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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

New World Order

Aunty Marlene Gilson
Wathaurung (Wadawurrung)
Interviewed by Monique Grbec
December 2020



A full moon rises to bring us into December 2020 with no active COVID-19 cases. Since our first confirmed case on 25 January 2020, there have been 3,581,144 tests with 20,345 confirmed cases and 819 deaths. What a year.

With 30 days without any new infections, there is a collective sigh of relief because epidemiologists consider 28 days the benchmark for elimination of the virus. By their calculations, 28 days is more than double the incubation period, or enough time for two chains of transmissions. We should be virus free, although the consensus among health professionals is that infections still exist.

Our borders are open and restrictions are limited. That said, the ripple of the COVID-19 crisis still reverberates through every area of public existence, from advertising and newsreels celebrating double doughnut days of 0 new cases and 0 deaths, to face masks and hand sanitising stations at shops, restaurants and medical centres.

While there were fewer than 100 cases in Wathaurong during the critical second wave of COVID-19 infections, Elder Aunty Marlene Gilson did heed health warnings by reducing her shopping trips to once every few weeks. The bonus of restrictions was having her hubby home and getting her garden looking like a park.

Otherwise, with family living within walking distance of her home and an enviable ability to talk on the telephone for ages, the COVID-19 crisis has barely affected her.

“Get up, clean up and paint,” Aunty laughs. A woman who enjoys her own company, Aunty is never alone. Painting her Wathaurong Ancestors into the colonised visual arts history of the area is a source of joy, pride, and connectedness to not just her Ancestors, which include her great-great-grandparents Narweet (head of the clan) King Billy and Queen Mary, but her grandchildren. While portraits of her children and other family members appear in all of her paintings, Aunty adores having her grandkids involved: “They love to pick their outfits,” and sometimes when they can’t



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decide between colours or styles, they appear in the same artwork more than once.

Currently, Aunty is working toward a solo exhibition coming up in March 2021 at Martin Browne Contemporary in Gadigal Country. For the show, she is creating a painting of Wathaurong with a 'not for sale' sign across it. Aunty is a righteous individual with great force of character.

There won't be any facemasks or other COVID-19 representations in Aunty's work: "It's already been done." Aunty is driven by events of the past, where First Nations people and ways of life are not included. She will ensure her Wathaurong Ancestors and, in turn, all First Nations People have agency and are not whitewashed from colonised history. We are still here, we are educating and we are getting educated. We are strong.

Another wonderful surprise to come out of the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns is the strengthening of relationships with her son Barry and his friends: "Many of Barry's friends have had more time to read and research, and they've sent me lots of snippets of important information." Aunty has already used some of the anecdotes in artworks for her upcoming show.

Aunty also delves into history books and journals, and had spent the morning reading about how smallpox ravished Aboriginal communities, and about how their buildings and huts were burned. Bridging the past into present she adds: "There's one family up here, we don't say the names. They still brag that they gave them the flour. Still."

How are we to respond when faced with such unbridled hate? How can we create a safer future, a better place for our children and their children? Every human has a role to play and the role Aunty Marlene Gilson has taken is truth-teller. Using the medium of paint, she is re-writing visual arts history to include Wathaurong custodians and Bunjil and Waa. An antidote to the ravages of colonisation, her work will grace museum walls, and the whitewashed racist dogma of the invaders will be a lesson. This land was never for sale.

Aunty Marlene Gilson's multi-figure paintings work to overturn the colonial grasp on the past by reclaiming and re-contextualising the representation of historical events.

Learning her Wathaurong history from her grandmother, Aunty began painting while recovering from an illness. Her meticulously rendered works display a narrative richness and theatrical quality akin to the traditional genre of history painting.



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Aunty, however, privileges those stories relating to her ancestral land, which covers Ballarat, Werribee, Geelong, Skipton and the Otway Ranges in Victoria. Often including her two totems, Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow, Aunty's paintings not only reconfigure historical narratives, but display her spiritual connection to Country.