

Birds of a feather: Barkindji artist Kent Morris looks to his past on Australian rooftops



Kent Morris' "Unvanishes" is at Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection through May 5. Photo by Tom Cogill

Arts



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Kent Morris stands in the lobby of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection with a big grin on his face. He's just in from a birding excursion through Charlottesville-area marshes, and swiping through photos on his phone: here's a few of a bald eagle, and a few of its nest. Here's one of a native bird perched in a budding tree, and one of Morris himself, standing in shin-deep water, his digital camera slung over his shoulder.

Morris, a Barkindji artist who lives and works in St. Kilda, an inner suburb of Melbourne, Australia, is in town for his photography exhibition "Unvanishes," on view at the [Kluge-Ruhe](#) through May 5. It's his first full exhibition outside of Australia, and after showing a few more photos, he slips his phone into his pocket and heads into the gallery room.

Standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by colorful, geometric, symmetrical images, he asks if I know what I'm looking at. I do not.

"Birds on roofs!" he exclaims, his laughter echoing out of the gallery.

When I see it, I almost feel silly for not noticing it before—it's right there.



Boon Wurrung (St Kilda) – Rainbow Lorikeet, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist

“I’m trying to make what’s unseen, seen,” says Morris. “Unvanishing” is a story of journey and travel, of connections to country. It is a story of survival via forced adaptation, he says, a story of people whose cultures and histories have been wiped from the physical landscape and survived in objects (such as the shields Morris’ images reference) and in people.

Many Aboriginal language, tribal, and nation groups have strong connections to birds—spiritual, ecological—and with “Unvanishing,” Morris adds one of shared experience. Like Aboriginal peoples, birds have been forced out of their habitats by Western culture and urbanization. They perch not on trees, but on roofs.

“We’ll start here,” says Morris, crossing the gallery to stand in front of “Barkindji (Bourke)-Magpie-lark,” an image of a black and white magpie-lark (or peewee) perched on a corrugated metal roof, a blue cable under its foot.

“This is shot on my country, on Barkindji country,” in what is now called Bourke, in the outback of northwestern New South Wales, says Morris.

The peewee is an important figure in the Barkindji creation story. Two traveling rainbow serpents knock the peewee out of his nest and chase him, and in their path leave two rivers, including the Darling River, the lifeblood of the Barkindji people.

While visiting family and walking Barkindji country, Morris spotted a peewee perched on the roof of the local bowling club, which has become a gathering place for Aboriginal peoples in the area. “It was a really classic moment, because, here is the creator, here now, on a contemporary place where we all gather and exchange stories and histories and meet to find each other,” he says.

Some of Morris’ paternal great great uncles and aunts were forcibly removed from their ancestral land by the government, placed on a truck and carted away; his father, like many other Aboriginal teenagers, was fostered by a white family. When Morris walks this land, he feels connected to it, and it pains him to see that there’s “really nothing to recognize” Aboriginal culture here.



Boon Wurrung (St Kilda) – Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist

What's more, Western farming practices are destroying the Darling River. People today are not living in sync with nature, but we should reflect, deeply, on our relationship to the land upon which we live, and aim to live in balance with it, says Morris, explaining his use of mirroring and symmetry.

"Culture and knowledge has been, in areas, really fragmented and displaced," he says, and his work aims to "piece it back together into something that is a whole."

In another image there's a blue-faced honeyeater on the roof of his sister's house in Hervey Bay, in Queensland, on the land of the Butchulla people. The 10th image is of a corella on a roof in Broken Hill, the town where Morris' father grew up. As Morris travels to maintain his ties to family, to country, he creates visible evidence to keep his culture strong.

Morris understands this duty as an artist, and as a Barkindji man. "You are part of something, he says. "You have responsibilities. Your ancestors are watching, your elders are watching."

To people who have not been removed from their land or forced to give up their culture, the story Morris' photography tells might seem remarkable. It is absolutely compelling, and Morris wants people to know it is not unique. It is imperative to acknowledge that this has been done not just to him and his family, he says, but to millions of people all over the world, including here in the Charlottesville area, where it happened to the people of the [Monacan Indian Nation](#).

It is also imperative to acknowledge that many of these identities, these cultures, have not vanished. They have adapted, and art can be an easy way of getting people to begin to understand this.

"There's a lot in these birds on roofs," says Morris, his hearty laughter reverberating through the gallery. "I'm telling ya!"

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