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Craft ACT's Mel George receives Indigenous Fellowship for MFA at NIDA

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The National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney is, as its name suggests, best known as a theatrical training school. But it was recently given a \$300,000 grant by the Luminis Foundation intended, in part, to assist Indigenous creative professionals undertaking a Master of Fine Arts in Cultural Leadership at NIDA.

The fellowship, which will be awarded annually for six years to an Indigenous student undertaking that MFA at NIDA, will fund 50 per cent of the fees for the course. It will develop entrepreneurial and advocacy skills to drive innovation, inclusion, growth and sustainability across the cultural sectors. The money has also been used to build the Luminis Foundation Director's Studio, a black box teaching space for NIDA's MFA students in directing.

Canberra glass artist and curator Mel George is very honoured to receive the inaugural Luminis Foundation Indigenous Fellowship for Cultural Leadership. She was selected by arts advocates Robyn Archer, the chairwoman of MFA Cultural Leadership, and associate professor Cheryl Stock, director of graduate studies and head of cultural leadership.

"I'll be studying 30 months part time for my masters degree at NIDA," George, 41, says. She'll be able to keep working in Canberra and do most of the work online: since the students are from all over Australia, the course is structured so they come together four times a year at NIDA for instruction and "unbelievable" networking opportunities and George hopes it will have a positive wide-reaching, long-term, effect on Australian cultural policies.

Of Aboriginal and Greek heritage, George was born in Canberra and says she became interested in art as a career through an inspiring teacher. Lyn Nolan, at Narrabundah College.

"She encouraged me to apply to art school."

George was attracted to glass, seeing it as a metaphor for the fragility for the human condition, and studied at the Glass Workshop at the ANU School of Art.

"After I graduated I went overseas ... for more than 10 years and worked in glass," she says. She spent eight of those years co-owning and operating Studio Ramp LLC, an artist atelier in Portland.

She returned to Canberra to become the artistic program manager at Canberra Glassworks in 2009 where she was involved in several artistic programs such as the Gallery Program, Artist in Residency Program, Artist Access Program and the Educational Program. During her time there she became a Member of the Advisory Board of the ACT Indigenous Textile Artists Group and orchestrated many projects for the group to engage and learn a new medium for the communication of their stories and cultures.

In 2013 George moved to her current position at Craft ACT. For the past year and a half she has also provided gratis consulting for Bula' Bula Arts Centre, Ramingining, in the Northern Territory and spent time with the makers in the arts centre to deepen her understanding of the skills and aesthetics of the Yolngu people. She is now also the cultural facilitator there and plans to study and be immersed in the Ramingining community to develop deeper understandings of the fusion of contemporary Yolgnu artists engaged in their traditional cultural storytelling.

George has exhibited nationally and internationally. Among the highlights of her artistic career, she says, have been receiving the Stephen Proctor Fellowship in 2013 from the Glass Workshop, which she used to travel to Istanbul, Venice and Rome to study mosaics, and being included in the Parliament House collection two years ago, having her work alongside that of Ben Quilty and Pro Hart.

She has work in the exhibition *Refraction* now on at Beaver Galleries.

Although this is the first year of the Indigenous fellowship, the cultural leadership course is in its second year.

"There's a diverse range of people," George says.

"There are 16 of us in the course."

The disciplines of the participants include opera, ballet, theatre and festival design. Among the group are another Indigenous woman, Merindah Donnelly, who runs contemporary Indigenous dance body BlakDance and another Canberran, Samuel Moynihan, who trained and performed with Canberra Youth Theatre and other Canberra theatre companies.

He works with forum theatre group Mind Blank. It performs at schools in the ACT region, engaging students by presenting real-life scenarios that teenagers deal with to help safeguard their mental health through audience participation in order to change the outcome of what they are seeing. Moynihan is also involved in multiple sclerosis advocacy. He was diagnosed with MS himself and writes a blog aimed at young people with MS. He says, "I'm excited to explore advocacy through the arts."

For the last six months of the 30-month masters program students will be helped to find an international placement to gain further experience. Moynihan says he will go either to South America, where forum theatre originated, or the New York City's Theatre of the Oppressed.

George is not sure where she will travel yet.

"I'd love to do something in a place like Dubai," she says - the fusion of indigenous craft and design with a contemporary edge there appeals to her. But she has plenty of time to decide and plenty to do in the meantime during this exciting period.

This story was found at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/content/adaptive/canberratimes/act-news/canberra-life/craft-acts-mel-george-receives-indigenous-fellowship-for-mfa-at-nida-20170126-gtzcyh.html>