



Interview with Deanne Gilson (Wadawurrung)

By Andrew Stephens

Recipient of the City of Melbourne Aboriginal Melbourne Award

The 8th Koorie Art Show (5 December 2020 – 21 February 2021)

After thirteen years of intense full-time study – a Bachelor of Arts, Honours, a Certificate IV, a Dip. Ed, Masters, and finally more than four years doing her PhD – Deanne Gilson, a Wadawurrung woman, was feeling somewhat tired in August. She would be happy, she told her supervisor at university, to never talk about her thesis work again. And so she turned to something deeply pleasurable; something she has always done but had not made a priority in recent times: making art.

Gilson has always loved making art and feels so honoured – “shocked, even” – to have won the City of Melbourne Aboriginal Melbourne Award (\$5,000) in *The 8th Koorie Art Show 2020*, for which she expresses great gratitude. She remembers entering a work in the Ballarat Begonia Festival when she was 18, and having solo shows at the Convent Gallery in Daylesford in the late 1990s, but now she is entering a new period of creativity, celebrating her freedom from academic pressures.

“I am as free as a bird, and I have been painting birds non-stop since I finished on 27 August,” she says. The winning painting *Post Pandemic, After the Gaze, the King Parrots Bring Hope* is the first work she did after those long years of feeling very stressed, very poor and being chained to a desk. “Now it is like a whole new beginning.”

The year of COVID-19 was initially very difficult for Gilson. Freelance art jobs she had organised fell through when lockdown began, and bureaucratic bungles meant she went for nine weeks without any income. “I nearly lost my house,” she says. “I was beside myself. I was more concerned with what we were going to eat.” Eventually, she started receiving JobKeeper payments – “It saved me, it saved my house” – and felt secure enough to get back into finishing writing her thesis.

On submitting it, she spent about five weeks painting *Post Pandemic, After the Gaze, the King Parrots Bring Hope*, spending a couple of hours on it each day. “I took my time, I didn’t rush it. I wanted to enjoy it.” While it might look like a straightforward painting in terms of materials used, it in fact uses white ancestral ochre, acrylic, wattle tree sap, fabric, elastic, and wood on a stretched linen support.

Moreover, the work has a complex layering of subject matter. Gilson says it is all about the various types of gaze, especially the way Aboriginal people



were objectified and treated as lesser than white people after colonisation. Thus, she has depicted herself as an object of that gaze, “standing proud while being immortalised and romanticised by the coloniser as a Royal Doulton figurine object”.

“I actually took that from a photo of a Royal Doulton figurine of a lady with long blond hair, but I have black hair. And I have probably made myself a bit skinnier than I actually am. I have a possum skin cloak dress on.” On the other side of the painting is a seated figure of Captain James Cook, beheaded but with a banksia where his head should be (his head, instead, is under a glass bell jar). Making his head a specimen, she says, is a reference to the fact that “some of our heads are still in museums in England in glass jars”.

So, in the work, she reflects back his gaze, but she is protected by a beautiful dingo nearby. And towering majestically over the top of everything else are exquisite king parrots, which Gilson says bring messages of spirit and hope as they nestle amid the silver banksia tree, which contains the ancient knowledge of her Ancestors.

“Those parrots were in Mum and Dad’s garden during the lockdown, and my dad kept saying they had never seen these king parrots there before,” she says. “They couldn’t take photos so I researched them. I have never painted parrots before. A lot of time was spent mixing up the green colour. I love Fifties kitsch objects and the circle pattern [in the painting] is from campsites, and the diamond pattern from traditional shields.”

Because her work has such a strong still-life aesthetic, and is lush with flowers and decorative objects, Gilson says many people do not realise there are ancestral marks and traditional symbols layered through the work. With the use of the white ceremonial ochre and the big white brushstrokes, she says she has mixed in references to both her colonised self and her love of Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings. “But then there is the blue. I use what I call ‘the colours of Country’ and the blue is highlighting that, even though it is a still-life.”

With such a rich palette of references and ideas, Gilson is excited about her life ahead as an artist: delving deeper into all her loves and the deep connections of her heritage.



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Deanne Gilson (Wadawurrung), *Past Pandemic, After the Gaze, the King Parrots Bring Hope 2020*, white ancestral ochre, acrylic, wattle tree sap, fabric, elastic, wood, linen. City of Melbourne Aboriginal Melbourne Award.

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