



Interview with Monique Grbec (Stolen Generations)
Recipient of the Viva Energy Australia 3D Award for *Wasted 2* 2020, fibreglass resin with glitter.

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

By Andrew Stephens



The words “Treaty” and “Truth Flash” are embedded in Monique Grbec’s two Koorie Art Show entries *Wasted 1* and *Wasted 2*. The words resonate with significance for both the artist’s personal history and for that of wider Indigenous culture and experience. Part of a larger family of works Monique has produced in recent years, the two works not only deal with truth-telling and history – how events are presented and interpreted – but also with an appreciation of beauty and what lies beneath a surface or behind a wall.

The widely published Monique is well-known for her exceptional writing, in essay and journalistic form, but she is also a noted artist for whom the materials she uses are not only a means to an end, but also valued for their intrinsic visual appeal. She deploys these materials in the same way she uses words – carefully choosing and weaving them into a larger, more complex form.

For years she has been working with resin because of the exquisite aesthetic results it can produce – but it is also a toxic substance, so she is now in the process of transitioning to friendlier materials, mainly in recycled forms to reduce her environmental footprint.

Wasted 1 and *2* are made with glittering forms embedded in resin and she initially wanted the two circular forms to have some functionality, perhaps working as tables. “I really know how to work well with resin so I went back to it for this work,” she says. “But they turned out not to be functional, they were too heavy, and so I made them as slabs. They are kind of like



stepping stones – hopefully to my next success in the playing with materials!”

The works were accompanied by a poem written by Monique which relates to their physicality, exploring how *“the weight bares down, smothers”*. The poem also references *“the skewed doctrines / The words making history that are lies of omission”*. But it also invokes an essential optimism, expressing how *“we are left with grace, gracious, grateful / Transparency. Treating others as yourself / A circle of kindness, respect and honesty.”*

The relationship between *Wasted 1* and *2* to the bigger family of works Monique has made runs deep. That family includes her work *524 Pages* (2019), which is held in the Koorie Heritage Trust art collection and is made of glitter, fibreglass resin, and metal on copper mesh on acrylic board. The larger group of related works, Monique says, is called *Bring Them Home* and consists of installation and audio works. The family of works is both a tribute to her mother and a response to the 524 pages of the *Bringing Them Home Stolen Generations* report, produced by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 1997. Taking into account knowledge of her mother’s extraordinarily difficult childhood, Monique is deeply aware of how the consequences of being part of the Stolen Generations reverberates through families in both the big and small experiences of daily life.

In this way, Monique’s work has its own distinct language. Throughout the *Bring Them Home* works, elements such as hexagonal-shaped shields stitched and woven together represent her mother’s siblings, while repeated motifs such as giant wreath shapes, suspended disc shapes bearing “heads of damage”, and repeated use of flowers, and even little stars, all have their own special significance.

“Those stars relate to memories of mum talking to the sky at night or to people who have passed,” she says. “Mum always liked shiny, sparkly things, and so do I.”

Monique has published writing about her mother’s history and has explored the deep emotions of how her mother was taken from her family at six months old, spending her childhood institutionalised and isolated from her own mother, father and siblings. When she was fourteen years old, she was taken again and delivered to a doctor’s house to be the family maid. Monique herself also experienced out-of-home care as a child – and her work uses a strategy of beauty as a double-edged tool.



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“In all that super beauty and heightened attractiveness of the materials is a message of decay and waste,” she says. “It’s also a false representation of what is really beautiful. Resin, say, is so toxic – the toxicity carries on through generations, and my mother being a member of the Stolen Generations, you can see how it carries through despite all the nice words, nice promises and all the tokenistic grandeur.”

Monique is now working on new project she wrote under a Creative Victoria grant – the creative development of *The Wall Remix: Speaking Truths*, a poetic reinterpretation through an Indigenous lens of Pink Floyd’s 1979 rock opera. She says it will be performed as a spoken word musical collaboration at MPavillion 2022.



Monique GRBEC (Stolen Generations), *Wasted 2* 2020, fibreglass resin with glitter.

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