

# Unlocking creativity in prisons

Indigenous prisoners in Victoria are benefiting from an arts program

MATTHEW WESTWOOD



PRISON is a punishment and the path to rehabilitation can be hard. But the plight of indigenous offenders seems especially tough. It's well known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are vastly overrepresented in jail: the Australian Human Rights Commission says the incarceration rate of indigenous people is 14 times higher than that of the general population; and 77 per cent of indigenous prisoners have been in jail before.

In Victorian prisons, a program called the Torch is helping prepare indigenous prisoners for life on the outside, through art.

For the past four years, Kent Morris, a curator and statewide indigenous arts officer for the Torch, has been visiting prisons and encouraging indigenous inmates to paint. The artmaking is more than a diversionary pastime behind bars. Morris prepares for each prisoner a cultural kit, with pictures and information about their language group, totems and country. He believes that by connecting people with their roots, genuine reform and behavioural change is possible.

On a recent morning I met Morris and former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett at a show of the inmates' work at St Kilda Town Hall in Melbourne. The exhibition, called *Confined 6*, is filled with paintings and sculpture:

about 100 works by 80 men and women, prisoners and former inmates. There are many brightly hued pictures, dot paintings and animal motifs, and among them some knockout paintings of commercial quality. But few of the artworks are available for sale because prisoners are permitted to earn an income from only a limited range of approved activities.

Next to one of the paintings was a lonely red dot, indicating a sale. Kennett had bought Michael Morgan's large, intricately worked canvas featuring land and water creatures — but was able to do so only because Morgan is out of jail.

At the exhibition opening, Victoria's Labor government boosted funding for the program to \$758,000 across three years. Kennett is also talking to Premier Daniel Andrews and Corrections Minister Wade Noonan about changing the laws that prohibit prisoners from making an income from their artwork. If the proceeds were kept in trust or paid to their families, it's reasoned, the prisoners would have an incentive to continue working and possibly see artmaking as a viable career when released.

"The idea is to change the regulations to enable these people — who are not incarcerated because they committed a crime in the art world — to be able to use art to rehabilitate," Kennett says. "It's the best rehabilitation program because it's themselves using their incentive and skill, to give them a reason to not reoffend."

No less encouraging is the boost to prisoners' self-esteem from their creative exercise.



AARON FRANCIS

Curator Kent Morris, statewide indigenous arts officer for the Torch Project, at the *Confined 6* exhibition

On his first day in the job in 2011, Morris met a prisoner called Ricky at Hopkins Correctional Centre at Ararat. Ricky had already been putting brush to canvas, and proudly showed Morris some of his paintings: they were desert landscapes, lonely and desolate. Ricky's people are Yorta Yorta from the river and forest regions of Victoria, and Morris tried to guide him away from the desert and towards the land of his forebears, but Ricky wasn't having it. The next day, a senior prison officer rang Morris asking what had made Ricky so upset.

A few weeks later, Ricky showed Morris a painting that combined a self-portrait with a broad-shelled river turtle: a totem of the Yorta Yorta. In the picture were two smaller turtles that represented Ricky's daughters. "He wanted to reconnect with his daughters, which he went off to do," Morris says.

Morris visits 12 jails across the state, including the maximum security Port Phillip Prison and the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre for women. In the four years since he started with the program, he has found that prisoners are more motivated to work and can see a future for themselves on the outside.

In many cases, prisoners have to change their behaviour and their rehabilitation may involve programs to deal with violence and drug and alcohol addictions. Morris's work is complementary, connecting indigenous inmates with a lifeline beyond the prison walls. He says the artist-prisoners in the program are craving a cultural connection.

Morris had his own journey of cultural discovery. He grew up in Melbourne knowing only his mother's side of the family. His father's family wasn't spoken about, until one Christmas, when Kent was 11, the family stopped at a

house in Dubbo that was full of Aboriginal people. His nan gave him a hug he has never forgotten, "this one hug from a big Aboriginal woman who was my grandmother". Nobody spoke on the long drive back to Melbourne.

It took years for Morris to reconnect with his indigenous heritage. In his youth he had some brushes with the law, but he also had art and music as a way to express himself.

He studied fine arts, then worked as a curator at the McClelland Sculpture Park & Gallery and at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne.

A few years ago he was visiting Bourke and noticed an ad in the *Koorie Mail* for the indigenous arts in prisons and community program. The job was initially to design and roll out a pilot program, but Morris saw its potential and put his heart into it. He has been running it more or less single-

handedly, and has battled to keep it going when funding and support were uncertain.

The new state government money, a 60 per cent increase, will give the Torch program security and allow Morris to hire an extra pair of hands. Kennett says he wants to build an endowment for the program and maybe expand it to other states.

An evaluation in 2011-12 found that the program may improve recidivism rates by 53 per cent. This suggests that making art is so life-affirming that it can motivate people to change their ways.

"My hope is that these artworks, and the behavioural changes, will go back to the family home," Morris says. "When that painting goes on the wall at home, it creates a sense of pride that filters through the family."

*Confined 6* is at the St Kilda Town Hall until February 18.