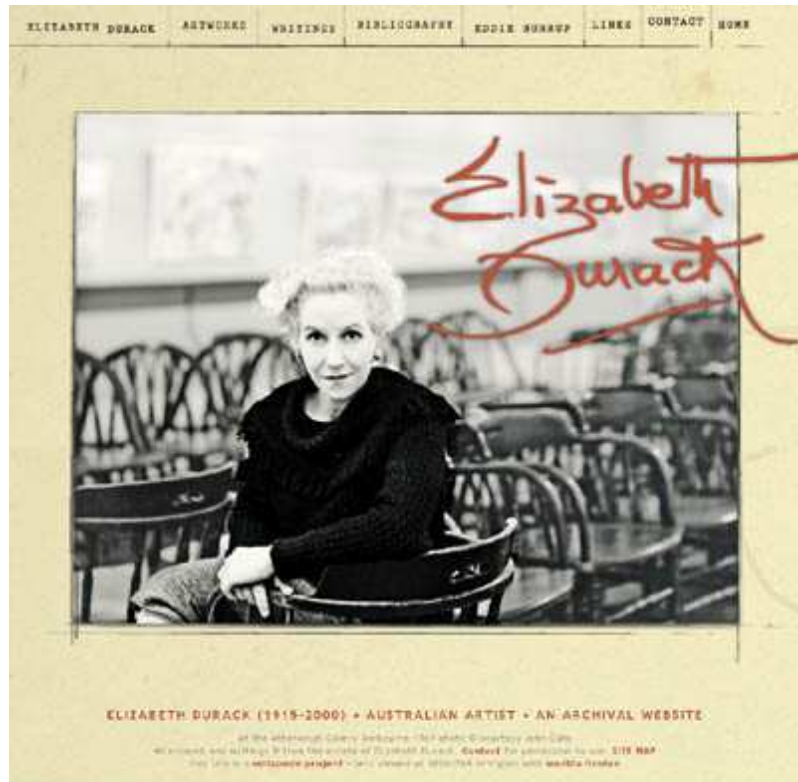


## Giving the Past a Future: Internet Archives Revive Australian Art

By Frank Campbell, on 26-Sep-2009

**An infinity of archival websites is dedicated to public culture, from obscure TV programs to extinct rock stars as well as cultural titans like Mozart and Picasso. Yet here we are, a decade into the internet era, with few websites dedicated to Australian artists.**



The front page of [www.ElizabethDurack.com](http://www.ElizabethDurack.com)

I'm not referring to living painters, who routinely maintain commercial websites, but to artists of the past. The Ian Fairweather Project, Artistsfootsteps.com and Drysdale site are exceptions, but where are the Ellis Rowans, Counihans, Clarice Becketts and Max Meldrums?

There's plenty of fragmentary information on the famous, but most artists are consigned to internet oblivion. Taste is fickle. The certitudes of the present capsize without warning. In Germaine's *Women Artists in Australia* (1991) for instance, Rosalie Gascoigne rates ten lines whereas others, already forgotten, fill a page.

Archival websites are by their very nature labours of love. So it is with a new website devoted to the life and work of Elizabeth Durack (1915-2000), created by her children Perpetua and Michael. Yet [elizabethdurack.com](http://elizabethdurack.com) is not a mere perpetuation of the memory of Elizabeth. The great controversy over Eddie Burrup, Durack's invention of the 1990s, is presented in detail. The site is naturally partisan, but references are given to all the hostile responses. Burrup purported to be an aboriginal elder painting in a unique style.

Critical acclaim was followed by outrage when Durack revealed she was Burrup in 1997. Was it cultural appropriation, satire or homage to aboriginal culture? Possibly all three, but Burrup can be seen as a logical extension of Durack's life-long immersion in the

marginal world of black-white contact. The Durack family of pastoralists pioneered the Kimberley and both Elizabeth and her sister Mary (*Kings in Grass Castles*) revealed the strange raffish life of north-western towns, stations and camps with insight and affection.

It's the fate of artists who cannot be classified by the art establishment to be marginalised, and Durack has always resisted categorisation. As the art critic Patrick Hutchings said in 1981, Durack was a "flexible, versatile, persistent" talent.

Outside the conventions of "national" art, she was at once isolated in Western Australia and liberated by it. The faintly disparaging "regional" label will probably fade in time. Durack's superb figural draughtsmanship will always command attention, but the essence of her art is the human condition. There's no question that at her best she captures the indomitable spirit of aboriginal people in a harsh new world.

The Durack website is a useful template for others to use. There's a wide-ranging bibliography covering interviews, exhibitions, books, articles, reviews and catalogues. One hopes that many more Durack paintings and drawings are posted over time, and that Durack's *oeuvre* is explained in an art historical context. That will take time and also an open mind. Such websites should ideally invite comment and criticism. This generates interest and reinterpretation. In the future, one can imagine fertile connections being made with other artists' websites. Noel Counihan and Russell Drysdale come to mind.

### About The Author

After an academic career in Australian history, economics and architecture, Frank Campbell turned to fine art. For fifteen years

he reviewed books, many on art, for The Australian. He has observed the art market worldwide for the last twenty years and one day will tell all. He now authenticates paintings.

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