



**Interview with Ronald
Edwards Pepper
(Gunnai)
Recipient of the Creative
Victoria Award for
Excellence in Any Media for
Coming Out 2 2021, mixed
media on canvas.**

The 9th Koorie Art Show (4
December 2021 – 20 February
2022)



By Andrew Stephens

With his winning art work in front of him, Ronald Edwards Pepper is an admirable example of true pride: the sort of honourable pride that reveals his serene confidence in his own abilities, and a great self-respect for the person and artist he is.

Ronald's work *Coming out 2* is a painting, but it operates more like a tapestry or a collage in that it weaves together multiple stories and strands from his own history and experiences. "Creating this artwork, I have included many elements and many colours," he says. "I just wanted it to be happy. The title and the story behind it helped me explain step by step the process of going through my art journey, like trips to Japan and China. I have put different elements on the artwork, as well as pictures and images of memories... it makes me happy and safe, and makes me proud to be an artist.

"The bright colour is to make me and everyone else happy, and to bring out the brightness in what's going on around me."

Ronald's trips to Japan and China were in 2010 and were enabled by his local government under a Sister City program. Since then, his commitment to art-making has been greatly amplified, and he graduated from Federation University with a Bachelor of Visual and Media Arts in 2017. He has since had multiple commissions and been involved in exhibitions in Australia and overseas. While he mainly paints in acrylics on canvas, sometimes incorporating ochre, he is also very experimental, using non-traditional material such as neon and glow-in-the-dark paint, and *Coming Out 2* is no exception to this, with its many added elements.



One of Ronald's recent successes was participating in the Yirramboi Festival, with work displayed prominently and publicly in central Melbourne's Swanston Street, having been commissioned by the Metro Tunnel Creative Program to do large-scale work on hoardings at the Town Hall Station site. It was called *Emerging from the Darkness*.

One of the significant elements in that work re-emerges in *Coming Out 2* – the spiral, which Ronald relates to the practice of sitting in a circle to tell stories and pass on the lore of the land to the next generation, which he experienced with stories told to him by his late mother. "Last year and the year before were sad and very dark for me," he says of this experience. "Doing the bright colours and having support around me brought me to where I am. They [my parents] would be very proud of me now. Moving on in healing, in art: that has helped me a lot to process what has happened and to move forward." Thus, Ronald says, the spirals signifying the intergenerational passing on of knowledge "will get bigger and bigger and grow more".

Being a proud Aboriginal man who is also gay inspired the title and content of this work, he says, because it is about emerging into Aboriginal culture and seeing how everyone differs in a variety of ways. He honours his man Cameron for the extraordinary support given over the grief of loss of his mother. He also honours his experience with Aboriginal Elders, especially through Morwell's Koorie Unit, and his involvement as a committee member of the Gippsland Pride Initiative Inc.

"The Koorie Unit helped me define culture because I hadn't learnt about it when I was young," Ronald says. "All we learnt about [at school] was CC – that's Captain Cook – and explorers, not about my culture. I am doing a lot of that now. The artwork, me being Aboriginal – I don't just do 'Aboriginal' artwork. Many artworks are about creating my expression, me being gay and emerging: that world is new to me but I am willing to be a role model for the mob in that also. To be proud of who I am. I don't care what people say, I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do and be proud of my culture and of who I am. That's all in the artwork. It tells that story."

Ronald points to various elements in the work, which began as larger work but ended up being tailored to a more compact result. Around a central crossroads-like form, there are pasted newspaper cuttings and photographs, scenes from his past, his travels, family, and several images of himself looking happy and free. There are renditions of meeting places, handprints representing the sharing of knowledge and culture, and footprints indicating various cultures walking together.



KOORIE
HERITAGE TRUST INC
GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

“Not knowing much about culture during my school days and learning a bit growing up, knowing there was something missing, and wanting to make a difference – art has taken me in that direction,” he says. “Going to art school, art events and cultural days, that’s made me want to be an artist.”



Ronald Edwards PEPPER (Gunnai), *Coming Out 2* 2021, mixed media on canvas.

The 9th Koorie Art Show is proudly supported by:



Creative
Program

