

I Am Gamilaroi

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I began painting back in 2020. I've always been an artistic person and prefer to express myself visually. I didn't start taking it more seriously until I was inspired by previous Year 12 Aboriginal art students at my school. Seeing them doing their own works about their family and culture made me want to do it. My body of work consists of 4 acrylic paintings on canvas and board of varying sizes and colours. These works relate to my search for my identity and culture.

For me, my Aboriginal culture has been a bit of a mystery. I'm Gamilaroi on my mother's side. I know all my family and our history. But because of the effects of assimilation and The Stolen Generation, our culture was heavily impacted. My mother and grandfather didn't get to learn about culture, so I never learnt either. I also wasn't brought up on our country. I was raised in a multicultural remote community in the Northern Territory. This allowed me to be exposed to many different cultures and see their communities. Specifically, the Warumungu, Warlpiri people, the traditional owners. In school, we were taught about their lore, kinship systems, bush tucker, dreaming stories and sometimes taken on country. These experiences made me realise how important culture was, but also how I was deprived of this with my own cultural heritage.

I had to work it out for myself, going through books, websites, learning resources and research papers. After much searching, I found Gamilaroi star stories and started to paint them. By doing this, I was learning and remembering the stories whilst creating visual maps of what occurs in these dreamings. I've been doing this for the last four years; my style is taking on many forms and is constantly developing and evolving. For my Year 12 works, I knew I wanted to create a body of work about my Gamilaroi heritage and country. In Gamilaroi culture, it's believed that what is above is also below. The land reflects what's in the sky. I need to show the physical land and the heavens above.

'Walaaybaa' means Home Country in Gamilaraay language. In my first work I wanted to use the common circular 'campsite' symbol and expand it. Instead of having just the circle to represent my country, I wanted it to envelope the entire work to show the importance of the land. A frequent feature I noticed in traditional Gamilaroi markings are the use of patterns and repetition. The circle has individual rings that depict a motif of the land. The first is the Pilliga Scrublands (Forest), the second is the Warrumbungles (Crooked Mountains), third is the Bagay (River), then the final is Mandha (Food, Tucker). It's like if you were to stand in the middle of this circle and look out all around you, you'd see natural resources and the beautiful landscape. I wanted to capture the feeling of immersion in this piece, the same way I feel when I go back to my homelands in New South Wales.

My artistic influences for Walaaybaa are Marina Pumani-Brown and Andrew Tjupurrpula Highfold. Pumani-Brown's use of intricate dotted circles was a key inspiration for my circular composition. Her paintings, Ngayuku Ngura Kuwari (My Home Now), are about her day-to-day life in her community. It is why I titled my piece Walaaybaa (Home Country). Her colours are harmonious and impactful, I wanted to use colours that would have a similar look. Tjupurrpula's use of fine dotting influenced how I approached each

layer. The small dots amplify each part of country, allowing the symbols to shine amongst the colourful detail.

'Warrambool' means 'Stream' in Gamilaraay language. In my culture, the Milky Way galaxy is a big river in the sky. Many stars and dust lanes stretch from horizon to horizon. The Warrambool is empty, and the water is faugh on earth. It's said that "everything up there is also down here", the Warrambool is mirrored on the ground. In the sky, campsites, ancestral places and other cultural figures are placed in the Milky Way, it's like a big library. On a small canvas, I used a fluent line to act as the stream with stars all around. I was inspired by Shanna Napanangka Williams 'Seven Sisters Dreamings' and how she depicts the stars in a line. As well as the background dotting, I used white and gold pattern in mine.

One story of the Milky Way is about the sons of Baiame, the 'Sky Father'. After his sons disobeyed him, they were turned into large rocks on either sides of the fish traps at Brewarrina NSW. There are two bright patches in the constellation Sagittarius. These are the sons' spirits, but their bodies are on earth. I depicted this story in my medium and large Warrambool paintings. On 2 canvases I created these hive-like structures representing the bodies on earth. Including 2 significant stars acting as the boys' spirits. I was influenced by both Alma Nungarragy Granites and Gavin Wanganeen. Granites 'splatter' technique made me use a similar technique called 'dub dub' to paint the Milky Way above. The way she creates star patterns inspired me to do intricate designs using an iridescent white colour. The look of Wanganeen's stars and clusters were relective in the background of these works.

My final body of work makes me feel proud. I believe that themes of my country and sky are successfully conveyed and leave an immersive effect on observers. Through this collection, I interpreted these ideas in my own way, without using symbols that have been commercialized and redefining what my contemporary Aboriginal arts practice looks like. This was challenging as I'd always relied on preset symbols to depict a story. But by taking them away, I became more creative with how to share and depict these narratives. My style is still developing and I believe that it will continue to take on many forms and as my understanding of my heritage continues to grow. By doing so I hope to influence and educate others, myself and the importance of my culture will be thriving.