



Lynette Riley Wiradjuri Cloak - Talbragar 2012, Pokerwork on Kangaroo hide. Image © the artist

PROTECTED IN THE SKIN – BESIDE MY SOUL

Love is a kangaroo ...

'Love' by Bart Willoughby, Mixed Relations.

Historian Keith Vincent Smith confirmed in 2010 that in 1793 a Sydney Aboriginal man, Bennelong, and teenager, Yemmerrawanne, had sung at the London home of Edward Jones, later to be the Royal Musician for King George IV. In describing the song, Smith said *'the only thing we have been able to translate is the first couple of words, which seems to be about jumping kangaroos'*.

I once saw superstar David Gulpilil perform a Kangaroo mime dance in Sydney in the 1970s. The Ramingining artist/actor was in the south for the filming of Peter Weir's apocalyptic story, *The Last Wave* [1977]. The Ramingining kangaroo, Garrtjambal, came from the eastern side of the Glyde River with the northeast wind, chased by dogs. As he went through the jungle his tail was caught in a spider web that marked his skin with a sacred rain cloud pattern. He came upon a creek -line and dug a hole in the ground that became a slow spring. He then became the land. There is a hill called Dungundha that is his head and the even, slightly sloping land of the town of Ramingining is the white fur on the chest of the Kangaroo. His spirit is in a group of small rocks the size of a loaf of bread on the outskirts of Ramingining.

There are many similar sites and stories across Australia. In the NSW city of Newcastle the local Awabakal people told missionary, Reverend L. E. Threkheld in 1855 that Nobby's Island in the mouth of the harbour was the embodiment of the spirit of a giant Kangaroo. It's thought that the Kangaroo, beating his tail on the earth, caused the Newcastle earthquake of 1989. What an amazing being populated this land!

It would appear Kangaroos of various sizes and forms appeared across the Australian continent before the appearance of human form. The Kangaroo has been here since the beginning of time and its tall, distinct, upright frame gives it a special relationship to humans. Even 'white' Australians use the description *'old man kangaroo'*. At its most basic, the Aboriginal 'dots of dance' are Ozzie [the Emu] and Skippy [the Kangaroo], that which captures the hearts of tourists. It is the quintessential antipodean anthropomorphic creature.

In 2000 I worked with Aboriginal artists Fiona Foley and Joe Hurst on an installation of 2,500kg of kangaroo bones called Ngaraka [Bones] concerning the issue of the return of human remains. The skeletal structure of the kangaroos was so human-like the audience thought I'd actually used human bones. (It's now located in the ANU Sculpture Walk.)

Although sighted by Europeans earlier, the name Kangaroo comes into English from the Cairns area during the 1770 voyage of Captain Cook. The local Gugu Yimithirr word 'gangurru' was recorded by the botanist Banks who also collected a kangaroo skull now in the collection of the British Natural History Museum in London. Kudjla/Gangalu Aboriginal artist Daniel Boyd from far north Queensland created an artwork *Up In Smoke Tour Ia* in 2012 referencing the skull after a residency in London in 2011. As a dark shadow on a shimmering pointillist background on the inside of a black museum 'skull box' it is there in the shadows.

There are of course hundreds of Aboriginal languages and at least forty other names for kangaroo. In Wiradjuri 'country' around Dubbo, Wambuwuny is one of them. There are at least eight million kangaroos in the western plains region of New South Wales, which includes Dubbo.

Kangaroo images made by this spirit, and reproduced by Aboriginal people, can be found across the country from engravings and paintings in the southeast to the oldest dated paintings (around 25,000 BCE) found in Kakadu. The first European sketch of a kangaroo was by Sydney Parkinson on the 1770 voyage with Cook. The sketch has been re-interpreted and included numerous times in the work of north Queensland Mamu I Ngagen Aboriginal artist Danie Melior [b.1971], including in the 2000 print Atherton in the Tablelands, and in sculpted kangaroos made with blue and white crockery fragments evoking Spode bone china, kangaroo skin used for ears, real paws, and synthetic eyeballs (for instance The Collector from 2008).

'Australian Bushmen Beat Cops :- With Frozen Kangaroo Tails' read the headline. I knew Aboriginal people made use of every part of the kangaroo but was this going too far? We do eat the meat, organs and intestines, utilise the bones, the skin and fat, and use the kangaroo as inspiration for song, dance and life. The carcass of the kangaroo could be seen as a mnemonic device positioning the hunter within their society with particular 'cuts' of meat, sinew, and bone set out in prescribed distribution to extended family members. The meat is lean of fat and rich in iron and vitamins such as zinc and eating it may be of benefit in controlling the onset of diabetes.

But when did people first wear animal skins? We should remember that tree bark used for house materials and sheets to paint on is really a form of skin. Humans started to wear animal skins for warmth or protection against the sun and wind from at least at the time of the last glacial period around 15-20,000 BCE. Aboriginal people, although seemingly not noticed by Europeans, wore possum and kangaroo skins for protection against the cold and were wearing these when Europeans arrived in Australia in 1770.

People have also decorated skins in many ways for a very long time. Marks were etched into these skins with stone and bone knives and rubbed with red ochre. The separate possum skins with their unique combination of images are metaphorically similar to song cycles, the pages of a book, a calendar of seasons, totems, and totemic events, composing personal identity that places you in a spiritual, hierarchical-social, and physical space/landscape.

A visiting academic just told me that the Greeks had a thing called *pharmacopeia*, which referenced not only medicines but also an imagery of ideas, memory and morals couched in myths. Often the materials used for painting could be used as curative medicines and/or poisons - so art could cure you or kill you. To be close to power is a dangerous place - to be close to a spiritual power should be a powerful and possibly empowering experience. Wearing such a sanctified cloak is not a casual practice. You are ambiguously outside or separated from the physical landscape and yet spiritually connected to places, botanic, zoological, and climatic beings and forces, people, events and times.

One should see our 'totemic' image as temporal, as being in motion, as being in a time spectrum, as an image of your soul, your spiritual essence as it exists all the time no matter the variation in the outer shell of your body, wearing your soul image against your skin - a mirror of your soul on the inside.

When Charles Kerry photographed an initiation ground near Quombone in 1898, just north of Dubbo, he found visual art patterns, compositions, and installation performance spaces of immense invention, scale and revelatory power. There were parallel lines, wave patterns, watermarks, scribbly gum patterns, and focused concentric circles and diamonds. As with practices elsewhere these are sacred imagery denoting sacred sites and events such as running water but often seen publically in the pantheistic idea of the world, or interpreted as deeper and more personal and secretive in the case of the photographed event. Similar images also appear in the rock art of these western lands, and in the style of the compositions on these cloaks – the continuing of a long tradition.

When did pokerwork begin? A friend suggested that this practice certainly took off when wire fences were erected on colonial properties. Aboriginal people used this wire for making fishing spears, needles and for heating for pokerwork marking. Enveloped by western hegemony unfortunately, in the post WWII period, Aboriginal people were thought of as being without real art, and taught crafts (print-making, crocheting, sewing, weaving, pottery, paper-making, and so on) as a remedy. Many contemporary artists use craft practices to express an idea. So is this merely craft or serious art? There has been a movement towards craft -orientated work over the last decade or so. Many artists generally use weaving, needlework etc. but it comes out of an idea, a feeling, first, a principle expressed.

And so we come to the gifted Wiradjuri Riley sisters, Lynette June Riley [b.1956] and Diane Maude Riley McNaboe [b.1960] who speak and teach Wiradjuri. Many Aboriginal creation stories talk of two spirit beings in the form of two sisters. Historically an Aboriginal nuclear family was, at its most basic, a man and two women who were sisters. The two Riley sisters here work with two natural yet supernatural materials and ideas of aesthetics, and attempt to turn around the colonial scar. The women grew up in families at home with the indigenous animal species, regularly hunting, dressing, and cooking. Lyn remembers cooking and eating Kangaroo. The apparently 'lethal' tail was Lyn's choice cut. A kangaroo-tail soup is a beautiful thing. I once said of the work of another Riley; feathers float, so do clouds and dreams, figure eight downward spiral, infinity.

A feather-appendage is a sign of two concepts in Aboriginal beliefs; a being at its height of health, alive with energy as displayed by its plumage, and the idea of an appendage maintaining attachment to 'mother' - to God. These lifelines we wear keep us safe from harm and warmly content as we reconstruct the space we live in and prepare it for the next generation.

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