



FIRED UP

STORIES
THROUGH
EMBERS &
EARTH

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EMBERS &
EARTH

Annie Brigdale

Yorta Yorta

Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis

Wiradjuri

Nicholas Currie

Yugambah, Kuku Yalanji

Trina Dalton-Oogjes

Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara

Eleanor Franks

Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi

Mick Harding

Taungurung

Darcy McConnell

Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta

Sean Miller

Gamilaroi

Corina Muir

Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung

The Koorie Heritage Trust acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Custodians of Narm, the Wurundjeri Peoples of the Greater Kulin Nation, on whose lands we operate.

We pay respect to each of the Blak Design participants and acknowledge the continuing culture of the Boonwurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Gamilaroi, Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi, Gunditjmara, Kalaw Lagaw Ya/Meriam Mir, Kuku Yalanji, Taungurung, Torres Strait Islands, Wadawurrung, Wiradjuri, Yorta Yorta, and Yugambah peoples.

We pay respect to all First Peoples and celebrate their continuing culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People are advised that this publication contains the names and photographs of deceased people.

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(Left to Right, Top to Bottom) Nicholas Currie, Mick Harding, Annie Brigdale, Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis, Darcy McConnell, Eleanor Franks, Trina Dalton-Oodjes, Sean Miller, Corina Muir
Photograph by Christian Capurro

FOREWORD

TOM MOSBY, KHT CEO

Wominjeka.

I wish to start by acknowledging the Wurundjeri Peoples of the Greater Kulin Nation on whose lands the Koorie Heritage Trust is located.

Fired Up: Stories Through Embers and Earth presents over 100 individual ceramics designed and produced by 9 First Peoples artists and designers, based in Victoria. The exhibition is the outcome of KHT's third iteration of the ground-breaking Blak Design Program, which provides an opportunity for talented, Victorian-based First Peoples artists and designers to further develop their individual skills and professional practice, whilst fostering broader design collaboration. Developed in partnership with the National

Gallery of Victoria and RMIT University, and generously supported by the Ian Potter Foundation, the KHT's Blak Design Program aims to support, promote and celebrate First Peoples cultural innovation within the design sector. It provides a platform for First Peoples designers to develop and diversify their arts practice, progress their commercial profile, and gain exposure to valuable networking opportunities and expert advice through an intensive mentoring process. I am also extremely excited that the importance of the Program was recently acknowledged in the 2023 Good Design Australia Awards for outstanding design and innovation across a number of award categories including Fashion Impact and Social Impact.



Clay balls courtesy of Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis. For more information see page 21 and 83. Photograph by Christian Capurro



(Left to right) Janet Fieldhouse, Corina Muir, Eleanor Franks, Nicholas Currie, David Ray and Darcy McConnell at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro

FIRED UP: STORIES THROUGH EMBERS AND EARTH PROVIDES AN INSIGHT INTO THE RICH CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF FIRST PEOPLES FROM SOUTH EAST AUSTRALIA, AS REFLECTED WITHIN THE RECENT CERAMICS MADE BY PARTICIPANTS.

I would also like to acknowledge Sharn Geary (Blak Design Coordinator). A participant in the first iteration of the Program in 2021, Sharn's eye for detail and care for the participants, and their work and stories, has contributed significantly to the successful delivery of the Program. I thank Sharn for her tireless effort and all that she has achieved. Thanks also to the KHT exhibitions and collections team: Gail Harradine (Curatorial Manager), Travis Curtin (Curator), Jessica Row (Curator), Savi Ross (Assistant Curator), Katherine Giesen-White (Collections Coordinator), and Gemma Jones (Public Programs), who provided vital support in organising and liaising behind the scenes on both the Program and exhibition.

The Blak Design Program is supported by the Ian Potter Foundation in partnership with RMIT University and Fed Square. The *Fired Up: Stories Through Embers and Earth* exhibition is proudly supported by Creative Victoria, City of Melbourne, the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support Program, the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body, and ANZ Bank.

Fired Up: Stories Through Embers and Earth provides an insight into the rich cultural traditions of First Peoples from South East Australia, as reflected within the recent ceramics made by participants. The participating designers weave together cultural experiences and personal stories using a variety of materials and techniques that reflect Country, Family and Community, to create unique pieces that underscore individual experiences. This fully illustrated publication provides an invaluable record and insight into the journey taken by each participating designer, and the perspectives and experiences of the Program mentors.

On behalf of the participants and KHT, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the 2023 Blak Design Mentors, leading contemporary ceramicists Janet Fieldhouse (Torres Strait Islands) and David Ray, for their invaluable guidance, generosity, care and the wealth of experience shared with each participant. A big thanks also to RMIT University and particularly Professor Kit Wise; Dean of the School of Arts, Kris Coad; RMIT Ceramics Lead, along with Mark Edgoose; Coordinator for Undergraduate Studies at the School of Art, and Te' Claire, Georgia De Wet and Ingrid Maklary; Ceramics Technicians.

The support, generosity and spirit of partnership extended by RMIT University is key to the success of the Program. I also wish to acknowledge the Ngarara Willim Centre for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples at RMIT University, and particularly Nicole Shanahan, Senior Manager Indigenous Education, for making the designers feel welcome and providing a culturally safe space on campus.

Finally, the 2023 Blak Design Program and this exhibition would not have been possible without the dedication, time, energy and extraordinary talent of the participating designers. I wish to acknowledge, thank and extend my sincerest congratulations to each of them: Annie Brigdale (Yorta Yorta), Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis (Wiradjuri), Nicholas Currie (Yugambah, Kuku Yalanji), Trina Dalton-Oogjes (Wadawurrung, Gunditjmarra), Eleanor Franks (Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi), Mick Harding (Taungurung), Darcy McConnell (Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta), Sean Miller (Gamilaroi), and Corina Muir (Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung).

Ngoon Godjin | Thank You

ANNIE BRIGDALE

Coming from a very creative family, Annie Brigdale (Yorta Yorta) has always made artworks, however during the past eight years she has had a strong focus on trying all sorts of mediums and disciplines. One highlight was undertaking the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Arts class at Bendigo TAFE. 'I loved it, doing it not so much for the certificate but for the community connection,' Annie says. 'I watched my mum [Lorraine Brigdale] go through 2022's Blak Design [jewellery] and when ceramics, which I have always loved, came up, I was excited about doing it, especially as it was with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, all of us immersed in that environment.'

The attraction of community interaction is strong for Annie, whose family history was deeply affected by Stolen Generations disconnections. 'We have had to rebuild those connections over many years,' she says. 'I can't say how wonderful it is to be creating art together in the Blak Design environment, it brings out the best in everyone. The intensity of working with the mentors and the other artists really does give you space that probably you would rarely access otherwise. It's a bit like a pressure cooker in that it is intensive and you are learning a lot; I wouldn't have been able to create the art I have made for this exhibition alone in my studio - it has come from the whole journey.'



Annie Brigdale
(Yorta Yorta)
Unearthing Roots: A Journey of Disconnection and Reconnection
(detail), 2023.
Earthenware, glaze, wire, decals, clay slip, charcoal flower
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Annie Brigdale at RMIT Ceramic Studio
Photograph by Christian Capurro

IN MOST FIRST NATIONS ART THERE IS SO MUCH STORYTELLING: THERE'S A LOT TO BE TOLD, GOOD AND BAD. YOU ARE GETTING A GLIMPSE INTO CULTURAL STORIES AND FAMILIES IN A REALLY STRONG WAY, IN TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT HISTORY.

Annie did not have many ceramics skills, having just dabbled previously and observed her mother's work as a practicing ceramicist earlier in life. 'So, I'd always been around clay but not formally trained. I went in [to Blak Design] thinking I would make something to use, a vessel or something to act as a canvas for my paintings.' As the process went on, Annie kept returning to the visual history of her family, especially concerning her great-grandmother's story of being forcibly separated from her family. 'And I kept thinking about my beautiful relationship with my grandmother and how sad it was that my gran didn't know her own grandmother because of racist government policies. So, what I have made is a story about that female relationship and the effects those policies had on the generations that followed.'

Annie's work went in an experimental direction when she decided to screenprint onto the differently sized and shaped slab-built vessels she constructed. Annie and a screenprinter friend made up screens that use copies of official documents as the imagery: these Mission notes concern the removal of Annie's great-grandmother from her family when she was 14 years old. The names of other girls are redacted from the notes out of respect for their families' privacy. 'It is not necessarily "beautiful" - these are other names of young women removed from their families - but it is a powerful history.' Other vessels Annie has made show images of her great-grandmother. Others show sections of a letter Annie's grandmother wrote to her, talking about her creative journey. The smallest vessel is in the form of a tea billy: 'When my grandma met her cousins for the first time at age 70-plus, one of our uncles took us onto Country at Barmah. We had billy tea on Country and it was a really special moment, a story of re-connection.'

Annie reflects that the tactile aspect of clay has strong appeal for her. 'For me as an artist, when I am using my hands, that is when my brain really engages. I feel like this final work came from the whole experience of when we were all in the room together talking to each other about different clays and ochres and sharing our stories. It was absolutely grounding. It was the experience of a lifetime.'

Annie says all the works made by the participants tell rich stories from the heart. 'In most First Nations art there is so much storytelling: there's a lot to be told, good and bad. You are getting a glimpse into cultural stories and families in a really strong way, in truth-telling about history. I will tell this story, my family's story, until I am an old lady. For us to have any impact, these are stories that can't stop. For our children I want them to know all of that and to embrace it. It is a way for us to move forward.'



Annie's work in progress
Photograph by Lorraine Brigdale

Annie Brigdale
(Yorta Yorta)
*Unearthing Roots: A Journey of
Disconnection and Reconnection*,
2023.
Earthenware, glaze, wire, decals,
clay slip, charcoal flower
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



267
The Board approve of the
following girls going to bootab-uncha
with their mothers.
The Mothers of
to be given out
in which to excise portions
their girls.
Similar action to be taken
in connection with the girl
when she has
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The Board approve of the
following girls going to bootab-uncha
with their mothers.
The Mothers of
to be given out
in which to excise portions
their girls.
Similar action to be taken
in connection with the girl
when she has
her illness.

Can you see a
beautiful dress
I can Nan
7x 2007



SUZANNE CONNELLY- KLIDOMITIS

As a child, Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis (Wiradjuri) would go on trips with dad to the riverside around Swan Hill and district, where the family lived. He would fish and Suzanne would play on the banks, digging up great hunks of clay. Suzanne would make clay balls, animals, cups – anything – and then leave it in the sun to dry.

‘Of course, they would crack,’ says Suzanne. ‘But I loved doing it.’ Suzanne has always loved clay because ‘it is from the earth’. Later, in year 11 at school, Suzanne studied art and did pottery as an elective, getting creations formally fired for the first time; later in life, when the children had grown up, Suzanne returned for further study in the visual arts.

Having spent much creative power during a life filled with weaving and making other objects, using traditional, contemporary, and recycled materials, Suzanne says it was exciting to explore a relatively new material in the Blak Design course. Lumina clay (porcelain) was especially attractive – when worked to a thin consistency, it is translucent. ‘But the ideas I had about what I wanted to make were completely different by the end of the course,’ Suzanne says.



Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis
(Wiradjuri)
7 sistas (detail), 2023
Porcelain, emu feathers, glue
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis
(Wiradjuri)
7 sistas (detail), 2023
Clay balls, emu feathers, emu eggs,
synthetic polymer paint
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis at RMIT Ceramic Studio
Photograph by Christian Capurro

One of the recurring themes in all of Suzanne's work is the story of the Seven Sisters, the famous cluster of stars visible in the Southern Hemisphere that is often referred to (in various iterations) in stories and cultural material of many First Nations people around the continent. As Suzanne thought about this, ideas began to evolve including the integration of weaving patterns into the work, along with representations of the Seven Sisters, and usage of the emu feathers that have always graced Suzanne's weaving works.

Suzanne soon realised that to re-create the weaving patterns, a mould would have to be made of them – simply pressing those patterns into clay would create the negative version. Having used the mould, the gathering of the various elements began to come together and Suzanne's vision for the work became more concrete: 'A lot of people know the story of the Seven Sisters but I want people to be more involved with our mob stuff, so I imagined a scene you can put yourself into – sitting around the campfire and looking up at the Seven Sisters and being told a story about them.' Using the clay, Suzanne made disc-shaped pieces of various dimensions to represent the stars, trying to approximate their scale relative to each other in the same way they appear for anyone gazing up at the stars. In the installation, the discs have been set in the approximate positions they are seen to occupy in the night sky, along with the moon. Below, a large platter is set with fragments of small clay balls to indicate a campfire.

Those balls are not dissimilar to the ones Suzanne made by the banks of the Murray River as a child. 'Because Australia is such a big place, mobs do similar things, but differently to each other. With my mob here, you go down to the river and you make clay balls. When you are digging a fire pit or earth oven, you dig a big hole, and it's then you might dig up clumps of clay. You save it and make balls.' When the fire is set, the balls are placed inside it and fired, then removed; later, bark and leaves are placed over the top of the fire, and then the food is layered on top of this, before being covered with more leaves and bark. Finally, the cooked balls are put back on top and the whole thing is covered with earth.

'And that's your cooking. When you empty it all out, some of the balls are broken and some are all right. The more firing, the more different colours you get.' Suzanne's father would go out exploring the bush and found many, many remnants of those clay balls from many generations past. He would pass them on to Suzanne.

'I have kept them all those years.' It is these fragments and remnants that Suzanne has used in the new ceramics work. In a similar way, the mentors in Blak Design have passed on much knowledge to Suzanne. 'I have learnt heaps of tips about how to do things better, quicker. They have all that experience and they just passed on their knowledge.'

BECAUSE AUSTRALIA IS SUCH A BIG PLACE, MOBS DO SIMILAR THINGS, BUT DIFFERENTLY TO EACH OTHER. WITH MY MOB HERE, YOU GO DOWN TO THE RIVER AND YOU MAKE CLAY BALLS. WHEN YOU ARE DIGGING A FIRE PIT OR EARTH OVEN, YOU DIG A BIG HOLE, AND IT'S THEN YOU MIGHT DIG UP CLUMPS OF CLAY. YOU SAVE IT AND MAKE BALLS.



Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis
(Wiradjuri)
7 sistas (detail), 2023
Porcelain, emu feathers, glue
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

NICHOLAS CURRIE

Nicholas Currie (Yugambah, Kuku Yalanji) says the work he has made for the Blak Design Program would probably not have been made in another sort of context. The three large and highly textured human-like forms he has created have a strong spiritual presence for him, with deep connections to story-telling and truth-telling.

A practicing artist who recently finished undergraduate study in visual arts at the Victorian College of the Arts, Nicholas has long been involved in creative work, including music, wood-work, painting and performance, while much of his paid employment has been spent in the construction and trades industries. 'When I was young, I never saw [art-making] as a commercial practice or as a space in which I could be financial or academic,' he says.

On hearing about Blak Design, he thought ceramics might be an interesting way to stretch himself. 'This program came as a new way to learn and experience. I really like that idea that Aboriginal people should be teaching Aboriginal people. And I knew of [Blak Design mentor] Janet Fieldhouse's work and that got me even more excited.'

On starting the course, he was immediately aware that he didn't have to 'code-switch' and mask himself, as he has had to do in other contexts, because he was immersed in an environment with other First Nations people. 'That really changed my perspective on what I was making.' He was fascinated that the nine different participants could make such different work yet be using the same sorts of materials.



Nicholas Currie
(Yugambah, Kuku Yalanji)
Gumai Giberra (Them mob are as big as mountains), 2023
Stoneware clay, stoneware slip
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

‘What I learnt will hold for the rest of my career. It was the unspoken things we communicated to each other.’

Nicholas started the Program with a couple of ideas in mind, but during the first two weeks he simply made as much as he could, throwing bowls, slab-building and learning new techniques about constructing, firing and glazing. At the end of this, he was gravitating towards making something large, given the access he had to such great facilities.

‘This sent me on a trajectory of wanting to make something that holds truth for me, uniting the abstract with the literal.’ He describes the three broad and highly textured figures he has made as ‘big men’. They were constructed using coil-building techniques, with the surfaces then being covered with slip. Nicholas used his hands and fingers to do a large amount of expressive mark-making upon the figures, with many of these gestural marks alluding to the natural world. ‘There are links between the marks, landscape and contemporary Indigenous people,’ Nicholas says. ‘I find that just beautiful.’

Nicholas has had a lot to do with the contemporary art scene in recent years and much of his non-ceramics work has focussed on masculinity, men’s mental health, Indigenous bodies, sport and exploring his identity as an Indigenous man. Using his body in his painting and performance work has been a continuing theme – painting his canvases, for example, with his arms, legs, hands and feet. So, it is no surprise that his hands took to clay so comfortably in the Blak Design Program: his creation of the three figures is an extension of that repeated use of his own body as an integral element of the artwork.

Having eventually and successfully put his work through the kiln firing process, Nicholas is very pleased that the three figures ‘are who they are’. ‘To me, they are timeless, even though they also feel quite new and expressive,’ he says. ‘They are also quite earnest in who they are, in that they are just existing. I wondered how do you make your work vulnerable? I guess by me being honest within myself, that is what vulnerability is. So, these figures hold these stories and spaces, and create a narrative. They hold truth in that they are what they are. They have stories and hold stories for myself in who they are.’

The three large ceramic figures are, of course, quite heavy, and it seems fitting that when Nicholas is transporting them around, he has to hold each individual sculpture in the crook of his arms, gently and protectively, as if they were infants – even though they seem more like wise old people. That care and a sense of nurturing seems entirely appropriate, for Nicholas is finding his confidence as an artist is growing: and he is intrigued to see how his new ceramics skills might manifest in his future creative output.



Janet Fieldhouse and Nicholas Currie at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro



Nicholas Currie
(Yugambah, Kuku Yalanji)
Gumai Giberra (Them mob are as big as mountains) (detail), 2023
Stoneware clay, stoneware slip
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

WHAT I LEARNT WILL HOLD FOR THE REST OF MY CAREER. IT WAS THE UNSPOKEN THINGS WE COMMUNICATED TO EACH OTHER.

Nicholas Currie
(Yugambeh, Kuku Yalanji)
*Gumai Giberra (Them mob are as
big as mountains) (back)*, 2023
Stoneware clay, stoneware slip
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



TRINA DALTON- OOGJES

As an artist who has had a lot of experience working across different artforms, especially weaving, Trina Dalton-Oogjes (Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara) found herself determined to push herself beyond her limits when she embarked on learning ceramic skills in the Blak Design Program. 'I started off with one vision but as we saw all the different techniques that were possible, thanks to the mentors, I thought I would extend myself outside what I had been thinking,' she says.

Trina has been weaving for most of her life, having been taught by an Aunty when she was very young.

Since then, she has found weaving to be an important conduit and access point to talk to people about Aboriginal culture, especially younger generations. In the Blak Design Program, she brought all her skills with her, even though she quickly encountered new, unfamiliar territory with many new understandings to absorb.

'And I enjoyed that challenge, working out how to use all the traditional basket-weaving techniques I have been taught, applying them to ceramics and figuring out how to hold the various pieces together. In a way, it has been like the old ancestors are holding the new together with the old.'



Trina Dalton-Oogjes
(Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara)
Interweaving Traditions (detail), 2023
Porcelain, raffia
29 x 22 x 21 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Trina Dalton-Oogjes
 (Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara)
Interweaving Traditions (detail), 2023
 Left
 Porcelain, cotton
 26 x 23.5 x 1 cm
 Right
 Porcelain, cotton, wool
 31.5 x 29 x 1 cm
 Collection of the artist
 Photograph by Christian Capurro

IT WAS ABOUT WEAVING OUR CULTURE AND CONNECTIONS THROUGH EVERYTHING. WHILE YOU ARE DOING IT, MAKING, YOU ARE SITTING DOWN AND YOU TALK AND YOU SEE WHO IS CONNECTED TO WHO.

All of this is constructed on top of shallow bowl-shaped bases, with each vessel having a different height and shape. 'Some go straight up, others are more organic and have taken on their own shapes.'

Trina has also made wall-hangings constructed out of strips of clay that have been almost magically woven together, with fibre between them, as well as some ceramic scarf pins. She says the act of weaving holds deep significance in Aboriginal culture, representing the interconnections between family, Country, and ancestral knowledge. Likewise, the art of ceramic clay works is a testament to the resourcefulness and adaptability of Aboriginal ancestors. By intertwining these two art forms, she says she is highlighting the shared threads, and emphasising the harmonious relationship between human existence and the earth, and the importance of sustainability and honouring cultural heritage.

Trina is fascinated by the way skills, ideas and traditions are learnt, retained and passed on and is active in passing on her own learnings to younger generations. This is partly why she thrived in the Blak Design environment, being with other like-minded artists and taking in all the knowledge handed down by the mentors. She describes the Blak Design experience as 'a growing thing' because of the way the participants were able to communicate and understand each other, even though their experiences and stories were so diverse. 'It was about weaving our culture and connections through everything. While you are doing it, making, you are sitting down and you talk and you see who is connected to who. It opened up doorways to business enterprise ideas as well.'

Trina is determined to continue with her learning about ceramics and to apply it to her creative work more broadly.

Trina has always loved being creative and during her life, she has moved back and forth between professional pursuits and training in the welfare arena and learning traditional ways of making things, learning many skills from Elders in the Moorabool areas of Wadawurrung Country and Gunditjmara Country. In all her creative pursuits, which have even included millinery, she explores stories that have been passed down to her that provide a spiritual connection with her culture, mob and Country, linking with Elders, the land, water, sky and living creatures.

'I have dabbled in everything, from painting acrylics to knitting and weaving on a loom, doing possum-skin cloaks and also doing wood burning,' she says. 'But weaving has been a constant and weaving is really important to me. The great thing is, I can bring it all back, all these things, into the pieces I am working on at any particular time.'

In her pursuit of mixing traditional skills with new works, Trina explored how to press weaving designs into clay and then how to weave the many dozens of clay discs she had made into upright vessel-like structures that would be able to support themselves. 'It was very painstaking, using raffia and weaving together, but it began to take shape. The result is something that is flexible but with enough stiffness to hold the ceramic pieces together.'



Trina Dalton-Oogjes at RMIT Ceramic Studio
 Photograph by Christian Capurro



Trina Dalton-Oogjes
(Wadawurrung, Gunditjmarra)
Interweaving Traditions (detail), 2023
Porcelain, raffia
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

ELEANOR FRANKS

When she was studying fine art at RMIT University, Eleanor Franks (Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi) was either in the studio with her art-student mates doing printmaking, or down at the Ngarara Willim Centre with her Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mates. The two different environments didn't intersect. 'In Blak Design, it was nice to have those two worlds mesh and connect,' Eleanor says. 'It was the right time and what I needed and it was such a good experience.'

Eleanor grew up always drawing and making art during her spare time, doing more formal study in high school and then going to RMIT University in 2018. She had been excited about her vision for her final third-year show before graduation – but 2020 was the big COVID year and it didn't eventuate the way she had planned for it.

During that university degree, though, Eleanor did some sculpture subjects, including bronze foundry work using the lost wax technique, as well as a sculpture elective with a heavy emphasis on carving. This was completely different to the experiences she had had with her major studies in printmaking. She enjoyed the challenges and so when ceramics came up for Blak Design, she was excited at the prospect of exploring it further.

'I was pretty open at the start of the course about what I wanted to do – maybe too open! – learning about all the different types of clay and techniques. It made sense to know what you were working with, which helps inform things down the track. There is no right way.'



Eleanor Franks
(Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi)
A Self-Adornment Study (detail), 2023.
Porcelain, glaze, silver lustre, silver leaf,
synthetic polymer paint, crystal flat-
back rhinestones, glue
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

I REFLECTED ON HOW WE ADORN OURSELVES AND HOW WE DO THINGS FOR OURSELVES... I AM USED TO WORKING SMALL-SCALE AND MY BRAIN IMMEDIATELY GOES THERE TO THE MORE INTIMATE DETAILS... SELF-ADORNMENT AND REFLECTION REALLY DO DRAW PEOPLE IN.



Eleanor Franks at RMIT Ceramic Studio
Photograph by Christian Capurro

Eleanor Franks
(Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi)
A Self-Adornment Study (detail), 2023.
Mid-fire clay, porcelain, clay slip, silver lustre, silver leaf, copper leaf, synthetic polymer paint, crystal flat-back rhinestones, glue, copper wire, glaze
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Eleanor's initial idea was for something sculptural and 'a bit sci-fi' but her concept was over-ambitious and too difficult to construct.

She had a small meltdown and took some time out to revisit her ideas and do some sketching, coming to the realisation that she needed to take time out for herself – that creativity on her own terms was a priority she had to nurture. Input from one of the Blak Design technicians helped clarify things, as did a group visit to the Koorie Heritage Trust and to the *Melbourne Now* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.

At the Melbourne Museum archives, Eleanor saw a reed necklace for the first time. It was here she discovered that these necklaces are also made in areas along the coast in Queensland. 'I really liked it and it struck something within me,' Eleanor says. 'I didn't want to go in a jewellery direction but I reflected on how we adorn ourselves and how we do things for ourselves, so I chatted through these ideas.'

The objects she ended up producing are extraordinarily powerful and have strong references to self-adornment: objects that resemble decorative mouth grillz used for dental embellishment; decorated fingernails, and knuckle-dusters. Eleanor used white and black coloured clay to make the works, and decorated some with crystal rhinestones and metallic finishes (silver and copper leaf, and silver lustre). All of Eleanor's works required a lot of experimentation with working out how to construct them. The mouth grillz were especially complex, and Eleanor worked with mentor David Ray to come up with the best approach, using a complicated method called a 'sprig mould'. It worked, and she ended up with more grillz than anticipated.

While all of her pieces aren't entirely representational, they are immediately recognisable as riffs on the original. They also reflect Eleanor's commitment to exploring, experimenting, and pushing herself beyond her comfort zone to make some breakthroughs.

Eleanor was interested in refining the messaging of the pieces she made after someone saw the knuckle-duster form and believed it was about being a woman and practising self-defence. 'That perspective is important but it also feels a bit tired,' she says. 'I am a woman, and also an Indigenous artist; but I don't want to make art all of the time that is about being a woman.' Making the nails, for example, was not so much about being feminine but about devoting time to oneself, and deserving nice things. The mouth grillz, likewise, were about self-adornment, but also about how they have historically been an indicator of pride and appropriate social status and seeing oneself as important.

In all these works, Eleanor was interested in texture, details and projecting a sense of the personal. 'I am used to working small-scale and my brain immediately goes there to the more intimate details,' she says. 'Self-adornment and reflection really do draw people in.'





Eleanor Franks
(Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi)
A Self-Adornment Study (detail), 2023.
Mid-fire clay, porcelain, clay slip,
silver lustre, silver leaf, glaze,
synthetic polymer paint, crystal
flat-back rhinestones, glue
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

MICK HARDING

Storytelling is at the heart of the creative world that Mick Harding (Taungurung) has forged for himself over a considerable period of time. This began when he was in his early 20s, a time when his grandmother first became fully aware of the family's mob, Country and heritage, sharing her newfound knowledge with pride. 'I was excited about it because it made sense of things,' Mick says. As he found out more over time and worked and studied in the field of Aboriginal cultural heritage, his creative life also began to develop and blossom.

One of the first steps was doing an Aboriginal studies course in Gippsland, learning historical and philosophical material.

This was followed by employment at various times in cultural heritage management, archaeological surveying, Aboriginal liaison and recruitment, and, crucially, learning much about the icons, tools and symbols used by mob historically across south-east Victoria.



Mick Harding
(Taungurung)
Dharnuk joined by copper, 2023
Mid-fire clay, copper wire, clay slip, glue
4 x 54 x 35.5 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

'All this has informed me that even though I use modern technologies, I am still using the same icons and trying to tell similar stories about the interface and friction between the colonised/invaded world and a more traditional space,' Mick says. 'And we are still here, so it's not all negative – as the years have gone by and I've learnt more and been able to reflect, overwhelmingly I think the reason we are still here is because of relationships. Our languages are absolutely steeped in relationship to everything, in everything existing together as a constant.'

Mick's ceramic works produced during the Blak Design Program reflect these ideas and have a foundation in his observation that while culture may have been fractured and disrupted, it is still connected, thanks to a strong ethos of protection, symbolised in the forms and shapes he has made. The last time Mick produced pottery was in year eight – he was interested, but was much more taken with timber and wanted to be a woodworker or cabinet maker. Since then, he has completed a Masters of Fine Art (2016, with distinction) and set up his own successful family business Ngarga Warendj (Dancing Wombat) in which his skills in woodwork, sculpture and printmaking are featured in the works being sold.

'For the past twenty years, I have existed on making my art,' Mick says. 'Everything that I've made and drawn over the years informs what I did recently with the ceramics.' In particular, the ceramics work has been influenced by the final piece Mick presented for his Masters, in which imagery was projected onto the bodies of performers, whose skin had been painted with white ochre. This, performed in front of a dark background, created a moving and spiritual atmosphere. Likewise, his ceramics work aims to project a special feeling about cultural knowledge.

'Ceramics is all about how you feel it and touch it,' Mick says. 'I was trying to understand the medium from the outset when all these new, different things were being given to us to learn. Some of the others [fellow participants] understood the basics, others were complete novices, others were more experienced, and I found it really challenging in the pace that was set. Constantly, conscientiously, I decided to slow down and go at my own pace and get the feel of the clay in a more focused manner, to see what I wanted to achieve.'

Uppermost in Mick's mind were stories about how men are made from bark and women come from mud. 'Here, I am making shield shapes and taarnaks (bowls) inspired by bark, and now working with clay, which is essentially mud. Everything works around that idea that we are interrelated: a tree has its roots firmly centred in the ground, the mud, the earth. The earth gives nourishment to the tree and the tree gives shade to the earth and holds water.' He used barks to make impressions in the clay, which he then shaped into taarnaks, and these are linked to each other with small pieces of copper.

'Good storytelling always has been about how you animate it,' Mick says. 'All we are is story. I learnt a lot about the medium of clay and how it can tell these stories.'



Mick Harding
(Taungurung)
Malgarr dharnak – Shield Bowl (2), 2023
Marbled mid-fire clay, raku clay and porcelain
7 x 36.5 x 19.5 cm
Malgarr dharnak – Shield Bowl (3), 2023
Marbled mid-fire clay, raku clay and porcelain
7.5 x 32 x 23cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

GOOD STORYTELLING ALWAYS HAS BEEN ABOUT HOW YOU ANIMATE IT... ALL WE ARE IS STORY. I LEARNT A LOT ABOUT THE MEDIUM OF CLAY AND HOW IT CAN TELL THESE STORIES.



Mick Harding at RMIT Ceramic Studio
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Mick Harding
(Taungurung)
Malgarr dharnak - Shield Bowl (1),
2023
Marbled mid-fire clay, clay slip
4 x 55 x 30 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

DARCY McCONNELL

When embarking last year on a mural design to decorate one of Public Transport Victoria's celebrated art trams, Darcy McConnell (Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta) soon discovered it to be an ambitious and inspiring project. Titled *My Aunt once told me*, the work not only celebrated Blak and queer identities, but it was also the largest-scale work Darcy had ever conceptualised, undertaken and completed.

During Blak Design, however, Darcy (they/them) has moved to an entirely different, and much smaller scale. Even so, the new ceramic work they have produced has been equally rich with challenges, including the learning of new skills and continued exploration of many aspects of Blak identity and Indigenous history.

Darcy, who also uses the artist name ENOKi, has made a standard-sized chess set, which is scaled at an intimate and very human level. At the same time, they have investigated ideas around the impact of first contact in Australia between Europeans and Indigenous people. One side of the board – black – is populated with Australian fauna as king, queen, knight, castle, bishop and pawns, while the white side has figures in the form of introduced and invasive species.

'When I came into Blak Design I had an idea on the backburner, a loose concept, but after I learnt in the early stages of the course what I could and couldn't do, I decided to go for making a chess set,' Darcy says.



Darcy McConnell
(Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta)
After You, 2023.
Mid-fire clay, raku clay, glaze, clay slip,
pine wood, kangaroo skin, synthetic
polymer paint
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

'Living in a share house, you can't have some big set of ceramic vessels or a massive pot to cart around. So, I began to think about board games that I could carry around with me if I needed to move, and this one that I have made is around the same size as a normal chess set, with the animals scaled to fit, but to be recognisable.'

Darcy has always been interested in the visual arts and during primary and secondary education they experimented with watercolours, collage, drawing and digital art. Later, after enrolling in visual arts at RMIT for tertiary study, Darcy soon discovered that they weren't well-suited to the world of academia, its assessment schedule and time pressures. 'Eventually I decided uni wasn't for me, that it wasn't an environment I could learn in, so I went back to teaching myself.'

Before Blak Design, Darcy's only experience with ceramics was 'playing with some clay and play dough'. What they immediately loved about Blak Design was the freedom to learn new things, with specialist mentors on hand, but without the pressures of being assessed. 'It was about learning really interesting things but not in the traditional academic sense; it was mentoring rather than being instructed and marked on the results.'

One of the big challenges was sculpting at a small scale, but being able to bring in enough detail and definition to make the small figures identifiable at first sight. 'Having never really worked with clay before, it involved making sure all the figures were the same radius and scale, and it was difficult to do this.' Yet, the challenges were faced and it was a great success.

IT WAS ABOUT LEARNING REALLY INTERESTING THINGS BUT NOT IN THE TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC SENSE; IT WAS MENTORING RATHER THAN BEING INSTRUCTED AND MARKED ON THE RESULTS.



Darcy McConnell at RMIT Ceramic Studio.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

Among other figures, Darcy used a black clay to create the black side's king (ancestral being Bunjil, the wedge-tailed eagle) and queen (an eel), as well as a kangaroo, barn owl and long-necked turtle for other pieces. On the white side, Darcy used raku clay with white slip over it to make a goat (king) and European wasp (queen) as well as a boar, cane toad, rabbit and cat. Darcy also made some larger vessels intended to hold the chess set. The black dingo head was for the white pieces and the white Rat head for the black pieces – however, they have ended up being decorative vessels rather than utilitarian.

Darcy says one of the underlying ideas was to explore the idea of a board game, which has various rules and restrictions, as a metaphor for the way European arrival in Australia was an experience of invasion with the sudden imposition of new and unknown 'laws'. 'These were rules that we couldn't understand and had to figure out,' Darcy says.

While there was a lot of information to absorb in the Program about glazes, firing times and construction methods, Darcy found the overall experience exhilarating. 'I found some things frustrating – there is a lot of patience and waiting involved! – but I like that there are virtually no limits with what you can do. I definitely want to explore it more in my future practice.'



Darcy McConnell
(Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta)
After You, 2023.
Mid-fire clay, raku clay, glaze, clay
slip, pine wood, kangaroo skin,
synthetic polymer paint
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

SEAN MILLER

The first thing Sean Miller (Gamilaroi) did when he arrived for the first session of ceramics in Blak Design was to pull out his tape measure and check the dimensions of the kiln. 'I wanted to see how big I could go,' he laughs. Sean's ceramics practice has been going for more than a decade and his 2016 and 2022 entries in Shepparton Art Museum's *Indigenous Ceramics Award* demonstrate that he works to an impressive scale. His work in the 2022 iteration, for which he won the \$5000 South-East Australian Aboriginal Artist Prize, is especially striking in its height. 'It was big,' he says of *Galibaay on Country*, 'but not as big as what I've made for Blak Design.'

Sean first fell under the spell of clay in 2011 when he attended an art class while incarcerated in Loddon Prison. That class, he discovered, had first been started by the much-loved Uncle Jack Charles, a former inmate. When Sean arrived at the Kangan TAFE-run class, the moment he put his hands into the clay, he was transported.

'I knew it was my medium, as soon as I felt it,' he recalls. 'It reminded me of being back on Country, there on the river bank, pulling clay out of the ground and making little figurines and putting them up on the logs to dry in the sun. I just knew this was for me.'

Sean Miller
(Gamilaroi)
How Waan turned Black, 2023.
Stoneware, glaze, LED lights, timber,
synthetic polymer paint, magnet, mirror,
nails
114cm x 35cm x 35cm (ceramic)
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro





Sean Miller at RMIT Ceramic Studio.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

Before embarking on Blak Design, Sean had been tossing around ideas related to a favourite Dreamtime story of the black crow, known as Waa among Kulin nations and Waan on Sean's Gamilaroi Country. 'These stories travelled up and down the east coast. It is a well-known story but for Blak Design I decided to write my own poem about how Waan turned black.' In the verse, he details how Waan the crow has gleaming white feathers, but also secretly possesses fire for cooking meat. When other birds go on the attack, Waan fights back; but his fire is spilled, and he is scorched black. But in the process, fire is discovered.

This poem was the basis for his Blak Design work, and a large black crow is at the centre of the fiery-glazed piece, which is more than a metre in height and augmented with lighting to accentuate the glow of flames. Even though he has had considerable experience with ceramics, Sean found the construction of his work complex and challenging, and was enthused by the input from the Blak Design mentors, especially in the area of learning more about glazes and the chemical reactions underpinning the results that can be produced. 'I learnt so much and it is really going to help me moving forward with my art practice,' he says.

IT [ART] CAN HEAL A PERSON AND CHANGE A PERSON – IT GETS YOU ENGAGED IN YOUR CULTURE AND HELPS REVIVE SOMETHING THAT WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM ALL OF US. ART IS OUR STORYTELLING, THE WAY WE PASS IT ON AND THE WAY WE LEARN OUR CULTURE.

That practice has been steadily growing and over the past six years he has invested considerable resources in setting up a ceramics studio with all the necessary equipment, tools and materials. 'It would be so much cheaper to just have a canvas and paint brush,' he says. 'But I love clay.'

When Sean was in Loddon, he was able to exhibit his ceramics on the outside through The Torch program. 'That reinforced that people want to hear my stories and see my art. That started my journey. When I was released, The Torch encouraged me to work with them and deliver the art program. I am still there.' As he is himself a practising artist, he is able to encourage other artists to look at the therapy behind it all. 'It can heal a person and change a person – it gets you engaged in your culture and helps revive something that was taken away from all of us. Art is our storytelling, the way we pass it on and the way we learn our culture.'

For his ceramics works, Sean does much research, especially in getting out on Country (he has lived on Wurundjeri Country since his 20s) to practise bird photography in order to provide resource material for what he makes in three dimensions. But going to Blak Design offered a greater sense of community: 'Being a ceramic artist and working from home, you tend to be isolated and stick to your own way of doing things and play it safe. It was great getting together with other artists. With mob, we all have the same focus about our storytelling. It's a much better environment than going to one of the big potteries.'



Sean Miller at RMIT Ceramic Studio.
Photograph by Christian Capurro



Sean Miller
(Gamilaroi)
How Waan turned Black (detail), 2023.
Stoneware, glaze
114cm x 35cm x 35cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph by Christian Capurro

CORINA MUIR

When she first signed up for Blak Design, Corina Muir (Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung) had straightforward but powerful motivations. 'To do it for myself, and to do something joyful,' she says. Many challenges arose as she started to explore the world of ceramics, a relatively new medium for Corina, but her ambition to enhance her sense of self-care and happy fulfilment was ultimately achieved.

Having worked in the creative industry with many other Aboriginal women artists around Narm (Melbourne) through her 100% Aboriginal-owned clothing label business Amber Days – which is inspired by the bush, desert and sea – Corina was excited to be joining people from other mobs in the course.

She has recently been in the throes of setting up her own shop near Victoria Market, titled the Manna Gum Boutique, selling fashion and homewares alongside a gallery space, so taking time out to learn ceramics and produce new work used other parts of her creative powers.

Corina, like many people, made some ceramics during her high school years. 'I really enjoyed it and have wanted to do more ever since,' she says. 'When I arrived at the Blak Design Program, I realised that I find it hard to create just for the sake of creating. Usually, my creative practice is around the business I run, and is therefore quite contained and restricted – I'm not used to creativity being open-ended with no set goal...'



Corina Muir
(Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung)
Non Linear Depths, 2023.
Stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

IT WAS A CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN A WAY THAT WAS NOT FORCED. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL AND MEANINGFUL, LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER.



Corina Muir at RMIT Ceramic Studio.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

‘...So, my journey from the beginning of Blak Design was to let go and allow myself to create for the sake of creating.’

This meant that Corina began to keep an eye on where her mind was going and why she was finding it difficult to ‘just let go’. ‘Once I started doing that, I made a lot more progress and began to feel quite free. At first, I wanted to create a beautiful mug that fits nicely in your hands – I really like to have that as a ritual in the morning or evenings, sitting down with a warm cuppa. But when I got on the [potters] wheel I realised it was a lot harder than I’d expected. I had five days on the wheel and realised I wasn’t going to be able to create something that was as perfect as what I had had in my head.’

It was then that her direction changed and she began to explore something even more special to her: the colours she experiences when she is on Boonwurrung Country at a particular location that is culturally significant to herself and other Boonwurrung women. ‘It is a very special place,’ she says. Reflecting on this, the vessels she began to make became more bowl-shaped and she started to learn about glazes and how to create colours that resonated with those seen at that special location on Country.

‘Ceramics is so technical, and I wanted to know everything, inside and out – but it was so overwhelming because it would take years to understand all the science of glazes,’ she says. ‘I ended up finding a green and a blue that sit in that spectrum and I mixed them to create the fluidity of the blues and greens that I see on Country.’

In the process, Corina also discovered that she enjoyed using handbuilding techniques. ‘But you just need to slow down when you are holding the clay and moving it around.’

One of the most wonderful things about Blak Design has been Corina’s connection with the other participants – being among other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who understand where she is coming from. ‘We can have this space creating the things we were making, but also having conversations with people of all ages and backgrounds, different stories and cultures,’ she says. ‘It was a cross-cultural exchange in a way that was not forced. It was beautiful and meaningful, learning from each other.’

She is proud of the way this affected her work and approach to creativity and is looking forward to integrating new skills into her future art practice. ‘I’m going to be very conscious of making time for it. I love a challenge and ceramics has so many parts to it that I can keep getting better at. And I just love colour – so being able to play and experiment with it is very exciting.’



Corina Muir
(Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung)
Non Linear Depths (detail), 2023.
Stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
6.5 x 13 x 12 cm
Collection of the artist.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES



ANNIE BRIGDALE

Yorta Yorta

Pronouns: she/her

b. 1978, based on Dja Dja Wurrung Country

As a Yorta Yorta woman, Annie is guided by the strength and wisdom of the remarkable Yorta Yorta men and women who came before her. Through Annie's art, she continues her connection to the land, drawing inspiration from the Murray and Ovens rivers that she spends time on. These rivers not only inspire her, but also rejuvenate Annie's spirit, allowing her to create from a place of deep authenticity.

A journey of discovering and embracing her authentic self and identity has seamlessly intertwined with Annie's creative path, particularly in the realm of visual, painting and ceramics. It has taught her the importance of listening, observing, and nurturing personal growth.

Annie's journey is a harmonious blend of creativity and cultural exploration, interwoven with a great connection to the land. It is a continuous pursuit to honour her heritage and leave a legacy for her children and future generations to cherish.



SUZANNE CONNELLY-KLIDOMITIS

Wiradjuri
Pronoun: Suzanne
b. 1958, based Swan Hill,
on Wamba Wamba/Wemba Wemba Country

Suzanne is a Wiradjuri woman who was born and grew up in Swan Hill and district. Since childhood, Suzanne has watched and helped make artefacts along the Murray River and in the Mallee scrub.

Suzanne uses traditional, contemporary and recycled materials to create artworks which have been acquired by the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, the Koorie Heritage Trust and the Melbourne Museum.



NICHOLAS CURRIE

Yugambeh, Kuku Yalanji
Pronouns: he/him
b. 2001, based on Wurundjeri Country

Nicholas Currie is a descendant of the Mulunjali Clan of the Yugambeh language group with connection to Kuku Yalanji Country. As an artist, Nicholas works in painting, performance and curatorial practices. Now, thanks to the Blak Design Program, Nicholas adds ceramics to the ever-growing skill set. Themes of place, identity and history are presented in the work within a mixed Indigenous and Anglo young male perspective, with the hand ever-present on the work and the heart consistent within the work: for art is family, culture and story intertwined to express the unsaid.



TRINA DALTON-OOGJES

Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara

Pronouns: she/her

b. 1961, based on Dja Dja Wurrung Country

Trina Dalton-Oogjes is a proud Wadawurrung and Gunditjmara woman and a contemporary Aboriginal artist. Her creative practice is the way that she remains connected to her heritage and culture, and to her ancestors who have passed. They have shared their cultural knowledge of weaving and painting with her, which has allowed Trina to build her gift of telling stories through art.

Trina enjoys many forms of creative practice, from fibre weaving to painting and ceramics. She also works with burning designs on possum skin cloaks and wood. Through Trina's art, she shares stories of spiritual connection to her culture, people and land. It is this cultural knowledge that Trina shares with her family and community.



ELEANOR FRANKS

Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi

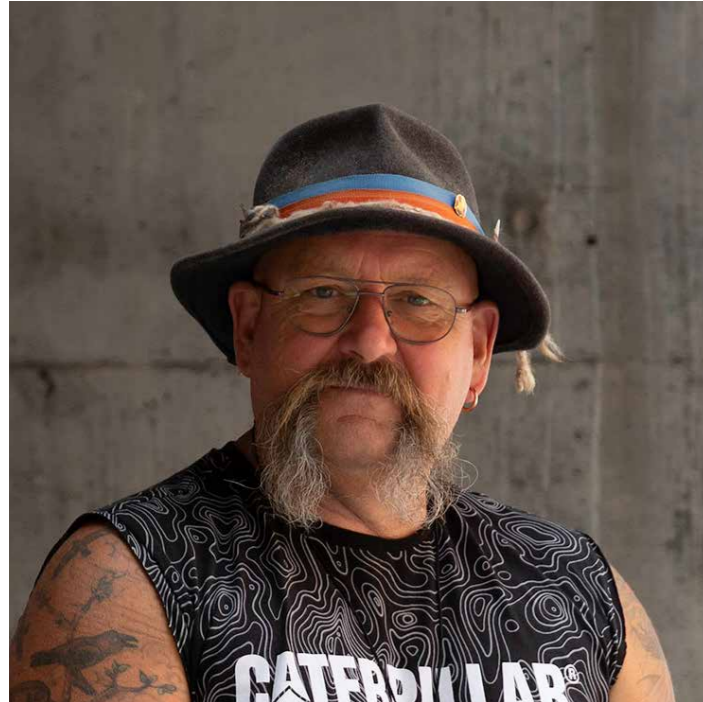
Pronouns: she/her

b. 2000, based on Wurundjeri Country

Eleanor Franks is a proud Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi woman, living and working in Narrm (Melbourne). Her practice is print-informed and utilises print techniques to talk to concepts of identity, belonging and connection, within ourselves and others.

She likes to focus on the malleability of materials and lean into the fluid nature of various mediums, mistakes and chance.

Her practice is continually expanding, evolving and growing alongside her. Eleanor graduated from RMIT University in 2020 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts.



MICK HARDING

Taungurung

Pronouns: he/him

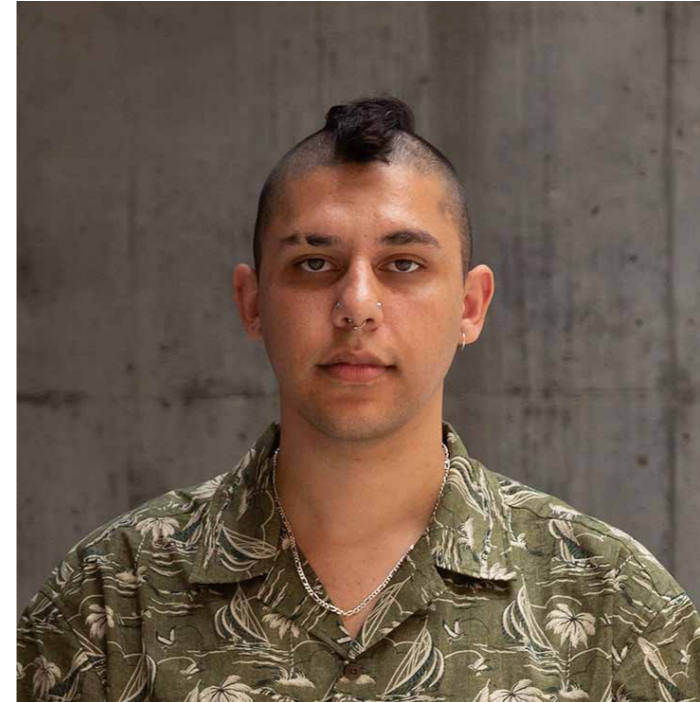
b. 1960, based on Gunai/Kurnai Country

Belonging to the Yowong-Illam-Baluk and Nattarak Baluk clans of the Taungurung people, Mick Harding specialises in wood-working, sculpture, printmaking and giftwares.

For Mick, 'art is a rainbow of many things' and his practice demonstrates this openness to innovative design. His *Ngarga Warendj – Dancing Wombat* company is known for high-quality works produced by hand or through ethical licensing agreements. A wide range of clients have commissioned his sculptures.

Mick is also a cultural educator and his commitment to knowledge is reflected in cultural narratives informing his works. He takes inspiration from his ancestors, his work in the museum sector, and from collections held at places such as the Koorie Heritage Trust, where the linework used in the South East can be seen.

Mick notes the importance of his art-making as a way to be both culturally and financially independent. His art is also for his children and community.



DARCY McCONNELL

Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta

Pronouns: they/them

b. 1999, based on Wurundjeri Country

Darcy is a proud Dja Dja Wurrung and Yorta Yorta Blak Fulla based on Wurundjeri Country in Narm (Melbourne). They are a multi-media artist with a focus on digital media. They are known locally in Narm for their *First People's RISING art tram 'My Aunty Once Told Me'* running on Routes 58 and 59, and internationally for their work with Apple in which they created the 2023 World Pride Campaign. They contributed to *Solid Lines*, a 2022 RMIT University-sponsored report on fostering First Nations involvement in the design and commercial art industries.



SEAN MILLER

Gamilaroi

Pronouns: he/him

b. 1965, based on Wurundjeri Country

Sean Miller is a proud Gamilaroi man, exploring his heritage through ceramics, woodwork, painting and photography. For Sean, working in clay and wood creates a tangible connection to Country, where his ancestors culturally and artistically shaped the ground and carved trees for ceremony.

Sean started working with ceramics in 2011 while incarcerated at Loddon Prison. Through the Torch's 'In Prison' program he exhibited his first works in the annual *Confined* exhibition. This led to a ceramics commission, acquired for the National Gallery of Victoria's 2013-2014 *Melbourne Now* exhibition.

Sean was a finalist in Shepparton Art Museum's 2016 *Indigenous Ceramic Award*, with the work acquired by SAM. In 2020, Sean won the Emerging Artist Award at the Koorie Heritage Trust's *8th Koorie Art Show*. In 2022, Sean won the South-East Australian Aboriginal Artist Prize at Shepparton Art Museum's *Indigenous Ceramics Award*, while the NGV acquired another work exhibited in KHT's *10th Koorie Art Show*.



CORINA MUIR

Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung

Pronouns: she/her

b. 1989, based on Wurundjeri Country

A proud Yorta Yorta and Boonwurrung woman, Corina Muir is a designer, nature protector, campaigner, mother and founder of ethical children's wear label Amber Days.

Corina is passionate about the environment and people, with much of her work inspired by the Aboriginal bush, desert and sea. She aims to have minimal environmental impact and create positive change. Through her work, she regularly collaborates with Aboriginal artists to share stories through art and continue culture.

Driven to break down the barriers that young women of colour face, having previously worked in the areas of family violence, child protection and community organising, Corina understands the challenges many women of colour face, and uses her business as a vehicle for change.

Corina aims to bring pride and connection to First People's culture, by strengthening their voice, sense of identity, connection to Country, and revitalising culture and language.

BLAK DESIGN MENTORS

JANET FIELDHOUSE & DAVID RAY



Corina Muir and Janet Fieldhouse at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro

During the very early stages of the 2023 Blak Design Program, mentors Janet Fieldhouse and David Ray noticed something significant among the nine participants, whose backgrounds, experience, mobs and previous dealings with ceramics were incredibly diverse. It was this: everyone had lots of ideas, and these were brought into the room with a great deal of positive energy.

Making objects from clay extends back thousands of generations among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. Much has been passed down from generation to generation, and this knowledge manifests in the present, draws on the past, and reaches into the future. In the Blak Design ceramics program, it connects with nine sets of work that are extraordinarily individual. Yet, say Janet and David, all the work produced explores relationships with history, story-telling, land and sea by using the same material, eked out of the precious earth beneath our feet: clay.

Between them, art educators Janet and David have had vast experience working with ceramics. Janet is a Torres Strait Islands woman who has exhibited her work for more than two decades. She has won the Shepparton Art Museum *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* twice (2007 and 2012) and her hand-built forms acknowledge the Torres Strait traditions of navigation, living off the sea and the land, and women's traditional practices such as weaving body adornments for ceremony and scarification.

David is a ceramics artist and teacher whose work is described as 'wild and flamboyant Baroque creations that incorporate an abundance of colours, textures and decals onto handcrafted vessels'. The works offer commentary on contemporary consumerism and the less-celebrated aspects of Australian cultural life. Like Janet, he has exhibited and taught extensively, and won many awards.

The Blak Design participants drew on all this expertise in their learnings in order to refine the multitude of ideas they initially produced. Progressively, they transformed their visions into something solid, often turning exciting but unexpected corners along the way. The Program was divided into several blocks beginning at the end of January 2023 and wrapping up by the middle of July, with the artists putting on the finishing touches for a short period after this. While the early introductory sessions of the course had a focus on design, storytelling and hearing about previous Blak Design Programs, the subsequent two weeks in February were all about technical briefings and demonstrations, learning and revising techniques and skills, and having conversations about the participants' individual designs.

'To begin with, ideas were flying around,' David says. 'As a mentor, it was a task to funnel each artist's enthusiasm and willingness to learn a new medium whilst conveying their idea and concept. To be able to work with the artists to realise their ideas and tell their stories was in some ways a daunting task – the ceramics medium is wide and varied in its scope, historically, and with its materiality. Clay and glaze use can have endless possibilities.'

'And from day one, many of the artists leaned into the idea of wanting to create more conceptual/ sculptural work to tell their story, rather than design a "product".' David says that, as with any new adventure, participants often start with a particular idea, as was certainly the case in Blak Design. 'But along the way, there may be failures, breakthroughs, new directions and changes of course.' He says he felt it a great privilege to be one of the two mentors. 'I felt it was my job to walk beside each artist to help them navigate their journey, to be a guide through the ceramic landscape and learning.'

AS A TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CERAMICS ARTIST, I'VE BEEN ENLIGHTENED BY THE BLAK DESIGN ARTISTS, AS EACH ARTIST HAS BROUGHT THEIR EXPERIENCES FROM THEIR OWN PRACTICES TO THE COURSE.

- JANET FIELDHOUSE

Janet agrees: 'The idea of the course was to explore and experiment with the physical properties of clay bodies and develop fundamental skills in the making of objects through ceramic methods. At the beginning, there was a lot of learning about hand-building, throwing techniques, texture, colours and glazes techniques. It was a tense learning process in those first two weeks.'

Both Janet and David say that one of the key learnings throughout the Program was appreciation of the fact that, from start to finish, ceramics can be a temperamental medium. Therefore, the artists had to learn how to manage different types of clay.



(Left to right, top to bottom) Te' Claire, Sharn Geary, Nicholas Currie, David Ray, Mick Harding, Eleanor Franks, Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis, Darcy McConnell, Annie Brigdale, Trina Dalton-Oodjes, Janet Fieldhouse, Sean Miller, Corina Muir. Photograph by Christian Capurro



I FELT IT WAS MY JOB TO WALK BESIDE EACH ARTIST TO HELP THEM NAVIGATE THEIR JOURNEY, TO BE A GUIDE THROUGH THE CERAMIC LANDSCAPE AND LEARNING.

- DAVID RAY

(Left to right) David Ray, Corina Muir, Janet Fieldhouse, Annie Brigdale and Trina Dalton-Oogjes at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro



David Ray and Corina Muir at RMIT Ceramic Studio.
Photograph by Christian Capurro

Once they started making, the Blak Designers experimented with pinch pots, coil techniques, slab-building and using moulds. With this array of possibilities in mind, the artists then tried to find their way towards how they wanted to construct their objects, which type of clay would best suit their idea, and how to ensure what they were making would be structurally sound in order to withstand the firing process. As Janet says: 'This helped the artists to understand the relationships between idea, concept, form, and material, and for them to have an individual approach to their art practice.'

David adds that all the designers' approaches and finished works are unique to their own story. 'Some use traditional patterns whilst others depict a Creation story that is specific to their place. Social/political narrative also runs through some of the work that relates to contemporary First Nations social culture and experience.'

In July, the second part of the Program revolved around intensive making, testing and finishing. Part of this was learning more about firing, a process that can take several days involving test-firing of different clay bodies, followed by the making and testing of various glazes, underglazes, and glaze stains, each of which bears a different result.

Underpinning the entire course is not only the extensive experience of the mentors and technicians, but an immense amount of cultural tradition, story and making. Curator Kimberley Moulton, who took the artists on a tour of the South Eastern Aboriginal Collections at Museums Victoria, outlined this broader history in *Art Monthly* in 2015. She noted that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ceramic arts are usually positioned as a relatively recent movement, in fact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have for thousands of generations been 'shifting the land' to form installations used in ceremony, and painted and carved story into stone.

'Ochre has been gently extracted from the earth to be used on the body and moulded into cultural material made of fibre, wood and animal,' she writes. 'The relationship to the earth and the tangibility of its offerings have been connected to Indigenous peoples from time immemorial. The foundations of Indigenous contemporary art practice, including ceramics, are entwined in these histories and relationships with Country which have undeniably remained connected.'

In particular, she explains how clans such as the Yorta Yorta of the south-east have been working with clay for many thousands of years, moulding it to form balls that would be fired hard and used for cooking. 'Fingerprints of the old people can be found embedded in these unassuming earthenware creations.'

Kimberley's article, 'Breaking Ground', also explains that the genesis of working clay 'within a western system of artistic intent' began to form around 1968 in the Bagot community of Darwin. From here, First Nations use of ceramics began to explode onto the contemporary art scene with people such as Eddie Puruntatameri and Dr Thancoupie Gloria Fletcher AO (Thancoupie).

Blak Design mentor Janet is of course a part of this long trajectory and says her own personal practice sits both alongside contemporary ceramics as well as within its own category: 'We all use our heritage to express ourselves.' David, too, observes that First Nations ceramics is a separate chapter in contemporary ceramics that should be celebrated as such. It is important, he says, that it be seen on the international stage as its stories reflect on displacement, how story and rituals can be used to hold culture and community together globally, and how humans can live within the environment in a positive way. 'I find this extremely important as it juxtaposes with the current industrial consumerist society that is destructive and dividing.'

With all this in mind, by the end of the Program, David, felt enriched. 'As a non-Indigenous mentor, the experience took my understanding of First Nations experience to a deeper level, of how their personal connection to culture is a large part of their identity, giving me a clearer perspective of how the subtle and not-so-subtle colonisation ideas have tried to erase their sense of belonging. Their resilience is inspiring.' Janet, too, was deeply impressed. 'I have taught First Nations artists for more than 20 years, by teaching skills that they can take back to their community and Country. As a Torres Strait Islander ceramics artist, I've been enlightened by the Blak Design artists, as each artist has brought their experiences from their own practices to the course.'



JANET FIELDHOUSE

Torres Strait Islands
Pronouns: she/her
b. 1971
based in Cairns

Born and based in Cairns, Queensland, the work of celebrated ceramicist Janet Fieldhouse (Torres Strait Islands) acknowledges the Torres Strait traditions of navigation, living off the sea and the land, and women's traditional practices such as weaving body adornments for ceremony and scarification.

Janet has won Shepparton Art Museum's *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* (inaugural 2007 and also 2012) and undertaken the Australia Council for the Arts residency at Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia, USA (2017). Her exhibition at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (2019) received the Premier's Prize for Excellence. Janet has exhibited widely throughout Australia, including *Tarnanthi*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (2023), *The National: New Australian Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2019), and the *9th Asia Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (2018-19). Janet holds a Master of Philosophy, visual arts (2010), from the Australian National University, Canberra, and her artworks are in major collections in Australia and overseas.



DAVID RAY

Pronouns: he/him
b.1972
based on Wurundjeri Country

David Ray is a contemporary ceramic artist, based in the Yarra Valley, on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people in Victoria. His ceramics have built a reputation for being wild and flamboyant Baroque creations that incorporate an abundance of colours, textures and decals onto handcrafted vessels.

David was born in Ararat, Victoria, and graduated with Honours in Fine Arts (Ceramics) from RMIT, Melbourne (1995). Throughout his 30-year career, he has established himself as one of Australia's leading ceramic artists, with artwork held in numerous Australian and international collections. David has received numerous awards including Winner of Excellence (2019) at the Victorian Craft Awards, Manningham Victorian Ceramic Art Prize (2017), and finalist in the Basil Sellers Award (2016 and 2010). David has undertaken residency programs internationally and nationally including The Clay Studio in Philadelphia (US), Blue Coat in Liverpool (UK) through an Australia Council grant, and Artspace Mackay, Queensland (2018).



TE' CLAIRE

Pronouns: she/her

b. 1993

Based: on Wurundjeri Country

Te' Claire's practice involves the research and exchange of feldspathic materials, a focal point of her studio practice involves the chemical analysis and experimentation of traditional ceramic materials. Most notably the wheel and cast forming techniques are used as a base to induce changes in surface structure, examining the alchemical knowledge of material chemistry. Te' Claire is a lecturer at RMIT, holds a BFA honours and Masters in Fine Art with both local and international residencies, exhibitions and collections.



Above: Nicholas Currie and Te' Claire at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro.
Below: Janet Fieldhouse and Mick Harding at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro



LIST OF WORKS

All measurements are in centimetres,
height before width before depth

ANNIE BRIGDALE Yorta Yorta

Unearthing Roots: A Journey of Disconnection and Reconnection

Billy 2023
earthenware, glaze, wire
20.5 x 19 x 16.5 cm

Nan xx 2007 2023
earthenware, glaze, decals
20.5 x 17.2 x 9.7 cm

Letter 2023
earthenware, glaze, decals
22.3 x 17.2 x 9.7 cm

Portrait 2023
earthenware, glaze, decals
28.5 x 17.2 x 12.8 cm

Tall Mission Notes 2023
earthenware, glaze, clay slip
46.2 x 17.5 x 12.5 cm

Short Mission Notes 2023
earthenware, glaze, decals
34.3 x 18 x 16.3 cm

Untitled 2023
charcoal flower
dimension variable

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

SUZANNE CONNELLY-KLIDOMITIS Wiradjuri

7 sistas 2023
porcelain, emu feathers, emu
eggs, clay balls, glue, synthetic
polymer paint

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

NICHOLAS CURRIE Yugambeh, Kuku Yalanji

Gumai Giberra (Them mob are as big as mountains.)

Figure 1 2023
raku trachyte clay, stoneware slip
52.5 x 47 x 23 cm

Figure 2 2023
raku trachyte clay, stoneware slip
51.5 x 50.5 x 20.5 cm

Figure 3 2023
raku trachyte clay, stoneware slip
55 x 39 x 28 cm

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

TRINA DALTON-OOGJES Wadawurrung, Gunditjmara

Interweaving Traditions

Bowl 1 2023
porcelain, raffia
29 x 22 x 21 cm

Bowl 2 2023
porcelain, raffia
26 x 18 x 18 cm

Bowl 3 2023
porcelain, raffia
16.8 x 20.5 x 20.5 cm

Bowl 4 2023
porcelain, raffia
16 x 17 x 16 cm

Bowl 5 2023
porcelain, raffia
7.5 x 10 x 10 cm

Flat Weave 1 2023
porcelain, cotton
26 x 23.5 x 1 cm

Flat Weave 2 2023
porcelain, cotton, wool
31.5 x 29 x 1 cm

ELEANOR FRANKS Gubbi Gubbi / Kabi Kabi

A Self-Adornment Study

Large Teeth

Kabi Kabi Cap 2023
porcelain, silver leaf, glue
8.5 x 5 x 5 cm

2525 2023
porcelain, silver leaf, crystal flat-
back rhinestone, glue
6 x 4.5 x 5 cm

22Two-th 2023
porcelain, silver lustre, glaze
12 x 6.5 x 6.5 cm

Self Adornment (Gemed) 2023
porcelain, crystal flat-back
rhinestones, synthetic polymer
paint, glue
9.5 x 7 x 7.5 cm

GGxGG 2023
porcelain, silver lustre, glaze
6 x 4.5 x 4.2 cm

Celestial 2023
porcelain, silver lustre, glaze
8.5 x 5.7 x 6 cm

Knuckle Pieces

Stone Cold (#1) 2023
mid-fire clay, copper foil, glaze,
wire, glue
2 x 9 x 2.9 cm

Stone Cold (#2) 2023
mid-fire clay, copper foil, glaze,
wire, glue
2.2 x 10.5 x 2.5 cm

Wannabe Brass (#1) 2023
porcelain, copper foil, wire, glue
1.7 x 9.2 x 2.5 cm

Wannabe Brass (#2) 2023
porcelain, copper foil, wire, glue
2.2 x 9 x 2.9 cm

Jaw Sets

2000 Angel 2023
porcelain, glaze, synthetic
polymer paint, crystal flat-back
rhinestones, glue
6 x 9.5 x 7.2 cm

Embellish (beauty spot) 2023
porcelain, glaze, synthetic
polymer paint, crystal flat-back
rhinestone, glue
7.8 x 10.1 x 7 cm

2000 Genesis 2023
mid-fire clay, glaze, silver foil, glue
8.8 x 10.8 x 7 cm

BLAKG(RI/IR)LL 2023
mid-fire clay, glaze
8.5 x 10.6 x 9.8 cm

Buck Tooth Legacy 2023
mid-fire clay, silver foil, glaze, glue
8cm x 11cm x 7cm

Small teeth

Cherished Collection 2023
porcelain, glaze, clay slip, crystal
flat-back rhinestones, glue
5 parts
Smallest: 2 x 1.2 x 1.2 cm
Largest: 3 x 1.7 x 2 cm

Nail Set

Untitled 2023
porcelain, silver foil, clay
slip, glaze, crystal flat-back
rhinestones, glue
10 parts
Smallest: 2 x 0.8 x 0.3 cm
Largest: 3 x 1.2 x 0.3 cm

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

MICK HARDING
Taungurung

Dharnak wurdha malgarr wurdha
'Many bowls and shields'

Malgarr dharnak - Shield Bowl (1)
2023
mid-fire clay, clay slip
4 x 55 x 30 cm

Malgarr dharnak - Shield Bowl (2)
2023
marbled mid-fire clay, raku clay
and porcelain
7 x 36.5 x 19.5 cm

Malgarr dharnak - Shield Bowl (3)
2023
marbled mid-fire clay, raku clay
and porcelain
7.5 x 32 x 23 cm

Dharnuk joined by copper 2023
mid-fire clay, clay slip, copper
wire, glue
4 x 54 x 35.5 cm

Reconnected dharnuk 2023
mid-fire clay, glue, eucalypt bark
20 x 65 x 28 cm

Galk Biik - Bark Country 2023
raku clay
4 x 72 x 23cm

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

DARCY McCONNELL
Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta

After You 2023
mid-fire clay, raku clay, glaze,
clay slip, pine wood, kangaroo
skin, synthetic polymer paint
4.5 x 42.5 x 42.5 cm
(chess board)
25 x 32 x 17 cm
(rat head)
21.5 x 32.5 x 22 cm
(dingo head)
8.8 x 3 x 2.8 cm
(largest chess piece)
4.7 x 2.5 x 2.2 cm
(smallest chess piece)

Installation variable
Collection of the artist

SEAN MILLER
Gamilaroi

How Waan turned Black 2023
stoneware, glaze, LED lights,
timber, synthetic polymer paint,
magnet, mirror, nails
114 x 35 x 35cm (ceramic)

Collection of the artist

CORINA MUIR
Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung

Non Linear Depths

Bowl 1 2023
stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
16 x 38 x 36 cm

Bowl 2 2023
stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
11.5 x 22 x 20 cm

Bowl 3 2023
stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
7.5 x 15 x 16 cm

Bowl 4 2023
stoneware, glaze, gold lustre
6.5 x 13 x 12 cm

Installation dimensions variable
Collection of the artist



Above: Nicholas Currie learning mould making at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro
Below: Suzanne Connelly-Klidomitis at RMIT Ceramic Studio. Photograph by Christian Capurro



FIRED UP: STORIES THROUGH EMBERS AND EARTH

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Koorie Heritage Trust

Birrarung Building
Federation Square
Cnr Swanston & Flinders Streets
Melbourne VIC 3000

Phone: 03 8662 6300
Email: info@korieheritagetrust.com
Web: www.korieheritagetrust.com.au

Open daily 10am - 5pm

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Authors

Tom Mosby and Andrew Stephens

Catalogue Editor

Jessica Row

Proofreaders

Gail Harradine, Travis Curtin and Sharn Geary

Copyediting

Andrew Stephens

Catalogue and Graphic Design

Myrtle Jeffs

Photography

Christian Capurro

Blak Design Coordinator

Sharn Geary

Blak Design Tutors

Janet Fieldhouse and David Ray

Blak Design Technical Assistant

Te' Claire

Exhibition Design

JAX SUN

KHT Collections and Exhibitions

Gail Harradine, Travis Curtin, Jessica Row, Savi Ross,
Katherine Giesen-White, Gemma Jones

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+61 3 8662 6300 | info@korieheritagetrust.com

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