

# Interviews with First Nations people living on Jarra Country



KAD '17

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The interviews in this publication were conducted by Melinda Harper, Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Castlemaine Health, between 2019-21.

The views, thoughts and opinions expressed belong to the interviewees and do not represent the opinions, beliefs or views of Castlemaine Health.

Cover artwork:  
Auntie Kerri Douglas



Artist: Kerri Douglas

*Our services are delivered on the traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people.*

# Introduction

**Reconciliation Australia's theme for National Reconciliation Week 2021 is More than just a word. Reconciliation takes action.**

It urges the reconciliation movement towards a braver and more impactful action.

Reconciliation is a journey for all Australians, and everyone has a role to play in building relationships and communities that value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures and futures.

Castlemaine Health acknowledges the Dja Dja Wurrung as the traditional owners of the lands on which we deliver our services, Jarra Country.

We acknowledge the spiritual, physical and cultural connection First Nations people have with their country, the land now known as Victoria.

We formally recognise this connection and strive always to demonstrate an awareness of and respect for First Nations cultural heritage in all we do.

Through our behaviours and actions, we work to promote mutual respect and understanding between First Nations people and Castlemaine Health.



*Aunty Julie McHale, a Palawa woman (Tasmanian Aboriginal) from the Trawlwoolway People, was born in Castlemaine and has lived her whole life (63 years) on Jaara Jaara Country. Aunty Julie was a primary school teacher for 40 years and has worked in the Castlemaine community for over 30 years as an educator, teacher*

*and learner. Her teaching work has extended to an enormous range of roles, from primary schools, kindergartens, secondary schools, TAFE, prisons, LaTrobe University (Aboriginal Support Unit), running professional development activities for teachers in a range of schools and at Castlemaine Health, and*

*running Bush Tucker courses at Castlemaine Community House. She is the co-ordinator and leading teacher at The Meeting Place which is held fortnightly. She has a passion for Bush Foods and Plants, and this has extended to growing. Her garden is looking amazing.*

***I included learner because you are a great reader and you are constantly engaging in learning and researching. Your perspective is not one of the “expert” which I find interesting. Do you see yourself as a learner and why is that important?***

I know the term “life-long” learner is bandied around but I do believe this is true. I love learning through reading because reading gives you time to analyse what you have read and relating these understandings to your experience in life. I love learning also, from other people especially older people in our community. I can be quite obsessive and often spend ages on the internet, reading books and speaking to other people about a particular current interest. Since “retiring” from teaching I have become

particularly interested in indigenous and native plants especially with regards to food and medicinal plants. What a lot to learn!!! I don’t believe I am an “expert” because I still have lots to learn about plants and other areas of interest. I don’t believe anyone can truly be an expert, they can have lots of knowledge but there is always something else to learn. I like the true definition of the scientific process where a hypothesis can be tested and supported but never proven, just supported.

***What is the best thing about living in this Country (Jaara Jaara Country), what is your favorite place?***

Although my Aboriginal heritage is Tasmanian and I have visited my Mob’s area and spent time with my Elders I see Central Victoria as my home, the place I belong. This area is special because there are still many places which are unspoiled and give you an insight into nature. I have always been an outdoor person and had the luxury of having a bush block near where I grew up. I remember rambling through the bush and sitting and

looking and listening since I was very small. Mum tells me I was the worry of her life because even as a toddler I was always wandering off or hiding in the bushes and she couldn't find me. She tells a story of when I was about 2 years old my grandfather (I grew up living with my grandparents) built a high gate to block off the porch at the back of the house to stop me from wandering, and he came out one morning and I had climbed to the top of the gate. He asked me what I was doing and I told him I was fixing the gate so "Julie couldn't get out".

My grandfather ran the "Koala Park" on Leanganook ( Mt Alexander) as a volunteer and we spent a lot of time up there. I love this mountain. I have spent hours and hours up there. I love the granite and the bracken, the wallabies and the koalas (who are no longer there), the orchids and the daisies, the Manna gums and the wattles, the views and secret places, the smells and the tastes (especially the new bracken fronds) and the feeling of being protected and nurtured when I'm there. It has taught me much,

punished me, made me laugh and made me cry. On the Mount there is a special outcrop of granite with a flat surface where I love to sit. This would be my favorite place in the World. I never take anyone else there because I want it to be MY special place. When I go there I consciously separate each of my senses. I try to block out the other senses and focus on each for a period of time. It's like I'm meditating or something. I let thoughts come and go.

***Auntie Julie you were working on a fantastic writing project for Reconciliation Week with some members of Nalderun, unfortunately this was postponed due to COVID-19. The theme for Reconciliation Week for 2020 is In This Together, what does this mean to you Auntie Julie? And do you think we can hope to see the writing project in 2021?***

Wow, In This Together has become a theme for the World at the moment, it is almost like a portent. In terms of COVID-19, I have been conscious of the fear and sorrow around this pandemic and relate this to the fear and sorrow of the Dja Dja Wurrung

people when smallpox came to this area through trade routes, long before the arrival of the other people. Two thirds of the population were wiped out and these people had no knowledge of what was happening. How horrifying this must have been.

In terms of the Reconciliation Week theme it, to me, means that Reconciliation is something we have to work together (Aboriginal and other Australians) to acknowledge the past, the good and the bad, and use this to decide how we can truly make Australia a country where all peoples are treated respectfully. I know this is unlikely to happen but I believe we can become better. I want to see the gap closed, not by some random percentage but 100%. Once again, maybe not realistic but better to be the aim rather than 85% or even 95%. For this to happen both black and white needs to look closely at their attitudes to each other.

Yes, it was very sad that the Writing For Reconciliation Project wasn't able to continue. I still plan to visit each of the schools I already worked with and talk to

the children about what they did. I have purchased lots of little rewards for children and our little working group will decide whether to give these out this year or keep them until next year. I certainly hope we can do the writing project next year. The children I spoke to at the schools were very motivated and some have done writings already. There was also a fantastic response from adults so I believe that can be encouraged to do the Project next year. The Judges we had approached were also very much on board and excited about the Project, I'm sure they'll still be enthusiastic about next year. I'm not sure whether the theme will carry over to next year or whether the Council For Reconciliation will come up with a new theme. I think that we will still accept writings done this year even if there is new theme.

***And I have to ask what have you been reading in this lockdown period?***

I love crime fiction to read for pleasure. I usually read for about 2 hours before I go to sleep. I particularly enjoy Australian crime and historical crime fiction. I have



just finished reading *The Dry* by Jane Harper which you lent me and thoroughly enjoyed it. I am currently reading *The Corset* by Laura Purcell which is challenging but written in way I am intrigued with. I have also read several from the Phryne Fisher mystery series and I love the ones set locally. I must say I have also read several of the James Herriot books as I love the descriptions of the Yorkshire Dales and the characters the vet meets in his travels. I enjoyed *The Iscariot Sanction* by Mark Latham and *Newes From The Dead* by Mary Hooper which is written in a similar way to *The Corset* in that the plot moves between two or more characters written in the first person. *Newes From The Dead* is supposed to be based on a true story of Anne Green but don't try to tell my mother that, she says she's never heard "such nonsense" in her life.

I am also researching the plants I want us to plant in the area to educate people about their uses. I have been looking closely at the Bunya as the pines at Harcourt have had a bumper crop this year. I have been reading *The Great*

*Bunya Gathering* by Dr. Ray Kerkhove which contains a number of quotes from Aboriginal people about the Bunya. I am also fascinated by the Fibonacci aspect of the cones and many of the plants I work with. I have also been reading *The Case of Eldrimmer* prepared by Darg Hartman from Ostersund who you and I met as part of the UNESCO Creative Cities project.

For these reasons I have enjoyed the lockdown period.

***What are you most passionate about at the moment in terms of the project you are working on, or hope to work on?***

I love working with Murnong Mummas and am excited about the potential of the Grant we have applied for to grow Bush Tucker at Harcourt. Although time consuming (and mind consuming) preparing the Grant application has re-inspired me. I love the idea of helping our young people start microbusinesses in this area and am looking forward to preparing produce for sale at the Farmers' Markets and other places. I am enjoying experimenting with the foods I



have harvested from my plants mixing curries, rubs and dukkha. On the fine days I am in my garden, tidying up, weeding, potting and repotting, preparing cuttings and germinating seeds. I love being outside but am not keen

on freezing cold mornings. I simply don't understand it when people say they are bored, I don't have time to be bored!!!

### **Balabalaa**

Arkeria Rose Armstrong

Acrylic on linen

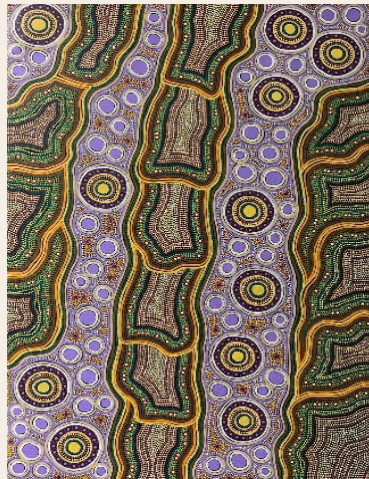
On display at Castlemaine Health

### **Story**

Balabalaa means 'butterfly'. It is the name given to my daughter by my mother. The butterfly 'balabalaa' would often wonder about the high mountains so that she could see along way away which were covered in white. Her husband told her not to leave their home.

But one day she went to have a quick look at the white on the mountain.

When she arrived she could see the mountains covered in white. As she reached the high mountains snow began to fall. She fell to the ground and the snow covered her. She didn't die, but lay quiet and went to sleep while the snow fell and buried her. She lay under the snow until spring came. As the snow melted away so did her beautiful colours. The colours just disappeared, melting into the snow. As the snows melted down the mountains and across the plains the colours ran with them to disappear into the ground near the lakes and ridges. This is how the opal came to be.





## Auntie Kerri Douglas

*Aunty Kerri Douglas is an Aboriginal woman, Elder, and a Traditional Owner identifying as Dja Dja Wurrung and Bangerang descent. Aunty Kerri has been a teacher and currently works for the Education Department, as a KESO worker (Koorie Engagement Support Officer).*

*She is on the board of the Dja Dja Wurrung, a member of the Local Aboriginal and Education Consultative Group (LAECG) and Central Goldfields NAIDOC*

*Committee. Aunty Kerri is also an artist exploring weaving and painting, interwinding cultural motifs with personal stories and regularly exhibits her work in Bendigo and Castlemaine.*

*‘Always Was, Always Will Be’ is the theme for NAIDOC Week this year. The theme recognizes the First Nations people have occupied and cared for this country for over 65,000 years. It invites all Australians to embrace and acknowledge the true history*

*of this country a history which dates back thousands of years.*

***What does the theme for NAIDOC mean to you personally?***

With the theme being Always Was, Always Will Be shows that whilst past Governments have put many policies in place to remove Aboriginal people from Country, to try to remove Aboriginal history from Australia, to try to wipe out our people, that we are still here – thriving and striving. Our connection to this country is strong and no matter where you are in Australia this country has always belonged and will always belong to Aboriginal people.

***Can you describe the importance of country to Aboriginal people?***

It is more than where we live. It is about a synergistic relationship. We care for the land and the land cares for us. It is a spirituality and connection that is hard to explain. It surpasses our physical presence. It's our Past, Present and future.

***I often hear the term Upside Down Country to describe this area, I am interested in asking you where this term comes from and what does it mean?***

Upside Down country means that everything that was beautiful about our country was turned upside down in the pursuit of gold.

Gold had no value to Aboriginal people due to it being a soft metal. Much of the Country that we had cared for was overturned to get the gold under the surface. Also, with the import of certain animals the hooves compacted the earth.

When we walk in the bush, we see the effects that this has had – mullock heaps, loss of murnong growing, many of our plants for food, medicine and fibre no longer available or growing freely.

Some of our plant species are still under the ground but have not had the cultural care to germinate. Studies have shown that since colonization about 150 species of plants are no longer around.

***I do want to ask you about your role as a KESO worker, as many people don't know about these important positions that are throughout schools in Victoria. What is the role? And do you see improvements in outcomes for***

***Aboriginal families and young people?***

Koorie Engagement Support Officer or KESO for short are Aboriginal people employed through the Department of Education and Training to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children to achieve better outcomes and for schools and Early Years services to embed Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.

There have been some great achievements over the years since KESO's have been employed. Some of these are:

- more than double the number of Aboriginal children completing Year 12 and continuing onto University
- more children enrolled in Kindergarten to start their education journey
- better results in NAPLAN testing.

***I noticed the new history board in Campbells Creek park, which you advised on with the Campbells Creek History and Heritage Group. It is beautifully illustrated also with your art work. The***

***inclusion of Aboriginal history, photographs and information in public places are visual signs that are extremely important to our towns and cities. They are not only an acknowledgement of the presence of Aboriginal people and culture but importantly that Aboriginal culture is a living culture.***

***What was it like for you personally growing up in this area? And now being asked to work on these projects, that are significant to changing the community's perceptions of history ?***

As a child growing up the racism I faced was horrible. I still cop it at times, but with growing up comes ways of dealing with it. It still hurts but you learn to cope. I didn't grow up in Mount Alexander but not far away. We moved to the area around 25 years ago. When we moved to the area there was a sense of coming home. It is hard to explain but it was like I belonged!

I was extremely honoured when I was asked to share some of my and my family's connections to Campbells Creek for the history

board. I am so happy to see the outcome. My family used to have a market garden in the area taking the produce to Bendigo for selling. Whilst I wasn't born here I have raised my family here and it is Home!

History is interesting as it is usually written from a dominant point of view, normally an English perspective. So to be able to share some of my history was a great chance to show that there are still Aboriginal people in the area and that they are still connected to Country, even if I don't fit the stereotype of what people think Aboriginal people should be. It's about recognising the past, admitting the wrongs, and to move forward together in Reconciliation.

***Where is your favorite place to walk on this country that you are willing to share with us?***

I live in Campbells Creek right on the edge of the bush. At times I just wander, following Kangaroo tracks and not a specific path. I don't literally get lost but feels like I do. I just stop and listen, sometimes speaking to the ancestors, especially at tough

times. It is amazing what I find up there! I do go and visit the mountains in the area sometimes but tend to stick to my own backyard. I have Bunjil (Wedge-Tail Eagle, Creator) who flies over my house regularly. I usually see him or her when I have questions to be answered, to guide me in the right direction or to settle me when I am scattered in thoughts or emotions. I don't know if I'd be the same if anywhere else.



## Jacinta Douglas

*Jacinta Douglas is a young Dja Dja Wurrung woman living in Castlemaine. Last year Jacinta completed VCE with the ambition of getting into the University of Melbourne to study Criminology and Psychology. And*

*congratulations Jacinta you did it! With Reconciliation Week coming up and events being cancelled, I thought we could share what we are doing in different ways.*

***So I am interested Jacinta, why Criminology/Psychology?***

During VCE I studied psychology and fell in love with the field, discovering that it aligned with my passion for understanding and being able to help people. I decided to combine this with my interest in understanding crime, which more specifically has recently been geared towards the inequitable experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the current criminal justice system. I am a firm believer of needing to become knowledgeable in a given field in order to critically engage with it and seek change in it.

***What are you most interested in as a career path with this area of study?***

At this stage I'm not sure what exactly career I will have, but I intend to work in a field in which I can continue to learn about people from varying walks of life every day. Currently I think that criminal profiling or working in rehabilitation for young offenders is where I want to work, although eventually I would like to be involved in policy change that would decolonize the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are treated within

the judiciary system.

***You were involved in the last two years in Nyarn-gakgo Mankie, a First Nations young women's network that is a program of Weenthunga Health Network. Can you tell me a little about that and was that helpful?***

The Weenthunga Health Network programs were an incredible opportunity for me to get to know other like-minded Aboriginal women my age, which really provided me with a community of people I felt welcome in and supported by through my final years of high school and entering into higher education. Their health days gave me an opportunity to listen to amazing guest speakers that were successful Aboriginal women who had entered health-related careers, and although my interests are no longer particularly within the health field, it was incredible to hear of people like me being able to achieve their dreams through hard work and inspired me to do the same.

***I suppose an obvious question is how is the COVID-19 virus affecting your study and how do***



***you think we as a country will change from this?***

All of my university classes have moved online for the semester, which although I can cope with, has taken away the opportunity for me to experience interacting with a new community of people on campus like I have for so long dreamed of doing.

Nowadays I often see in the media peoples' hopes for things to eventually "go back to how they were" as soon as possible, but in my opinion it is much more crucial for every individual to take responsibility for the health of our population and correctly social distance/isolate for as long as possible than to risk the lives of others for selfish purposes. In the future, I hope that not only the government but the general public will have a newfound respect for our essential workers, from those in healthcare to supermarket or cleaning services, who before the COVID-19 crisis were often considered lesser in society and yet did incredible

things daily before the pandemic and media attention, and will continue to do incredible things to keep society functioning when these circumstances fade away.

***This year's theme for Reconciliation is In this Together, which seems very relevant at the moment, what does this mean to you?***

"In this Together" for me holds many layers as a phrase. I think that it not only shows the connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with each other and the land in which we live on, it highlights the importance of the need for all Australians, despite any cultural or political differences, to support and respect each other in such turbulent times. This theme for Reconciliation fits perfectly with my hopes for a time when the world will genuinely be a better place in which people can respect each other and help each other as a community should, after all we are all living in the same beautiful country.



Ira Barker

*Ira is a Gunditjmara person living on Jarra country. Ira works with Murnong Mammis catering service based in Castlemaine and at Gung Hoe growers in Harcourt. Ira also works on Bush Tucker projects in schools and a bush tucker sculpture project for the Castlemaine State Festival in partnership with The Village Festival.*

*Ira is also on the First Nations Maternity Group at Castlemaine Health, so we thought it would be*

*a great opportunity to have a chat about Reconciliation and what Ira is presently working on.*

***Truth telling and reflection is central to the Reconciliation process, this year's theme, More than just a word, seems to me to be asking Australians to reflect and engage in a more meaningful way. And to take action.***

***What do you think?***

I think the theme this year is an incredibly important one when it

comes to genuine work toward reconciliation. First Nations visibility is higher than ever, acknowledgement is much more prevalent today but important issues that the Indigenous community continue to face are still being ignored or go unsolved. We see more Acknowledgments of Country at events and gatherings big and small but often we are only hearing the same words again and again. It is rare to see somebody truly acknowledging the custodianship and ownership of this land in a meaningful way, to acknowledge the spirit of the custodians rather than just their names; and when we do it is often First Nations people that are doing so. Acknowledgement and visibility are important first steps to reconciliation but it is imperative that people take action in a meaningful way rather than rituals that become performative and tokenistic.

***What is an important issue and change you would like to see for you as a young Aboriginal person looking towards the future?***

As a Queer person the support and celebration of our Rainbow Mob has been an incredibly re-

warding thing to see in our community. Intersectionality is an imperative part of reconciliation and having every Australian recognise that our Indigenous community is diverse in and of itself is integral. Inclusion and celebration of LGBTQIA+ members amongst the First Nations people community and of First Nations people in the LGBTQIA+ community continues to grow and needs to keep its momentum going. Black members of the Queer community were necessary to our history and vice versa. I have great faith that the coming generations will champion the importance of intersectionality and make the changes that need to be made.

***You have been working with Gung Hoe Growers in Harcourt over the last 12 months, transforming one of the plots into bush foods. Can you tell me a bit about this project, and the importance of community and working locally for you?***

I was introduced to Mel and Sass of Gung Hoe Growers through my work with Murnong Mamas and thankfully the farm was one of the things that kept me sane during lockdown. I've had the oppor-

tunity to learn and grow as a person whilst working with these incredible people and it has emphasised how important community truly is. I've made lifelong friendships at Gung Hoe and it's been a nurturing experience and continues to teach me how important this community has become to my identity and wellbeing.

After many rewarding and meaningful conversations about Food Sovereignty and how Indigenous people and knowledge fit into this framework, it was decided that one of the plots at the Harcourt Organic Food Cooperative would become a plot for bush foods. Right now there is currently Warragul Greens, Salt Bush, Murnongs, Chocolate and Vanilla Lillies growing and we're just getting ready to pick up another lot of plants from the Goldfields Reveg nursery to be planted alongside them. Gabby Baxter and I have had the opportunity to learn from the experience of growing indigenous plants in this microclimate and get insight from Gung Hoe about what it takes to build and sustain a market garden, how to interact with consumers and buyers and how to connect with the community in

different ways. It's been a rewarding experience and a partnership that I hope continues on.

***As you have been working on a lot of projects over the last 18 months, all in very different settings from kitchen, farm, The Village Festival, schools, filming for the Castlemaine Festival, what would you like to focus on in the next few years?***

It's been a whirlwind of a time for me in this community and one I wouldn't trade for anything (including a healthy work/sleep schedule). I've had the opportunity to work with people of all kinds of backgrounds, experiences and values in all sorts of environments. I've been lucky enough to work and gain experience in fields that I am really passionate about like food, plants, education and film - and it's been an absolute pleasure. I'd love to explore more opportunities and expand my working knowledge of the film industry and cinematography in my own time, but the work I've been doing more of and really enjoying is facilitating workshops and classes in local schools. Cultural workshops in primary school had a big impact on me (not just

because my Dad taught them) and it's rewarding to see it from the other side. Instilling curiosity and pride in the younger generation is imperative to raising engaged people that are willing to push for the changes needed in Tomorrow's Australia.

### ***Who do you find inspiring?***

Lately I have been inspired by local makers and entrepreneurs that I have been lucky enough to work with or learn from like the Master Weaver Ilka White, Mel

and Sass at Gung Hoe, the gorgeous duo at People Pictures - Cath and Stewart. I recently had the opportunity to see Yorta Yorta woman Allara Briggs Pattison perform and her words and melodies are absolutely electrifying. Barkaa, the Barkindji rapper creates songs that can be simultaneously devastating and empowering and are great anthems. And of course I couldn't miss Auntie Julie whose guidance, warmth and encouragement has helped get me to where I am today.

#### **Yulay**

Arkeria Rose Armstrong  
Acrylic on linen  
On display at Castlemaine Health

#### **Story**

Yulay means 'Skin' which for me has always been a question that I find myself exploring. What does your skin mean to your identity and what is the expectation that society has when looking at it? When I think of my own identity my skin can be seen to be a question, an answer, an assumption, a judgement and my place. As Aboriginal people we are all different but together we connect as a community. This painting explores these ideas and feelings and looks closely at the idea of Aboriginality and what it means to me. It is not the colour of our skin that brings us together it is our connections to each other, country, ancestors and our history.



**Tirrintirri (Burdekin Ducks)**

Janice Murray (artist)

Sugar lift and aquatint, edition of 30

On display at Castlemaine Health

**Story**

The Burdekin Duck is a rich food source for the Tiwi people.

Janice Murray is renowned for her depictions of the vast array of birdlife that inhabit the Tiwi Islands.

While drawing on the plates for this image Janice was thinking of her son Claude, therefore the image of a mother and baby.



The original limited-edition print was made as a result of Janice being awarded the 2017 APW Collie Print Trust Fellowship. Janice was artist in residence in May 2017 and worked in collaboration with Senior Printers Martin King and Simone White at the Australian Print Workshop based in Melbourne to produce a major body of works.

## **Flying Fox and Bamboo at Muranapi**

Janice Murray (artist)

Lift ground and aquatint

printed from 1 plate

On display at Castlemaine Health

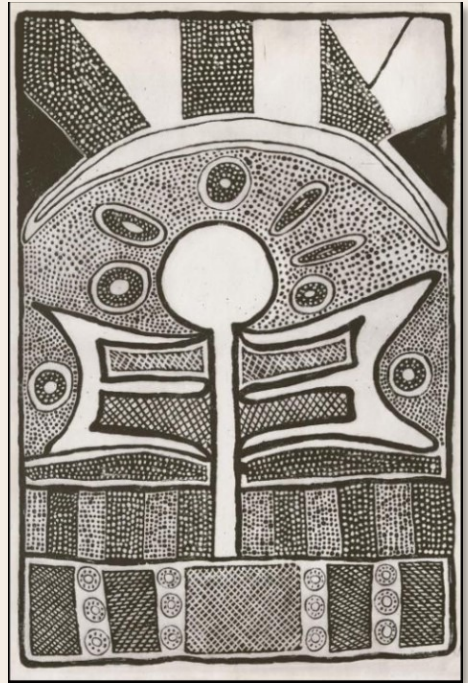
### **Story**

Flying Foxes like resting in the bamboo as they eat parts of the plant.

This particular work was based on an old bark painting of the same design that is in the Mumford Collection in South Australia.

In 2000, Pedro and Janice did a funded project where they were flown to Adelaide and had access to the collection of work that mostly comes from Milikapiti and was collected a 100 years ago by Charles Mumford.

They then produced a range of prints based on these old works, including this one. This print is based on an old bark painting showing a flying fox in bamboo at Murunapi.









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