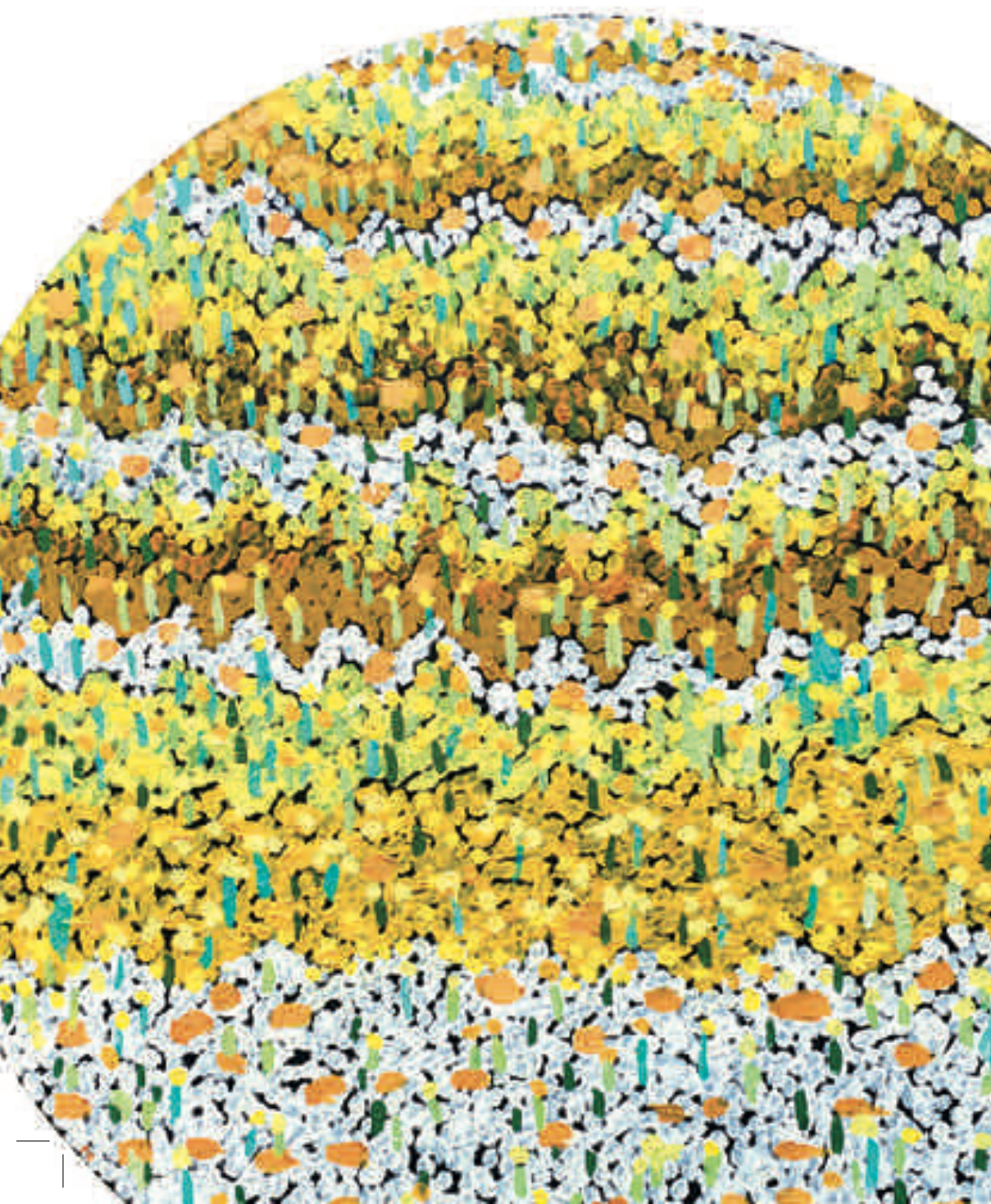


Murnong: Yam Daisies

Deanne Gilson



Deanne Gilson Artist Statement

My name is Deanne Gilson and I am a proud Wadawurrung woman and award winning visual artist of thirty-five years experience. I am currently undertaking a PhD looking at the objectification of Aboriginal women by the male colonial gaze and how this has affected traditional Aboriginal women and what was known as traditional women's business. My recent clay vessels/installations and paintings look at the colonial disruption of family, culture, language and traditional women's practices and how this continues to impact Aboriginal women today. I create contemporary art that assists in healing through a reflective process within my research and art, while at the same time disrupting and challenging the gaze. I aim to highlight and bring back women's business through art practice as research and link this to the revived practice of ceremony.

In this exhibition I pay homage to the murnong or yam daisy as it is also known, and all that it has given my women before and after colonisation. The murnong daisy has become a symbol in recent multi-media artworks and has many deeply sad but also happy meanings for me.

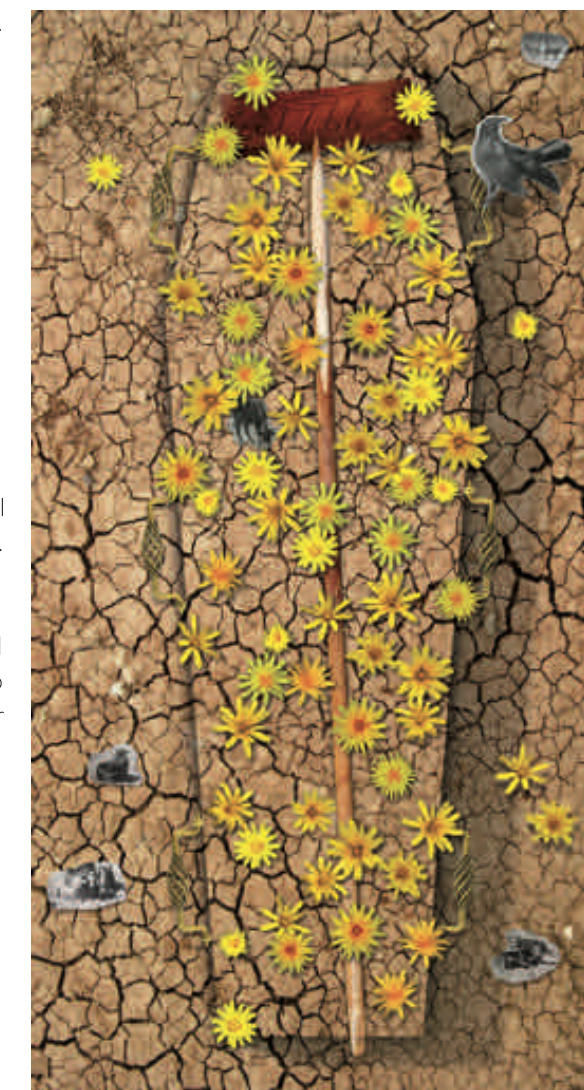
Today as a contemporary Aboriginal woman and artist, I am still being affected by the changes that took place because of colonisation. Through the introduction of the sheep and cattle by the early colonisers, the murnong daisy was quickly eaten up to the point of near extinction. For my ancestral women this meant that a main food source was unavailable for their children and family

and the women had to rely on other means to survive. Through this period many of my women died, were placed into missions and became workers for white settlement families. This led to the breakdown of the traditional Aboriginal family, and a new fractured family was to become the norm for my people.

Today, I am a descendant of one of three surviving Wathaurung people of the Ballarat area and it is this knowledge that I am proud to share for the mere fact that it remembers our past and what was taken and lost. By telling my family story through art, my children have a sense of who they are and where they came from. Oral and visual stories are part of our past and inform the future stories for our children, so that they never forget they are Aboriginal and this is Aboriginal Country.

As a contemporary Aboriginal woman I continue the Murnong Dreaming story. I believe this flower has shaped my life and connected me to the past, present and future. Childhood memories of a young girl growing up first in Sunshine a suburb of Melbourne and then returning at age seven to our ancestral Country of Gordon near Ballarat. It was here that I began what I believe was the internal healing process. I fell in love with the colour yellow from the Australian bush. Yellow wattle, the murnong daisy, the native silver banksias and the wild daffodil fields that grew all around Gordon. It was here that I did my best thinking sometimes with my friend Lea, lying in a field of yellow and dreaming of

what my/our lives would become. The pull of the past is still tugging away at Aboriginal family life today and in *Lubra II*, 2017, I depict myself as the 'exotic other' still used as a muse for white men and still reflecting the colonial gaze. This self-portrait reclaims my Aboriginal identity, standing proud on my Country and yet the colonial stage permeates the backdrop as a staged and not real landscape of Lal Lal Falls, our sacred site. The disconnection from ones ancestral Country is still at play and lurking in the backdrop. Although on Country and proud there is still an impending unknowing of what is to come and I am standing in a position ready to defend myself and my children, for the gaze still exists today.



right: Deanne Gilson
Part II of the series
Cook, Murnong and Me: Death of the Murnong and Women's Traditional Practices
2017, digital photo on aluminium, 150 x 80 cm

left: Deanne Gilson
(Wathaurung/Wadawurrung)
Part II of the series,
Cook, Murnong and Me: Cook, Collective Impact II
2017, digital photo on aluminium, 150 x 80 cm

far right: Part II of the series,
Cook, Murnong and Me: Lubra II
2017, digital photo on aluminium, 74 x 114 cm



What If?

Marlene Gilson





Foreward

Linked by their Wathaurung ancestry, the Koorie Heritage Trust is proud to present two exhibitions by mother and daughter artists: *What If?* by Aunty Marlene Gilson and *Murnong: Yam Daisies* by Deanne Gilson. We have had a long association with both Marlene and Deanne, and are pleased to be once again working with them.

As a platform and springboard for Victorian Aboriginal artistic expression, we provide a space that is intended to foster and develop genuine creative pathways. In particular, we see ourselves as a space that facilitates the showcasing and sharing of Aboriginal art through supporting our emerging, mid-career and established Aboriginal artists.

I gratefully acknowledge our key supporters, the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria's Organisations Investment Program, the Australian Government through the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program, and the City of Melbourne through its Triennial Arts Grants Program.

I especially wish to acknowledge and thank the artists, Aunty Marlene Gilson and Deanne Gilson for their work on these exhibitions. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Trust's curatorial staff, in particular our Curatorial Manager, Charlotte Christie, our Assistant Curator, Zenzi Clark, our Collections Coordinator Jane Walton, and our Curatorial Officer, Jade Hadfield.

Tom Mosby
CEO The Koorie Heritage Trust

left: Marlene Gilson
(Wathaurung/Wadawurrung)
Captain Moonlight at Mt Egerton, 2017, acrylic on linen, 76 x 100 cm
What If? 2017,
acrylic on linen, 150 x 120 cm, private collection

Marlene Gilson Remembering, Reclaiming and Reversing

"I like to collect stories and paint them...
Wadawurrung stories"
Aunty Marlene Gilson, 2013¹

I had the pleasure to meet talented artists Aunty Marlene Gilson and her daughter Deanne a few years ago when I curated their show *Past, Present, Future* (Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, 2015). I was instantly connected to Aunty Marlene's unique style of painting and exceptional detail to the layers of story, humour and resistance in her work, not naïve but a technique of superb detail and narrative. Aunty Marlene's unwavering pride and continual journey of her heritage and her Ancestors is the centre to her works, this ancestral line to country and the oral histories of the creation beings that she paints is what forms the foundation of her story telling.

Aunty Marlene Gilson was born on Gunditjmarra country and is a proud Wadawurrung Traditional Owner and Elder. Aunty Marlene's art practice began several years ago as a way of therapy after an illness and her rise to success is not only a testament to her ability as an artist but her determination to continue the stories of her Wadawurrung Ancestors. Aunty Marlene's works tell a story of Sovereign First Peoples who knew the land, had law and ceremony, who did not mine for greed or gain but took care

of their country and each other. Her works tell the story of (un) settlement of Melbourne and tales of escaped convicts and the goldfields of Ballarat, they are snapshots of the establishment of the colony and the people whose legacy we have inherited, good and bad. Importantly, her work places Victorian First Peoples particularly the histories of the Kulin Nation to the fore, addressing the absence of First Peoples history both in the representation in books and in colonial art.

The representation of Aboriginal people in early colonial art both in the establishment of Melbourne (note, Narm already existed, this is the original name which was re-named to Melbourne upon its invasion) and in the goldfields is limited and often depicted through racist tropes of the time- the drunkard, the noble savage and the dying race. Colonial artists such as Eugene Von Guérard and goldfields artist Samuel Thomas Gill painted the settler history, their hardship of the gold rush era and the landscape they saw and wanted to imagine, Guérard like other early artists painted romantic landscapes and depicted First Peoples (although scarcely) through a fictional utopian lens. The absence of First Peoples or their imagined portrayal of life and conciliatory relationships on the frontier is part of the colonial effort in the distortion and erasure of history, to promote the grand myth of a passive colonisation. "The near absence of Indigenous people in mid-nineteenth-

century colonial painting has been one of the most potent assertions of continued settler presence in Australia. This invisibility reinforced the myth of terra nullius and rendered further colonial expansionism picturesque. Many colonial artists were reluctant to insinuate the original owners into the landscape, thereby avoiding complicated issues of dispossession, resistance and guilt."²

Aunty Marlene's inclusion of First Peoples alongside that of the colonial settler past of Ballarat and the Kulin Nation addresses the history of 'invisibility' and acknowledges our existence to re-enforce First Peoples Sovereignty.

This exhibition is titled *What If?* and Aunty Marlene's what ifs reflect on what her life might be like if she hadn't started painting, if she had the opportunity to continue her education as a child or had gone to art school and one of the key works for this exhibition plays with the concept of reversing the role and history of invasion; what if Aboriginal people had invaded England? I often wonder what if I had turned left instead of right that day, how would my world be different, what if I never left my home town of Shepparton, what if my nan was still around to tell me her stories. These reflections provide us with the ability to understand where we are at now and make sense of the learnings and experiences our path has taken but, we can never really know how the sliding door may have changed our journey.

In the tongue-in-cheek work 'What If' (2017) we see Aboriginal people sailing into England, gleeful scenes of everyday simple English lives are portrayed, farmers tending to their crops and games being played, but this quaint life is suddenly disrupted by intruders anchoring their ships and penetrating the carefully manicured ground with a flag, a symbol of another land and another law. They are trading and asking questions about their new found land, who are these strange white creatures? This fanciful work aims to invert the colonial history and raises important questions, what if someone came and took your house, your farm and refused your Sovereignty? What if they began to systematically kill your family and removed you onto your neighbour's land who you never really talked to and made you speak a different language, how would you feel?

What If and its re-imagined humorous colonial beginning is reminiscent of 1986 short film *Babakueria*. *Babakueria* was created two years before the bicentenary of Australia and it commented on the black and white relations and the racism that was so prevalent in Australia in the 80's, it reversed the roles with white people being the minority 'Babakuerians' and Aboriginal people being the settlers. The first scenes we see the white 'natives' having a BBQ, the Aboriginal settlers land ashore and speak to the group; "What do you call this place?...Babakueria" they reply. "They call this Babakueria...nice native name, colourful, I like it."³ Themes

of police brutality, racism, unjust court systems, negative stereotypes and paternalistic government structures are critiqued and the late Yidinji and Murray Island actor and activist Bob Maza plays the 'Minister for White Affairs'.

Sadly, thirty one years later *Babakueria* is still as relevant to First Peoples of this country today as it was in 1986, nothing it seems has changed and I wonder, *what if* Australia learnt from its past?

What If contributes to the discourse of colonial critique and addresses the gap that is present in early Australian colonial art visually positioning First Peoples into the history that we are intrinsically a part of. Significantly, her work is now part of the collection at the National Gallery of Victoria and her work will sit alongside other great artists such as Eugene von Guérard giving us voice in these early histories where it has been lacking for so long.

Aunty Marlene's work is as much a record of history and a maintenance of cultural story as it is an act of resistance and Sovereignty, her stories have been handed down by her Ancestors and the histories she paints are one that many Koorie people share.

I don't like to wonder *what if* we didn't have her art that continues the Wadawurrung storyline because her works are too important to imagine a reality that is not that of the present. I am grateful that her path took her to becoming the artist and Elder she is.



"I like to research and paint the stories of my Ancestors to keep the stories and for future generations back onto my grandchildren"⁴.

Kimberley Moulton, Yorta Yorta
Senior Curator, Southeastern Aboriginal Collections, Museum Victoria

1. Gilson, M. The Indigenous Spirit of Eureka, public forum, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkVUP13AP7g>
2. Clegg, H and Gilchrist, S. *Depictions of Aboriginal People in Australian Colonial Art: Settler and Unsettling the works of Robert Dowling*, Art Bulletin of Victoria 48, 2008. National Gallery of Victoria.
3. *Babakueria*, 1986. Short Film, 30 mins. Written by Geoffrey Atherden.
4. Gilson, M. In conversation with Lucinda Horrocks. <http://windsky.com.au/painting-stories-aunty-marlene-gilson/>

top: Marlene Gilson
(Wathaurung/Wadawurrung)
Black Swamp 2017,
acrylic on linen, 76 x 100 cm
right: *Murnong* 2017,
acrylic on linen, 76 x 100 cm
covers:
Marlene Gilson
What If? 2017,
acrylic on linen, 150 x 120 cm
private collection (detail)

Deanne Gilson
(Wathaurung/Wadawurrung)
Murnong Dreaming
2017, acrylic on canvas (detail)



What If? Marlene Gilson
Murnong: Yam Daisies Deanne Gilson
5 August – 8 October 2017



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