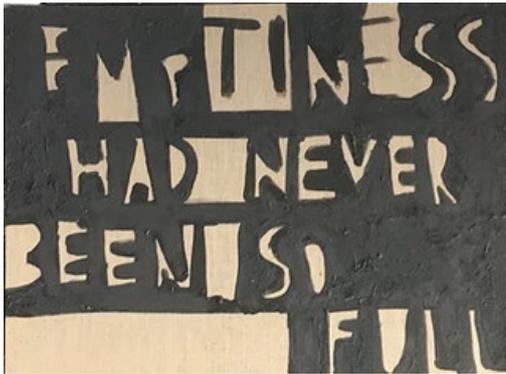


# SEEING CANBERRA

## Take a walk-through *Seeing Canberra* with an Indigenous lens

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Dean Cross, *T.N (it started here)*, 2016 synthetic polymer paint and powdered charcoal on linen

**'Emptiness had never been so full' is another way of saying terra nullius. This country wasn't empty, it was chockers full of people, it was totally full.**

**Dean Cross, 2018**

A small painting by Dean Cross sits above large landscapes by A.E. MacDonald and Theo Brooke Hansen depicting the just announced site of the new national capital. *T.N (it started here)* 2016, intends to respond to settler culture depictions of landscape as vast and empty; with the view that these perpetuated the mythology of the land as uninhabited, waiting to become productive. Cross' powerfully poetic statement 'Emptiness had never been so full' challenges the notion of *terra nullius* in asking the viewer to recognise that these landforms, these skies, this river all contained rich stories and evidence of long-term occupancy.

Canberra, as the nation's capital, was built on the untruth of Canberra being an uninhabited place through the exclusion of traditional custodians. Just a decade earlier ancestor Nellie Hamilton was proclaimed by the newspapers to be the 'last of her tribe', failing to acknowledge the descendants of Nellie and many other families with Indigenous ancestry in the region. This testimony has instilled a determination in descendants of the Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri ancestors to prove their cultural resilience and survival.



Ngunnawal ancestor, *Reed necklace*, 1862; string and Phragmites Australis reed.

**The late Wilfred Brook Forbes recalled from [stories] passed down to him that this necklace had been presented by the king of the local [group of Aboriginal people], who came to Ginninderra by darkness of night to deliver the necklace [as a wedding gift]...**

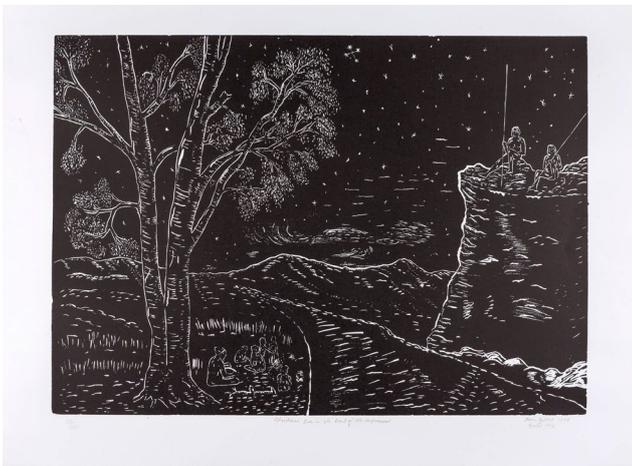
**Lyll L. Gillespie, 1984**

This *Reed Necklace* 1862 is an emblem of a relationship between local Ngunnawal ancestors and this pastoralist family.

The ancestor, thought to be Noolup (also known as Jemmy the Rover), gave this wedding present to Minna Close Palmer from Palmerville Estate (Ginninderra) in 1862.

Noolup was a leader of his people and bore witness to the arrival of pastoralists to his country in the 1820s. Over the subsequent decades, he brokered relationships with pastoralists that continued access to his traditional lands.

This intricate and treasured necklace has been passed down by the Palmer family for five generations. The necklace consists of about twelve large loops, most likely made from pieces of *Common Reed Phragmites Australis* threaded onto handmade string (also said to be made from the same reed species).



Kevin Gilbert, *Christmas Eve in the land of the dispossessed* 1968, edition printed 1992

***As a child, sitting, drawing in the ashes of the campfires with twigs and charcoal... I never even dreamt of being an artist. I was very much aware of... the injustice of having my land, Wiradjuri land, stolen from us, my people forced to live in refugee situations, on travelling stock reserves, forbidden to be in the white township after dark, the tens of decades of massacre, oppression, abuse of our human rights. In 1965, mature, I saw art, and writing as a way to communicate.***

**Kevin Gilbert, 1992 in *New Tracks, Old Land*.**

Canberra became a place of meaning for all Indigenous Australians when Aboriginal activists descended upon the lawns of Old Parliament House in 1972 and launched their own Tent Embassy. Many followed, journeying across the country to provide a united voice in their fight for Land Rights. Kevin Gilbert was one such activist and went on to make a home with his family in Ainslie, Canberra.

***Christmas Eve in the land of the dispossessed***, was originally carved as a lino print in 1968 when Gilbert participated in an art class at Sydney's Long Bay Jail. This work is now recognised as the first print made by an Indigenous artist. At first glance the image appears to be a peaceful work, echoing the nineteenth-century European romanticism of Aboriginal Australians in a natural setting. The title, however, is sharply ironic and reflects Gilbert's talent as a poet as well as an artist.

Gilbert became a prominent figure and activist in the Canberra Aboriginal community, playing a significant role in re-establishing the Tent Embassy in 1992, and drafting and publishing the first proposed treaty. He also created politically challenging art works at local art cooperatives such as Megalo Print Studio where this print edition was created from the carving made almost 30 years earlier.



Ngunnawal Land Council, ACT and District Council of Ngunnawal Elders with photographer Barbara Wheeler and writer Mary Hutchinson. *Scar Tree*, 1997; *Ngunnawal Country, these two mountains, they are breasts* 1997

***I think the level of awareness raised [by Gungahlin on a Plate] has made people feel a bond with the place, a part of the community, a part of our history.***

**Toni McPhee, of the then Ngunnawal Land Council, *Canberra Times*, 1 December 1996.**

These plates were created as part of a 1996 community cultural project, ***Gungahlin on a Plate***, that captured the cultural landscape of Gungahlin when it was on the brink of development as a suburb.

Each picnic plate told a story of place and, together as a collection, created a cultural map of the sites and landmarks of Gungahlin. "Gungahlin was not a virgin green field, it had layers of cultural meaning and heritage from a traditional chert quarry, flaked stone artefacts scatterings and pioneer sites." Barbara Wheeler, 2020.

These cultural landmarks and community stories captured here on ***Scar Tree*** 1996 and ***Ngunnawal Country, these two mountains, they are breasts*** 1996 were shared by Don and Ruth Bell recorded by Mary Hutchinson. These plates were created by Barbara Wheeler in conversation with the then Ngunnawal Land Council.

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Paul House (artist) with Tom Rowney (glassblower), *Ngambri Murrumbidya - Yamaingmarang green Yidaki (Didgeridu)* 2016

***This [glass] yidaki (didgeridu) is designed to represent the Murrumbidya (Milky Way) - Yamaingmarang (Green) honouring the creation of the Murrumbidgee river (Dhuurlaan) and its life-giving importance to the Ngambri-Ngurm (Walgalu) and Wallabalooa (Ngunnawal) people...***

**Paul House, 2018**

Hung amongst a salon of landscape paintings depicting Canberra with river flats now filled by the lake, Paul House's *Ngambri Murrumbidgee* 2016 weaves the Murrumbidgee River back into the landscape and imprints the night sky's Murrumbidya (Milky Way) spirit onto the gallery walls.

Made in collaboration with Tom Rowney at Canberra Glassworks, this contemporary glass *yidaki* is designed to be played and resonates with a deep tone of 'E'. Hung on custom hooks, Paul House can lift the *yidaki* from the wall echoing sounds of country through the gallery. The artist states: 'It's like it plays itself ... This one came out so naturally ...it screams to be played'.

Paul House has been playing *yidaki (didgeridu)* since the 1980s and is a distinguished communicator in Ngunnawal and Walgalu language.



Brenda L. Croft, *'Civic Centre Canberra 1959' (Dorothy Jean Stone) #21* from the series 'Made in Australia II', 2018

***It was here that my mother and father, Joseph Croft and Dorothy Jean Stone met in 1959; she, a young Anglo-Australian woman just turned 21, he, an Aboriginal-Chinese-Irish/Australian man of 33...***

***In the photographs there is the image of Canberra... the vivid blue sky... and all the limitless possibilities that are suggested by their love in that time and place.***

**Brenda L. Croft, 2018**

***'Civic Centre Canberra 1959' (Dorothy Jean Stone) #21*** from the series 'Made in Australia II' 2018 was produced by artist Brenda L. Croft. This artwork draws upon her mother Dorothy Jean Croft's collection of personal photographs capturing the courtship and early years of married life with her husband Joseph Croft, who is captured in this photograph gazing at Hotel Civic and the Sydney Building in Canberra's Civic Centre.

This series reveals a life story of a non-Indigenous woman, Dorothy Jean Croft, who broke from suburban convention in Sydney to pursue employment on the Snowy Mountains Hydro Scheme. There, she found love with a Gurindji/Malgnin/Mudburra man, Joseph Croft, whom she married; they raised their family in Canberra.

This series of photographs tells a lesser known story of how an Indigenous man defied racial prejudice to build a professional career during the 1950s; working in a lead role establishing the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs at their head office in Woden.



Matilda House, *Murrumbidgee towards dooligah* 1996, lithograph on paper printed at Studio One.

***For thousands of years my people were on this beautiful Ngunnawal Ngambri country. When we walk around this city [Canberra], we are walking around on Aboriginal places – my ancestors place. It always was, and always will be Aboriginal country...***

**Matilda House, told to ABC Radio National, interview with Jonathan Green, 30 March 2019.**

Ngambri-Ngunnawal woman Matilda House affirms her connection to ancestral lands with her mystical artwork *Murrumbidgee towards dooligah* 1996.

Depicting the Murrumbidgee at dusk, this rhythmic representation of land and water shows that Matilda House does not need daylight to know the contours of her country. To see land so clearly without light requires a deep memory of place.

Matilda House learnt this knowledge from her grandparents who were fortunate to remain on country, living and working on local pastoral stations, at a time when most local Indigenous families were removed to the Hollywood Mission in Yass. Matilda House shares insights into her grandparent's quiet yet poignant heroism:

“My grandfather was a wonderful stockman just like his father Black Harry Williams. My grandmother did domestic duties in Red Hill around Yarralumla way. Their survival was just that - making sure that they kept their family together, ensuring that we had a future ... I tell my grandchildren to always pay respect to the past, though the atrocities were really bad and hard. If we fix up some of that past, we can have a better future.”  
(Matilda House public talk at CMAG, 7 July 2017)



Dean Cross, *Untitled Landscape (Double Self Portrait with horse)* 2018 Pure pigment print on archival paper.

***In the Western mode of thinking landscape and portraiture are really separate; you have landscape painting and you have portraiture. I think that for us, they are one and the same.***

**Dean Cross, 2018**

Cross' work *Untitled Landscape (Double Self Portrait with horse)* 2018 is a contemporary self-portrait within the Canberra landscape. As an artist of Worimi descent born in Canberra on Ngambri and Ngunnawal land, his identity is intimately bound up in place. To create a meaningful self-portrait required a layered approach, the artist comments:

‘I have often likened my experience of being a mixed-race Indigenous man of being something like living as a human collage. Differing parts coming together to form a new and rich whole, that hopefully is somehow greater than the sum of its parts... The pieces are mostly of places I have been or belong to, or moments in time and place that I would like to remember.’

He regards the notion of an ‘Untitled Landscape’ as a white construct – an Indigenous person would never name a landscape as ‘Untitled’ – country always has a name and a story, so the artist uses this conventional term ironically in his title.