



Interview with Dr Deanne Gilson (Wadawurrung)
Recipient of the Lendlease Reconciliation Award for *Post Preston, After the Bushfires, Our Native Wildlife, Plants & Country Need Healing 2021*, white ceremonial ochre, wattle tree sap, acrylic paint on linen.

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

By Andrew Stephens



Dr Deanne Gilson's love of kitsch objects and ornaments is embedded in her paintings, but always with a meaningful personal touch: every object she depicts has a deeper layer of significance, and there is nothing of the merely decorative about it. Bringing various elements of her experience and cultural identity together, she is luxuriating in the joy of it all.

"I've been going to vintage and op shops for years and there are now lots of kitsch objects I have bought," she says. "And now is the time in my life that I get to paint it all: I spent thirteen-and-a-half years on my studies [fine arts and a PhD]. Now I can get into the actual work. That'll be me for the future, basically: not guided by somebody else's essay or to fit into someone else's box."

Deanne's winning work *Post Preston, After the Bushfires, Our Native Wildlife, Plants & Country Need Healing* (2021), brings mixed emotions about the famous painter Margaret Preston (1875-1963) to the fore. Deanne adores Preston's work from an aesthetic perspective but has concerns about the way in which the painter controversially appropriated Aboriginal motifs and colours in her work. As a result, Deanne has been researching Preston's endeavours in this field since 2012, exhibiting her responses soon afterwards.

"I am a huge Margaret Preston fan, I love her work, but I was bit confused by her use of Aboriginal art and motifs," she says. "How could she use those forms when she wasn't an Aboriginal artist? She was romanticising Aboriginal art and trying to 'help' us and everything, yet it's wrong. There is another side to that story and I am telling it."



In this particular painting, Deanne says she is partly dealing with objectification and the idea of “the gaze” – who is looking and how are they looking? The various elements of the painting interrogate not only the male gaze but the female gaze – as Deanne points out, Aboriginal women have been abused in various ways by non-Aboriginal men and women. “In this case, with all that previous knowledge in my head, and even though I’ve had a Western education, I have returned that gaze.”

One of the crucial elements of *Post Preston* is the use of white ceremonial ochre throughout the painting. The ochre was collected on Country and brings a connection to the physical living body. Likewise, she has incorporated ceremonial diamond patterns, a row of Murnong yam daisies, a traditional greenstone axe head from pre-colonial times, and a central interweaving of native flora, such as wattle, chocolate lilies, paper daisies and flowering gum blossoms.

Other elements have specific meanings, too: Deanne has appropriated two kookaburras from a Preston painting, subtly altering them to make them her own. There is also a response to the destruction of Country wrought by cataclysmic bushfires, linking to human-generated climate change. Those fires made Deanne confront the impacts on Country and the deaths of so many plants and animals, hence the presence of the rosella and the koala (the latter based on a porcelain sculpture in her kitsch collection).

“While painting, all of a sudden in my mind I imagined koalas would become extinct and all we’d have left are those kitsch objects,” she says. The rosella, by contrast, is based on a living bird, not an inanimate object – but it is falling to its death amid all the environmental chaos.

Perhaps more prominent is the figurine depicted within the centre-right of the canvas, a romanticised version of a similar object discovered at the Footscray Markets and given by her nan to Deanne when she was a little girl. “It looked like a Royal Doulton, with the lady in a Victorian dress,” she says. “I love it, I’ve still got it and it has never broken. But it is a symbol of colonisation. And as a little girl, having both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family, there was that identity crisis. It was confusing for me growing up with my identity, being both Aboriginal and English with white skin. So, I have reflected this figurine back, making her an Aboriginal woman, beautiful and connected yet colonised.” This glowing figure wears possum skins and holds gum blossoms.

“Because I am a ‘60s baby, I love the kitschiness, and it has so much meaning. But it is still an object and it has layers of emotion, history,



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culture and different art genres. I love her.” Challenging the history and working in this way has been wonderful for Deanne and she remains deeply proud of it – with the promise of more to come as she embarks on three solo exhibitions for 2022.



Dr Deanne GILSON (Wadawurrung), *Post Preston, After the Bushfires, Our Native Wildlife, Plants & Country Need Healing* 2021, white ceremonial ochre, wattle tree sap, acrylic paint on linen.

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