



Kent Morris, *Barkindji Blue Sky - Ancestral Connections #1 2019*, giclee print on rag paper, 100 x 150 cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery.



BRIONY DOWNES

Kent Morris on looking through a First Nations lens

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In the exhibitions *Barkindji Blue Sky* and *Unvanished*, Melbourne based Barkindji man Kent Morris uses digital photography to illustrate how Indigenous culture adapts to change. Incorporating the fluid movements made by birds like the magpie, currawong and rosella, Morris blends elements of the natural world with angular forms taken from the built environment to create geometric patterns resembling the multi-faceted innards of a kaleidoscope. Briony Downes spoke to Morris about contemporary Indigenous culture and how art helps us to understand who we are.

Briony Downes: You came to know more about your Indigenous ancestry as an adult. Can you tell me what has changed for you since learning more about your background as a Barkindji man?

Kent Morris: Everything has changed. My life has meaning and purpose based on my culture, community and family. The pain of the past hasn't vanished, but it has been channelled in positive directions. I more fully understand my identity as a Barkindji man, my culture and the history of my family, community and ancestors. I feel part of the community and have a meaningful place within it.

BD: The art you create is deeply connected to your Indigenous heritage, and through the medium of photography you create images dominated by geometrical forms reminiscent of Indigenous artefacts. What draws you to this medium and these types of forms?

KM: Initially, it was the absence of Indigenous cultural representation in the built environment and the deliberate erasure of First Nations histories and stories that motivated me to create my artworks. I wanted to reveal how Aboriginal history and culture still persists in the contemporary Australian landscape, despite colonial interventions that have irreversibly altered the environment.

Through my work, I digitally reconstruct the angular shapes and structures of the built environment to reflect the patterns and forms of items specific to the First People of Australia: boomerangs, shields, clubs, containers, possum skin cloaks and handwoven objects. By reimagining the shapes of the built environment – the shapes colonisation brought with it – through a First Nations lens, I am able to reaffirm our enduring identity and connectivity to Country within the contemporary experience.



Kent Morris, *Barkindji Blue Sky – Ancestral Connections #4*, 2019, giclee print on rag paper, 100 x 150 cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP. Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery.

BD: Can you elaborate on what the shapes of colonisation are? For example, are they solely architectural shapes or can they also be the shapes carved into the landscape by agriculture?

KM: The shapes of colonisation are modern architectural forms and any deliberate changes made to the landscape and waterways. Currently I'm focused on the built environment. I'm trying to make visible what is not visible in an architectural structure – the history, memory and stories that remain significant to a place. I'm also in the development phase of a new series of photographs addressing manmade lakes and waterways.

BD: Like many of your earlier images, the photographs in *Barkindji Blue Sky* feature birds. The photographs were taken on a morning walk in Bourke, NSW while you were there for a family reunion on Country. Can you tell me why birds are important visual symbols in your work?

KM: The images in *Barkindji Blue Sky* are based on my observations of a flock of kiinki (corellas) as they flew around and perched on the antennas and dishes of a telecommunications tower. For me, the interaction between native birds and the built environment reflects the ongoing changes being made to ecological systems and nature. It also reflects an ability to adapt to a changing environment. Learning from the rhythm and habits of native birds in both natural and urban spaces, I see how birds have adapted to the built environment and to introduced technology like the telecommunication tower.

In their songs and flight patterns – which form an intrinsic part of Indigenous cultural knowledge and spirituality – and their interaction with the colonised landscape, I see the complexity of contemporary Indigenous experience and how our culture continues to survive and adapt.

BD: During the early part of this year you spent time in the US and your *Unvanished* exhibition was shown at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection in Virginia. While there, how did you engage with the collection and what was it like to experience Aboriginal art and culture so far from home?

KM: The response to my *Unvanished* series was extraordinary. American audiences engaged deeply with the exhibition and the concepts behind it. A collector who was particularly moved by my work and story acquired the entire exhibition.

Studying the Kluge-Ruhe Collection and seeing other collections and exhibitions of Indigenous Australian art and culture in the US opened my eyes to the importance and global relevance of many of the issues expressed in our historical and contemporary cultural activities. It highlighted the importance of sharing our stories and culture globally.

BD: Has this experience in the USA influenced the work in *Barkindji Blue Sky*?

KM: My *Barkindji Blue Sky* series was already completed before I left. The installation of the show has definitely been influenced though. Experiencing so many museum and gallery exhibitions in the US significantly shifted and inspired my creative and curatorial thought processes. My time in the US also reinforced that artists and galleries need to lead the way in expressing and promoting cultural and creative diversity.

BD: A central element of your work is the contemporary Indigenous experience and how it retains knowledge of the past while openly embracing the future. As a Barkindji man and artist working in 2019, what do you consider to be the most meaningful aspects of your practice?

KM: Acknowledging diversity is the key. There are continuous, aligned and common cultural and historical threads in my work and there are unique and very personal threads as well. I think it is important to tie them together to express and share honest stories and thought-provoking ideas with a First Nations perspective. It's crucial that our Indigenous experiences and knowledge systems are utilised now and into the future to reshape ways of thinking and seeing, to bring us closer together as a nation.

Barkindji Blue Sky

Kent Morris

Vivien Anderson Gallery

12 October - 9 November

Unvanishing

Kent Morris

Horsham Townhall

24 August - 10 November