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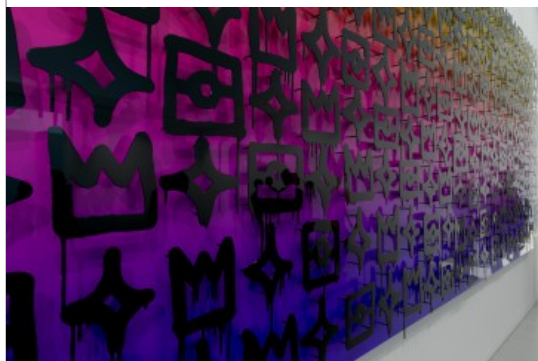
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Aboriginal Royalty at the Venice Biennale: Interview with artist Reko Rennie

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First were the fuchsia kangaroos appearing in Paris' arrondissements. Then neon canvases were seen in galleries and museums from Adelaide to New York. Next thing you know, colourful diamond patterns started covering buildings and walls all over Australia.

Street art is the second closest thing to world domination one can achieve with aesthetic weapons. The first, of course, is architecture. Architects are somehow dictators. You can turn your face away from a painting. You can even not enter a gallery at all. But you can't possible ignore a building that is there, right in the street where you pass every day to go to work. Same thing with street art. Street art is about reclaiming your existence. It's about marking the territory. It's about overloading your insides in the outside world, so that everyone is forced to confront them. Because deep down all demons are alike.

One warm Australian night I was walking through a shady alleyway, one of those Melbourne is so famous for. My attention was captured by some blue and pink lights on the blind side of a building. Looking up I saw neon silhouettes of emus, kangaroos and echidnas. Since Australians are quite precise people, I didn't have to look too far to know who was the artist responsible for that. The name on the explanatory plate read "Reko Rennie".

Colours right from eighties. A striking street art aesthetic. Obsessive patterns and graphic clearness. A synthesis of subcultures. Reko's art is really cool to look at. But the reason it

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stays with you long after that first glance, is because of what his art is expression of. It comes from a place of revendication. It brings with it all the pride and the struggles of being an Aboriginal man who grew up in urban Australia. It is the art of a cultural warrior.

I meet the artist during the Venice Biennale preview days. He has a work at “Personal Structures”, a collateral exhibition to the Biennale at Palazzo Mora. The thing you suddenly notice about Reko is his natural friendliness. His manners are easygoing and his stare is brown and deep. Being Reko very Mediterranean-looking waiters in Italian restaurants would speak to him in Italian. He doesn’t mind: “When I was a kid in Footscray I grew up with Italians, Macedonians, Greeks. It was always mistaken for another European kid.”

The work that Reko is exhibiting in Venice is titled Regalia and talks about royalty. It is a multilayered metal installation with an iconography declaring the origins of Australia. “I’ve used references to the crown, a symbol of royalty as well as a reference to Basquiat and to my graffiti background. The little square with the circle and the line is the aboriginal flag. The diamond is my family crest, it’s like a coat of arm. I have the mission to use it as it is part of my lineage. These symbols combined together states Australia’s aboriginal royalty. It’s the first people, is the indigenous people, it’s not fucking English, the queen and all that. Regalia is a reminder.”

Exhibiting in Venice has always been a goal of Reko. Because of the political nature of his work, he always knew he wanted to expand beyond Australia and tap into an international audience. “Through work artists have the power to inform, raise awareness, make a statement. And Venice is the ideal platform for that.”

There is also personal satisfaction in being part of such an important event. “In high school, I had an art teaching saying that my art was shit. And then I had a gallery director, years ago, who asked where I saw myself in a few years. I said New York, the Venice Biennale. He said I had to make more realistic plans. He laughed at me and I was like; what the fuck, no, I’m actually going. I’ll be there one day.” He pauses for a second. “And so here we are.”

Another work of Reko I have recently encountered was realized during an art residency at Cemeti House in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It was called “Warriors Come out to Play” and was inspired by the iconic movies “Warriors” and “Mad Max”. In the video for the Cemeti show, you see a gang of bikers roaming through the Javanese streets. Reko coated an old vespa in silver, painted his face with the rhomboid shape of Kamilaroi people, and wore a leather jacket with a boxing kangaroo and the writing: “Original Aborigenal. Kamilaroi.”

But it is not all just playing around subcultures and outlaw behaviours. What these works do is subverting negative stereotypes around a cultural heritage and transforming them into a powerful and empowering images. The victim becomes the warrior.

It is, first and foremost, about acknowledging the past: “In Australia it was only one or two generations ago that Indigenous people were victimized for their identity, they were persecuted, disposed, dislocated because of their culture.” The story of the stolen generation in Australia is shameful, to say the least. Aboriginal children were taken away from their families and land, and forced to work as domestic servants and to live on the white peoples’ government-controlled missions and reserves.

Reko’s family knows that firsthand. “My grandmother was taken away and gunpoint at the age of eight with her brother and sister. She was made to work on missions and she never saw her family again.” While the artist has always been politically engaged, his own family history was something that he had to consciously research at one point in time. “I tried to find out and it took a while. Many people from the older generation never talk about it. It was traumatic for them. Awful things happened. That is why it is very important for me and our generation to reclaim our Aboriginal identity and to know where we come from.”

As a kid Reko grew up in Melbourne, in the then infamous suburb of Footscray. “Now Footscray is really cool, but in the ’80 there was a lot of heroin, a lot of crime. It was a very working class and immigrant area. When I got my hands on a copy of Martha Cooper’s Subway art, it really resonated with me. In the ‘80s and ‘90s Melbourne had a huge subculture. I was part of a graffiti crew, we were writing our names. My father was an artist too, but graffiti resonated more with me because they were an act of rebellion.”

When it came to pick a profession though, Reko didn’t think of art. Journalism looked like

a more realistic option to him. Painting was then relegated in the snippets of free time. Ten years and a couple journalistic awards later, Reko realized that newspapers didn't give him the expression he sought. He decided to quit his job and dedicate to art full-time.

Today, with a big studio in Melbourne and a busy schedule of upcoming shows, art for Reko has become a daily practice. "With the years I've channelled my anger into making work. Art gave me a voice. I want to have an impact, I was to raise awareness, I want to make a work that is beautiful but has also meaning behind it. If you like the look of something you're drawn in. And it's having fun, I love what I do."

On our way back from an ice cream shop, I ask Reko if he still does graffiti. "Still do a tag every now and then." "Did you left a tag here?" "Oh no, I'd never do that to Venice. It's too beautiful." He smiled and ate a scoop of ice cream: "Maybe on the train on the way back. I'll wait I'll get out of here."

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