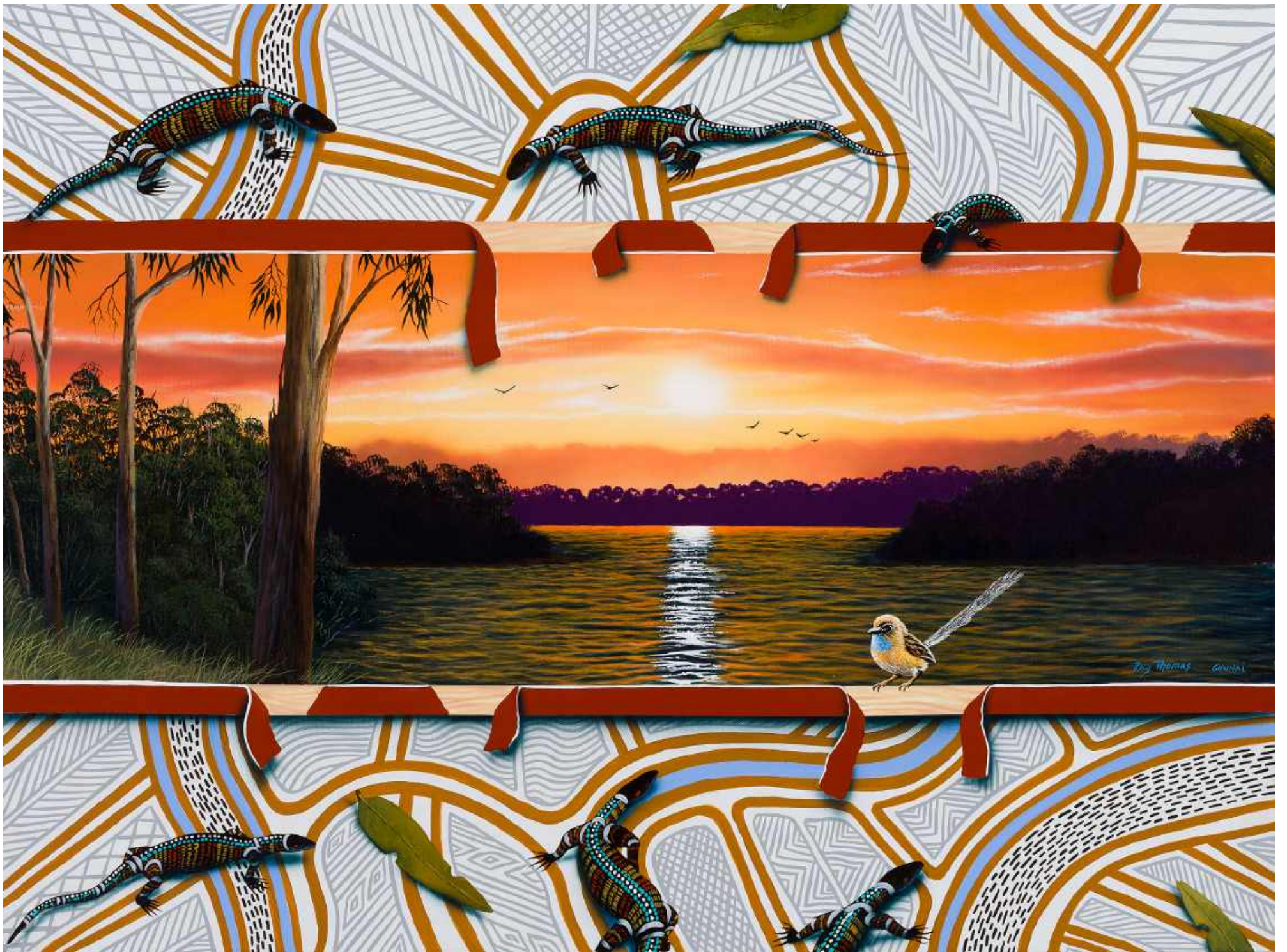




RAY THOMAS:

Yeerung's Journey

30 May — 9 August 2026



The Koorie Heritage Trust acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Narm, the Wurundjeri people of the Greater Kulin Nation, on whose lands we operate. We pay respect to their community, their Ancestors and their Elders, past and present.

We also pay deep respect to Ray Thomas, a proud Brabrawoolong Gunnai man, to his Gunnai community, Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

We extend this respect to all First Peoples and celebrate their continuing culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this publication may contain images, names and stories of people who have died. Readers are warned that there may be words and terminology that may be culturally sensitive or outdated.





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Bataluks (lizards) and orbs
2002
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust
AH 03385

Foreword

TOM MOSBY
CEO, KHT



Wominjeka (welcome)

The Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT) is honoured to present *Ray Thomas: Yeerung's Journey*, a compelling and deeply resonant exhibition that brings together key works from across the extraordinary career of Ray Thomas, alongside new works created especially for this exhibition.

A highly respected Brabrawoolong Gunnai man, Ray has maintained and grown a significant and enduring arts practice spanning more than four decades. His work is underpinned by a lifelong commitment to learning, a philosophy that is both embedded within and activated through the works on display. Across this exhibition, his practice reveals a sophisticated and deeply personal visual language, where cultural symbolism is not only explored, but carefully distilled and articulated with integrity, precision

and care. In this context, art becomes both a site of inquiry and a conduit for wellbeing, healing and the transmission of knowledge.

Ray's art practice is itself marked by a quiet authority. His generosity and modesty are reflected in the depth of his ongoing connection to family, community and Country, and the way his work invites others into dialogue. As a senior artist, he continues to interrogate and illuminate the enduring impacts of colonial dispossession, as well as resistance and identity, simultaneously asserting the strength, continuity and resilience of First Peoples knowledge systems. His work is grounded in lived experience, yet always oriented towards the future, encouraging the continuation and intergenerational sharing of cultural knowledge. *Yeerung's Journey* represents a significant moment within the KHT's exhibition program.

For the first time, works by Ray from the KHT's unique and important collection of southeastern Australian art and cultural belongings are presented in dialogue with new and recent works by the artist. This merging creates a layered and expansive narrative, offering rare insight into the evolution of Ray's practice over time. The exhibition traces a shift in technique, the deepening of conceptual frameworks and the increasing complexity in how cultural, spiritual and emotional dimensions are articulated. By bringing these works together, the exhibition creates a dynamic and immersive environment that invites audiences to reflect, connect and engage with the work on multiple levels.

I gratefully acknowledge our presenting partners for their support of this exhibition: Creative Victoria; City of Melbourne; Creative Australia; the Australian Government through the

Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program; and Viva Energy Australia.

I also acknowledge the curatorial team that brought this exhibition together, in particular Sophie Kahl, whose rigour and care have been instrumental in shaping it.

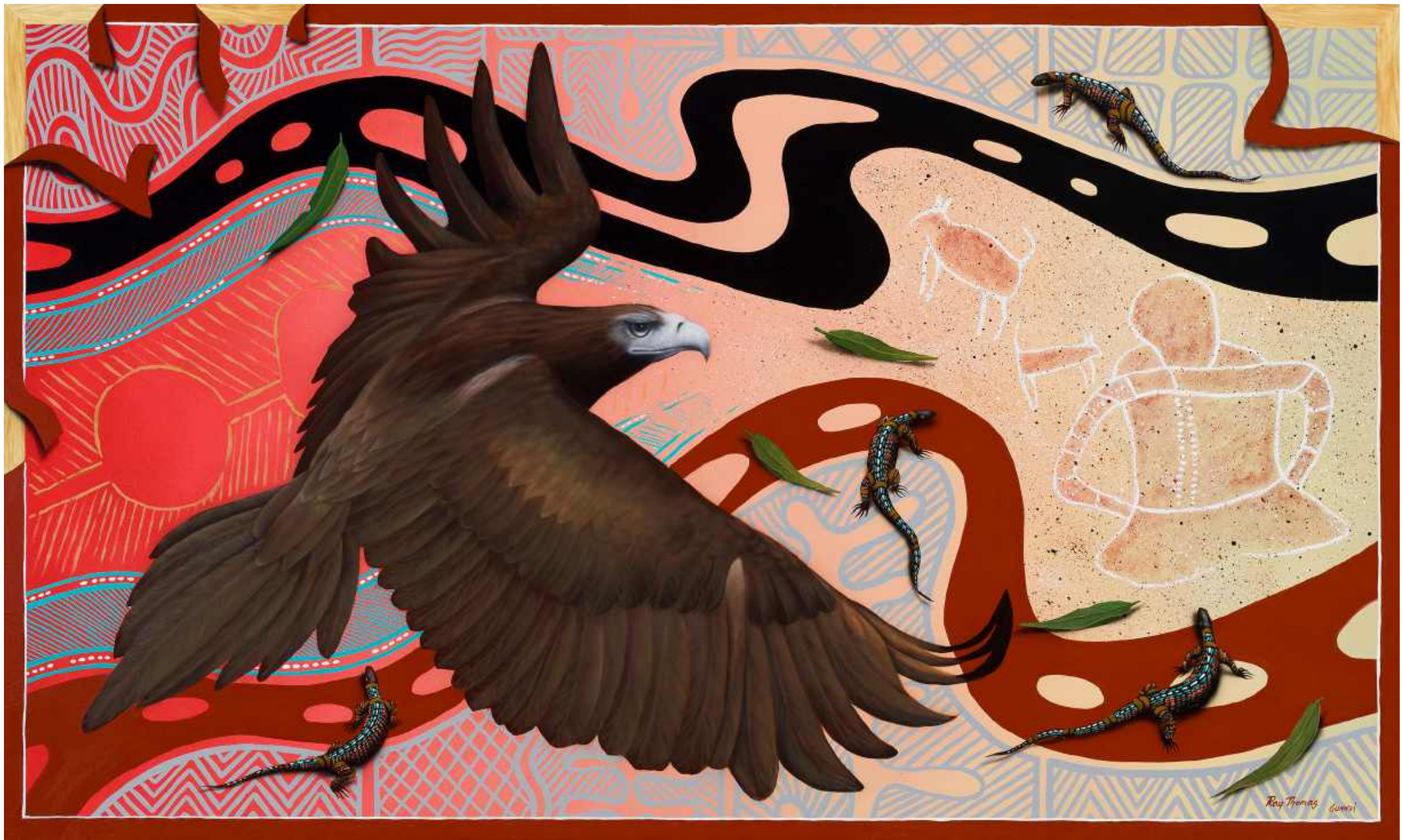
Finally, I extend my sincere thanks to Ray Thomas for his generosity, trust, and unwavering commitment to sharing his stories, knowledge and cultural practice through this exhibition.

Ngoon Godjin (Thank You)

TOM MOSBY
CEO, KHT

My Painting Table
2001
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust
AH 02687





Bunjil's Country
2025
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist



The old mission church
1986
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist



Rosy Thomas. 2004

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 1861 to present
2004
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust
AH 03416

Art mimics life because we're always learning

RAY THOMAS
Brabrawoolong Gunnai



My artwork has been a constantly evolving journey since the early 1980s. Over the years, through experimentation and learning, I've developed my own style. I work across oils and acrylics, combining airbrushing with hand-painting to create bold, colourful and detailed works.

A signature part of my work is the use of peeled-back corners and floating elements layered over traditional Gunnai markings, patterns and totems. These layers hold stories drawn from my Gunnai heritage and from connection to Gunnai Country in Gippsland over many years. My practice has continued to grow over time, encompassing digital design, woodwork, pyrography, sculpture, cement rendering and large-scale public murals.

Early on in my journey, during the mid-1970s, I was introduced to Lin Onus

AM, who became one of Australia's most prominent urban Indigenous artists. Throughout the years that followed, I was fortunate to have many conversations with him about politics, art and technique. On the few occasions I visited his studio, witnessing his progress inspired me further. Sadly, Lin passed away in 1996.

Another artist who shared their technical knowledge with me was Australian landscape painter Leonard Long OAM. In Gippsland, he demonstrated specific palette formulas for mixing landscape colours. His technical insights remained with me, eventually becoming part of my evolving practice.

Art is a forever evolving journey as in life; there's always something new to learn.

RAY THOMAS
Brabrawoolong Gunnai



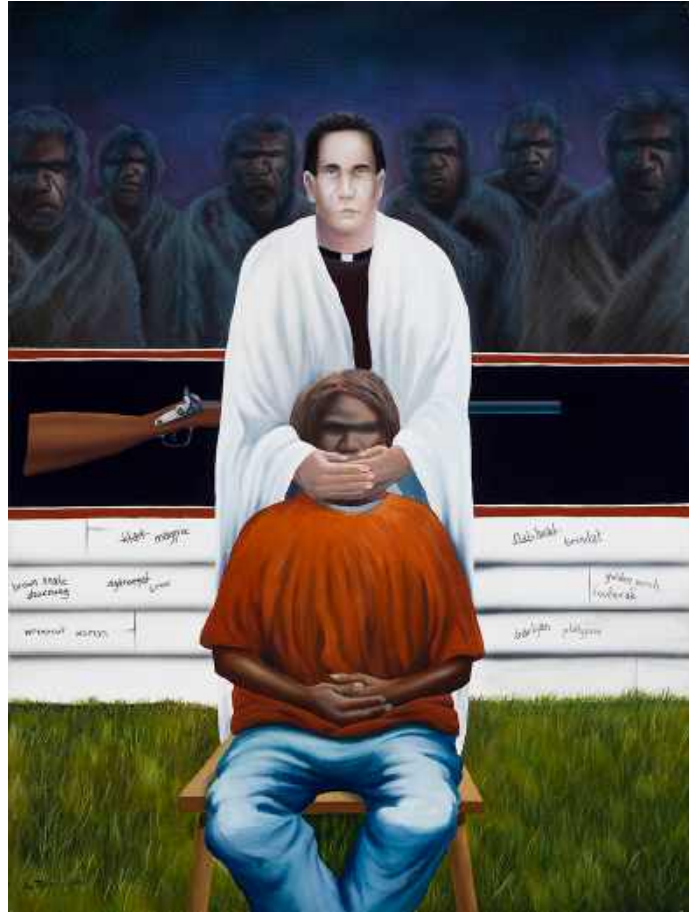
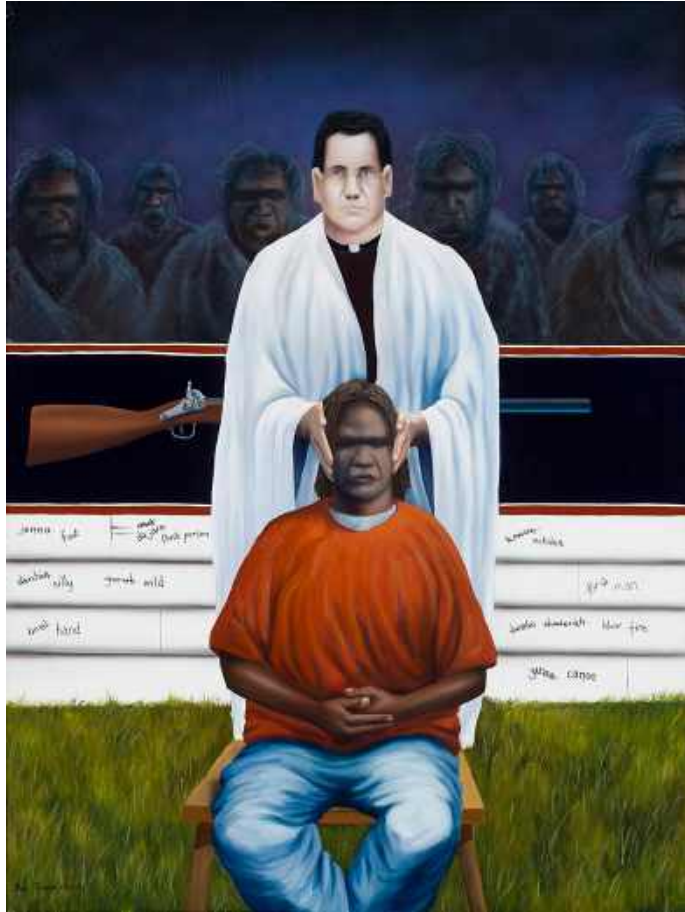
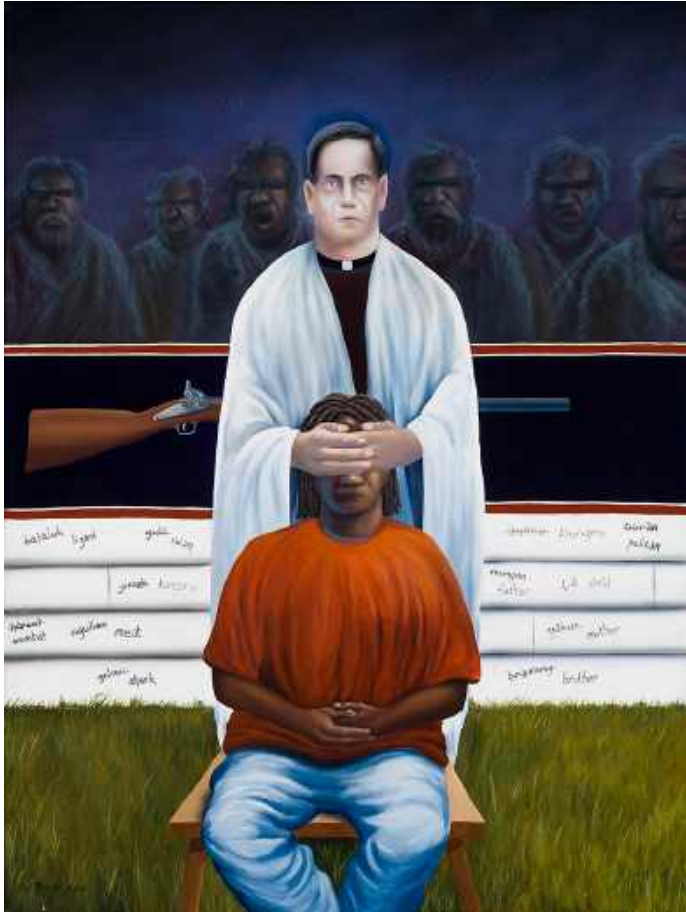
Lin Qiu

Ray Murray



Previous page: **Homage to Lin Onus**
2014
oil and acrylic on canvas
Private collection, courtesy of the lender

Private Property
2003
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust
AH 02848



See 'em, Hear 'em, Speak 'em no Debbil-debbil
2003
acrylic on linen
Collection of the artist

An Artist, A Teacher, A Legacy

CRYSTAL STUBBS



I first met Ray Thomas in 2018. I had long admired his remarkable murals, so when a colleague mentioned he was in the gallery, I didn't hesitate to introduce myself. Ray was—and remains—a giant of the art world.

“My artwork has been an evolving journey since the mid-1980s. Like many urban-based Koorie artists, I began working with the widely used dot and cross-hatch styles of Central and Northern Australia. Since then, I have researched and explored the stories, designs, and markings of my Gunnai people.”

Ray's work is instantly recognisable. He uses a unique layered composition of peeled-back corners, floating elements, and traditional Gunnai markings, patterns, and totems. These elements set him apart entirely. There is a distinctiveness to both his style and subject matter that is unmistakably his own. Predominantly self-taught, Ray's technical mastery is equally compelling. His use of the airbrush brings an extraordinary realism to his animals, which appear three-dimensional, as though emerging from the surface of the canvas.

A strong influence on his work was the late artist Lin Onus, whom he met around 1974. That meeting sparked Ray's interest in painting Country using a Western landscape style.

The first work Ray ever exhibited at the East Gippsland Art Gallery was a triptych titled *See 'em, Hear 'em, Speak 'em no Debbil-debbil*. This was a powerful introduction to the deeper layers of Ray's practice. The work is confronting, evocative, and raw. These paintings speak to the loss of language and the profound injustice embedded in Australia's history. In Ray's words;

“All human beings have a fundamental right to practice their traditions and ceremonies. Being denied the ability to pass on language or dialects integral to one’s identity is a great indictment on Australia’s history.”

In each of the three works, a priest stands over a seated Gunnai man. Behind them, weatherboards cut across traditional Gunnai language, replacing it with English words of the same meaning. In the first painting, the priest blinds the man, denying him sight of his ancestors’ traditions. In the second, he covers his ears, silencing language. In the third, he covers his mouth, preventing speech. In the background, ancestral figures stand—watchful, present, and haunting.

I reflect now, with sadness, that when I first encountered these works, my understanding of First Nations history in this country was limited. Experiencing Ray’s work was a turning point. These paintings compel us to bear witness—they ask us not to look away.

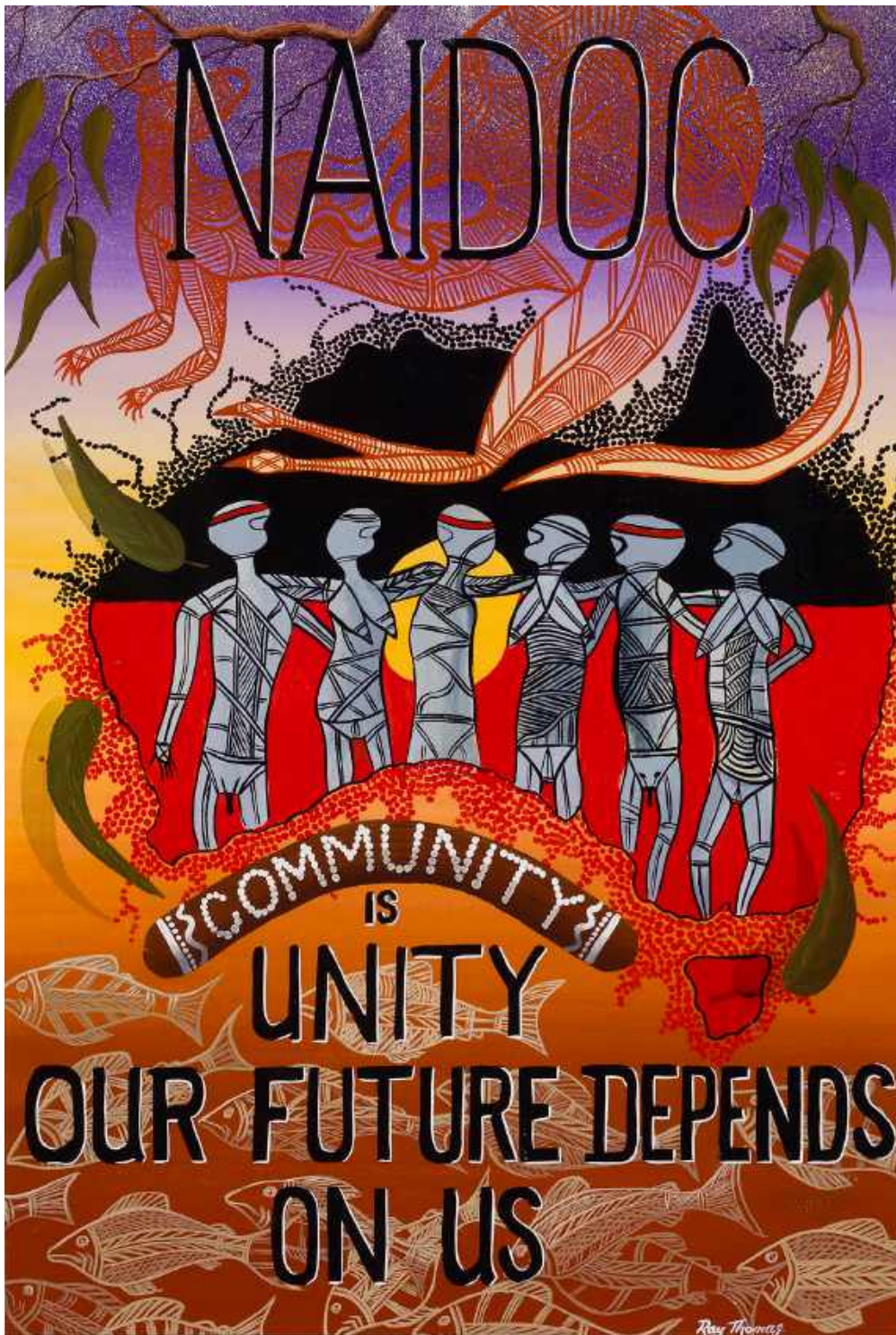
Over the years, Ray has taught me so much about these histories, through both the power of his artwork and the generosity with which he shares his people’s heritage. Many of Ray’s works are inspired by the stories of his much-loved mother, Aunty Alice Thomas (1919–2014), a revered Gunnai Elder and respected figure in Victorian Aboriginal communities.

In 2005 Ray completed a Master of Arts by Research at RMIT University. The project involved interviewing his mother about her childhood memories, which became integral to works including *See ‘em, Hear ‘em, Speak ‘em no Debbil-debbil*. As Ray explains,

Mum Alice
2013

oil on canvas
Collection of the artist
Courtesy of Gippsland Art Gallery





“The content of the work is the story of my mother’s early childhood and recollections of growing up on her grandparents’ farmlet in Lakes Entrance in the 1920s.”

Over the years, this research has shaped and transformed his work, and what he has learnt, he has generously shared with the next generation of Koorie artists. Ray is incredibly generous in sharing his knowledge, using his arts practice not only as a form of expression but also as a powerful educational tool. Through workshops and demonstrations, I have watched him engage with the children and young people of East Gippsland, teaching them about the totems of the Gunnai people.

With an airbrush, a few pieces of precisely cut paper, and the arch between his forefinger and thumb as a guide, Ray creates portraits and animals that seem to materialise before your eyes. Children watch, mesmerised, as sharp lines form and soft gradients bring depth and life. It is a remarkable thing to witness. He is a true master of his craft—and he makes it look effortless.

This retrospective celebrates not only Ray’s extraordinary artistic legacy but also his generosity, his cultural leadership, and his unwavering commitment to truth-telling through art.

It is a privilege to know him and to learn from him.

CRYSTAL STUBBS



Ray Morning
Gunnah

A Shameful History
2013
acrylic and oil on canvas
Collection of the artist

BIOGRAPHY

RAY THOMAS
Brabrawoolong Gunnai



Ray Thomas (Brabrawoolong Gunnai, b. 1960) is a respected Aboriginal Elder and senior artist living and working in Victoria. His creative practice has been part of his life for more than four decades. Working across painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking and, most recently, large-scale murals, Ray creates art that grows from family, Country, memory and lived experience. His work demonstrates that art can be both powerful and healing, with each work tracing his journey and the

stories from the Old People, places and mentors that have shaped him.

In the early 1970s, Ray came across an autobiography of the late, great Arrernte artist Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). Reading it as a 14-year-old was the first time he had encountered the watercolour landscape genre. Albert's story was a tragic one – 'a shameful history' in Australia. From then on, Ray was fuelled to follow his own path as a largely self-taught artist, developing a distinctive and vibrant style over many years. His works are rich with colour and movement, layered with cultural symbols, patterns, people and storytelling that honour his Ancestors while reflecting personal memories and shared histories of community.

Not long after learning about Albert's work, he was introduced to Lin Onus (1948-1996). This meeting was a pivotal point, providing an introduction to landscape painting in oils. Through



this friendship, Ray came to understand that art could carry not only stories, but also responsibility – a way of speaking up for community, culture and Country.

For Ray, art has never been separate from life. Having experienced and carried profound loss throughout his life, Ray has found in his practice a place for healing – a quiet remedy that allows him to reflect, remember and keep going. His work speaks powerfully about the realities faced by Aboriginal people in Australia. It is political in its truth-telling, yet always shaped by Ray's generous spirit.

Portraiture and storytelling sit at the heart of Ray's practice. Through these elements, he shares memories – recording people and moments that matter, while highlighting the resilience and strength of living Aboriginal culture.

Alongside his art practice, Ray has remained strongly committed to community. He has held roles within

the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation and with The Torch, supporting programs that strengthen cultural connection, opportunity and self-determination for Aboriginal people.

Ray also continues to give back through mentoring and creative workshops. He facilitates art workshops as part of the men's healing and youth programs at Dardi Munwurro, as well as for Anglicare Victoria, regional galleries and primary and secondary schools across the state.

Ray's work is held in significant public and community collections across Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, Museums Victoria, the Australian Football League Hall of Fame, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation, the Aboriginal Advancement League, the City of Darebin Art Collection and Nillumbik Shire Council.





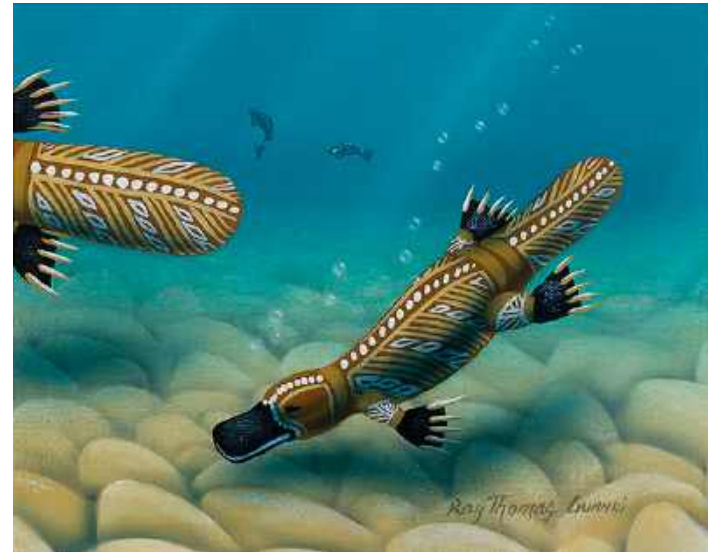
Untitled (landscape)

1995

acrylic on board

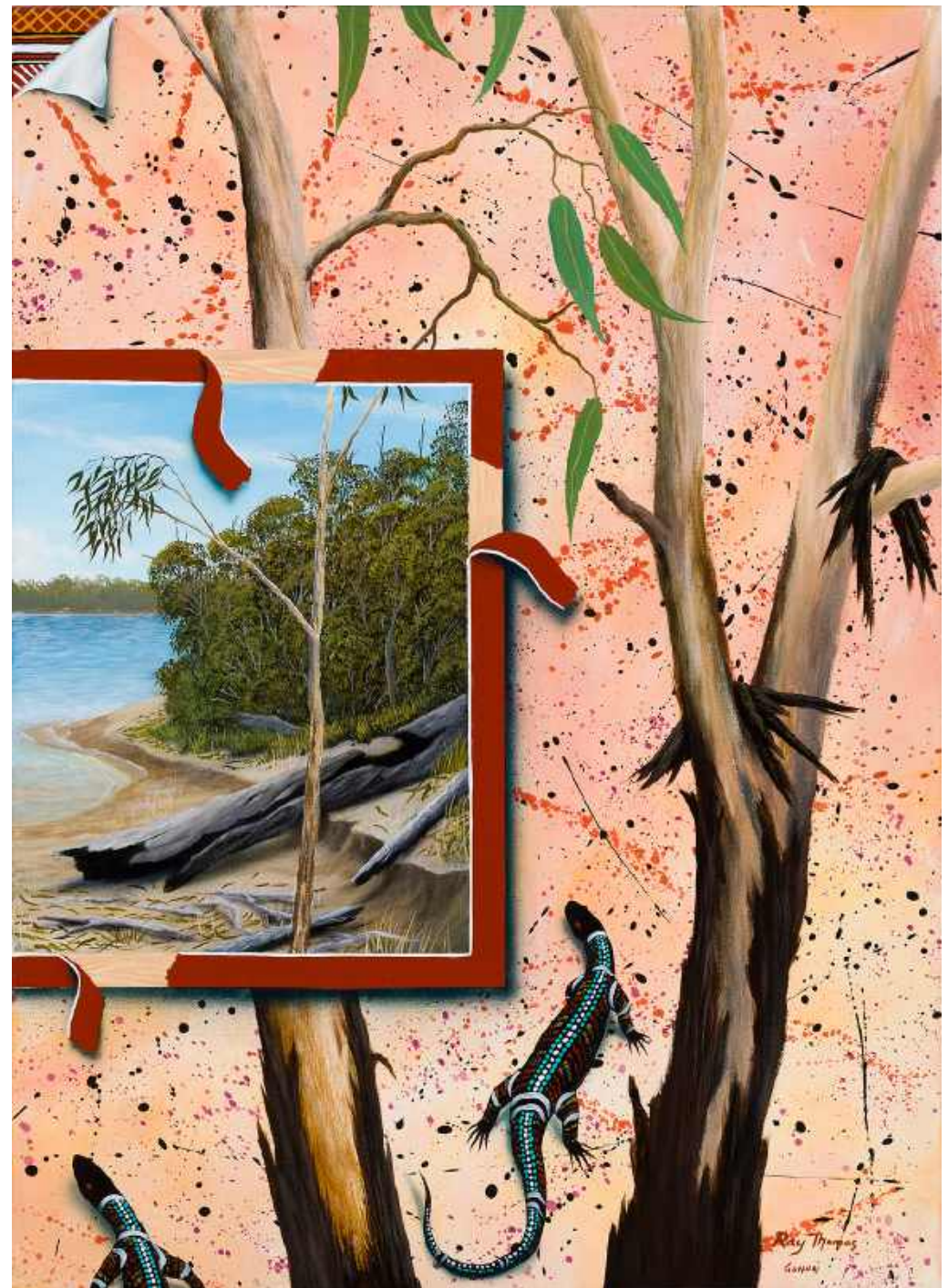
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust

AH 03041



Untitled (platypus)
2004
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust
AH 03439

Next page: **Lizards and lakes**
2026
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist





Borun's Country, The Origin of the Gunnai of Gippsland

2025

acrylic on canvas

Collection of the artist, courtesy of Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation

List of Works

RAY THOMAS
Brabrawoolong Gunnai



Mum Alice
 2013
 oil on canvas
 160 x 110 x 3.5 cm
 Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Gippsland Art Gallery



Bataluk the Lizard, collaboration with Tirilli Thomas (Brabrawoolong Gunnai)
 2000
 woodburning and acrylic paint on redgum
 120 x 60 x 40 cm (overall)
 Collection of the artist, courtesy of Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation



Borun's Country, The Origin of the Gunnai of Gippsland
 2025
 acrylic on canvas
 92 x 152 x 4 cm
 Collection of the artist, courtesy of Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation



The Gathering
 2005
 acrylic on canvas
 90 x 122 x 3.5 cm
 Private collection, courtesy of the lender



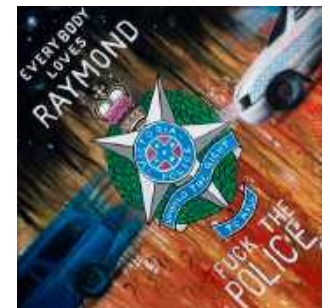
Homage to Lin Onus
 2014
 oil and acrylic on canvas
 90 x 122 x 3.5 cm
 Private collection, courtesy of the lender



A Shameful History
 2013
 acrylic and oil on canvas
 100 x 150 x 2 cm
 Collection of the artist



Bunjil's Country
 2025
 acrylic on canvas
 91 x 152 x 3.5 cm
 Collection of the artist



Everybody loves Raymond
 2018
 acrylic on canvas
 92 x 92 x 4 cm
 Collection of the artist





Lizards and lakes
2026
acrylic on canvas
2 parts: 92 x 61 x 2cm;
92 x 66 x 2cm
Collection of the artist.



Native Title Checkmate
2003
oil on canvas
197 x 197 x 3.5 cm
Collection of the artist



The old mission church
1986
acrylic on canvas
85 x 70 x 4.5 cm (framed)
Collection of the artist



Yeerung (emu wren) on Country
2018
oil on canvas
66 x 92 x 3.5 cm
Collection of the artist



Brolga family
c.1987
acrylic on canvas
48 x 63 x 3.3 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1987
AH 02889



Dancing Brolgas
1987
acrylic on canvas
53 x 42.7 x 3.3 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1987
AH 00166



*Michael Long's grandmother's
Country*
2001
acrylic on canvas, airbrushed
92 x 92 x 4 cm
Collection of the artist



*See 'em, Hear 'em, Speak 'em no
Debbil-debbil*
2003
acrylic on linen, 3 parts
92 x 122 x 4 cm (each)
Collection of the artist



Uncle Kevin Coombs
2022
oil on canvas
66 x 92 x 2.5 cm
Collection of the artist



Bataluks (lizards) and orbs
2002
acrylic on canvas
79 x 54 x 4 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2002
AH 03385



Bush Tucker
1987
oil on artboard
76.8 x 60.9 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1987
AH 00164



Desert scene with orbs
2002
acrylic on canvas
46.3 x 69.3 x 4.5 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2002
AH 02850



Sunset at Lakes Entrance
2024
oil on canvas, 122 x 61 x 4 cm
Collection of the artist



Evening Shadows
1999
acrylic on canvas
56.7 x 67 x 3.7 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1999
AH 02296



Krautungulling
1987
acrylic on canvas
45.8 x 70.5 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1987
AH 00165a



Krautungulling
1987
acrylic on canvas
27 x 52.7 x 23 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1987
AH 00165b



Kangaroo with trees
2002
acrylic on canvas
69 x 46.3 x 3.8 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2002
AH 02849



*Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 1861
to present*
2004
acrylic on canvas
68.4 x 68.4 x 51 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2004
AH 03416



Malu Hunt
1989
acrylic on canvas board
64 x 78.9 x 3.5 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1989
AH 00455



My Painting Table
2001
acrylic on canvas
104.2 x 75.4 x 31 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2001
AH 02687



Outback scene
2001
oil on canvas
62 x 82.1 x 3.5 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2001
AH 02700



Private Property
2003
acrylic on canvas
46.3 x 69.3 x 4.4 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2003
AH 02848



NAIDOC
1991
acrylic on canvas
104.3 x 75.4 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1991
AH 02493



Reflection in River
1999
acrylic on canvas
68.1 x 58 x 33 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1999
AH 02298



Sharing the Catch
1996
acrylic on canvas
58 x 68 x 4 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1996
AH 02455



Spirit of the Land (1 of series)
1995
acrylic on board
33.4 x 43.7 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03626



Spirit of the country (1 of 3)
1995
acrylic on board
33.4 x 43.7 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03044



Trees in early evening
2002
acrylic on canvas
69 x 46.3 x 3.7 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2002
AH 02847



Spirit of the country (2 of 3)
1995
acrylic on board
33.4 x 43.7 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03045



Untitled (night scene)
1989
oil on canvas
68.2 x 58.5 x 2.5 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1989
AH 00438



Spirit of the country (3 of 3)
1995
acrylic on board
33.4 x 41 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03046



Untitled (landscape)
2001
acrylic on board
28.5 x 38.8 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2001
AH 02688



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.7 x 38.9 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03037



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.7 x 38.9 x 3.2 cm
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03038



Untitled (landscape)
2001
acrylic on board
28.6 x 38.8 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03039



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.7 x 38.9 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03040



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.6 x 38.8 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03041



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.6 x 38.8 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03042



Untitled (landscape)
1995
acrylic on board
28.7 x 38.9 x 3.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 1995
AH 03043



Untitled (platypus)
2004
acrylic on canvas
37.8 x 98.9 x 2.2 cm (framed)
Collection of the Koorie Heritage
Trust, Narrm (Melbourne)
Purchased 2004
AH 03439

Contributors

Crystal Stubbs

Crystal Stubbs, Director of the East Gippsland Art Gallery has worked with Ray Thomas for 8 years. She has developed a strong and enduring relationship with Ray, whose presence as an exhibitor, mentor, and friend has deeply shaped her work and commitment to arts engagement.

Acknowledgements

The Koorie Heritage Trust extends a heartfelt thank you to Ray Thomas, for his incredible ongoing contribution to the cultural practices and cultural life of First Peoples in South East Australia.

We gratefully acknowledge Sophie Kahl, for her wonderful consultancy, and Crystal Stubbs for her generosity in sharing her friendship with Ray. We extend our gratitude to Gippsland Art Gallery, the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC), and the private lenders for their generous support of the exhibition and publication.

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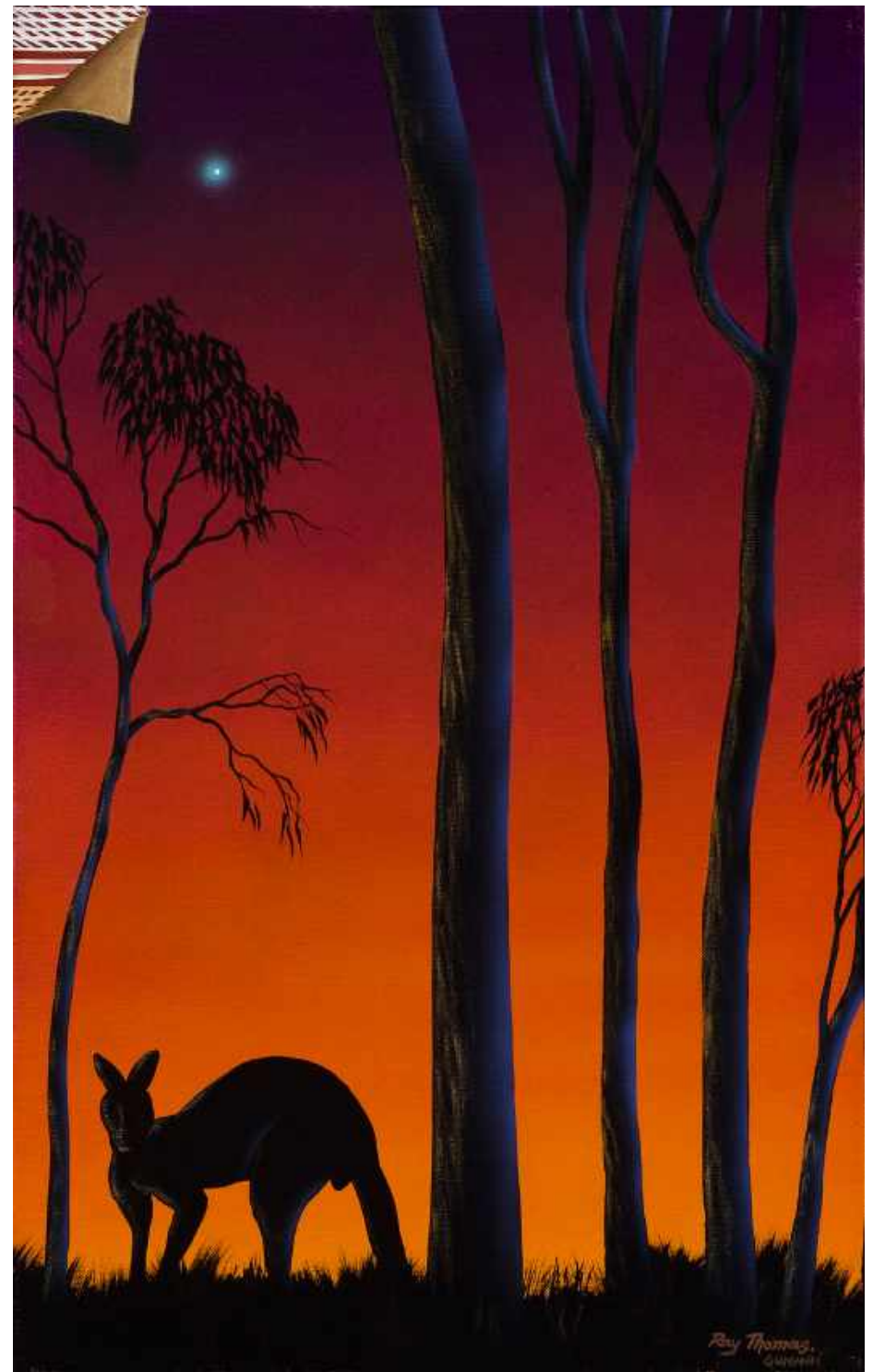
Kangaroo with trees

2002

acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust

AH 02849





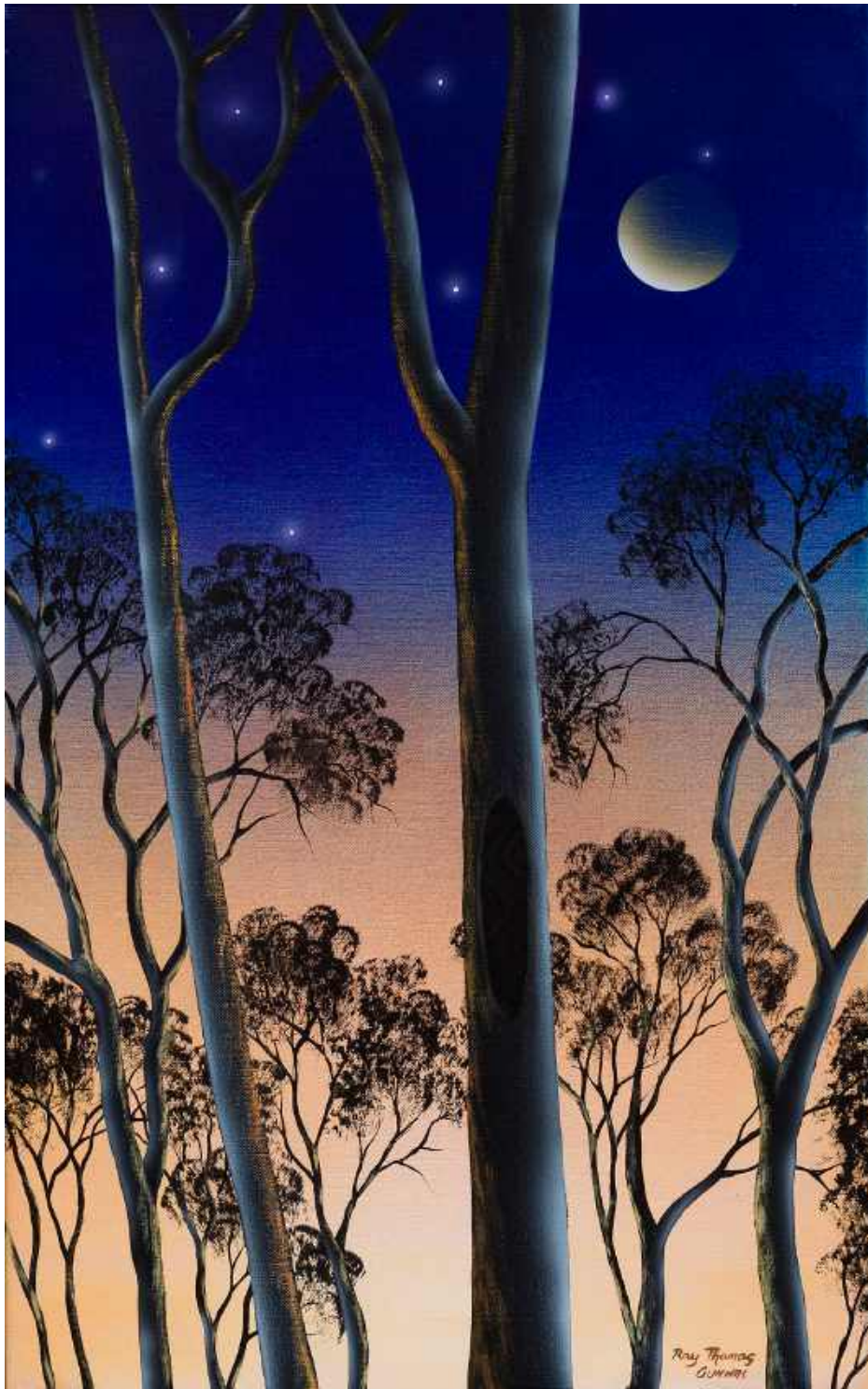
Untitled (landscape)

1995

acrylic on board

Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust

AH 03037



RAY THOMAS:

Yeerung's Journey

Published by Koorie Heritage Trust in conjunction with the exhibition *Ray Thomas: Yeerung's Journey*, Koorie Heritage Trust: 30 May – 9 August 2026.

Koorie Heritage Trust

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kht.org.au

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Cover Image: Ray Thomas (Brabrawoolong Gunnai), Untitled (landscape), 2001, acrylic on board, 28.5 x 38.8 x 3.2 cm (framed). Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust, Narrm (Melbourne), purchased 2001, AH 02688. Photo: Christian Capurro.

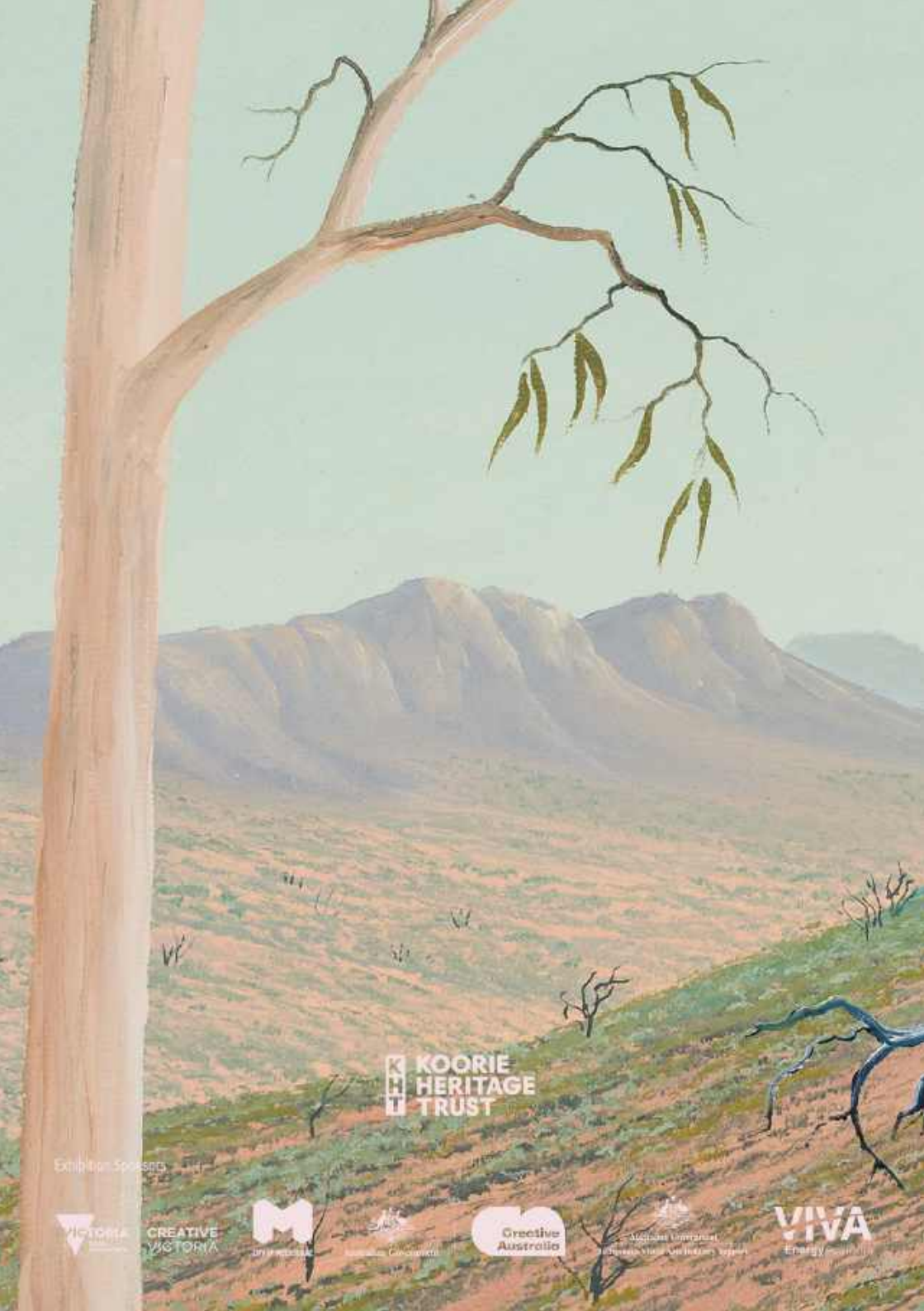
Trees in early evening

2002

acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust

AH 02847



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HERITAGE
TRUST**

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