

**CELEBRATING
FIRST PEOPLES'
MARK MAKING**



**SAT 5 MARCH —
SUN 15 MAY 2022**

WOMINJEKA

Mark making is an enduring technique to tell stories and share knowledges amongst the world's longest continuing cultures.

Off The Wall celebrates mark making in the south-east of Australia. In this exhibition, First Nation artists Mandi Barton (Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba), Simone Thomson (Woiwurrung, Yorta Yorta) and Charlie Miller (Kanolu) are given the opportunity to create large format paper-based artworks that speak of connection to family, culture and Country.

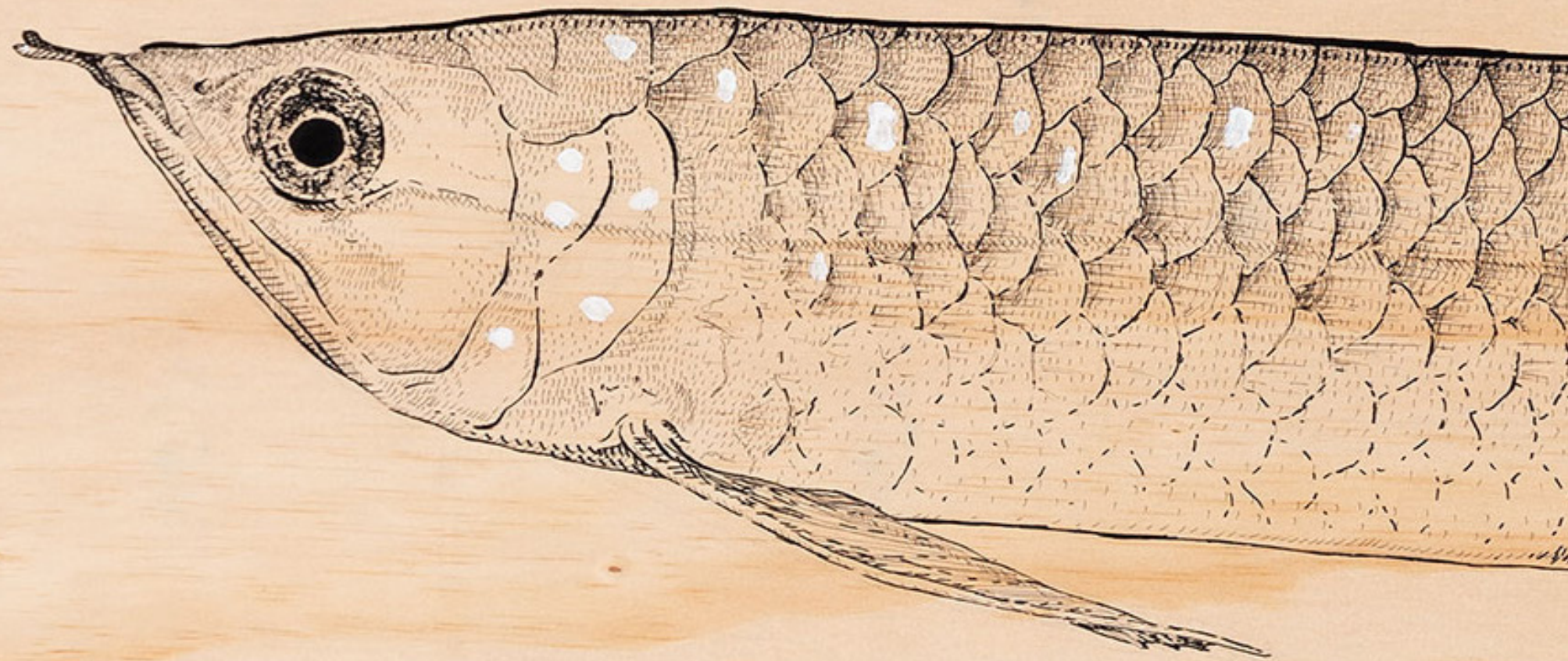
For the exhibition, the Koorie Heritage Trust provided each artist with a 1.5 metre by 10 metre roll of archival paper as the medium for new artistic expression and experimentation. Working closely with the KHT curatorial and collections team, the artists have been encouraged to extend themselves and their creative practice by marking their own personal

cultural journey through the mark making tradition. The nature of the exhibition and use of material invites the audience to consider the endurance and multiplicity of First Nations stories and peoples - departing from, and deconstructing the supposed margins on which we have existed.

The Koorie Heritage Trust is proud to showcase contemporary Victorian art and artists through our annual exhibitions program. I wish to acknowledge the three artists involved in this project as well as our curatorial and collections team for their dedication and support of the artists.

I also acknowledge the generous support of our programming partners Creative Victoria, City of Melbourne, the Federal Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program and the Australia Council for the Arts.

TOM MOSBY
Chief Executive Officer
Koorie Heritage Trust



CELEBRATING FIRST PEOPLES' MARK MAKING

Markings make, and are made by us all at once. Imprinted on memory: muscle, collective, waving in and out of grasp; markings map connection to Country, to one another.

Wrapped up in the archive, album, anecdote, we unravel yarns that live beyond dimensional space.

Featuring works by three Naarm-based artists; Mandi Barton, Charlie Miller and Simone Thomson, *Off the Wall* is a celebration of the endurance of Blak storytelling, songlines and sovereignty.

Over 65 000 years of First Nations' mob caretaking Country, cultures and communities? That's going to leave a mark. Not unlike the reciprocal nature of this caretaking – whereby Country nurtures us, as we nurture Country, and so on for time immemorial – the markings we inherit and those we offer are inherently informed by one another: in eternal exchange, we are creative and canvas all at once.

“THEY ARE ALWAYS THERE LIKE THE SPIRITS, REMINDING US THEY ARE LISTENING, REMINDING US WE ARE CONNECTED TO COUNTRY JUST LIKE THE COMPLEX ROOTS.”

— Simone Thomson

Translating inherited and imagined markings onto large scale paper works, each artist reflects this reciprocal relationship between Country, culture and corporeality throughout their work. While sharing this sensibility, Mandi, Charlie and Simone each bring unique voice and approach to materials

emblematic of simultaneously mutual yet manifold experiences of Blakness. With works suspended from the ceiling, unfurled over plinths, and rolling onto the gallery floor, *Off the Wall's* experimentation with conventional material and installation boundaries invites the audience to consider the endurance and multiplicity of First Nations stories and peoples - departing from, and deconstructing the supposed margins on which we have existed.

The very notion of mob as marginalised people(s) is complicated. On the one hand, it is an accurate (albeit sanitised) reflection of the historic and ongoing harm we navigate surviving the colony: genocide, ecocide, overimprisonment, criminalisation of cultural practices, dispossession and racist policy to name just a few. On the other, this consideration can work to centralise - and thus naturalise - the colonial project in this place. If we are to be considered marginal, I wonder from whom? And where?

Each artist navigates this positioning with their own lamentations on loss, resistance, and reclamation.

“I WILL NOT BE YOUR PRODUCT OF GENOCIDE”

— Charlie Miller

Where mob's presence, let alone sovereignty, disrupts the many mythscapes upon which the Australian nation was forged, and continues to fortify itself, the relentless framing of mob as a problem to be solved by the coloniser functions as a means to justify injustices against our people, indulge paternalism entrenched in settler-colonial culture, assert white supremacy and undermine Blak resistance. While the sentiment of 'the Aboriginal problem' is palpable throughout systems of colonial control today, it certainly isn't a new idea. In fact, the idea predates the federation of Australia itself. Our first aggravation? Existence, sovereignty, connection to Country, resistance. With the colonial

project looking to expand, our presence simply wouldn't do, and thus the myth of Terra Nullius was born. Dubbing the land mass as 'nobody's land', the colonists would 'remedy' their first iteration of the 'Aboriginal problem' by legislatively erasing Indigenous nations from the landscape in order to justify their invasion of the land. This would catalyse a long and violent history of the problematisation of Blakfullas, the most common 'solution' to which being the figurative and literal erasure of First Nations peoples, cultures and connections.

Where mob have refused to cede sovereignty and continue to vigorously challenge exercises of colonial control, the colonial project reiterates and recalibrates itself in efforts to become less visible, less scrutinised, less penetrable. In turn, mob become masters at observation and adaptation and find innovative ways of protecting culture, one another and occupying spaces that aren't built for us.

**“AROUND AND AROUND OUR
YARNING CIRCLE. WE FALL
DOWN. ANCESTORS, STRENGTH,
BELONGING. WE ALL RISE UP.”**

— Mandi Barton

This story is evident in each artist's work featured in the show: Mandi's works affect an internal vibration that speaks to inherited knowledges that live within mob - be that of our histories, languages, caretaking Country and community, Charlie's intricate and unbroken line work speaks to the endurance of our ways of being and knowing, and Simone's works evoking a viscerality that reflects the experiential nature of connection to culture and Country - and how these 'two things' are one in the same. Mapping personal, familial and collective accounts of where we've been, and where we might go, *Off the Wall* celebrates the innovation and reclamation of space beyond the conventional boundaries Blak people and art have been relegated to.

PIERRA VAN SPARKES
Assistant Curator
Koorie Heritage Trust



Marmu

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SIMONE THOMSON WOIWURRUNG WURUNDJERI, YORTA YORTA

SIMONE THOMSON is a Naarm-based Fine Artist, Muralist and Creative and is a Woiwurrung Wurundjeri and Yorta Yorta Traditional Owner through her mother. She draws inspiration for her art through her spiritual connection to Country and the rich colours and textures of the earth and sky.

In her early years, Simone performed traditional song and dance in cultural dance troupes with her cousins, and for years again with Worawa Aboriginal College. It's here she started painting,

later becoming the school's first graduating student. She would go on to continue this sacred art of storytelling well into her adult years remaining strongly connected to her culture through the ancestral knowledge and oral history as passed down through her mother and grandmother. Simone's signature use of vibrant earthy colours, texture and detail have produced varied styles of work including public art commissions and design, Indigenous sculptured gardens, portraiture, large scale exterior and interior mural design, hand painted silk wraps, emu feather hangings, wooden message sticks, custom handmade shields, feature wall wood art, netball and basketball design and giftware.

Simone has extensive experience in the corporate sector delivering artwork for Reconciliation Action Plans, including cover artwork and document design. Simone applies cultural stories and narratives to all her pieces.

My intention was simple.

To 'feel' my connection to my Culture and translate that onto luxurious Stonehenge paper. Connection is many things to us all, but if I had to choose four words, it's – Sky, Water, Earth and Trees. So many stories are held within each of these, and I wanted to give the viewer a glimpse into my spirit and what these connections represent.

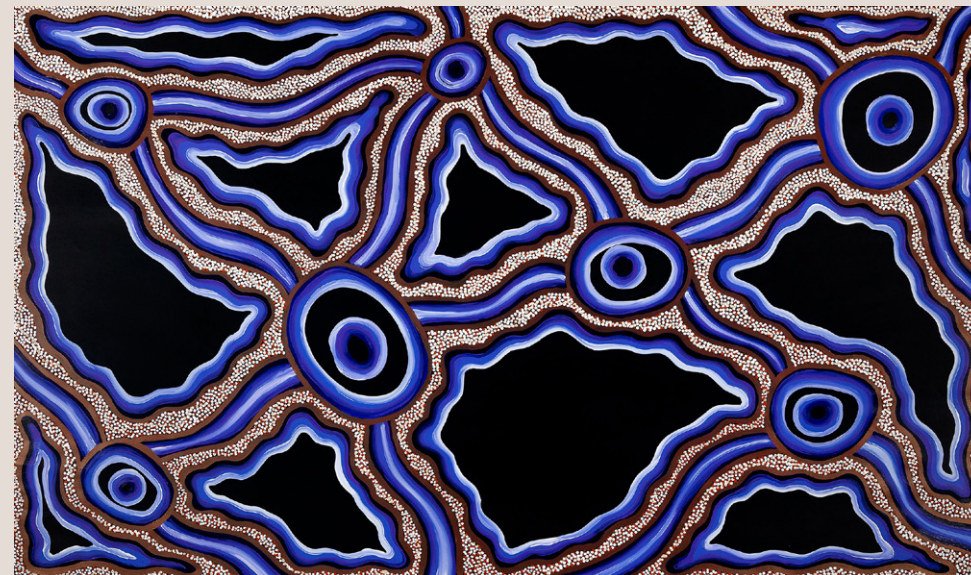
When I think of the sky I think of the stunning chandeliers of light and the fact that my ancestors – our ancestors once looked up to these very same wondrous stars and told stories, painted, sang. Mapped.

For me, the red gritty texture of sand and dirt is foremost when speaking of the land. I need to feel this through my fingers the way I feel it between my toes when I walk along the river – that to me is the essence of the earth. To capture the sensual windswept peaks with those red orange hues is to me – a snapshot in my memory, glimpses of my childhood when I sat along the Murray and dragged sticks in the mud.

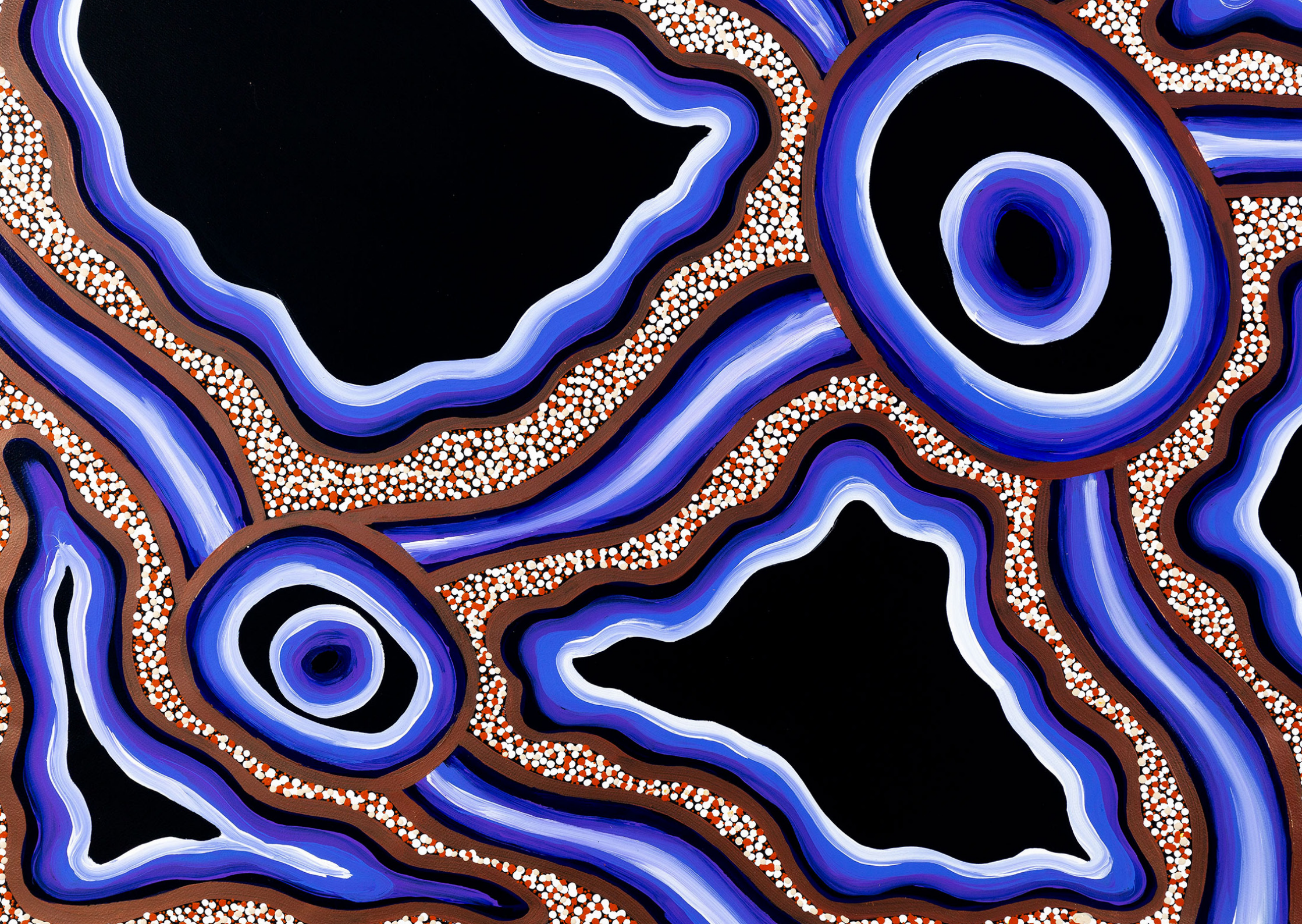
Water, to me, is like therapy. The healing gained from just staring at the ripples does amazing things for the spirit. I wanted to somehow reflect this in the gentle rippling motions that transfix. In ways, these precious waterways represent the countless hours spent swimming with my cousins and sister on Wurundjeri Country, up in Healesville. We would sit on the riverbank and sing with the guitar after we'd all had enough; they are good memories.

Just about every photo I'd ever been in that was taken outdoors has got one in it. They are always there like the spirits, reminding us they are listening, reminding us we are connected to Country just like the complex roots. Gumtrees. They, for me, are treasures from the past. I see one, I'm home.

— **SIMONE THOMSON, 2022**



SIMONE THOMSON
(Woiwurrung Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta)
Baan Biiik, Water Country, 2022
Acrylic paint on paper
2500 x 1500 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



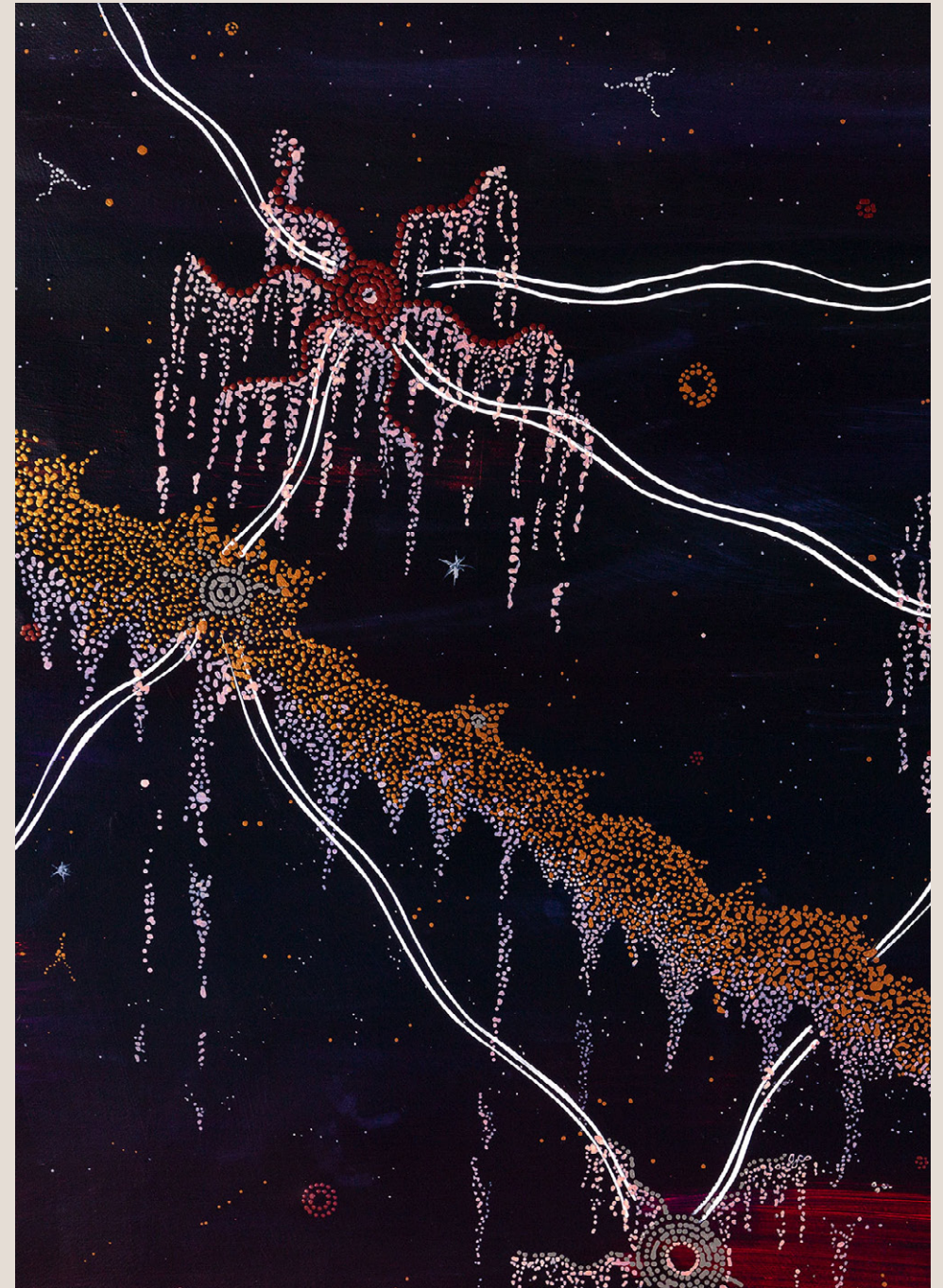


SIMONE THOMSON
(Woiwurrung Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta)
Darrang Marrup, Tree Spirit, (detail) 2022
Acrylic paint on paper
2500 x 1500 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro





SIMONE THOMSON
(Woiwurrung Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta)
First Light, (detail) 2022
Acrylic paint on paper
1500 x 2500 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro





SIMONE THOMSON
(Woiwurrung Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta)
Beneath the Earth, Songlines, (detail) 2022
Sand, moulding paste, acrylic paint on paper
1500 x 2500 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



MANDI BARTON YORTA YORTA, BARAPA BARAPA, WEMBA WEMBA

Mandi was born in Sydney and grew up in Footscray, Victoria. She is a Yorta Yorta woman with Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba heritage, a mother of three daughters, an Aboriginal community member, an artist, an entrepreneur who still resides in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria.

Her identity and her story are the foundations in which she interprets knowledge and visualises and produces creative works.

She has been an artist for over 20 years and attained her Cert 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Design at RMIT Bundoora Victoria.

Mandi is a multi-disciplinary artist. Many of Mandi's previous works are acrylic on canvas and more recently public art (murals and sculpture designs) she does however work with many other mediums such as emu feathers, sand, twine, metal, photography and graphic art. It is always going to be about the story then deciding what mediums are best to illustrate that knowledge, feeling and connection.

Mandi's art aspires to strengthen identity and cultural knowledge, opportunities for storytelling, connecting communities, illustrating concepts and relationships.

Mandi practices as an artist within her business Biyala B, an Indigenous Creative business that combines her knowledge and experience within the Arts and Wellbeing fields to create culturally safe spaces with art designs and products.

The front of the five panels depicts the cultural knowledge with an array of rich browns, red and yellow ochre colours, the symbols of time, people and place. It is the accumulation of a lifetime of knowledge. The different heights and angles of the five panels denotes the different perspectives, the lens and the circumstances that one requires that cultural knowledge, values, gender, age, connection, opportunity, heritage, religion, family, Songlines and totems can all play a big part in how you see, feel, hear and sense culture.

Behind the panels is the shadows, it is very similar to front as it illustrates cultural knowledge. However, this knowledge is hidden, it is in the dark, a place of uncertainty but with a strong sense of 'knowing'. It is the stories that have been passed down and remembered by our subconscious minds, and within our DNA.

— **MANDI BARTON, 2022**

MANDI BARTON
(Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba)
Molwa (Shadow) Reflections, (detail) 2022
Ochre, ink, gold leaf, silver leaf, paper
1550 x 2050 mm (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



A broken fallen shield....

A shield is protection, protecting the culture from being taken away. It is protecting our wellbeing that would be harmed without it.

It strengthens identity, pride and purpose.

It assists with belonging and connections

It sustains happy healthy relationships.

It heals trauma and lessen the impact of grief and hardships.

It enriches our mind, body and spirit.

Without our protection we would be wounded.

— **MANDI BARTON, 2022**

MANDI BARTON
(Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba)
Protection, (detail) 2022
Ochre, acrylic paint on paper
3000 x 700 x 200 mm (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



“Loss of oral culture. Like Burnt Words. The ink that records our existence”

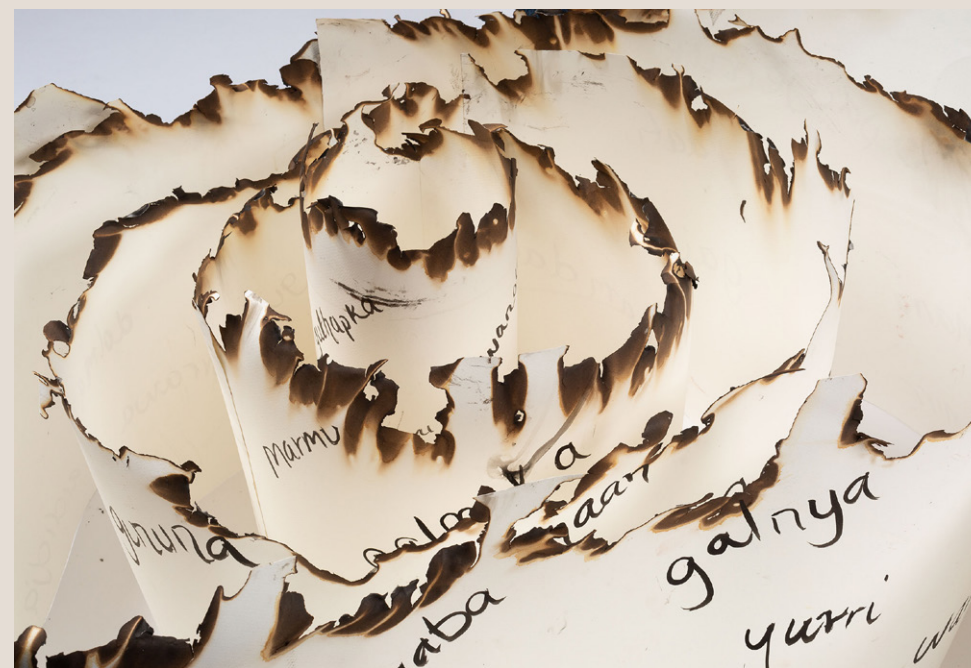
Burning words is similar to taking away our oral storytelling. Not allowing us to speak language, taking children away from families so they never know the stories, the histories and connections. Burning words is the act of destroying evidence of cultural knowledge, family ties, Songlines and Creation.

Arranged into a yarning circle and features Yorta Yorta words and images of country and connections.

WORDS IN THE YARNING CIRCLE:

“Around and around our yarning circle. We all fall down. Ancestors, strength, belonging. We all rise up”

— **MANDI BARTON, 2022**



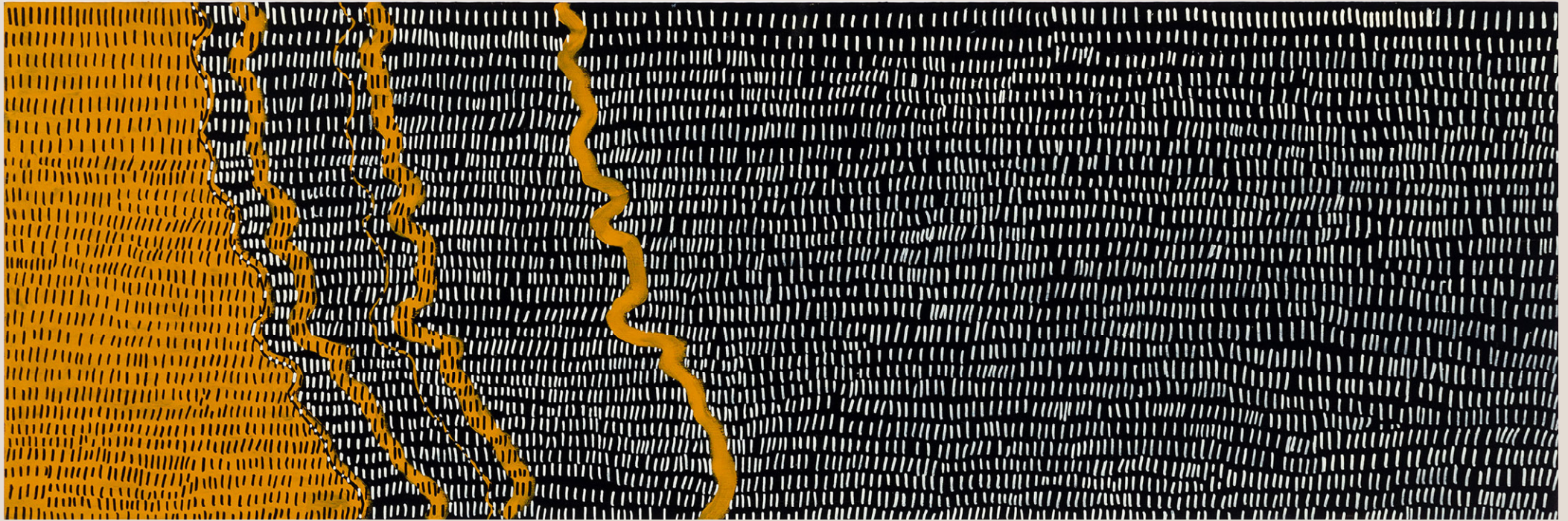
MANDI BARTON
(Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa, Wemba Wemba)
Burnt Words, (detail) 2022
Paper, charcoal, ink, burnt paper
450 x 1250 x 1250 mm (dimensions variable)
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro

CHARLIE MILLER KANOLU

Charlie Miller is a Kanolu man, born and raised on Wurundjeri Country. He is currently studying zoology and marine biology at university and his passions are ecology and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and waterway management.

Art has formed a large part of Charlie's life and upbringing. Living in a Deaf household, he was raised to value the importance of working with one's hands and encouraged to view the world in a very visual way.





The spotted bonytongue is a freshwater species endemic to Australia and native to my Country. My Aunties and Uncles that create traditional artworks say that our works usually depict animals from Country. I have always been fascinated by marine and freshwater aquatic life, so I wanted to explore this with a species native to my Country through mark making methods.

The reverse side depicts the bends and turns of the Comet River flowing across the western end of my Country. The lines across this work symbolise the isobilateral nature of Eucalyptus leaves. The Eucalypt makes me feel connected to place and culture, and was important to me before I knew whose mob I belonged to. It continues to be a personal symbol of Indigeneity.

— **CHARLIE MILLER, 2022**

P35
CHARLIE MILLER
 (Kanolu)
Country, (detail) 2022
 Acrylic paint pen on acrylic panel
 2 parts: 595 x 420 mm
 Courtesy of the artist
 Photo: Christian Capurro

CHARLIE MILLER
 (Kanolu)
Spotted Bonytongue, 2022
 Ink, acrylic paint on wood
 400 x 1200 mm
 Courtesy of the artist
 Photo: Christian Capurro

In my experience, cultural identity, and Aboriginality are different things. All mob share Indigeneity, but we are all diverse and from different cultures and have varying levels of connection to our mobs.

I feel proud and strong in my Aboriginality, it is something heavily integrated into my values, social groups, STEM studies and career ambitions. However, it is a lot of the unknown factors about my mob that make me feel 'young' or more vulnerable when speaking of my connections to Kanolu culture, language and spirituality. This artwork is about feeling young in culture, through the depiction of a solitary emu chick (my totem). Despite feeling strong in my Aboriginality, at times my connection to Kanolu culture can feel fragile or lost. It takes time to recognise that disconnection from culture is not your fault. In my experience I have had a lot of shame around not knowing enough. This leading to unkind thoughts, internalised colourism, self-blame, and people whitesplaining and policing who I am. This work challenges these thoughts and emotions, repositioning the anger and blame towards the colony that dispossesses and continues to oppress mob.

— **CHARLIE MILLER, 2022**

CHARLIE MILLER
(Kanolu)
Emu Chick, 2022
Ink, acrylic paint on canvas
1830 x 990 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



As Indigenous people, we know there is a difference between the term 'country' in both Indigenous and colonial ways of thinking, however the English word describing 'Country' doesn't differentiate between cultural meanings of Country or geographical descriptions. In Auslan, the sign for 'Country' which (Mob's connection to Country, culture, and custodianship) is an entirely different sign to 'country' (where in the world are you from?). This work is a self-portrait of me signing 'Country'. I find that the sign is what more accurately resonates most to me, relative to the English word, when trying to capture all the notions about Country in a single word/phrase.

Blak signs in Auslan are constantly being created by Deaf Indigenous peoples, and I would like to acknowledge the strong voices of the Blak Deaf community. It is Blak Deaf individuals who create new signs to decolonise Auslan by creating vocabulary where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ideas, phrases, values, and individuality can be spotlighted and clearly communicated. Their role in creating these signs and diversifying language beyond barriers presented by the English lexicon is what has allowed me to create this work and further strengthen my connections between culture and Auslan.

— **CHARLIE MILLER, 2022**

CHARLIE MILLER
(Kanolu)
Country, (detail) 2022
Acrylic paint pen on acrylic panel
2 parts: 595 x 420 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro



This piece resonates with comfortability, especially around mob. I usually sketch these kangaroo doodles when I'm stressed or when I need to relax. I chose to depict kangaroos as they resonate with a variety of places and memories of comfort. These being depictions of roos in artworks, food, and nature. There are also the classic notions of comfort around a kangaroo's pouch. On one of my first kangaroo trips, my dad sat me on the back of a kangaroo. Although I was too young to remember it, photographs and stories of that day tie me back to family and being close with these creatures from a young age.

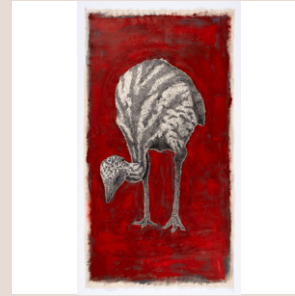
I gathered a few of these studies at the zoo, to better understand their anatomy, behaviours, and interactions. The simpler rendering of the subjects allow me to truly relax and to just naturally create. The paper was coloured with coffee, in reference to the coffee analogy. I learnt the coffee analogy from mob at uni and it became one of the fundamental components which made me feel more secure as an Aboriginal man, despite my complexion. A lot of stresses surrounding Blakness in colonial and institutional contexts really get to my mental health. These contexts dominated by and founded on white ways of thinking and white values. It's hard for these to not become ingrained into how you perceive yourself or degree of Blakness. I wanted to create this piece to remind myself of the presence of mob as a safe space to return to when the white world can be so fucking hard.

— **CHARLIE MILLER, 2022**



CHARLIE MILLER
(Kanolu)
Mob of Kangaroos, 2022
Coffee, conté on paper
510 x 760 mm
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Christian Capurro

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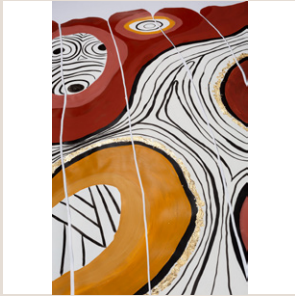
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Ink, acrylic paint on canvas
1830 x 990 mm
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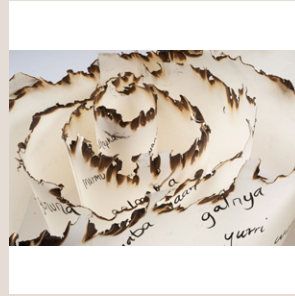
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Mob of Kangaroos, 2022
Coffee, conté on paper
5950 x 420 mm x 2
Courtesy of the artist



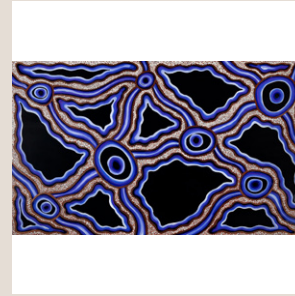
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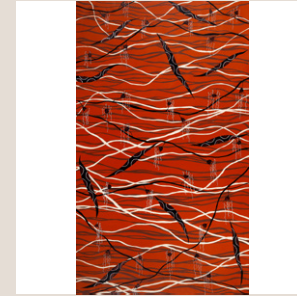
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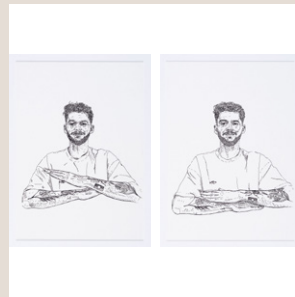
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1500 x 2500 mm
Courtesy of the artist



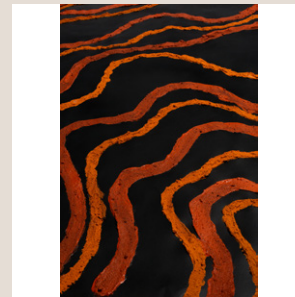
CHARLIE MILLER
(Kanolu)
Spotted Bonytongue, 2022
Ink, acrylic paint on wood
400 x 1200 mm
Courtesy of the artist



CHARLIE MILLER
(Kanolu)
Spotted Bonytongue, 2022
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Acrylic paint pen on acrylic panel
2 parts: 595 x 420 mm
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Beneath the Earth, Songlines, 2022
Sand, moulding paste, acrylic paint on paper
1500 x 2500 mm
Courtesy of the artist

Photography by Christian Capurro



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