, it is still quite sobering to think that I live in a generation where there still can be 'firsts'. Hopefully the presence of both Paul and myself as the first inaugural Charlie Perkins Scholars, and also the growing indigenous cohort at Oxford University, will send a very strong message back home that these realms are not impossible for us to be part of, and in fact there is a place for us in this conversation and on an international stage.'

To view the video interview visit: www.ox.ac.uk/annual-review