



**Interview with Thelma Beeton (Palawa)
Recipient of the Metro Tunnel Creative Program
2D Award for *Multicultural*
2021, acrylic paint on
canvas.**

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

By Andrew Stephens



Even though Thelma Beeton's Counihan Gallery exhibition *Banj Banj/nawnta* happened mostly in the middle of Melbourne's long and most-recent COVID lockdown, it was a huge success and a great boost to Thelma's art journey. Exhibiting with her long-time friend Stacey, whom she calls sister (*Banj Banj/nawnta* means sister in Taungurung/palawa kani respectively), the pair sold 19 of the 24 paintings.

Discovering the power of art-making and of creating her personal expression on canvas, Thelma has become a committed artist in recent years and is enormously grateful for the way her journey in life has turned out. Not so long ago – 2014 – she was on the streets and homeless, and went to prison. There, however, she was introduced to The Torch and its Indigenous Arts in Prisons and Community program and things began to open up for her. Winning a Koorie Art Show prize has embellished these great successes.

The Torch, in St Kilda, has been offering art, cultural and arts industry support to Indigenous offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria since 2011 and Thelma's big message to The Torch participants is to have a go and enter the Koorie Heritage Trust's Koorie Art Prize, given how rewarding it has been for her. "I am pretty well-known at The Torch and I think people have seen me throughout my journey," she says. "And I think if I can get other artists interested that's great – if I can do it, others can do it."

Thelma was incarcerated in 2014 and has been out for about four years, while Stacey remains inside. "I'd really like to help her participate from inside prison," Thelma says. "Her paintings are beautiful and she is like the



leader of all the girls in prison with her art. She's going to be successful so I want to encourage her."

It's no surprise their strong connection has endured, as has Thelma's resolve to make more art and explore her culture. One of the most significant things to happen for her in the prison-based The Torch program was discovering more about her culture – in particular finding out that her totem is the emu. "My Arts Officer Paul told me it was an emu and that my mob was Palawa (Tasmania). I began to paint as much as I could to get my emus looking good. I don't know how many I have now painted, but my paintings are about personal experiences, dreams and stories I remember. I use bright colours and I do it to inspire. It not only gets the eye of children but adults like my art work as well."

Her winning painting represents different nationalities mixing in with Aboriginal cultures – Thelma's mother is Palawa and her father is of German heritage. "And I have cousins who are Aboriginal on one side and Italian on the other. I just wanted to do a painting that represents a lot of different people, backgrounds and different families... I wanted to touch everyone's culture. It took a long time to do it. I paint on a layer and let it dry, paint on another layer and let that dry. So, there's no mistakes in it."

When she was making this work, she says she had "loads of fun" exploring colours and imagery. She was sometimes with her mother who, she says with some humour, kept offering advice. "She was trying to tell me what do it here and there, and I was saying 'It's my painting!'. But I remember the yarns we had as I was painting. She is also quite creative and did a lot of pottery, but I was too young to appreciate it at the time."

Thelma says her journey to get to this place has been rough, especially when she was on the streets and not in contact with her family. Staying in touch with The Torch once she was released from prison has been essential – they sent her materials to keep working with and she keeps it simple, working on the floor in a direct and concentrated manner.

"If it wasn't for art I wouldn't have got out of jail and had this opportunity for the show with Stacey and to enter the Koorie Art Show," she says. "An exhibition is huge. Sometimes people don't get lucky enough to have an exhibition in their lifetime. It keeps me inspired and busy. I have everything I could ever want. My art has given me a better life and I'm very thankful."



KOORIE
HERITAGE TRUST INC
GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI



Thelma BEETON (Palawa), *Multicultural 2021*, acrylic paint on canvas.

The 9th Koorie Art Show is proudly supported by:



Creative
Program

