



Interview with Charlie Miller (Kanolu and Gangulu)

Recipient of the RMIT University Emerging Artist Award for *K-A-N-O-L-U* 2021, fine liner on transparent paper

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

By Andrew Stephens

Growing up in a household where Auslan was the dominant language, Charlie Miller naturally found himself interested in expressing this alongside other parts of his heritage and identity in his self-portrait. He ended up with a layered portrait in six parts. The wiry but delicately rendered drawings were done on transparent paper, and he is shown smiling broadly and making Auslan hand signals that spell out the six letters of the word Kanolu. The six drawings – one letter of Auslan hand signalling in each – are arranged one upon the other in such a way that the viewer sees Charlie signing the entire word in Auslan: *K-A-N-O-L-U*.



This project began when Charlie took time to do an elective in drawing at the Victorian College of the Arts – he is focussing on zoology and marine biology in his major studies at the University of Melbourne. Drawing is not something he has considered as a career, but he has always loved doing it.

In the drawing subject, Charlie created multiple artworks, some of which focused heavily on his Aboriginality and connection to Country. The work *K-A-N-O-L-U* explores intergenerational teachings. “It was part of my life-drawing class, so obviously it wasn’t drawn from life – because it’s me.” In the work, he wanted to explore the intersectionality of being a KODA (kid of Deaf adults) and a Kanolu and Gangulu man. Both of these things strongly contribute to his identity, as do intergenerational teachings and family. “It was about learning from my family and growing up with a lot of pride, not just in my Aboriginality but in the fact that I am a KODA.”

Charlie, whose father is a Blak Deaf man, says he cannot imagine what it would be like to grow up in a different situation. “I don’t understand what it is like to have hearing parents, it seems weird to me,” he says. “Also, I always grew up knowing I was Aboriginal and being proud of that. But it was later in my life when we found out we were Kanolu and Gangulu



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people, and the self-portrait perhaps goes back to a memory I have of my parents telling me about that through Auslan. I knew how to spell Kanolu before I even knew how to pronounce it!"

When he was making *K-A-N-O-L-U*, Charlie wanted to give it a sense of movement, like a photo series shot with a slow shutter speed. "Something drawn out," he says. Each drawing was done in one continuous line: "My aim was to keep the fine-liner pen on the page the entire time and do it in one stroke. It was part of an exercise in class to get our hands more flexible and to get more creative, which was something I struggled with a lot in that course. It was about not being so rigid and taking the time to start with the details and relax and get those forms. I grew to love it."

While his earlier education had a focus on maths and science, Charlie always made sure he did hands-on subjects too, such as art, wood or metal tech. For *K-A-N-O-L-U* he made a video, running through it to select snapshots of frames that had the best composition and were at the correct angle to indicate each letter of the word Kanolu. He used those photographic references for drawing a portrait on cartridge paper to make sure he had the correct measurements and composition for the page.

"I wanted my face to overlap but with slight changes in my face, especially to the smile." Charlie then drew the half-dozen portraits on the tracing paper. "I wanted to make sure everything lined up and stacked up together. The opaqueness of the paper really helped with that."

Submitting to the Koorie Art Show 2021 has increased his confidence in drawing. "I definitely want to do more art-making and experiment, and see what else I can contribute to," he says.



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (1 of 6)



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (2 of 6)



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (3 of 6)



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (4 of 6)



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (5 of 6)



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Charlie MILLER (Kanolu and Gangulu), *K-A-N-O-L-U*, 2021, fine liner on transparent paper (6 of 6)

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