

# KENT MORRIS

## BARKINDJI BLUE SKY



VIVIEN  
ANDERSON  
GALLERY



*Barkindji Blue Sky* is a multi-layered, significant series featuring eight striking photographs, each masterly composed and compelling, that challenge western denials of traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems. The series also tells an underlying story of Kent Morris's connection with his Barkindji family and culture, back on his father's Ancestral homelands.

Morris shot the original photographs during a family reunion on Kurnu Barkindji<sup>1</sup> country, in Bourke, New South Wales, when descendants of Jacky and Kitty Knight gathered to connect, reconnect and remember. By walking and exploring Country, sharing historical family photographs, recounting oral histories and stories, and even featuring in the Bourke Easter Parade, the family came together as one, on Country.

During this rare family gathering, another congregation also captured Morris's attention. A small flock of Corellas or *kiinki*<sup>2</sup> was flying around the top of a tall, conspicuous, telecommunications tower which was stacked full of jutting dishes, antennas and radio masts.

Observing nature at play comes naturally to Morris as he travels Australia and walks on Country. Always looking up, he is drawn to the sounds and activities of the local native birds and documents their interactions with a wide variety of buildings and other man-made structures. Australia's native birds are a key feature in his works, not only as a representation of Ancestors but also as a reminder and reaffirmation of the cultural connection and continuity with native animals that Aboriginal people still have today.

Fortunately for Morris, this chance observation of the *kiinki* enabled *Barkindji Blue Sky* to be captured poignantly on his Country. With only a five-minute window to document the interaction early one morning, it was a moment and an opportunity that couldn't be missed.

Dominating the skyline, the tower sits starkly against the cloudless, pervading blue sky. Reflecting the joyous intermingling of his Barkindji family, the *kiinki*, the only birds seen there that day and in a world of their own, were playfully interacting with this artificial metal tree.

Although the tower is another symbol of colonisation and change for Aboriginal people, it is also a modern representation of adaptation, a linkage in a chain of towers providing a virtual connection for Barkindji people both to culturally significant areas close by and to worlds beyond their rich, red-earthed and freshwater river homelands.

The *kiinki* are blissfully unaware of its use and importance to those below. By strategically zooming-in with his lens, Morris has ingeniously captured their inquisitive nature. Their white wings and body are camouflaged against the tower or, at times, become an extension of the tower as they hang off or fly around it like native bees on a flower. Their continued presence is a reminder of nature's innate ability to adapt to intrusive

structures and a powerful reflection of the resilience of Barkindji people who have also had to adapt to many changes over time.

The tower is a powerful, multi-layered symbol, speaking to the rapid utilisation of communications technology that Aboriginal people around the country have incorporated into their daily lives. For some, a desire to connect from their remote geography is a factor but for many it's their ingenuity to produce creative works and impetus to preserve cultural knowledge, ideas and histories for future generations that drive their use of the technology, ensuring communications technology is yet another tool to educate and empower.

For centuries, since British colonisation, Aboriginal people and their cultural knowledge have been systematically ignored, excluded from history or challenged. It's only now, through new technologies and western science and research, that the world is 'validating' and 'legitimising'<sup>3</sup> what has always been known. Communities are finally earning respect, understanding and acknowledgement of their deep-time cultural knowledge, concepts, oral histories and connection.

Morris's works aim to redress and rebalance the two different, but nowadays complementary, communication systems and express how Aboriginal Communities are embracing, adapting and excelling with new technological tools. The tower enables the transmission of ideas and culture and the creation and coming together of different Aboriginal Communities<sup>4</sup>. As well, it is an embodiment of old and new knowledge systems merging together, like a modern-day virtual message stick.

In *Barkindji Blue Sky* the contrasting vivid silver tower sits strikingly against the deep blue cloudless sky. By visually and mentally re-forming and bending key parts of the tower, Morris composes and reshapes it into reimagined forms, metaphorically reshaping the denied thought about Aboriginal knowledge systems and how they are understood and used today.

Through seamless digital manipulation of a primary image, mirrored into quarters, an overall balanced picture is revealed, featuring a striking central form with birds punctuating and adding life to the image. Like floating satellites connecting earth with space, each work is layered and can be read in multiple ways. In *Ancestral Connections #7*, a *kiinki* sits in each corner of the central, stacked, shield-like structure, attentively watching all that is below. Like guardian Ancestors, they circle with wings flared and outstretched as they watch. In *Ancestral Connections #8*, several *kiinki* hug the central concentric diamond whilst a semi-formed moon sits in each corner. These *kiinki* reflect the important Barkindji Ancestral constellation story about two sisters called *kiinki'ngulu*, the two white cockatoos (corellas) in the sky, representing the clouds of Magellan<sup>5</sup>. In *Ancestral Connections #2*, three *kiinki* collectively hover, like a gathering of women around a floating, oval, bowl-like shape, perhaps representing an imagined contemporary version of a Barkindji *yukutya*<sup>6</sup>, with its intricate and repetitive deeply lined pattern.

The intertwining of Aboriginal cultural knowledge systems, technology and the built environment is an important and integral element to Morris's works. By visually deconstructing and reassembling western systems, he mirrors the methodical disassembly and denial of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and highlights his desire to reshape and reaffirm contemporary thought, understanding and truth about the deep-time existence of Aboriginal philosophy and knowledge and the role they continue to play in today's society.

Like the *kiinki*'s curiosity with the tower, these works intrigue you and draw you in, sparking a profound aesthetic appreciation of Morris's impeccable blend of sharp geometric angles, hard metal, culture and nature. A sense of otherworldliness is evoked by the resulting composite, mechanical, cyberpunk style. The majesty and ingenuity of *Barkindji Blue Sky* is in Morris's ability to manipulate structures and nature into forms that reflect elements of Aboriginal tangible and intangible cultural heritage and reinforce cultural continuity since time immemorial.

The works are a positive reinforcement of Morris's connections to family, community, culture and Country, and a recognition of Aboriginal strength, resilience and empowerment. They are a poignant reflection of modernisation and adaptation, of a technological utopia elevating and projecting ancient Aboriginal knowledge all under a *Barkindji Blue Sky*.

Tina Baum, Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, National Gallery of Australia

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<sup>1</sup> Kurnu Barkindji is the language group of the Bourke area and the upper catchment of the Darling River system of far northwestern New South Wales. Barkindji means *people of the Barka (the river)*.

<sup>2</sup> *kiinki* is the Barkindji name for white cockatoo (corella), from the Paakantyi Language dictionary by Luise A. Hercus, AIATSIS publishing, Canberra, 2011.

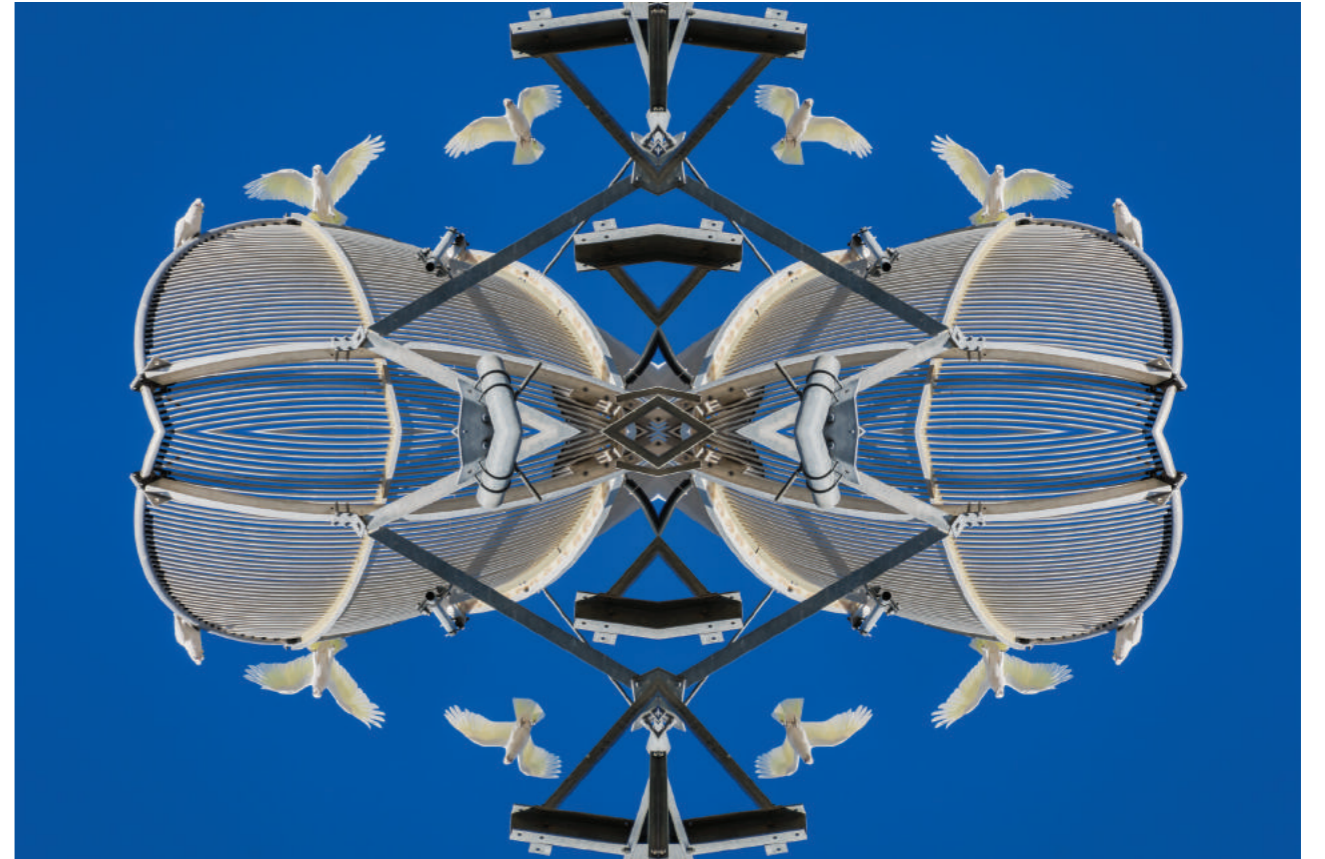
<sup>3</sup> Time immemorial, Aboriginal cultural knowledge does not need western validation and legitimisation to make it real or truthful. However, with more appropriate Community engagement and employment of Aboriginal people to document and manage their knowledge it will ensure its future preservation and the empowerment of the Community.

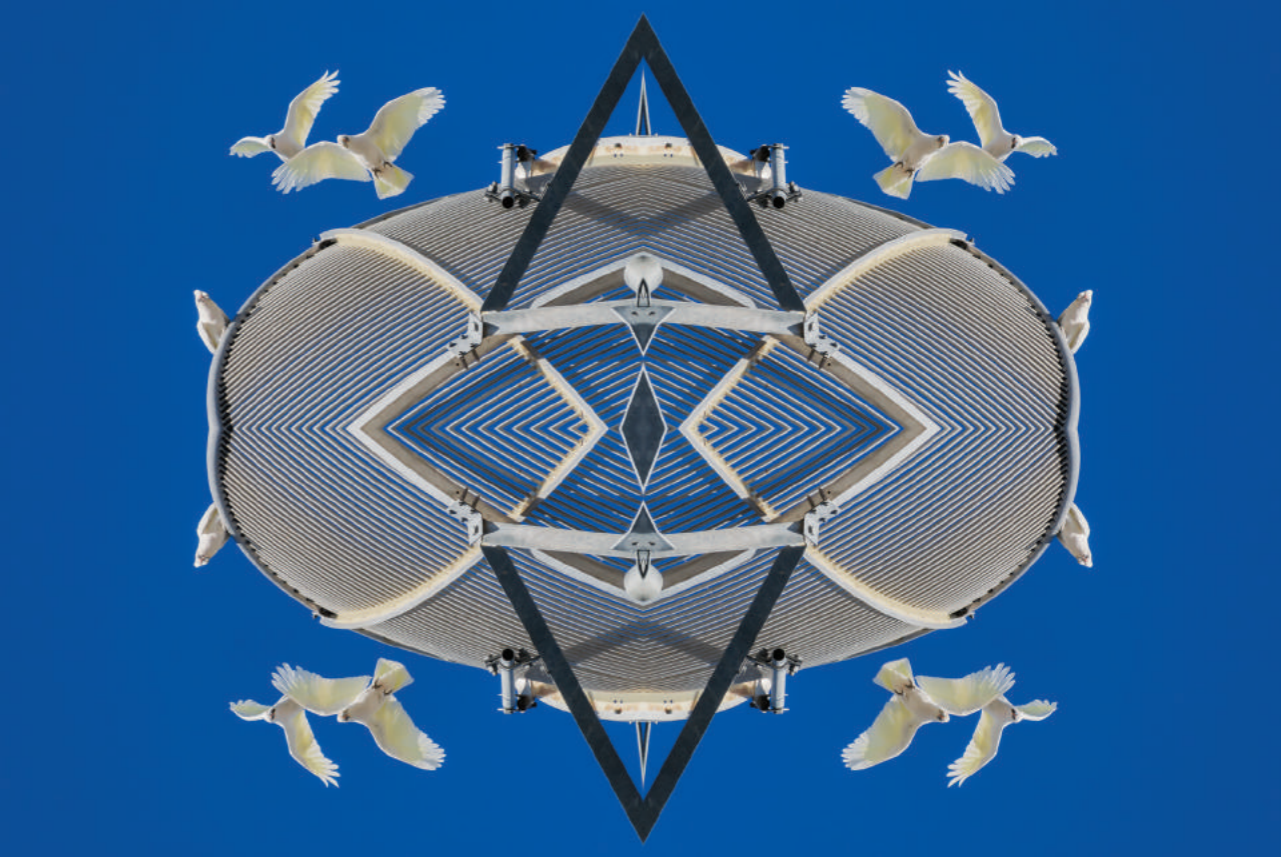
<sup>4</sup> Many Aboriginal people have been displaced from their traditional homelands either through colonisation or through necessity with work or by choice. Sometimes connection online and the forming of virtual Communities is one of the few ways to stay connected and abreast of current affairs nationally and in the different regions.

<sup>5</sup> Story relayed by Barkindji man, Murray Butcher.

<sup>6</sup> *yukutya* is the Paakintyi name for a large wooden bowl, from the Paakantyi Language dictionary by Luise A. Hercus, AIATSIS publishing, Canberra, 2011.

*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #1* 2019  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP



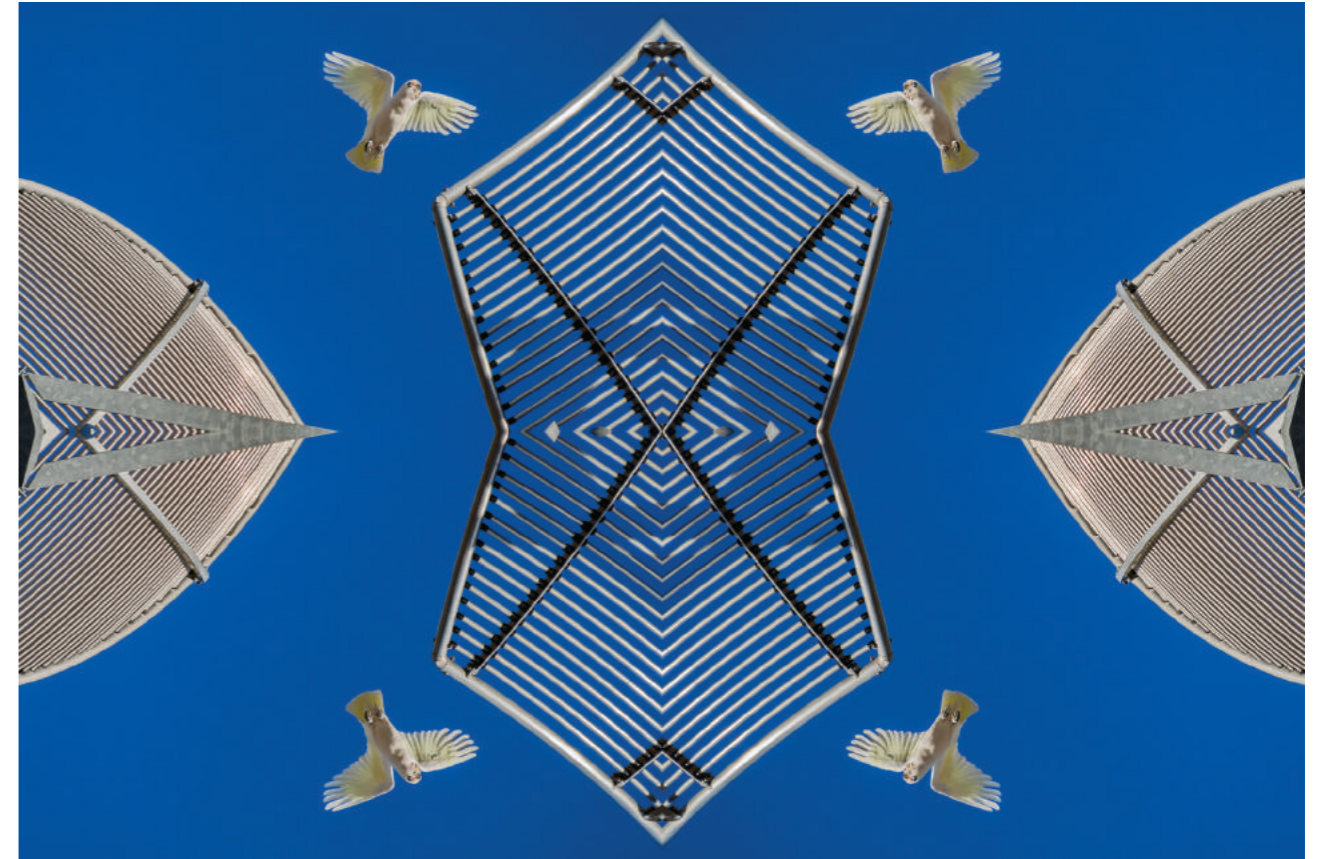


*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #2 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP

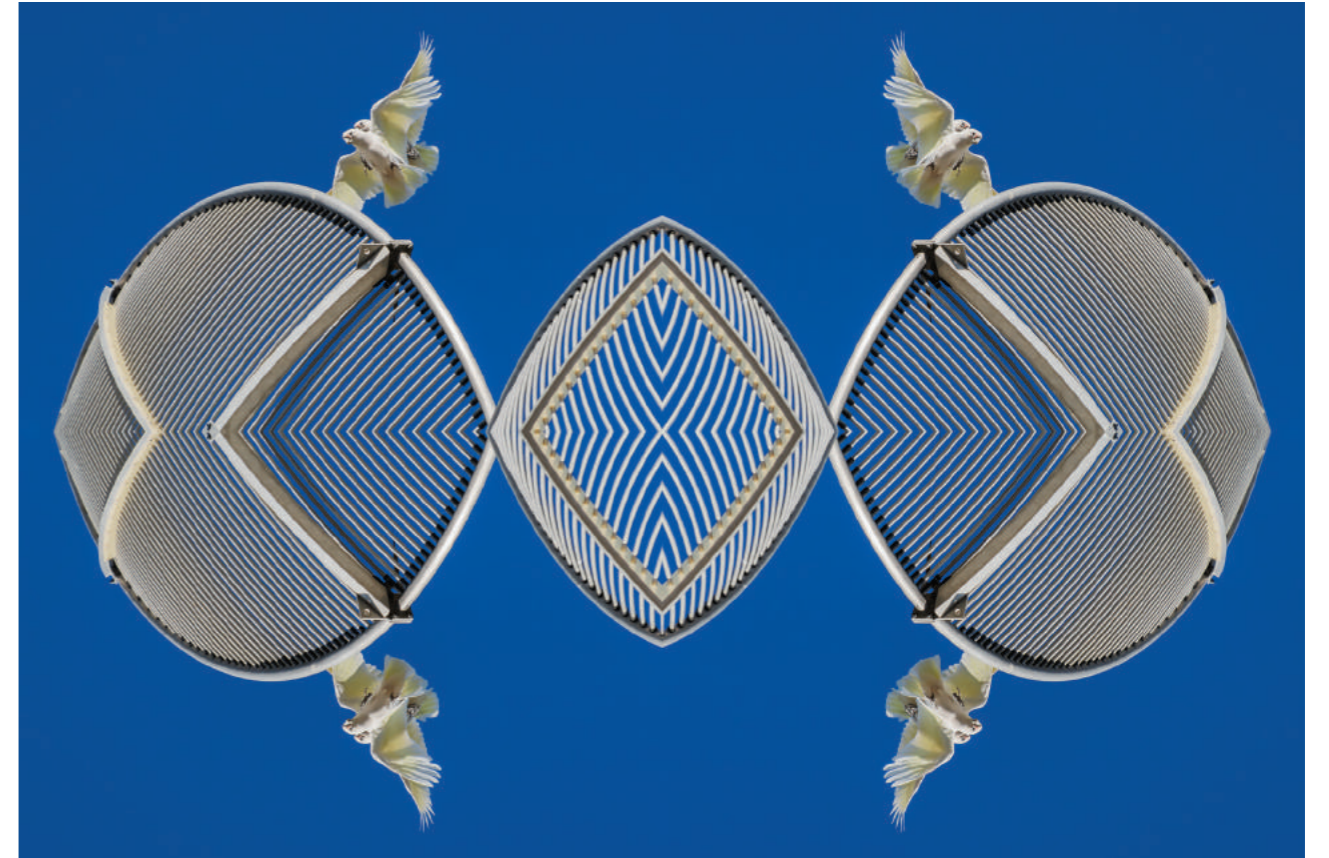
*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #3 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP



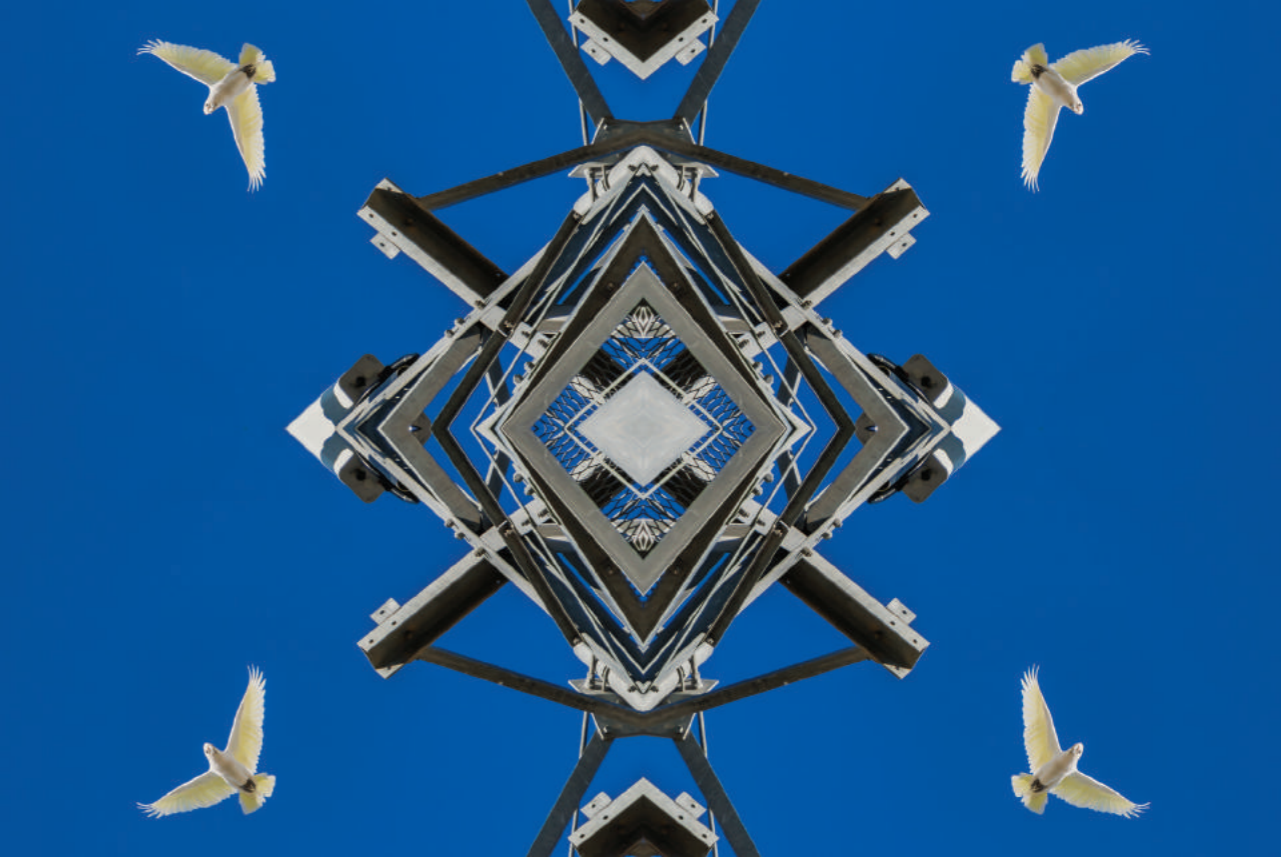
*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #4 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP



*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #5 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP

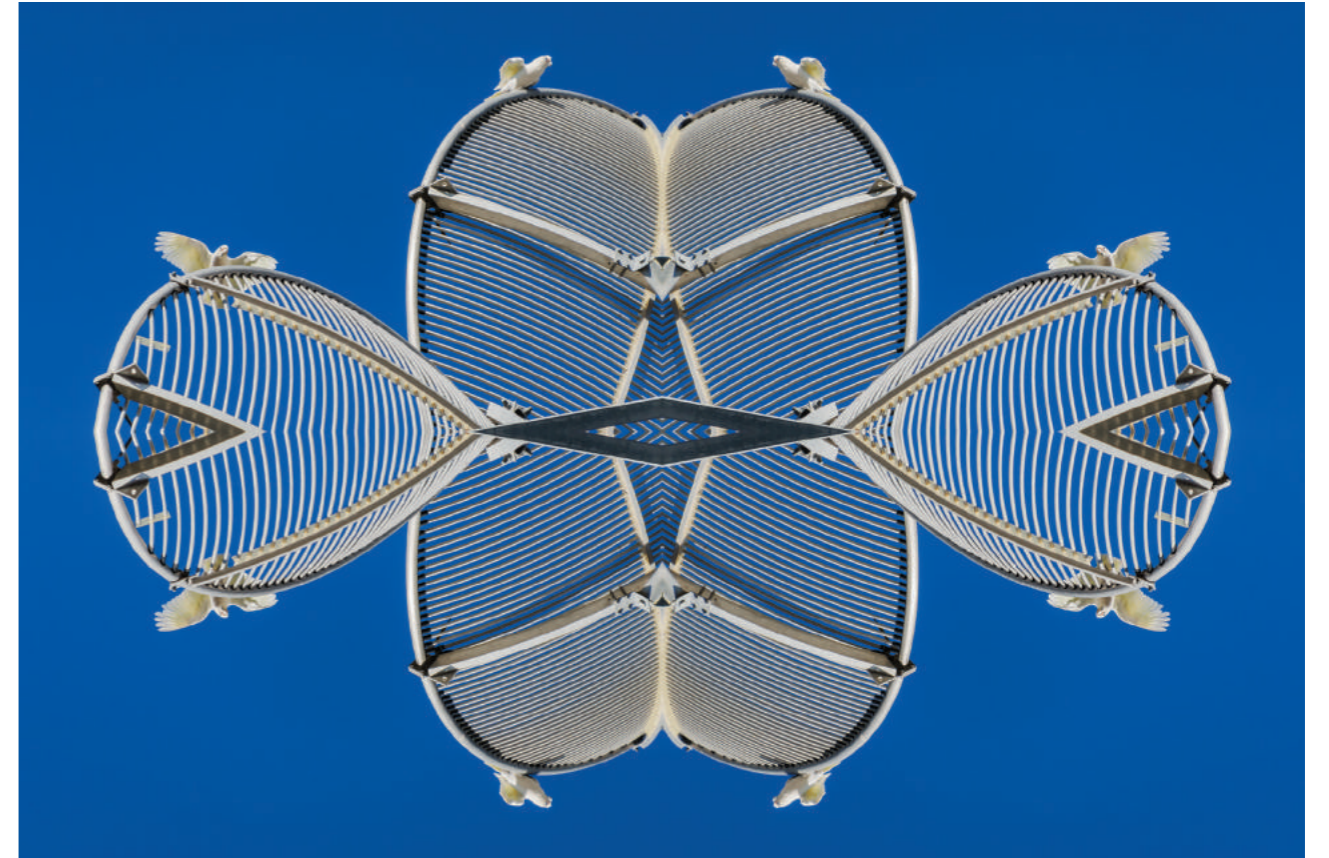




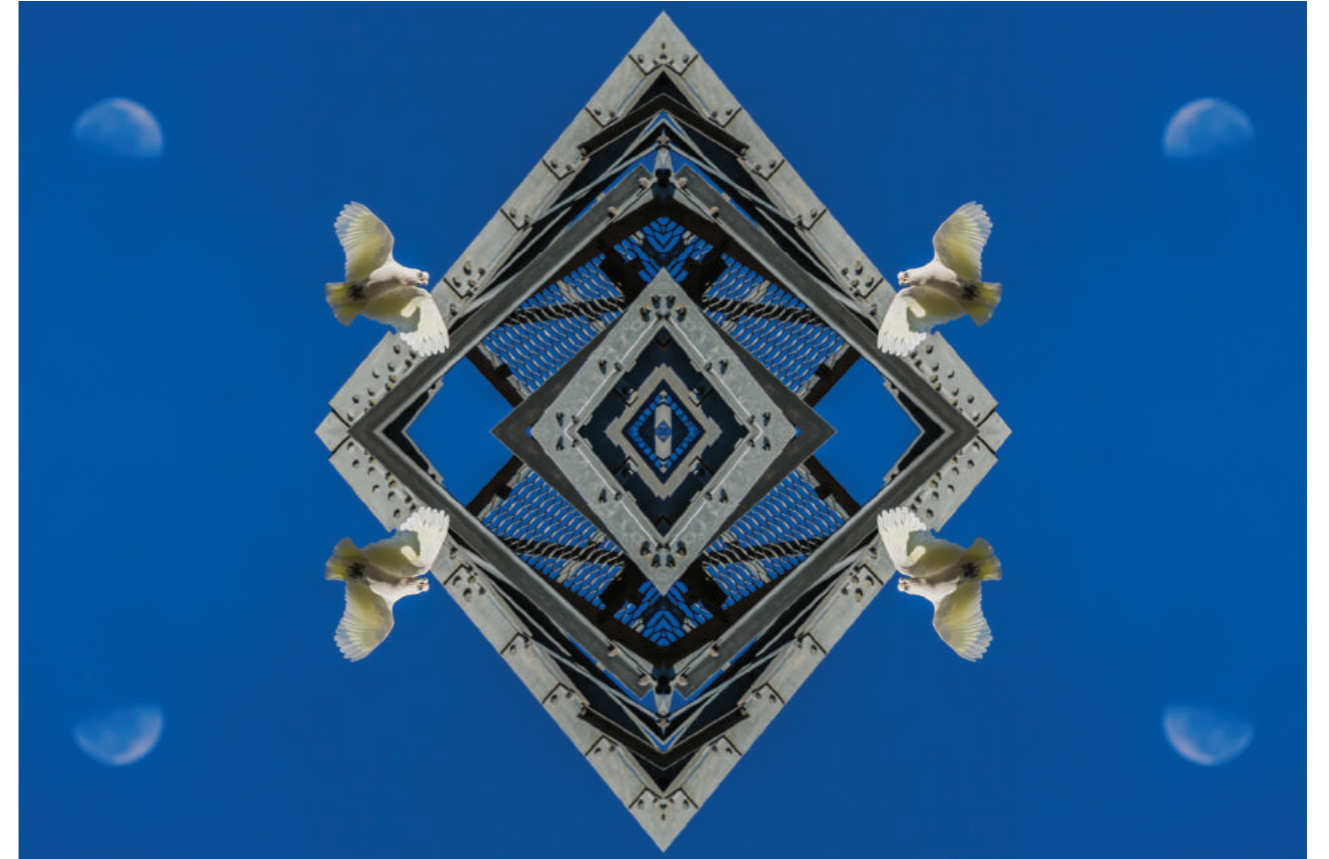


*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #6 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP

*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #7 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP



*Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #8 2019*  
giclee print on rag paper  
100 x 150 cm edition of 5 + 2AP  
80 x 120 cm edition of 8 + 2AP



## KENT MORRIS

Born 1964 Townsville QLD  
Lives Melbourne VIC  
Language group Barkindji

## EDUCATION

2013 Indigenous Arts Leadership Program,  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra ACT  
1985 - 1986  
Post Graduate Diploma Fine Art  
(Distinction), Victorian College of the Arts,  
Melbourne VIC  
1982 - 1984  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, Monash University,  
Melbourne VIC

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 *Barkindji Blue Sky*, Vivien Anderson Gallery,  
Melbourne VIC  
*Unvanished*, Horsham Regional Art Gallery,  
Horsham VIC  
*Unvanished*, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art  
Collection of the University of Virginia,  
Charlottesville VA USA  
2017 *Unvanished*, Vivien Anderson Gallery,  
Melbourne VIC

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019 *36th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres  
Strait Islander Art Award*, Museum and Art  
Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT

*Celebrating Culture: Contemporary  
Indigenous Art*, Glen Eira City Council  
Gallery, Melbourne VIC  
*Echo Chambers: Art and Endless Reflections*,  
Deakin University, Melbourne VIC  
2018 *35th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres  
Strait Islander Art Award*, Museum and Art  
Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
*Foundation*, Fairfield City Museum and  
Gallery, Sydney NSW  
*King and Wood Mallesons Contemporary  
ATSI Art Prize*, NSW Parliament House,  
Sydney NSW  
*Afterimage*, Deakin University Art Gallery,  
Melbourne VIC  
*Wyndham Art Prize*, Wyndham Art Gallery,  
Melbourne VIC  
*Tell*, Sydney Festival, UNSW Galleries,  
Sydney NSW  
2017 *Tarnanthi*, Art Gallery of South Australia,  
Adelaide SA  
*Bowness Photography Prize*, Monash Gallery  
of Art, Melbourne VIC  
*34th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres  
Strait Islander Art Award*, Museum and Art  
Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
*Tell*, Ballarat International Foto Biennale,  
Ballarat VIC  
*Sunshine Coast Art Prize*, Caloundra  
Regional Gallery, Caloundra QLD  
2016 *Sovereignty*, Australian Centre for  
Contemporary Art, Melbourne VIC  
*33rd Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres  
Strait Islander Art Award*, Museum and Art  
Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
*Reframed*, Incinerator Gallery, Melbourne  
VIC

*The Incinerator Art Award*, Incinerator  
Gallery, Melbourne VIC  
2015 *Darebin Art Prize*, Bundoora Homestead Art  
Centre, Melbourne VIC  
*The Incinerator Art Award*, Incinerator  
Gallery, Melbourne VIC  
*Victorian Indigenous Art Awards*, Art Gallery  
of Ballarat, Ballarat VIC

## RESIDENCIES

2019 Artist Residency at the Kluge-Ruhe  
Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of  
Virginia, Charlottesville VA USA

## COMMISSIONS

2019 University of Technology, Sydney NSW  
Australian Unity, Melbourne VIC  
Melbourne Art Trams, Melbourne VIC

## COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC  
Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra ACT  
University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Sydney NSW  
Hamilton Gallery, Hamilton VIC  
Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Horsham VIC  
Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne VIC  
City of St. Kilda, Melbourne VIC  
The Wesfarmers Collection  
Australian Unity, Melbourne VIC

Private collections in Australia and USA

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC  
Bullen, C. 2019 Catalogue *Unvanished*, Kluge Ruhe  
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Catalogue 2015, *Victorian Indigenous Art Awards  
2015*, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat VIC  
Catalogue 2016, *Telstra NATSIAA 33*, Museum and  
Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
Catalogue 2017, *Telstra NATSIAA 34*, Museum and  
Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
Catalogue 2018, *Telstra NATSIAA 35*, Museum and  
Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
Catalogue 2017, *Tarnanthi*, Art Gallery of South  
Australia, Adelaide SA  
Catalogue 2019, *Telstra NATSIAA 36*, Museum and  
Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin NT  
Catalogue 2016, *Sovereignty*, Australian Centre for  
Contemporary Art, Melbourne VIC  
Cox, W. 2016, 'Sovereignty: Always Was, Always  
Will Be', *Broadsheet*, 20 December 2016, Melbourne  
VIC  
Eugenia, F. 2017, 'Review: Sovereignty', *Art and  
Australia*, January 2017, Victorian College of the  
Arts, Melbourne VIC  
Moulton, K. 2017, Catalogue *Unvanished* Vivien  
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O'Hare, E. 2019, 'Birds of a feather: Barkindji artist  
Kent Morris looks to his past on Australian rooftops',  
*C-VILLE Weekly*, 17 March 2019, Charlottesville VA  
USA

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BARKINDJI BLUE SKY

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