



Interview with Iluka Sax-Williams (Taungurung, Tibrean)

By Steve Dow

Recipient of the KHT Encouragement Award

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

Having just turned 21, Iluka Sax-Williams is carving many paths in his career: artist, model, actor, fashion designer. “I like to incorporate them all into one,” he says.

The Taungurung man took a grey kangaroo’s skin, and with a wood burner, or poker, created a design in five sections to represent the five tribes of the Kulin nation. The untitled pyrographic artwork earned him an encouragement award at the 8th Koorie Art Show.

“I’ve been doing this for maybe ten years now,” says Sax-Williams of his artistic practice, which often involves acts of cultural reclamation.

The grey kangaroo is known as marram to the Kulin people. Sax-Williams writes of this marsupial “enduring his yananinon [travels]” and “watching the baan [water] and biik [land] change over time”, while the “flow and essence runs through it all.”

“I’ve always loved kangaroos,” he says. “It’s always been a very sacred animal to these lands. You’d wake up early in the morning and see hundreds of them, all looking around, staring at you.”

An inspiration has been his mother, Annette Sax, a Taungurung woman who owns an Indigenous education consultancy, Yarn Strong Sista, based in Melbourne’s Westmeadows. According to its mission statement, Yarn Strong Sista is dedicated to “Aboriginal pedagogy, social justice and self-determination”.

For 20 years, the consultancy has supported Aboriginal youth with employment and mentoring opportunities. In part, that strong community involvement meant Iluka performed a lot of traditional dance while growing up.

“Ever since I was little, I’ve been going out with my mum onto different sites, teaching Indigenous education in early childhood settings. That’s what drove me to build on my artistic side, because my mum is an [ochre paintings and pyrography] artist as well.”



Sax-Williams was born in Carlton, in inner-Melbourne, and is the eldest of three, with a younger brother, Mani, and sister, Kiella. They have extended family around the Yea and Mansfield areas, so often travel to his Country to see cousins and Elders.

Their maternal grandmother, Taungurung Elder Aunty Maureen Franklin, was also an artist and storyteller.

“My parents made sure I was reconnecting with my people and my land,” says Sax-Williams, referring to Taungurung Country on his mother’s side. “I find my guidance when I go out there.”

His father, Bob, is from Saibai Island in the Torres Strait, and has German lineage. He hopes to connect with that side more in the future.

As a child, Sax-Williams was athletic, playing football and baseball, and often “outspoken,” he says, while not enjoying the schooling system.

Self-motivation has helped him find his place. He’s done television extra work on Melbourne soap opera *Neighbours*, freelances as a model and works as an event assistant.

“I understand in the world these days you’ve got to be quite versatile,” he says. “I learn things quick. I’m always trying to learn new things.”

He’s “always been a bit of an artist.” At age six, Sax-Williams submitted some art to the Royal Melbourne Show and one a first prize; although, he can’t recall the category he entered. “My mum was pretty proud,” he laughs.

At 14, he started poker or pyrography burning work. The interest first grew out of his work with a soldering iron on electronic systems during his high school years.

Since then, Sax-Williams’s art practice has ranged widely. For the Yirramboi festival in 2019, he had three of his photographs on display atop large light boxes as part of the *dis rupt* exhibition in Melbourne’s Hamer Hall.

“I decided I wanted to do something with cultural reclamation,” he recalls. “These three photos consisted of me. My face was painted up, I was



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wearing a white tuxedo, and had the first ever kangaroo skin that I burnt draped over my body.”

Sax-Williams has also collaborated to create a one-off Indigenous hoodie and T-shirt design range, titled Bulidu Ngul, meaning heavy sound in Taungurung language. The “merchandise drop” was for the Unify Gathering music festival held in South Gippsland.

All proceeds from the effort went to the Boonwurrung Foundation, which represents the traditional people and custodians of the lands from the Werribee River to Wilsons Promontory.

“It was great to show my art off as well as give back to my cousins on that side, to the community,” says Sax-Williams.

As a creative polymath, he has no intention of ruling out any of his various artistic endeavours.

“One hundred per cent I believe in this world I’ve got the mentality of making money 12 different ways, using all my crafts and art,” he says. “I’m going to make sure I use that to my full advantage.”

Scrolling through Sax-Williams’s Instagram account, a strong sense of identity is clear.

In one image, his hair in dreadlocks and wearing a white-T shirt, black shorts and red shoes, and standing in front of an Aboriginal flag, the caption reads: “80,000+ years runs through my blood and I ain’t ever gonna stop telling you that.”

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Iluka Sax-Williams (Taungurung, Tibrean), *Untitled 2020*, pokerwork on kangaroo skin.
KHT Encouragement Award 2020 (1 of 2).