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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

## **Interview with Sean Miller (Kamilaroi)**

**By Steve Dow**

**Recipient of the KHT Emerging Artist Award**

The 8<sup>th</sup> Koorie Art Show (5 December 2020 – 21 February 2021)

Biya the whistling kite has a special significance for Kamilaroi artist Sean Miller, who won The 8<sup>th</sup> Koorie Art Show's Emerging Artist Award for *Twilight Flight*, his computer-generated design of the circling raptor.

"It's got a strong spirit," says Miller, who lives at Diggers Rest, a suburb north-west of Melbourne.

"They fly all over the nation. Everywhere you go, you can find whistling kites. They circle around, and I love the way the young ones are always playing."

Miller, too, is always looking to play with new mediums to express his artistic inclinations, which were seeded in his younger years while working with graphic arts, and at one stage working at an uncle's printers in computer publishing and printing.

His Biya design was printed onto aluminium, a material he likes for its contemporary feel, and one he has been experimenting on.

"I take my graphic design to be printed as a reverse of the image, then it goes through a heat process called dye sublimation that fits it into the coating that's on the aluminium."

Miller also takes lots of photographs – including birds as subjects – and has long worked with ceramics, using an old kiln at his home.

He was introduced to ceramics while serving time in gaol, through the Statewide Indigenous Arts in Prisons and Community Program, during which time he studied graphic design as well as looked further into his culture and genealogy.

After his release, Miller became an Indigenous arts officer with The Torch, helping current and former Indigenous prisoners learn artistic skills and reconnect with their culture.



“When I talk to fellas in prison now and they learn I did time, it kind of gives them hope,” he says.

During the recent lockdown in Melbourne, Miller threw himself into his work, trying to get Torch participants painting, “so they didn’t go off and do something stupid and end up in gaol”, he says.

A lot of participants “really struggled” during the lockdown, “especially those living by themselves”, he says.

“We were doing ‘wellbeing walks’. On permit, I would go to their house, meet up with them, and instead of going inside, which I couldn’t, we’d don the masks and go for a walk. You’d be surprised how much a walk around the block a few times would curb the anxiety, just connecting with someone.

“We couldn’t go into prisons. Instead we worked through the Aboriginal wellbeing workers still inside the prisons, gave them research materials on the participants’ mobs and set up to either have them mail us the paintings or do gatehouse pickups. We also did Zoom calls with lower security prisoners and in some cases wrote letters.

“We had an exhibition, which was online as well.”

Miller was born in 1965 to a Scottish mother and Kamilaroi father, who had been born and raised in Moree, a town in northern NSW. Miller was born in Sydney, where his father came seeking work, and was truck driving at the time.

“Dad grew up in a pretty racist town and didn’t talk much about it. Mum told me a bit. She encouraged him to connect more to his Aboriginality. Because of the racist ways things were, he couldn’t even open a bank account.”

Miller married and had children with a woman from Melbourne, which brought him south.

In 2013, he had a series of ceramics in the Melbourne Now exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, which were designed with optical yellow and black renditions of Kamilaroi sacred geometry, and inspired by a memory of his late father, John, showing him carvings within the trunk of an old burnt tree.



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Miller remembers sitting when he was in his 20s with his father at a campfire, and bringing up the memory of paternal cultural information being imparted to him when he was five years old.

Finding ceramics became Miller's "real love of art", he says. However, ceramics is an expensive art form when you use your own kiln and clay.

"I don't like public kilns where you're putting it in with everyone else's," he says.

"I have a room at my home in which I have a wheel and a second-hand kiln that I got really cheap and I've struggled to keep it going.

"It needs new bricks now because the bricks have been fired so many times that when they're fired they spit out little bits of brick into my glaze. I'm going to have to rebuild it."

When his makeshift studio does operate effectively, the cultural connection is strong.

"I just love shaping and moulding clay, it feels like a connection to my Ancestors," he says.

"Sometimes once I've made a piece, I feel it wasn't me that made it. It feels like I've been guided.

"It's an unusual feeling, you know? Where did this skill come from?"

The 8<sup>th</sup> Koorie Art Show is proudly supported by:



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Sean Miller (Kamilaroi), *Twilight Flight* 2020, print on aluminium. KHT Emerging Artist Award 2020.