



KARLA DICKENS

A proud Wiradjuri woman, Karla's powerful imagery is gaining increasing and much-deserved acclaim. She draws from her personal experience and her responses to some of the critical and crucial issues of our time, to produce works that are compelling and challenging. For *The Partnership Project* Karla has designed a small brave boat, one capable of sailing endless galaxies. With its hull painted by local artist Leigh Arnold, the work addresses the attempted world take-over of the British Empire. This work will extend Karla's concerns evident in earlier work such as *Unwelcome* – where she floats direct issues concerning the colonization of Australia's Aboriginal peoples. Karla is represented by Andrew Baker Galleries (www.andrew-baker.com).

I was born in Darlinghurst Sydney, growing up in a range of suburbs around the inner city – Beaconsfield, Waterloo, Mascot and we moved to the Eastern suburbs when I was about ten. My brother Grant is five years older than me. Dad was a wharfie and a truck driver and Mum was a factory worker. I was always close with my Grandparents who lived in Mascot. My Grandmother Myrtle was brought to Mascot when she was young - she lived in a humpy village where Mascot Airport now sits. There was large community of displaced people who'd been moved off their original lands and who'd come to the city for work and a range of reasons. Myrtle met my grandfather, a German immigrant and agreed to marry him if he bought her a house. He did, and they were married. Still in their teens, they remained together in that

same house he bought her in Mascot until they both died. My father moved out of that same house just last year as a result of Mascot's re-gentrification and motel explosion around the airport. My father was my grandparents' only child. My Grandfather worked in an iron foundry in Mascot 'til he was seventy-six. He and my grandmother lived a simple life, no phone or car and little contact with others as they maintained their insularity as a result of the trauma they'd suffered. My grandfather was a very tall man - about six feet four, and my grandmother was tiny. Daily they would walk together holding hands to the local shops, working in their garden and reading the race guide.

I'd spend time with my grandparents every school holidays and often during weekends. I'd help in the

garden and would help with cooking, and was always being told I was loved. They've had a huge influence on who I am – my grandfather would find stuff on the street and make things. Like him, I enjoy the tip – it's a great resource for my art and it's also my tie with him and my grandmother – the things I select even now are often things that were made and used from their time – they remind me of them – my nostalgia is based on those two people – Myrtle and Tommy.

I knew I was Aboriginal while I was growing up but nothing much was said. My grandmother was very cautious about identifying as Aboriginal – she warned me to stay out of the sun, to avoid going to the beach, and to tell people I was Italian. But there were plenty of other things going on at home and the issue of being Aboriginal was not the most pressing issue – it was simply more important to make sure there was food on the table and that we were all safe.

During my primary school years I went to Gardeners Road public school and loved it. I was class captain and house captain and school captain. I was hardworking and diligent until my teenage years. My favourite subjects – in order – were Geography, Maths and Art. I loved the geography teacher – he gave me a sense of the world outside of my own. I liked maths because I was good at it. I was always making things at home; my parents loved the way I'd keep myself entertained for hours. Cutting, pasting, reconstructing and building – all of which I found more enjoyable than the art classes at school. Things haven't changed much in that sense as I still love the same basic process of making and the solitude I find during those processes of creating.

Once I started moving towards my teen years, things changed in a big way. I became uncomfortable in my own space and moved towards a pattern of self-destruction that included drug abuse. At the end of that period – at the age of twenty-four - I ended up in a rehabilitation centre. When I exited from that facility, I enrolled in the National Art School. I had a family and dear friends who watched over and took care of me. They were involved in the arts and it was them who recognised the passion and talent I had. Either that or they might have taken the trouble to enrol me simply because I was driving them mad. At that point my obsession for self-destruction was transformed into an obsession with making art. One of my teachers, Roy Jackson, was a practicing artist who was also a Buddhist. He had an amazing way of talking his students through the process of making art – he would recognise the kind of emotional headspace they needed to keep going forward – to take risks and to push themselves. I did well at the Art School; I lived close by at Taylor Square in a share house above a shop across from Kinselas. Taylor Square was alive then – there were always people on the streets, there were

lots of artists and it was affordable. There were plenty of cheap food spots and Artist Run Initiatives in which to show your work. I exhibited in group shows in an ARI called the 'Tap Gallery'.

But by the time I'd finished my degree in 1993/4 I couldn't afford to live in the city and make art, so I moved to the Hunter Valley. I wanted to be in the bush – there were a lot of artists living in the area and I got a mortgage and a small house for forty dollars a week... Margaret Preston's brother had worked in a printing studio on the same mountain. There was no power, but there was an old cooker that I used morning, noon and night. I had a forty-four gallon tank outside that I'd light a fire under for showers and washing. There weren't many walls on the dwelling – it was rustic, but it enabled me to live a lifestyle in the bush that connected me with nature and with myself. That little dwelling was my way to move out of the city for the first time, and it enabled me to make art. I had a car some of the time, and when I didn't, I'd hitch into Cessnock and back for provisions and art materials. I was on a disability support pension that enabled me to keep this lifestyle going for seven years. I didn't have exhibitions during this time – I just lived and made art. I threw most of it away, but I did have some shows towards the end of the period with Elaine and Gordon Syron who had a gallery in Taylor Square called *Blackfellas Dreaming*.

The exhibition with Elaine and Gordon drew supportive responses and the show sold out. People enjoyed it. The show was called 'The Garden of Wings'. It was pretty naughty – full of vaginas with butterfly wings. It was about letting go of shame and being comfortable with my sexuality. There were two rooms of heavily collaged canvases. The sell-out left me feeling validated and inspired.

Apart from art I have had much needed work to do on myself – my mental health and recovery were the most important considerations for me, so I didn't really take my art seriously commercially until I had my daughter in 2005. She has just become a teenager.

Through the nineties I just made art for myself. I had a housing commission residence in Chippendale for a bit, but I wasn't interested in living in the city anymore and so in 2003 I moved to the Northern Rivers. I had close friends living in the area and it seems to be a safe and open part of the country to be a gay parent, artist and Aboriginal environmentalist. With beautiful bush and beaches nearby, it seemed to be a great fit. Elaine and Gordon Syron opened up a gallery called *Blackfellas Dreaming Art Gallery and Museum* in Bangalow where we showcased the work of Aboriginal artists – mainly contemporary urban-based Indigenous art. Elaine is a documentary photographer who'd been documenting urban Aboriginal life since the 1980s.



There was a house attached to the gallery that I initially lived in, before buying a small house in Bangalow. It was here that my daughter was born. I took a few years off making art to devote to child rearing and to setting up the home. When my daughter was a toddler I was offered a show at Lismore Regional Gallery by then-Director Steven Alderton. I had been prepared to let go of making art at that time, as it didn't seem financially practical, but when the offer for a solo show was offered to me, I decided to have one more crack before becoming an adult and getting a real job. That solo exhibition at the Lismore Regional Gallery in 2007, was called *Loving Memory*. It was about the grief of losing a child and a close friend. I worked in sculpture and fabric and collages – the fabric element of my collages were particularly successful. The response was positive and uplifting and the opportunities that came out of it again validated my role as an artist and reinforced the positive possibilities for me to make art and feed my daughter. From a financial point of view, I'd sold a few pieces, but the opportunities that came out of it, on a local as well as an interstate level, were the most important outcomes. Teaching, running workshops and inclusion in a number of group shows managed to keep me afloat, and demanded that I just keep on making art on a more-or-less daily basis.

I moved from Bangalow in 2007 to Goonellabah, an outer suburb that's close to the bush. I bought an old house with plenty of space to make art. I planted fruit trees and developing garden beds to feed both myself and daughter. Ever since I got off the streets and out of a cycle of drug abuse I've lived a frugal life where growing my own food has been helpful in a number of ways. My daughter Ginger who is now thirteen is very health-conscious and careful about what she eats, so the simple lifestyle we've taken up in order to survive has paid off in a number of positive ways.

I love the space to make work – I've got a roof – a safe space – and the foundation to be able to work away at buying a home gives me the sense of security I need. My work is therapy and often challenging and difficult, so the site of the home is very important to me. My daughter has been the major catalyst to continue with my work and to stay in one place. She is the source of my drive and inspiration.

Throughout my daughter's primary school years, I continued to make art and to support both of us. I've always been inspired by and aspired to the kind of life lived by grandparents – one that's honest and simple.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced?)

Growing up in Sydney I made a decision soon out of art

school that I was serious about following my passion in creating and making. At this time, I also realised that leaving the big smoke would be essential to live and work as an artist. Focusing on art seemed more important than the stress of funding city living. Regional NSW is affordable, beautiful and spacious.

What might make it difficult?

I'm at a great stage in my practice where regional living only helps my work, there is a healthy interest in my work and I receive exciting opportunities which involve short trips away. I'm inspired in my studio working and as long as the internet stays contacted and I can find my phone I'm a happy camper.

Where do the other challenges lie?

I don't get to see as much art as I would like to.

But are these challenges worthwhile?

Social media softens the blow - as a single mother with a strong working practice I probably wouldn't get to see as many exhibitions as I imagine I would anyway.

And what kind of benefits are there?

I have a great space to work in, that is more than (affordable) - I'm inspired by the easiness of everyday life, the beauty of the country I live on and fresh air.

Do you think your galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?

Yes I do, yet in saying that I also believe that the lack of art community is important to the artist in the area. Nothing like the inspiration of real life and concerns to inspire.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

Yes I did but I definitely did not expect it to work as well as it does for me.

How does it feel now?

It feels like a perfect fit, I'm inspired by the materials I have at my doorstep - (sourcing them in a city is near impossible) I make art, do housework - do a decent good parenting - rock a beautiful and yummy garden; all I need is here in the town of Goonellabah that next to nobody has ever heard of.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

If you have been bush or out of the city for a decent amount of time and head into town - city slickers are attracted to your energy - it has a freshness and rawness that isn't found in built up areas. Just as they are attracted to people's energy I believe they feel the energy in the art. I know with my art more and more holds the essence of the bush and rural Australia - whether that be in story, materials or both.



Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

Shit yeah.

Do you think it's important to 'get out' and come back in again?

When I think of getting out - I feel the need to leave Australia more than the area I live in. Australia's racist politics does wear me down - Staying away from social media also helps.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

I'm not really sure how important they are for other people; for myself I simply enjoy visiting other regions, meeting the people and explore the history and culture.

Do you think that where you work is still important?... or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc)?

When I first started making art I didn't have a computer, didn't have a smart phone, I had no idea how to send digital images. Now that times have changed it has made life as an artist living outside of major city very do-able.

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