



Kelly Koumalatsos

Wergaia, Wemba Wemba with Greek heritage

Interview by Andrew Stephens

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For Kelly Koumalatsos, time now moves at a different pace. Not only has the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic altered her ability to move around geographically, it changed the ways in which she is able to apportion her time. With her strong desire to care for family, community, colleagues and professional connections, there are many ways she can direct her energies, but Kelly has been learning to go more slowly, and with more focus.

Kelly is a Wergaia and Wemba Wemba woman with Greek heritage whose artwork is held in many collections, including the Koorie Heritage Trust, the City of Melbourne Arts and Heritage Collection, Yarra Arts, City of Yarra, Maroondah City Council and Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, while the National Gallery of Victoria is also in the process of acquiring a recent work. Her practice encompasses both traditional and contemporary concerns and materials. Working with possum skins and screen printing, she investigates pre-colonial interests with a 21st century perspective, bringing political, cultural and historical strands into conversation with each other in fascinating, visually stunning ways.

A resident on the Bellarine Peninsula, for the past 14 years Kelly has been in the habit of working across four locations in her vicinity. These include her own studio at a shared church space near her home; at the Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop; at Deakin University's Waterfront campus, when students are absent during semester breaks; and, at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin's Waurin Ponds campus, where she is granted access as an alumna.

"Printing is my main practice and everything stems from that," Kelly says. "But since the virus lockdown, one of my biggest problems has been where to print and how to keep this work going. It was pretty stressful as each of those places shut, one by one. I was losing the ability to print."

Kelly has continued to produce smaller-scale works in her own studio. "You really have to warm it up in winter, but it is a beautiful space," she says. "There are four of us there with our own corners, and we all support each other's practices, discussing practical, technical things." But there are limited printmaking resources there, so Kelly has also been travelling to



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Sunshine Print Artspace in Melbourne's western suburbs where she has had some highly productive sessions working on larger-scale pieces for an upcoming Melbourne Museum project. "The Print Artspace has a beautiful big press," she says. "It has been my saviour."

Sunshine is also near her father's home and Kelly's father, like many older people in isolation, has required extra support over the past two months. "The first time I tried to use the Print Artspace, I tried to do his grocery shopping and get his prescriptions filled as well," she says. "I'll never do that again. I realised I have to look after him separately; it is just not a great idea to try and do more than one thing at a time. It was not the time to rush my Dad into the day. You can't expect to do things in the same time-zones we used to, pre-virus."

Kelly maintains that at the onset of lockdown restrictions, everything felt very difficult and frightening. "We didn't know what would happen. We thought people were going to die around us left, right and centre. It was this harsh pressure, and the intensity of the atmosphere was so heavy." Thus, she initially tried to continue the full pace of a busy pre-COVID-19 life, which has included Department of Education employment as a Koorie Engagement Support Officer, her art practice, caring for her parents and their partners and other family members, and working on a book with writer Din Heagney. Eventually, she gave in to a slower schedule, and the result was being more present for those around her, as well as some excellent, productive sessions at the Printspace.

"Printing is quite a physical thing, and they aren't small, little prints. You are on your feet for hours so you want to be in a good position, not stressed out, and completely engaged."

Working with possum furs is the pinnacle of her artistic enjoyment, and when Kelly is able to immerse herself, find complete focus and be at one with the process, she loves it and it is a great antidote to the stresses and anxieties associated with the pandemic. "It can be tricky printing with possum fur. It is not rocket science, but it really is in the lap of the gods, sometimes. Amazingly, at Sunshine, the first time I inked up the furs and put them through it was like 'Let's go! Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!' I had never had that happen before. That press there can be set at exactly the right pressure for my possum fur. You could spend ages trying to get that right in other places."

For Kelly, the great joy from the process is an enduring connection to the fur, which she has been using in her work for more than two decades. This began with an interest in rekindling the use and display of possum fur cloaks. "Pre-colonisation, everybody had one, everybody wore one. That



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was your bed, that was your coat, that was your drums ... it was so many things. Where did they all go? I was passionate, like other members of the community, about bringing them back into the world. And because I did printmaking at uni, I just started experimenting with them in that way ... and I just love it. It connects me to a pre-colonisation practice.”

Even so, there is another dimension to Kelly’s work and interests that is generally not considered or discussed by non-Indigenous people. “It is those other realms of existence that aren’t acknowledged by Western society.” In the midst of a world facing enormous challenges, difficulties and grief, she finds – and is able to share through her work – valuable solace, depth and a broader horizon.

Wemba Wemba and Wergaia woman Kelly Koumalatsos is a Victorian Aboriginal artist living and practising on the Bellarine Peninsula. Kelly’s artistic practice include possum skin cloak making and screen printing with fur, elements of which are seen in her practice today. Kelly’s works are held in many collections, including the Koorie Heritage Trust, the City of Melbourne Arts and Heritage Collection, Yarra Arts, City of Yarra, Maroondah City Council and Wagga Wagga Art Gallery.