'Soft Power' and *Temporal Legacies*

Tony Birch, 2025

Imagine the political strength and creative genius of the artists present in *Temporal Legacies*. Consider, for instance, the works of Cassie Sullivan and Jenna Lee, two First Nations women 'speaking truth to power'; power that is both corrupt and pervasive. We live in a time of colonial violence, with a frightening legacy in Australia, the site of the illegal occupation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land. Country is under constant threat of destruction by extractive and other capitalist ventures with no serious concern for the destruction of ecological systems or the communities that live with Country.

In 2025 we are also living in what the Aboriginal activist, Robbie Thorpe, has long reminded us, is *a crime scene*. His is not a melodramatic or political claim. It is a statement of truth, speaking out against attacks on the basic human rights of our people. More of our children are being incarcerated, sometimes in adult prisons, than any other period in the colonial history of this place – *Australia*. The rate of deaths in custody is a horror that all Aboriginal people are forced to consider, constantly confronting the spectre of violence that haunts our communities.

There is nothing subtle about colonial violence. A sledgehammer is a sledgehammer. And yet, what Cassie Sullivan and Jenna Lee have produced, articulating their authority as First Nations women, are works of quiet and courageous dignity. Sullivan's 'a spectral, a chronicle (ii)' and 'to collect with holes in your basket (i)' are also acts of defiance. On first appearance her sculptural works bring to mind delicacy, a sense of fragility, a misleading notion. Imagine (again) an Aboriginal nation, a community, a First Nations' woman under threat of violence, and suffering *real* violence. Imagine (also) the hubris of a colonial occupier unwilling to accept it's inability to crush opposition to its project of destruction of people and Country.

With this imaginative provocation in mind, Sullivan's creations become unbreakable, simply by the fact that they were made. They exist as a legacy, the literal proof of colonial failure. We all know the story, even those of us who have chosen to forget it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should not exist. Cassie Sullivan should not exist. Her beautiful works should not exist. But they do. She does. We do Likewise, Jenna Lee, through her works, 'Living' and 'Still Light' avoids taking a sledgehammer to a sledgehammer. The work she has produced is the more powerful for this. Lee has always understood the power of seeming subtlety to answer back, to stake a claim, to articulate the cultural authority of sovereignty.

A much misunderstood and often abused term, sovereignty is not a token, a set of glass beads granted in exchange for stealing Country. Sovereignty is an embodied experience. It is a statement of agency. Each of the artists involved in *Temporal Legacies* assert their sovereignty with their work. But they also do so through their identities. By this, don't be mistaken. These artists are not on display. They are not articulating an essentialist version of *Aboriginality*, to satisfy the white gaze. These remarkable people are *activists* in the true sense of the work. Their works are acts of First Nations speech.