



KOORIE

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

A Butterfly Flaps Its Wings

Kait James

Wadawurrung/Wathaurong

Interviewed by Monique Grbec

October 2020



It's the first week of October 2020, and new COVID-19 cases from Kulin Country are finally down to single digits. With a mixture of fear and excitement, the city waits at the precipice of re-opening. A year ago this week,

Wadawurrung/Wathaurong artist Kait James was experiencing the same blend of fear and excitement waiting to open her first solo show, *Dry Your Dishes On My Culture*, at Koorie Heritage Trust's Project Gallery.

The *Dry Your Dishes On My Culture* works are a series of 1970s and 1980s calendar tea towels printed with images of traditional Aboriginal culture and embroidered with vibrant coloured wool and cotton thread depicting popular Western culture of the year. They speak of two different worlds and how the economy of capitalism and the fad culture of consumerism have woven their way into the human psyche of this country.

Looking beyond the materialism of the works to the beauty and strength that the images of Aboriginal culture depict offers insight into James' personal ambitions of deconstructing and stripping back the trappings of Western culture. For James, the show was the first step to choosing a life of creation, education and nurturing. Like a metaphorical egg in a metamorphosis, she emerged from the show ready to learn more of her Wathaurong culture, and by March 2020, she shed the skin of her weekly wage to embrace flight like a butterfly.

"This is not the year I thought it was gonna to be", James laughs. When lockdowns were enforced in March, instead of dancing at Tanderrum and enjoying immersing herself in Wathaurong culture, walking with cousins on Country, and nurturing relationships with mob, James is isolating alone on Wurundjeri-willam Country with occasional Zoom chats with friends, and the government sanctioned romantic partner exemption that allows her to visit Pineapple to marvel at Wurundjeri Country from its hills.

"Merri Creek has been my saviour". Every day she acknowledges Wurundjeri people past, present and future, and along the trails she listens for the *whitgewherri* (hair tree or she oak) as wind rushes through its



foliage. This is a tree she knows from Wathaurung Country and she listens for the sweetness of the harp-like sound that is the voice of ancestors. This is a place of wisdom and James ponders the Ngarrrai as a site for burial, and where babies and children were left safe from snakes on the branchlet cushions.

For as much as James is challenged by the uncertainty of COVID-19 restrictions, and struggles with the daily grind of isolation – a “lack of motivation... feeling sorry for myself... the difficulty of stringing a sentence together with both a mask and sunglasses” – her creative practice is thriving.

James’ ability to present layers of colonialism with vibrant and vital visuals is being recognised, lauded and rewarded. Following the success of *Dry Your Dishes On My Culture* winning the Lendlease Reconciliation Award, and multiple works bought by the National Gallery of Victoria for their permanent collection, 2020 has embraced James’ talents as a finalist for both the Wyndham Art Prize and the King Wood Mallesons Art Prize. Most magnificently, her work *Colonial Virus* made a glorious glossy cover for the Spring 2020 issue of the prestigious *Art Monthly Australasia*, the leading critical platform for visual arts in this country.

Colonial Virus is one of many Aboriginal-centric cloth patches James made especially for the #ournameamongstothers project guest-edited by Raquel Ormella. Curated by Ormella, the project involved artists posting small artworks to each other. Given this wonderful opportunity to share space with some of Australia’s creative greats, James addressed all of her artworks with the Aboriginal name of the Country the recipient works on. She relished the experience and privilege of looking up maps to re-learn traditional Country names, and plans on continuing this practice throughout her life.

While James dreams for “that feeling, the lightness of being when you’re crossing the Werribee River knowing you’re heading home” to Wathaurung Country, she waits for the final proofs for a *Life Be In It - Black Lives Matter* t-shirt she designed for the Co-op shop where profits will be donated to Ngarrimilli. The next big thing on James’ post COVID-19 calendar of deconstruction is the reconstruction of another series of tea towel calendars for her May 2021 Ballarat Art Gallery solo show. This butterfly flies, her work pollinates and the flowers and fruits will flourish.

Kait James is a proud Wadawurrung woman and visual artist based in Melbourne. Kait obtained a Bachelor of Media Arts (Photography) from



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RMIT University in 2001, but only recently returned to making art, through her love of culture, textiles and colour. In 2019, Kait was awarded the Craft Victoria Emerging Artist award, and the Lendlease Reconciliation Award at the Koorie Art Show. Her exhibition Dry Your Dishes on My Culture was held at the Koorie Heritage Trust's Emerging Artist Space, in 2019.