



**Interview with Wayne Quilliam
(Palawa)
Recipient of the City of Melbourne
Aboriginal Melbourne Award for
Ascension 2021, mixed media on
canvas.**

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

By Andrew Stephens

Well-known for his extensive work in photography, Wayne Quilliam is a highly experienced artist with an enormous amount of work behind him – but it doesn't stop him experimenting and pushing the boundaries of traditional photography. In his new work *Ascension* (2021) he has printed an image on canvas and then painted over it with his own mix of paint, ochre, dye and metal filings to augment and emphasise the meanings embedded in the form.



Wayne says *Ascension* began with a photograph, of which only the feathers crowning the head remain fully visible. He trialled printing the image on a variety of surfaces, from heavy-duty art paper and silk through to glossy photographic paper. “None of it ‘took’ in the way I wanted it to, so I ended up printing it on archival canvas,” he says. “But as beautiful as the artwork was by itself, it was missing something. That is when I started to paint on to it, and I put traditional ochre and dye into the paint and start to create the artwork. Then it took on a life of its own.”

Wayne says the individual qualities of the ochre, dye and also some metal filings gave the work some unique textures. “It was experimental and about finding the right canvas that can accept digital ink as well as the paint.”

Because he works within so many variables, Wayne says the “art” element of his creativity – as opposed to technical considerations – always seems to emerge when he is on Country. “I go out to different communities



throughout Australia and document and record people's stories," he says. "But as they share their stories with me, a lot of the nuances of their own cultures rub off on me. When creating any particular art work, it is always from my experiences of my Countrymen. So, developing this type of work is then done in my unique style."

One of the main thrusts of his work is to bring out the interface between traditional Indigenous culture and the contemporary experiences of First Nations people. As he says, he challenges the myth that Aboriginal cultures are "frozen in time in some idyllic pre-contact state". Rather, he likes to offer commentary on how an ancient culture evolves in contemporary society, and how culture is a living and spiritually rich thing. In *Ascension*, he references the influences of ancestors.

"I live in society in the modern world and my art comes from living modern life," he says. "But it is in reference back to our culture and the importance of connection, while also making art in our own style. The definite lines and colours and shadows all come from the stories that have been passed on to me – in the desert, or with the Yolngu in the Northern Territory, or my own mob [Palawa] from Tasmania.

"It comes from the cultural essence of what I capture as a photographer or an artist or a storyteller. The gaze is everything. The stories that are told – without being told by voice – is what drives me. It is my interpretation of what I am experiencing at any given time. I often say that I never *see* an artwork, I *hear* an artwork. Say I am working up in Arnhem Land with the Yolngu – I'll be sitting around and I'll be listening to the song, but also to the sound of the feet on the ground, whether it is the shuffle of the women or the stamping of the men; or I'll listen to the clap sticks.

"I'll actually hear the art and the songs of the ancestors. It is far more than a visual medium. People will often say to me that they see a story in my photographs. They are not sure what the story is, but they see the story, which is beautiful for me."

Wayne's other Koorie Art Show entry, *Automaton of the Darkness* (2021), is technically straightforward (a digital print on canvas) but he says it tackles his fascination with how ancient cultures might interface with modern technologies.

Within this is an interest in how contemporary society can grapple with a tendency to become passive, corporate automatons. Wayne believes all



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people have a yearning for a more spiritual way of life – hence the imagery that suggest the merging of two figures within a field of darkness.

His own work aside, Wayne reckons he and his daughter Tanisha must be the first parent-child team to scoop prizes together in the Koorie Art Show. Tanisha says her work, a sculpture titled *Mother Earth and her Creations*, is full of joy and connection, with creative spirits looking over the land, the animals and the bush. “It shows a strong connection to Bunjil because I have been creating the school jumper for my school. And I needed to show I could represent what I am feeling.”



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Wayne QUILLIAM (Palawa), *Ascension* 2021, mixed media on canvas.

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