

Painting My Landscape. Painting My Culture.

Kieren Karritpul

Watching Kieren Karritpul paint, it appears his arm, hand and the brush are all interconnected: a fine brush moves effortlessly over the canvas. It is compelling as he seamlessly moves the brush to paint his world. Kieren feels he was born to be an artist. He can't imagine another life.

In junior school in Nauiyu there were art classes but when his parents wanted to send him to Darwin for more schooling he ran away and hid with his grandmother at the billabong until his parents agreed reluctantly he did not have to return. He told his mother, Patricia McTaggart Marrfurra¹, he wanted to be an artist and he would paint and draw every day. That was 10 years ago, and he has kept his promise.

Beginnings

After his birth in Darwin in 1994 his mother whispered his traditional totems and dreamings into his ears:

stars clouds lightning rain fire thunder king brown snake water rainbow sand frog pelican yellow tree snake black bitten black bream

In Indigenous culture totems make you who you are, they inform you and guide your life. In the dreamtime totems were thought to be human. Kieren's totems and dreamings were handed down to him from his mother, grandfather and great grandfather.

When he was brought home to Nauiyu Community, Daly River, a former Catholic mission which is about 260 kilometres from Darwin, his grandmother Molly Yawalminy² and great grandmother Mercia Wawul³ were waiting to welcome him: the third son of Patricia and Andy. Molly immediately whispered to him to always be strong and humble and these are virtues he has carried with him.

These three important women his mother, grandmother and great grandmother were already established artists⁴. While lying in his woven baby basket he would be placed next to them as they talked while they wove merrepen and pandanus into baskets, fishnets and dilly bags. When he was five years old he decided he too would be an artist.

Painting

Initially Kieren painted his totems and the plants and animals of Nauiyu. As a young person that is what interested him. However, he also quickly began interpreting through paint the weaving practises around him. In his culture only women weave but as a male he was able to interpret the practice and forms of weaving through paint.

Each painting investigates a different aspect of weaving. In *Spider's Web Weaving*⁵ it is the traditional Nauiyu narrative of how weaving started in the community from seeing a spider making a web. This story has been passed down in Nauiyu from generation to generation. In the painting the spider's web in the middle slowly evolves into a pulsing weaving pattern. The painting appears to move like a spider's web in the breeze or a person's breath. It is also a metaphor for the living plants that make the weavings and also the people talking and breathing, as they laboriously turn plant fibres into beautiful objects: a tradition that has been followed for hundreds of years.

In other paintings Kieren paints either a more magnified or enlarged interpretation of the woven surface or explores the technical processes of weaving including the colour palettes used by the weavers of Nauiyu and the actual finished form of the weavings as in *Syaw* or bundles of fibres as in *Yerrgi Pandanis Strips*.

¹ Patricia McTaggart Marrfuura OAM

[https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/60493/Accessed 18/3/2020](https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/60493/Accessed%2018/3/2020)
[https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/9536/ Accessed 18/3/2020](https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/9536/Accessed%2018/3/2020)
<http://www.holmesacourtgallery.com.au/>

² [https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/218.1994/ Accessed 18/3/2020](https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/218.1994/Accessed%2018/3/2020)

³ [https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/8645/ Accessed 18/3/2020](https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/artist/8645/Accessed%2018/3/2020)
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⁴ Kieren's mother grandmother and great grandmother are all still alive.

Writing the essay for Kieren's debut exhibition at Nomad Arts in Parap Darwin in 2015, the art historian Maurice O'Riordan states "Kieren's yerrri-stacks are a mediation on and celebration of Aboriginal culture. Looking at the paintings force the viewer to see and understand more of the weaving processes and the underlying links to culture, tradition, land and Australian history". These things are all important to him.

Kieren also paints weaving as a metaphor for himself and his relationship to land. He sees himself as an indigenous person woven into the land. More recent paintings have depicted the land as a breathing living entity. Kieren is a part of both the land around Nauiyu and also his grandfathers country.

Each of his paintings begin in the middle of the canvas with Kieren representing himself as a dot or star. He previsualises each aspect of a painting before he commences. He does this through first speaking to his ancestors and asking their advice on the imaginary.

In more recent paintings and as Kieren has travelled away from his community he has been visually interpreting one of his totems: stars. Stars have always been important for him and his community because they provide guiding marks. When writing about the painting *Nganime* he stated:

The clear shining lights fill me with wonder and delight as well as taking me back to my past. The stars make me feel safe. When I am out hunting, I know that when I see the stars it is time to go home and cook dinner with my mother. When I am in the city, I don't know what time it is or what direction I should go in to get home⁶.

In the painting the sky is full of stars that are bright and twinkling. This is the Nauiyu sky. A safe, warm and guiding sky. A sky that is not seen in big cities and towns. The painting is a reflection on the safety and security Kieren has grown up with in Nauiyu. A place with family and friends and a close connection to a sumptuous landscape filled with bush tucker.

Kieren also designs textiles and more recently he has also been painting onto ceramic forms. *Fish trap marks* is a recent work he made painting in glaze the shape of a tradition fish trap with woven marks:

My love of painting and textile design comes from being able to tell old stories passed down to me from my elders and telling old stories in a whole new way by placing these on textiles and paintings⁷.

Processes

Although Kieren works full time at the Merrepen art centre in Nauiyu, he continues to fulfil his promise to his mother and paints most nights in his room. Only Johnny McTaggart, his beloved dog is allowed to keep him company. He locks the door and disappears into his own imaginary world where he reimagines totems and dreamings. A world where he can also reconnect with his ancestors.

Kieren has been travelling into this imaginary world since he was 5 years old. A place that nurtures him, provides inspiration and guidance and helps him manage his other life: the one not in his imagination.

In 2014 Kieren was awarded the inaugural Telstra Youth Art Award⁸ for his fabric *Yerrgi*. Another fabric, *Fishnet* was selected to be presented to Prince William, when he visited Darwin. His work has subsequently been collected by many major institutions including the National Gallery in Canberra, The Museum of Applied Arts and Social Sciences in Sydney and Art Bank.

Kieren is an Indigenous artist who is determined to make his mark mean something in the art world for himself, his family, his community and all Australian indigenous people. He is his own star humble and strong as his grandmother instructed. Kieren continues his promise to his mother and ancestors each day, to realise his dream to tell, reinterpret and visualise his landscape and culture through art.

Dr Cathy Laudensch

Cathy is an artist, writer and curator who currently manages Merrepen Arts in Nauiyu, Daly River. She has worked alongside Kieren for over three years.

She has both a PhD and Research Masters in Fine Art and has lectured in numerous Australian Universities including The Australian National University.

⁶ Kieren Karrantpul statement for painting. Catholic Care Darwin.

⁷ Kieren Karrantpul Woven Lines .2015 Catalogue Essay.

⁸ Telstra Art Awards MAGNAT Darwin, 2014

Cathy has worked alongside Kieren Karritpul at the Merrepen Art Centre since 2018.

References

1 Kieren Karritpul, Woven Lines Nomad Art Darwin. 2016.

2. Artlink. 1 June 2016 .

3. Cross Arts. <http://www.crossart.com.au/current-show/351-old-way-new-way-kieren-karritpul-patricia-marfurra>