

# ARTS

Film Cris Kennedy

## Revelation at dry lake

**T**here is much that is fascinating for those of the filmic persuasion about the documentary *Message from Mungo*, screening this weekend at Palace Cinemas. Firstly, it is wonderful that a locally produced documentary did turn-away business at the recent Stronger Than Fiction Film Festival, prompting Palace to offer an encore season.

The film itself is interesting for a number of reasons, from the long gestation of the production, the meticulous consultation of the filmmakers, the Canberra connections in its story and then the subject matter itself – the revelatory uncovering of Mungo Lady in 1968 and her role in smashing existing Western concepts of Australian history.

When a team of Australian National University archaeologists, working at Lake Mungo in south-western New South Wales, identified human remains that erosion had uncovered, they started a discussion that

***Message From Mungo* (G) screens on Friday, September 19, at 6.30pm and Sunday, September 21, at 1pm at Palace Electric Cinemas.**

changed traditional ideas of Aboriginal history, especially its longevity, suggesting the female remains were 40,000 years old.

While the academic world was having its mind blown, with car-loads of scientists arriving at the ancient lake-bed to mine the treasure-trove of archaeological “evidence”, the traditional owners of the area (and long before that term would come into common use in the vernacular) were quietly unsettled at the unwanted intrusion on what they considered sacred.

“Mungo Lady was not discovered; she surfaced,” says Ann McGrath, a Professor of History and Director of the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the ANU, and co-director of *Message From Mungo*,



Landscape wonders: Unusual silcrete formations on the “Walls of China” at Lake Mungo.

“and such a statement underlines the different perspectives between scientists and indigenous custodians. “For scientists, the human remains are evidence about human origins, but for many indigenous people, the remains are those of someone they feel is a relative,” McGrath says, “like an old aunty who has just recently passed away and whose remains are being disturbed.”

Working with noted Canberra filmmaker Andrew Pike, they aim with their film to balance these two very different perspectives on Australia's past.

This film is about a defining moment in

Australia's past, marking the life of someone who was a modern human, yet lived so long ago – approximately 42,000 years ago – challenging the idea that Australian history began in 1788.

McGrath thought film would be the medium to open up Mungo Lady's story to as wide an audience as possible, but also to open up the minds of many who may not realise the breadth of Australian history.

“There's a thirst to learn more about Australia's history, yet despite all the great work done by historians in recent decades, Australian history still gets taught as a story

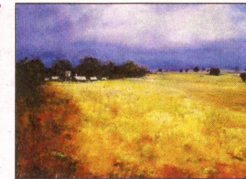


## EXHIBITION

**BUNGENDORE FINE ART:  
LIGHT ON THE LANDSCAPE.**

Vivien Pinder aims to capture the essence of the landscape in an impressionistic manner. Until September 30. Open daily, 10am-4.30pm, 42 Ellendon Street, Bungendore. Ph: 6238 1640.

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that started in 1788," she says. As a collaborator on the project, McGrath couldn't have chosen a better partner than Andrew Pike, whose company Ronin Films has both produced and distributed some of Australia's pioneering documentaries exploring the history and ethnography of our part of the world, from his own Papua New Guinea film *Man Without Pigs* to the works of maverick doco makers like Denis O'Rourke and Bob Connolly.

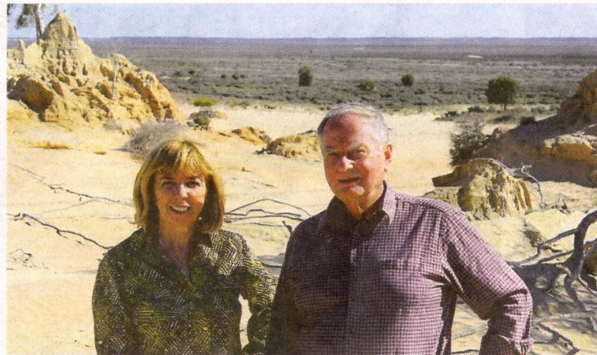
Ronin Films has a long history championing the works of indigenous filmmakers or those by Western filmmakers on indigenous subjects – Pike released John Pilger's film *The Secret Country*.

"Andrew has been a great collaborator as he's so experienced in filmmaking, so patient and further – he's trained as a historian, so he 'gets it' in terms of this gap in Australia's history telling," McGrath says. Pike's involvement explains the different approach to contemporary documentary practice the pair decided on for their film, with a bare minimum of archival footage or music.

"Throughout we saw consultation as vital to our filmmaking process," Pike says.

"We wanted to differentiate our project from most other films about Mungo, not only in the story we were telling, but in how we were telling our story – told entirely by the participants, with the structure evolving in response to their stories and their experiences."

Among the many archaeological finds the Lake Mungo area has given up, the filmmakers concentrate on the one story – Mungo Lady, identified in 1968 by scientist



Jim Bowler and archaeologist Rhys Jones.

She had been given some form of ritual cremation, proving the area was home to culture and society tens of thousands of years before the Egyptians or the Mayans or those other civilisations history had considered great or ancient.

While academia worked on the find, three remarkable Aboriginal women – Alice Kelly, Tibby Briar and Alice Bugmy – with encouragement from archaeologist Isabel McBryde, began a vocal challenge to the work of the scientific community. Aboriginal groups became increasingly involved in the management of archaeological work, and the site, and eventually a handing back of the Mungo Lady remains occurred.

The film chronicles the long journey of evolving understanding across a range of complex issues – who owns Mungo Lady, who

**Filmmakers:**  
**Co-directors**  
**Andrew Pike**  
**and Ann**  
**McGrath on**  
**location at**  
**Lake Mungo.**

side to the story being told, with the story of the ANU as a hub of scientific excitement in archaeology in the '60s and early '70s, and with many well-known Canberra identities including John Mulvaney, McBryde and Wilfred Shawcross interviewed for the film.

The film is also a story of the region's indigenous people and their own sense of identity. "Indigenous people from around the area feel passionately about the people who lived in the Lake Mungo area," McGrath says. "For them, Lady Mungo had important messages for Australians of all backgrounds – not an object for science, but an important actor in her own right, and one who surfaced for a reason."

"What was obvious as we began recording these oral histories," Pike says, "was that for the indigenous communities, the emotion over Mungo Lady was intense because they were discovering family histories and new ways of seeing themselves. As one young indigenous man, Gary Pappin, says in the film, 'Mungo Lady gave us a voice – and we're using it'."

