

# Vault™

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AUS \$24.95 / NZ \$29.95





MARGINS · COLLECTOR PROFILE

# BÉRENGÈRE PRIMAT

Bérengère Primat has one of the largest collections of Australian Indigenous art in Europe, yet considers herself more ‘enthusiast’ or ‘advocate’ than traditional collector. Fondation Opale, established in 2018, is based on Primat’s collection of over 1,500 works by nearly 350 artists, making it one of the world’s largest collections of contemporary Aboriginal artists in private ownership – and the sole foundation in Europe dedicated to promoting Australian Indigenous art.

WRITTEN *by* GRACE SANDLES

## Is there an artwork that started it all and if so, what was it?

It all started in 2002 when I saw the exhibition *Wati, the Larw Men* in a small art gallery in Paris. I purchased two artworks from the exhibition – a work on bark titled *Mimih Spirit with Spear and Woomera, Snake and Yam* (2000) by Jack Larrangai, and *Snake Dreaming* (1996) by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri. I still have these artworks in my collection and I’m still enjoying them after all these years! A few months later, I flew to Alice Springs with the French gallerist who held the exhibition, and he introduced me to several artists and their families. It was the beginning of a new life for me.

**Did you set out to collect art without a specific focus and find your passion for Australian Indigenous art, or did you start your collection with that focus in mind?**



I never thought of collecting anything and I didn’t develop my collection with any real awareness. It grew naturally, following encounters with Indigenous artists and their families. I was lucky enough to live with some of them and I wanted to keep memories of those moments, so I bought the artworks they painted, sang and danced while I was with them.

**What is it about Australian Indigenous art that captivated you initially? Has that evolved or changed as you add to your collection, or has the central cohesive thread remained consistent?**

I asked myself why I had been so moved by these works, and I think I recognised a part of myself in them – my humanity, and our unity as human beings. I’m fascinated by the power of these works and the knowledge they convey. Even if as uninitiated persons we can’t fully comprehend the works, there’s a vital energy that we can feel.

*“I asked myself why I had been so moved by these works, and I think I recognised a part of myself in them – my humanity, and our unity as human beings. I’m fascinated by the power of these works and the knowledge they convey.”*



All images  
Installation view  
*HIGH FIVE!*, 2023-24  
Fondation Opale,  
Lens, Switzerland  
Photo: Yorick  
Chassigneu

Courtesy Fondation  
Opale, Switzerland

Opposite  
JACK LARRANGAI  
*Mimih with spear  
and woomera,  
snake and yam*, 2000  
natural ochres on bark  
112 x 62 cm  
© Fondation Opale,  
Switzerland / Vincent  
Girier Dufournie

Courtesy Fondation  
Opale, Switzerland

Page 120,  
top to bottom  
Installation view  
*HIGH FIVE!*, 2023-24  
Fondation Opale, Lens,  
Switzerland  
Photo: Yorick  
Chassigneu

MICK NAMARARI  
TJAPALTJARRI  
*Snake Dreaming at  
Nyunmanu*, 1996  
acrylic on linen canvas  
61 x 61 x 2.2 cm  
© Fondation Opale,  
Switzerland / Vincent  
Girier Dufournier

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Portrait of  
Bérengère Primat  
Photo: Olivier Maire

**Do you have any favourites from your collection? What’s the most exciting acquisition you’ve made so far?**

I don’t have a favourite, and I like to change the works that hang on the walls of my house – with the exception of a very large painting by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri in my bedroom, which keeps revealing new motifs and sometimes gives me the impression of changing colours.

Two very large collaborative works that were made during a women’s camp and a men’s camp respectively, in June and September 2018 in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, also have a very special meaning for me. We spent two weeks with 35 women in Amata (Tjala Arts) and then 12 men in Fregon (Kaltjiti Arts). Throughout the production of the artworks, the women and men shared songs of their Country in a continuous manner.

**Do you have any dream acquisitions?**

I’m always happy to discover new works or new artists that I can follow in their career. It’s very important for me to help promote the contemporary creations of Indigenous artists. I also follow auctions for the works of certain artists who have unfortunately disappeared.

**What’s your process for collecting art?**

**Do you research and choose a piece or artist then seek out, or is it more spontaneous?**

It’s often more spontaneous than well thought out. As the art world is quite small, I often receive proposals for works, and sometimes I have *coups de coeur* for them!

**Fondation Opale is now five years old.**

**Congratulations! Why did you want to establish the foundation in Lens, Switzerland? Why is it important to have a centre that brings Australian Indigenous art into dialogue with European art?**

Thank you! It’s a succession of coincidences that can’t possibly be coincidences because everything has happened so obviously. The previous foundation, which had built the first building, asked me to lend works from my collection for a 2017 *Country of the Dreaming*. Then, due to a lack of funds, that exhibition became their last and they asked me if I would like to take over the art gallery. A few months later, returning from a trip to the APY Lands with my five children, I accepted the offer and created Fondation Opale in Lens, which is where I live, in the sunny Swiss Alps. The core of my collection and Fondation Opale’s *raison d’être* is Australian Indigenous art, and I think it’s essential not to compare it but still to exhibit it on an equal footing with all other art forms.

This is actually what we’re doing in our current exhibition *HIGH FIVE!* We challenged 26 personalities from the world of Swiss culture – in the broadest sense, including artists, writers, collectors as well as a neuroscientist and a watchmaker – to choose a work of contemporary Aboriginal art from Fondation Opale’s collections, and then to propose a ‘mirror’ artwork of their own – something they had created or that the foundation could borrow. The invitation had only one request: “Surprise us!” There was no



curator, so a principle of open-mindedness was established. The resulting exhibition presents works ranging in size from a few centimetres to large-scale, site-specific installations, exploring the multiplicity of the Swiss guests’ perceptions of Aboriginal art. But the dialogue doesn’t stop there. To respond to the Swiss participants, we called on Daniel Browning, a journalist and artist from the Bundjalung and Kullilli communities. He interviewed most of the Swiss participants, and the transcripts of these interviews have been published in the exhibition catalogue.

**What is your best advice to emerging or established collectors looking to invest in Australian Indigenous art?**

Don’t hesitate any longer! Let this art move you, then read to better understand what the artist who touched you is expressing. In this regard, I don’t think the approach has to be any different to that with works of art and artists from other cultures. This being said, please make sure you find out more about the provenance of the works you’re interested in – you don’t want to end up with works for which the artists weren’t paid fairly. **V**

*HIGH FIVE!* at Fondation Opale features more than sixty works by Australian Indigenous and international artists and runs until April 14, 2024.  
fondationopale.ch